Critical Analysis of Jane Eyre's Protagonist as a Feminist Figure in Victorian England

Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Jane Eyre, one of the most fabulous and famous novels in English literature, was published on 16 October 1847. It was written by Charlotte Bronte, who is the eldest of the three Bronte sisters, under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. It is clear that Charlotte Bronte, established herself as a distinguished feminist woman writer in her treatment of women's situation in her novels (Jane Eyre, Shirley, Emma). In Jane Eyre, she discussed different topics such as: Social rules, religion, spiritual and the super natural, belonging and love, gothic elements, External vs. internal beauty, and gender inequality. However, the main theme in my opinion was about 'Gender Inequality'. She wrote the novel in the Victorian era, where women were forbidden from their simple rights and suffering from the patriarchal authority. No woman can practice any job, they have believed that jobs are just for men and women's only job was taking care of their houses and their children. Moreover, they were forbidden from writing literature, because male publishers didn't think the literary world was a place for women. Therefore, women writers as Bronte Sisters were forced to write under male pseudonyms to avoid prejudice in male-dominated circles. We need to explore how Bronte examines the suffering of women and how they could overcome difficulties and achieve success through her novel Jane Eyre.[footnoteRef:1] [1: Wikipedia]

No one could disagree with that Jane Eyre is one of the greatest works in English literature, in fact it considered by many to be ahead of its time because of Jane's strong and individualistic character, and because the novel's main focus was on these topics; Class and gender roll, sexuality, religion and feminism. Charlotte's narrating style was unique; she had this passion and brilliant storytelling which attract readers. She addressed the injustice inherent in Victorian England's social class customs and gender standings through her main character Jane Eyre. She creates the character of Jane to reflect women's voice, she considered to be as an inspiration to those women who have no voice and no right to defend their selves. After reading the novel and analyzing her narrating style of the actions since childhood to the following stages of life, and how Jane was treated by her aunt and by the society as a whole; we will notice the theme of ' Injustice and Inequality'.

While reading Charlotte Bronte's personal life, we figured out that Jane Eyre is actually Charlotte Bronte. She reflects her personal life through the character of Jane, and we can see a lot of similarities between them. First, both of them were orphans and both were sent to boarding schools where the conditions were not pleasant and they felt uncomfortable being there. Second, Charlotte mentioned in the novel the epidemic of typhus which spread in her school, and another disease which killed Jane's best friend Helen. Similarly, in her actual life the typhus claimed the lives of two of her sisters when they were at the school, then she was brought home immediately. Third, Charlotte, like Jane, worked for some time as a governess, and fell in love with the married headmaster at a school in which she was enrolled. Fourth, Jane Eyre marries Mr. Rochester after he becomes blind because his crazy wife has set fire to the

house. She ends up caring for him as an invalid rather than as a wife. The same thing happened to Charlotte with her father because after she lost all her sisters to illnesses, she was left to care for her father until his death. Thereafter, she accepted a proposal from one of her father's friends who served as the headmaster at the school where she had attended. Finally, Jane at the end of the story gave birth to a child from Mr. Rochester. However, Charlotte unfortunately died with her unborn child at an early age. ('Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë')

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Jane Eyre was Charlotte's masterpiece, because its seeking for equality in an era full of injustice, people at that time think that men are superior to women and people were porn unequally. Therefore, In this research, we want to discuss feminism in general, as well as, the feminist traits in Jane, the protagonist of the novel. Moreover, we need to know how Charlotte Bronte examines the suffering of women and how they could overcome difficulties and achieve success, through the character of Jane Eyre.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does the novel comment on the position of women in Victorian society?
2. Can Jane Eyre be considered as a feminist figure?

1.3. Research Hypotheses

According to the research questions, this study has the following hypotheses to investigate :

1. We hypothesis that Jane Eyre was characterizing both Charlotte Bronte's real life and her suffering in unequal society, and women's suffering from the patriarchal authority in the 19th century. Women in the Victorian era were suffering from gender inequality in every aspect of life. They were forbidden from education, work, the right to choose, and the freedom. Therefore, The novel conveys women's lives in the Victorian era through Charlotte's picturisation of the real life and the real suffering at that time when women were forbidden from their simple rights.
2. We hypothesis that Jane Eyre is a feminist figure, she was struggling for self-realization through the novel actions since her childhood to the end of the novel. The novel's main focus was on reflecting women's call for equality through Jane's suffering. She was fighting to be equal to men and to have the right to study, work, refuse, decide her future, and to be a strong individual even if she was an orphan and have no parents and no love.

1.4. Research objectives

The objective of this research is to explore feminism along with the changes it has brought in the lives of men and women. Also, this study would highlight the feminist traits of the protagonist, as well as the effects that Jane Eyre has produced in women's lives in the 19th century.

1.5. Research Significance

[bookmark: _30j0zll] The importance of this study is that it would enlighten the reflection of feminism in Jane Eyre. By the end of this research, we would discover the effects and the influences that the novel made on women's thoughts in specific, and in English Literature in general.

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter we want to discuss some critical studies about Jane Eyre. Then, we will present some antecedent studies about how the novel of Jane Eyre has affected the Victorian era and the social standings in general, and women's lives through the ages in specific. We also want to discuss Charlotte Bronte's unique style in writing, we need to know how she influenced women in the Victorian era through the character of Jane Eyre.

2.2. The literature review

When Jane Eyre was first published, it had a great impact upon the society at that time, and most critics admired the style of narrating and the truth of character portrayal, however, they did not admire the improbability of circumstances or the characters portrayed.

According to Sarah Waters, who is an author of six famous novels, she gave her opinion about the novel of Jane Eyre and how it affect her personally. She said:

' When Jane is engaged in one of her many wrangles with the teasing Mr. Rochester. “Do you think,” she asks him, “because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!” The lines capture part of the appeal that the book has always had for me: the small, unglamorous, passionate figure staking her claim to equality, insisting on her right to feel, to act, to matter.' (Waters, 2016)

Besides Sarah Waters' opinion, several writers, philosophers, and critics were agreed that Jane Eyre is a feminist novel and considered to be ahead of its time. Many early reviews praised the novel for being “original,” “new,” and “fresh,” and having a strong voice and message. It was, however, also condemned for being “vulgar,” “too bold,” and “coarse, 'especially by those reviewers who thought that Currer Bell might be a woman.' (Alexander and Smith 134).

According to a reviewer in ' The London Quarterly Review ', he stated that ' the novel of Jane Eyre was the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit, and that the character of Jane was destitute of all attractive, feminine qualities.

A governess, the reviewer reminds her reader, is not a real woman, but a burden to society. No real woman would create a character as unseemly as Jane Eyre; if she did, she has 'long forfeited the society of her own sex' (Ridgy, December 1848).

Jane Eyre, considered to be the most powerful and popular novel to represent the modern view of women’s position in the society. Since its publication, many critics and reviewers have reviewed it from different perspectives. Pat Macpherson points out in his book Reflecting on Jane Eyre , “Jane Eyre is marked by strong romantic elements and the role of nature is

especially important”(1983, p.297-302). This book shows how 'Jane Eyre' is the site for a women's exploration of a morality of desire and power, alternative to the material and sexual double-standard of middle class men.

Moreover, Many early reviewers criticized Jane Eyre for what they saw as subversive elements in the novel, believing that these elements undermined social, political, and religious conventions. They believed that the novel rejected Christianity and advocated gender and class equality. Many modern critics agree with those early assessments, although they praise the novel for those same subversive qualities. Jane Eyre, however, is not subversive because it rejects Christianity or because it advocates gender or class equality. Jane Eyre is subversive because it advocates a Christianity in which all are equal before God, regardless of gender, class, or any other differentiations.