

## Brontë: Women's Role in Society

Dutta, Sangeeta. "Charlotte Bronte and the Woman Question." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 40, 1991, pp. 2311-2313, 2315-2316

Bronte inherited the divisive legacy of the age: a primal duality between Romanticism and Reason. She adeptly captured the ambivalence of her age through her intensive concern with the various phenomena of the divided self, and her experimentation regarding the emergence of the positive female protagonist. Bronte's feminism derived from her persistent effort to define herself and her female protagonists autonomously; resisting pre-determined cultural formulations, and responding to the powerful demands of her personality.

For her, independent action was the process of writing. In the 1840s the job of the woman novelist was becoming a recognisable profession. The group of writers writing at this time were the Brontes, Gaskell, H Martineau, and George Eliot; their social coevals were Florence Nightingale, Mary Carpenter, Angela Burdett. Pioneer professionals-- they were female role innovators breaking new ground and creating new 'feminine' possibilities. These women tried to struggle free from social and literary confinement, through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society. Like Charlotte and her sisters most 19th century women writers were trapped in men's houses and it is but natural that images of enclosure and escape characterises much of their writing. The woman novelists of the 1840s thus, used the novel to demonstrate woman's proper sphere and to remake woman's image in the face of dominant ideology. Charlotte Bronte described the processes of creation that could lend this 'almost preternatural' power to her writing, in a letter to G H Lewes: "When authors write best or at least when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master which will have its own way-- putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words-- new moulding characters, giving unthought of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones."

Mid-19th century saw the emergence of a female literary community coincide with the social phenomenon of an excess of female population, which stimulated widespread reassessment of women's role and relationship. Women's work had meant work for others, women were defined as wholly passive, projected as selfless. Work for self- development was in direct conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the feminine ideal. In a famous letter to Charlotte, Robert Southey expressed the notion: "Literature is not the business of a woman's life and it cannot be."

Charlotte Bronte assured him in 1837 that I have endeavoured to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil' confessing with shame that "I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I am teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing!" The self-centredness implicit in the act of writing made it an especially threatening one-- it required a concern with the ego and therefore writers like Charlotte and her sisters, Elizabeth Barrett and Elizabeth Sewell had to face deepseated guilt about authorship. The Bronte sisters had a dozen male alter egos in the Angrian chronicles and later assumed the names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell because authoresses were liable to be looked on with prejudice.

This period saw the beginning of a major revision in thinking about woman. She was fighting for a degree of equality and personal freedom. Writings were exploding myths about marriage and motherhood and insisting that women have every right to shape their own lives. The subject of women's occupation had become one of 'awful importance'. Charlotte Bronte questions the same ideological assumptions and boldly asserts the role of the single woman exploring her ambivalent position in society in the 1830s and 1840s. She thus established herself as one of the earlier feminist thinkers before the movement took on a cumulative force:

I often wish to say something about the 'condition of women' question, but it is one respecting which so much 'cant' has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it.

Elizabeth Gaskell sums up the conflict Bronte faced between her career and her domestic duties.

A woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice, nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents.

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Bronte wielded the pen to explore and formulate alternatives to the male authority which imprisoned women. The training of the Victorian girls in repression and concealment was deeply inhibiting especially for those, who, like the Bronte sisters, wanted to write. Charlotte analyses the effects of repressed feelings in a letter to Ellen Nussey.

I have some qualities-- some feelings that few, very few, people in the world can at all understand-- I strive to conceal and suppress myself as much as I can; but they burst out sometimes and then those who see the explosion despise me.

Independence is a keynote in her thinking about her own life and the life of all unmarried women; it is also a central theme in all her novels. Inseparable from her emphasis on the importance of career is her strong exhortation of the ideal of independence to the unmarried woman:

Lonely as I am, how should I be if providence had never given me courage to adopt a career? I wish every woman in England had also a hope and motive; Alas there are many old maids who have neither.

In a letter to her teacher Miss Wooler, she declares

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!

In the works of Bronte, Gaskell, Eliot, we find not merely an exposition of woman as victim but exploration of women as agents of change and their persisting power. In women's fiction, we can trace an emergent rebellious structure of feelings about inequities of power between men and women and economic inequities as well. Women were excluded from independent intellectual evolution, and confined to the domestic sphere. An ideological emphasis existed on women's spiritual control over the home and society. The conflict between individual development and marriage and reproduction became acute for women who thought that their own self-development was important. In literature, power and influence became central concerns and the woman writer revised patriarchal plots and genres to emphasise the identity of the female protagonist. [...]

Writers like Charlotte Bronte were seeking heroines who could be inspiring role models as well as women who suffered for their passions. In the course of her writing, a strong minded heroine emerged as an assertive and individualist personality-- one who could move the plot along and

dramatise the main concerns of the novel. Though the reviewers and the public were critical of this new heroine, they were clearly fascinated by her.

Bronte's fiction shifts the focus from the limitation of women's situation to the reality of their ability and power, acknowledging the idea that female power can lodge in dangerous nooks and crannies. The struggle for an integrated female subjectivity is seen as a demand which can actually be met in strong, independent minded women like Shirley, self-supporting women like Elizabeth Hastings and Frances Henri, independent yet intensely lonely like Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, and protected, dependent, but intellectually frustrated women like Caroline who crave to look for something beyond the prospect of spinsterhood.

Women have a problematic place in social and psychic representation and Bronte's novels explore a rehabilitation of the female psyche. Stories of orphaned heroines or hero, of uncertain class origin reflect anxiety about their identity. Deprived of power, Jane Eyre has lost her family heritage, Lucy Snowe forgets her history, Caroline is in search of her mother.

Rejecting repression, Bronte cast her mind about for a means of making acceptable the notion that women can have passionate emotional turmoils. Each novel is a story of a quest, of entry into the world of education and employment. Charlotte's yearning for independent work and her desire for a loving relationship were ideals she strove to unite through tormenting images of work, power relationship and love in her novels. She engineers a fictional resolution in marriage which ensures the security and fulfilment of her lonely, hardpressed heroines. [...]

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The centrality of gender is the distinguishing aspect of Brontes writing. Bronte repeatedly works out the vision of an oppressed, usually female figure trapped in the structures of a patriarchal society devising escape routes from their enclosure in traditional patriarchal roles. Female identity is linked with the social mechanism of social repression and psychic alienation. This allows Bronte to expose conflict inherent in her protagonists' attempts to discover a relational self amidst the stasis of social conventions. Charlotte Bronte's adult life was spent in dealing with the exigencies of earning a living. Preliminary sketches of the autonomous heroine are found in her early writings, exploring and rejecting the roles of dependant woman in an aristocratic world. In the *Juvenilia*, Charlotte introduces the working woman rising from governess (Miss West) to independent school teacher (Elizabeth Hastings). Marriage is presented as a working partnership with financially earned independence for the wife. Frances Henri, the quiet but grimly determined heroine of *The Professor* enjoys a relationship of emotional dependancy when she agrees to marry William Grimsworth, but she immediately makes it clear that she would retain her employment as teacher, thus maintaining economic independence. 'We shall both have the same profession' (p 328). Jane Eyre similarly bids for independence after marriage to Rochester. [...] In *Villette*, Bronte depicts work as a true lover's gift. Lucy gains unfettered freedom to work only by losing Paul Emmanuel and prospects of marriage. Recognising that her solution is fantasy, Bronte dissolves this balance by preserving Lucy's economic independence and drowning her prospective husband-- thus handing over more power to her as she has to live without the pleasure of dependence. Lucy's survival in cultural history suggests acute curtailment of personal desire. On the other hand acceptance of the ideology of woman's sphere by Gaskell, commits her to marriage and 'economic' dependence as a happy ending thus suppressing the economic situation in *North and South*. [...]

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To Bronte novel writing became an unique feminist activity and a necessary form of self expression. Though Bronte was not in a position to resolve all her ambiguities-- she nevertheless defines the power of the female imagination to find within itself the artistic authority to break with the confining role models and move closer to a challenging representation of the self.

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