The Brontë Novels : Anxiety, Rebellion and Varieties of Conservative Ideology

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

'**The Brontë Novels: Anxiety, Rebellion and Varieties of Conservative Ideology**' submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Professor Shanta Dutta, Presidency University, and that neither the thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Dated:

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This work I dedicate to my late mother (I lost her early in my life) who had hoped bravely that I would write my thesis one day.

Table of Contents

Introduction

There is no denying that huge body of works on the novels of the Brontë sisters exists. Such is the volume that going through all of them is quite impossible. In spite of this truth, the fact that the sisters continue to be so widely read even in the twenty-first century fascinated me. I began the journey thus of re-discovery, hoping there will perhaps be something that still needed to be addressed as far as the novels of the sisters are concerned. Reading through the works of the Brontë sisters, it became gradually easier to realize the apparently universally shared experiences of their novels. Ambition, loneliness, vulnerability and desire, form the core of the universal experience in the novels of the Brontë's. True, the concerns of the Brontë novels are intimately that of the sisters but their works also give the effect of universal identification. This journey of the discovery increasingly became fascinating and filled me with the conviction to wade further.

The first thing that one is bound to be struck by is the secluded world to which the Brontës sisters belonged. The comparatively reclusive life of the sisters expectedly sparked speculations. The early biographers like Elizabeth Gaskell spoke of the eccentric circumstances in the lives of the young novelists. A slow change in outlook occurred over time with later biographers like Juliet Barker and others who began to read the sisters in more stable orientation. True, for a long time, it was Charlotte and Emily who held attention, with Anne hovering about the periphery of the canon. It is this about Anne that intrigued me. Reading Anne's two under-rated novels, I found her clear in thought and felt that the author's ability to call a spade 'a spade' was laudable.

As young children, the imaginary world of *Angria* and *Gondal* gave them wings of creativity but as adults they encountered more pressing realities and the imaginary world got left behind. Lonely and yet curious, the feisty souls were not hesitant of expressing themselves. This then brings us to another interesting facet of the Brontë world, and that is, their letters. In 1840 the Penny Black stamp was issued. This was the first stamp in the world. People wrote a lot of letters at this time, as this was the only way to communicate over long distances. The sisters wrote a bulk of letters not necessarily out of fashion but I am prone to think that writing letters gave them comfort and the privacy that they fiercely guarded and yet allowed them to voice their concerns about many issues. Their letters are a revelation as they speak of their anxiety, fear, ambition – emotions that are at times contradictory but they help to concretize our understanding of the minds of the sisters. It is not absolutely necessary to reconstruct history to understand the works of the sisters. Nevertheless, my attempt is to reach as close as possible to the version of reality as presented in the novels of the Brontë sisters, using their letters as and when I feel they would do justice.

The six young Brontë children became each other's companions when they lost their mother at a very tender age while their father, Patrick Brontë, kept mostly to himself. Initially, the eldest of the siblings, Maria and Elizabeth, took to being the mother to the younger ones. Sometime later, when the two eldest sisters fall victim to consumption, Charlotte, Emily and partly Barnwell found it difficult to cope with their once again motherless state. Anne, the youngest sister, was the least affected amongst the lot as she still had her elder sisters to look up to and then there was Aunt Branwell who had come down to help in the Brontë household after the passing away of their mother. This isolated state of the sisters meant that they absorbed as well as developed individual views on various things on their own but the circumference of

their knowing was limited in a way. It helps to trace the growing up years of the sisters (Charlotte, Emily, Anne) because it makes it easier to understand as to why the sisters in their novels do not talk about larger social issues aggressively. The larger social issues do not become their concern perhaps because they could not and did not feel the need to. Nevertheless, the sisters do respond to the immediate world around them through most of their works. Daughters of an evangelical clergyman, the sisters burst forth on the literary scene in the 1840s ─ a decade that saw England dip in financial crisis soon after the introduction of the Bank Charter Act. The seemingly non-committal approach to the larger social issues has been a long standing accusation against the sisters as far as their novels are concerned. But a very close reading of the texts will show a concern for finance, essentially a reflection of the times they were living in. They were not completely non-critical about social issues; one thing that the sisters seem quite critical about is the school education system. They speak of corrupt headmasters, terrible food and gruelling schedule that literally ran down the children. The two eldest daughters of Patrick died of consumption that was propelled by the bad food and somewhat unhygienic conditions of the schools to which they went.

In spite of accusations of non-commitment to larger social issues, the sisters in their novels herald the emerging and changing face of women. The decade of the 1840s is interesting as far as women's history is concerned. Harriet Martineau in 1840 published *Women's Rights and Duties*, a book that explored woman's influence on society and her condition, while the same year saw a judge uphold a man's right to lock up his wife and beat her in moderation! 1840 was also the year when London held the World Anti-Slavery Convention wherein accredited women delegates from the USA were not allowed to participate because of their gender. The very next year

that is in 1841 the Governesses' Benevolent Institution was founded. 1841 was significant from the woman's history point of view as Mother Marian Rebecca of Oxford became the first woman since the Reformation to take religious vows from the Church of England while Lady Rolle became the first woman governor of Bridewell and Bethlem Hospitals. Then in 1844 came the Factory Act for women and children and in the publication year of *Jane Eyre*, Ann Knight, an elderly Quaker, published a leaflet that advocated the right of women to vote. Thus the sisters were witness to the changing face of the woman, though legal or political rights were not exactly in her favour. The sisters were affected by the concept of this new emerging woman. Hence, the female protagonists in the novels of the sisters often are shown to be standing up to the challenges of circumstances. This is a marked change in attitude as far as Charlotte is concerned because her women in *Angria* would be mostly presented as victims. Though many women in the novels of the sisters happen to be quite spirited, they are often mentally or physically (sometimes both) isolated from the larger world. Catherine and Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* prefer the life of young savages, away from the other people of the heath. A young Jane when put in the Red Room is both in mental and physical isolation. Helen of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is also lonely. These and many such cases; seem the order in the novels of the Brontë' novels.

The fascination for seclusion and romance probably helps to understand the sisters' comfort in dealing with the Gothic settings. Such settings have a sense of seclusion that go well with the understanding of the sisters who lived a large part of their lives in Haworth – a stark windy village of stone dykes, steep lanes and a single steep cobbled main street and fringed by moorland hills stretching to the virtually seemingly infinite horizon.

The reason for stressing on the state of isolation of the sisters is to understand the very opposite emotions that make way into their works – they are at once anxious and rebellious and then reveal an almost conservative self. Their protagonists in the novels are often alone and naturally tend to be anxious. The female protagonists embark on the journey of life alone but they are not essentially weak. When pitted against oppression, the female characters are not hesitant to rebel. A young Jane when put in the Red Room is angry but not crying. In the given state, Jane can either embrace the psyche of a victim or protest. Jane chooses to rebel. Even Heathcliff and Catherine rebel and refuse to conform to tradition. Helen Huntington of *The Tenant of the Wildfell* Hall uses her dignified silence as a tool of rebellion when gossip about her spreads across the village. True, the female protagonists in their novels are built on the notion of the conventional ideal woman but they are not without voice or individuality. From Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, and Shirley to Agnes Grey – all assert their individual self and reveal a mind determined and upright.

We know that as young women, Charlotte, Emily and Anne had taken up jobs as governesses. Naturally, they had to deal with children but unfortunately their experience with the children they had been called to look after had not been exactly pleasant. The world of the children as portrayed in their works is not one of unqualified innocence. Heathcliff as a young child is wild, savage and even violent and his companion Catherine is no less. The Murray boy is found taking to willful killing of birds and relishing the act of cruelty. Jane Eyre is also a child but unlike her boorish cousin she is angry. While in the Red Room she gives Bessie, the servant, some shock with the way she boldly takes to protest. Reading of this world of the children is in itself a fascinating venture – the children are wild, untamed and anxious, yet they mould their own destiny through the choices that they make. The children in

the novels live life almost on their own, as their parents are usually dead or too indulgent or weak in their presence. Again, what is worth noting is that apart from Helen Huntington, and partially Jane Eyre, none of the female characters grow up to show any concrete parenting skills or abilities. The virtual absence of parents in the lives of the young children means that children can be seen as miniature adults, a small prototype of what they will be as adults. Though, to the Victorian mind, the child was a contact with innocence, the Brontë sisters unhesitatingly present the child as a brat, one who is cruel, angry, suffering and struggling in a hostile atmosphere. Emily's fiction children in her novel are reminiscent of her *Gondal:* grief, death, pain come to them. Many of the Emily's children in *Gondal* have little future and they are stranded in the past and present. The children created by Anne in *Gondal* are often orphaned but, as typically in a romantic tradition, there is some hope lurking in the future and it is not the complete grief that Emily presents as awaiting these children.

Though by the time the Brontë sisters had grown up, governess-ship had opened a small door of financial independence but marriage was still largely the passport to social and economic security for women. This reality the three Brontë sisters dealt with varyingly in their novels. Consequently, it does become an interesting study to see how the female protagonists in their novels try to hold on to their sense of identity as an individual within a marriage. The sisters were affected for sure by the status of the woman and views about her in the society in which they lived and had been brought up. Patrick Brontë as a father seemed to be aware of the limitations as far as the future plans for his daughters were concerned; after all not many options were open to the daughters of an impoverished clergyman. The most likely option was suitable marriage but Patrick seemed to realize that without money behind them, his daughters were unlikely to attract men of substance. True, if his

daughters moved in better circles, then their chances of marriage would have improved; right education could prove to be beneficial but possession of fortune was an important step in the right direction. He knew it was unlikely that all his five daughters would marry or rather marry well. If the option of marriage was not open to them, then a career as an option had to be considered. Also, his daughters could not enter a profession that was unheard of for women in the nineteenth century. Dress-making, shop-keeping, nursing and going into service were working-class occupations and these could not be considered by Patrick's daughters. So the only option that remained was teaching – teaching in a private school or in a private household or becoming the companion to a wealthy lady. In either case, education was essential. The girls would have to learn not only to read and write but also know how to talk and walk correctly, especially in a society that condemned any deviation from the accepted standards of conduct. The Brontë daughters would have to have the right sort of feminine attainments like the ability to draw, play the piano and do needlework; a smattering of French, Italian and German was an advantage but the classical languages or mathematics were still considered to be the prerogative of the male. This pressing reality might have directed the course of action of Patrick for his young daughters but it would not be wrong to say that as a child Charlotte Brontë was growing up with a Byronic sense of romance. She had not given it up as she grew up though she was now more conscious of the real plight of the woman, now that she was herself a young woman. The sense of romance that had been talked about has been retained in the fairy tale structure of her first published novel, *Jane Eyre*, though within the novel the author does invert a number of conventional equations. Emily or Anne nurtured their own sense of romance. Emily, who loved leading Charlotte through the wilderness of Haworth, brought that sense of Gothic romance into her

only novel. One of the three sisters, Anne is the least complicated in her approach of creating characters of her novel. Helen Huntingdon is in an unhappy marriage but there is a Gilbert Markham waiting for her. The heroes in the novels of the sisters come in wide array – there is the Byronic Rochester, the Miltonic Heathcliff and Arthur Huntingdon who is modelled on Branwell, and so on. There will be an attempt in this thesis to understand the man-woman relationship of the novels of the sisters.

Questioning is a form of rebellion and the sisters do question a lot of things – the role of woman, the role of clergy (*Shirley*, *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall*), religion etc. Their attempt was not to create an alternative world but they wanted to exercise the liberty of choice. At the same time, the sisters stress and glorify conventional morality – a Catherine Earnshaw cannot live a life of adultery but she can give up her life; likewise, an Ingram Blanche (*Jane Eyre*) cannot be the heroine of the novel as the latter lacked a strong sense of individuality, a quality almost essential for the heroine in the novel of the Brontës'.

The Brontës were progressive as well as romantic souls but firmly rooted in their age. They attempted to sort out the asymmetries of life, sometimes becoming anxious and sometimes feeling the need to question and rebel against certain conventions. Most of the Victorian novelists present contemporary evils in their novels with a view to reforming the society. The Brontës do not present the squalour of the times but are concerned with certain sexual and moral bias of the age. It is not that the sisters as young children did not have exposure to what was happening in the outside world. The periodicals that Patrick Brontë read were a mine of information for his young children. *The Leeds Intelligencer* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, conservative and well written, but better than the *Quarterly Review* that defended political ideas whilst addressing a less refined readership (the reason Mr. Brontë did

not read it), were available to the sisters in their growing up years. *Blackwood's Magazine* in particular, was not only the source of their knowledge of world affairs, but also provided material for the Brontës' early writing. For instance, an article in the June 1826 number of *Blackwood's* provides commentary on new discoveries from the exploration of central Africa. The map included with the article highlighted geographical features that the Brontës refer to in their tales of *Angria:* the Jibbel Kumera (the Mountains of the Moon), Ashantee, and the rivers Niger and Calabar. The author of the article in the magazine is also seen advising the British to expand into Africa from Fernando Po, where, Christine Alexander notes, the Brontë children locate the Great Glass Town.[1] Their knowledge of geography was completed by Goldsmith's *Grammar of General Geography*, which the Brontës owned and heavily annotated.

From 1833, Charlotte and Branwell's Angrian tales begin to feature Byronic heroes who have a strong sexual magnetism and passionate spirit, and demonstrate arrogance and even black-heartedness. Again, it is in an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* dated August 1825, that they discover the poet, Byron, for the first time; he had died the previous year. From this moment, the name Byron became synonymous with all the prohibitions and audacities as if it had stirred up the very essence of the rise of those forbidden things. Branwell's Charlotte Zamorna, one of the heroines of Verdopolis, tends towards increasingly ambiguous behaviour, and the same influence and evolution recur with the Brontës, especially in the characters of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, who display the traits of a Byronic hero. Numerous other works of Byron have left their mark on the Brontës. The

[1]Brontë Sisters. World Heritage Encyclopedia. www.gutenberg.cc/articles/eng/Brontë_sisters. Web accessed on 16th September, 2014.

influence in *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is much less clear. Anne's works are largely founded on her experience as a governess and on that of her brother's decline. Furthermore, they demonstrate her conviction, a legacy from her father, that books should provide moral education. This sense of moral duty and the need to record it are more evident in *The Tenant of Wildfell* Hall. The influence of the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, Gregory 'Monk' Lewis and Charles Maturin is noticeable, and that of Walter Scott too, if only because the heroine, abandoned and left alone, resists not only by her almost supernatural talents, but mainly due to the power drawn from her temperament.

Jane Eyre, *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Shirley*, *Villette* and even *The Professor* all present a linear structure concerning a character who advances through life after several trials and tribulations, to find a kind of happiness in love and virtue, recalling the works of religious inspiration of the 17th century such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or his *Grace Abounding* to *Chief of Sinners*. In a more profane secular manner, the hero or heroine follows a picaresque itinerary such as in the works of Miguel de Cervantes (1547–16), Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Henry Fielding (1707–1764) and Tobias Smollett (1721–1771). This lively tradition continued into the nineteenth century with the 'rags to riches' genre to which almost all the great Victorian romancers have contributed. The protagonist is thrown by fate into poverty and, after many difficulties, achieves a golden happiness. Often an artifice is employed to effect the passage from one state to another such as an unexpected inheritance, a miraculous gift, grand reunions, etc. and, in a sense, this is the route followed also by Charlotte's and Anne's protagonists, even if the riches they win are more those of the heart than of the wallet. Apart from its Gothic elements, *Wuthering Heights* moves like a Greek tragedy and possesses its music, the cosmic

dimensions of the epics of John Milton, and the power of the Shakespearean theatre. One can hear the echoes of King Lear as well as the completely different characters of Romeo and Juliet. The Brontës were also seduced by the writings of Walter Scott, and in 1834 Charlotte exclaimed: 'For fiction, read Walter Scott and only him – all novels after his are without value'.[2]

That the world of the sisters happens to be fascinating and myriad is obvious and there are many spectres that are reflected in their works. But this thesis will only look into the aspect of conservatism, their anxiousness about certain things and rebellion regarding some issues close to them.

[2] www.theguardian.com › Arts › Books › Charlotte Brontë, Web accessed on 15th June,2016.

The brat or the angel: Children and Childhood in the Brontë Novels

Undeniably, the child had been a major preoccupation with many Victorian novelists and to an extent also in the novels of the Brontë sisters. Historically, Queen Victoria's England was a child-dominated society. Throughout her long reign, one out of every three of her subjects was under the age of fifteen. In 1799, children's author and educator Hannah More had reacted against the revolutions that had recently taken place in America and France in terms that tell us a great deal about the child's place in British society at that time. Denouncing Thomas Paine's radical insistence that all men are created equal, More went on to argue that recognizing just 'the rights of man' was not enough. She said later reformers would begin to discuss the rights of women, and then talk of the rights of youth, the rights of children, and the rights of babies much later. More's thought was not entirely conventional in a society where laws to protect animals came into existence before the right to child protection.

The idea that children have rights that the state should protect may have seemed silly at the dawn of the nineteenth century, but by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, it had gained significant support. Beginning in the 1830s, the Victorians passed a variety of laws aimed at protecting the well-being of children at work, at school, and in the home. This activism was motivated in part by a growing acceptance of the Romantic idea that children are innocent creatures who should be shielded from the adult world and allowed to enjoy their childhood. As the century wore on, writers and artists began to produce increasingly sentimentalized images of children, emphasizing their angelic, adorable qualities. Yet, despite such rhetoric, real reform did not come quickly. High infant mortality rates, inadequate schooling, and child labour persisted right to the end of the nineteenth century, suggesting that many

Victorians remained unconvinced that childhood should be marked off as a protected period of dependence and development. Nevertheless, we are famously reminded of Charles Dickens who dealt with the state of the orphan child in warehouses and elsewhere. Be it Oliver Twist or David Copperfield, generations have looked sympathetically at the condition of such orphan children. In a society that was largely and rapidly heading towards commercialization, the child in the Victorian times remained the only contact with innocence. In a number of novels of the Victorian age, the child thus becomes either a concern as an individual, in what way the child/ childhood shapes the mind of the future adult becomes the subject of analysis. In the novels of the Brontë sisters, one can see the presence of these ideas to a great extent.

Growing up as the children of an Evangelical clergyman, the Brontë siblings lived on their own. They lost their mother early. The childhood that the sisters spent had far reaching effects on the adult life and thought of the novelists. The death of Maria and Elizabeth, the eldest two sisters of the Brontë's, had a traumatizing effect on the younger siblings. As children, the younger Brontë children had looked up to the elder sisters for leadership and support. This dependence took on a larger importance because Maria, and to a lesser extent Elizabeth, had helped to fill the void caused by their mother's death so early in their lives. Once again Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell were deprived of the maternal figures with the death of their elder sisters. This profound nature of their loss was to be reflected in most of their works. Motherless children and orphans feature not only in their juvenile writings but also in their novels. All of Charlotte's heroines, from Frances Henri in her first novel, *The Professor*, to the schoolgirl in *Emma*, her last unfinished work, were orphans. It would not be wrong to say in the light of the above that the absence of maternal love

is a major cause in determining not only their future prospect but also their sense of loneliness and deprivation.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë too seems to have created an orphan world. Virtually every child, including Heathcliff, Catherine and Hindley in the first generation, and Linton, the young Catherine and Hareton in the second, lose at least one parent, mostly the mother. Though the crucial effect is much lesser in the novel of Emily but the motherless state of so many children ought to be treated with importance. In the novel by Emily Brontë, it is to be noted that the relationship between the two cousins Catherine and Linton is essentially that of a surrogate mother and her child.

By contrast to her elder sisters, Anne Brontë, who happened to be the closest to her aunt, ends up creating the most normal family picture in her novels. Agnes Grey has a father, mother and sister who make a happy home and also, like Jane Eyre, she goes out to be a governess on her own insistence. Helen Graham, the heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, has an ordinary life with her uncle and aunt, even though her parents are dead. Helen's uncle and aunt are not like that of Jane Eyre's. Helen's suitor, Gilbert Markham, is fatherless but not from his childhood and enjoys a robust and happy family life with a mother, brother and sister. Incidentally, Anne Brontë had been only five when Maria and Elizabeth died and so she seems to be the least affected by the intensity of loss of her mother as she still had her elder sisters, and later Charlotte and Emily, to look up to and care for her.

To begin with, the children are not angels in the novels of the Brontë's. Be it in *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*, the children are rebels. Then there are also the tyrannical children of the Bloomfield residence or of the Murray family (*Agnes Grey*). A study will reveal that a familiar Victorian pattern works in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

Jane Eyre, like Oliver Twist, does not lose her sense of innocence in spite of finding herself in difficult and challenging circumstances. As Jane grows up, her innocence is something that comes to be associated with her ability to take the right (moral) decisions and of sticking to them. Jane does start taking her decisions when quiet young; but then, ironically she is forced to make some choices early in life. When once put in the haunted Red Room, Jane does not lament but is very angry. Jane was a very young child when she was locked up in the Red Room. Even Bessie, the servant of the Reed household, is initially shocked by the behaviour of the young child, Jane. When the tale of *Jane Eyre* opens, we are treated to strong images of coldness, bleakness and banishment. Jane is seen trying to hide behind the curtains from her aunt, her two girl cousins, and her boorish boy cousin John. The icy coldness outside and the chilly family circle inside – such similar images are used to evoke a sense of isolation that Jane is subjected to at that time. What adds to Jane's isolation is her social position, an isolation that is more violently felt by Heathcliff. In their early growing up years, both Heathcliff and Jane are treated as the outsider, both are subjected to a certain amount of physical violence and initially both of them react with a sense of violent frustration though they are young children. Thereafter, the similarities end and Heathcliff and Jane begin to react very differently to their external circumstances. Incidentally, Charlotte Brontë chooses not to give the orphan Jane questionable parentage even as we note that the ignominy of questionable parentage is the fate of Emily's Heathcliff. Though not directly, but the difference in their state as an orphan gives different kinds of bitterness to young Jane and Heathcliff respectively. Young Jane, who is found looking at a book of engravings of Arctic wastes and the legendary regions of winter, suffers from a sense of isolation that can be easily identified with. Jane, as the orphan, is the outsider in the Reed

household (Charlotte Brontë as a young child copied minute details of engravings, though she was not very original in her paintings and drawings. A strong sense of imagination affected her art works and when Charlotte left painting and concentrated on writing, what did not leave her is her strong ability to present visuals in words. Also the author seemed fascinated by paintings of landscape like the Romantics). John Reed, her cousin, provokes young Jane by striking her in the face and she is taunted for her poverty and dependence on the Reed family. Immediately, the very political, social and economic circumstances of Jane's life are established. Early Victorian literature often uses the case of the orphaned child to evoke many questions about various social systems and evils. The society, which preached charity on the one hand, was more than often brutal in the treatment of the orphan child. Jane Eyre was subjected to hypocritical treatment at Lowood. Brocklehurst, the headmaster of Lowood (Charlotte had painted her imagination of Brocklehurst as someone with a wide forehead, stern eyes and nose and stiff lips), is not very different from the people who were present in the warehouses where Oliver Twist had been forced to stay as a young orphan child. Philanthropists, religious leaders, doctors, journalists, and artists all campaigned to improve the lives of poor children but in reality everything was not fine. In 1840, Lord Ashley (later the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury) helped set up the Children's Employment Commission, which published parliamentary reports on the working conditions in mines and collieries. The shocking testimony contained in these reports inspired Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous protest poem *The Cry of the Children* (1844). Shaftesbury went on to become president of the Ragged School Union, an evangelical organization which established hundreds of schools for the poor. Famous child-savers like Mary Carpenter and Dr. Thomas Barnardo taught in Ragged Schools before opening their own institutions for destitute youths. Dr.

Barnardo described some of his missionary efforts in the *Children's Treasury* while investigative reporters like Henry Mayhew went on to tirelessly document the dire conditions endured by many working-class families.

To begin with, instinctively, the orphan is aware that he or she has to survive. Since the orphan child begins as a dependent, often one way of tormenting the orphan child is not to give him food or to keep him under-fed. 'Hunger' had been commonly used as a motif in the treatment of the orphaned children in Victorian Literature. Is not Oliver's rebellious side revealed when he first asks for a second helping of food in the warehouse? Even Jane is under-nourished compared to her cousins in the Reed household. Later too at school, Jane Eyre seems to have spent more time thinking about her frozen limbs and her empty stomach than in learning the Scriptures. The account of food in *Jane Eyre,* and subsequently in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë,* which aroused the most sympathy (largely because Mrs. Gaskell blamed Charlotte's school for the latter's stunted growth and ill health, and also for adversely affecting the health of her sisters and eventually killing her elder sisters) help us to understand the hunger motif better. In *Jane Eyre,* we are told that the housekeeper at school was 'a woman after Mr. Brocklehurst's own heart, made up of equal parts of whalebone and iron'.[1] The breakfast porridge was regularly served up so burnt that it was inedible, and dinner, 'redolent of rancid fat', was a mess of 'indifferent potatoes and strange shreds of rusty meat, mixed and cooked together',[2] as reported the Parish Registers; hence, corroborating that the state of such schools was similar and that as a novel, *Jane Eyre* stands inspired by real life episodes. Unable to eat these disgusting main meals, the girls became so weak that half the school soon had fallen victim to fever! This account actually gives us an insight into the real state of affairs in many schools

[1]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin,2012), p.83.
[2] Parish Registers, St Peter's Church, Hartshead : *The Parish Registers of Hartshead*(London:Armytage,1920), pp.280-82.

of the time. Here I would like to draw attention to two facts about the education policy during the early Victorian times: 1) In 1833, the government awarded grants of money to schools. However, not everyone who ran the schools was able to read themselves, so the standard of education was not very good. 2) In 1844, the Parliament passed a law requiring that children working in factories should be given six half-days' schooling every week. 'Ragged Schools' were set up to provide free basic education for orphans and very poor children.

Yet such laws did not change the actual state of things in schools. Charlotte told Mrs. Gaskell that the food at Cowan Bridge was 'spoilt by the dirty carelessness of the cook, so that she and her sisters disliked their meals exceedingly'.[3] That the food was bad is something even Carus Wilson, the rector and founder of Cowan Bridge, agreed with. Charlotte would be sometimes so hungry in school that she would be thankful even for a piece of bread but unlike her contemporaries she did not take to stealing. Elizabeth Brontë and another pupil, Maria Gauntlett, who came from the south of England, were unable to stomach the north-country diet of oatmeal porridge and therefore went without breakfast for six months! When forced to eat it on one occasion, Elizabeth vomited. Another Cowan Bridge girl who belonged to the period of the Brontës sent a horrific account to prove that all that had been said of the food at school was not untrue. Her first reaction on reading of *Jane Eyre* was an instant recognition of a picture that was not exaggerated; she rather felt that the matter was understated, than otherwise, in this novel by Charlotte. She then went on to say:

> The housekeeper was very dirty with the cooking and very unkind to the girls generally. I have frequently seen grease swimming on the milk and water we had for breakfast, in consequence of its having been

[3] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (London: Penguin, 1992),p.8.

> boiled in a greasy copper and I perfectly remember having once been sent for a cup of tea for a teacher who was ill in bed, no teaspoon being at hand the housekeeper stirred the tea with her finger, she being engaged in cutting raw meat at that time. If space would allow I could give you scores of such instances as these which fell under my observation and which nearly after twenty-five years have elapsed, dwell unpleasantly in my memory. Our food was almost always badly cooked, and besides that we certainly had not enough of it, whatever may be said was to the contrary.[4]

Charlotte had to be sent to the doctor because of the food and the doctor who examined Charlotte spit out the portion of food he tasted. Even Miss Andrew, the junior headmistress at Cowan Bridge, acknowledged that during the spring when the doctor was called to examine the girls with 'low fever', he had spoken rather scornfully of a certain baked rice pudding. Miss Andrews protested saying that the ingredients of the dish were rice, sugar and milk and the effects of these could hardly be as serious as the doctor suggested; this shows a lack of sympathetic concern in the teachers about the girls' complaints about the food offered. True, Cowan Bridge was not a singular case; there were complaints about food at Woodhouse Grove that came in as late as the 1850s:

> Breakfast consisted of a thick slice of dry bread and about half a pint of skimmed milk, occasionally sour, and sometimes slightly warmed in winter. At dinner we generally had two courses; and supper, at six o'clock, was an exact repetition of breakfast…my stomach rebels at this moment at the thought of rice, it was either boiled very dry (into snowballs) and then anointed with a thin unguent composed of treacle and warm water, or else baled in huge black tins, in which it looked as

[4]Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontes* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson,1994), p. 126.

> if it had been 'trodden under foot of men'. You had to eat it all up, or Mrs. Farrar would probably give you a box on the ear, and stand over you till you did. I have many a time gone away from the table with food in my handkerchief to throw away, because, had I been forced to eat it, I should have been ill. [5]

The school register actually supports the claims of Mrs. Gaskell. Ill health was a common thing among the girls in the early years of the school. Of the fifty-three students who were there at the same time as the Brontës, one died at Cowan Bridge, eleven left for home because of ill-health and six of them died soon after reaching home. There is no doubt that Charlotte suffered much and endured much hardship during her stay in the school. Her fastidious nature was revolted by the unavoidable evils of communal school life and she resented the feeling of a *charity child.* Also she could not forgive the fact that her elder sisters had died as a result of their experience at the school. Charlotte had entered school to train to become a governess. This experience did not prove pleasant and was physically damaging mainly because of the food. Early in the novel *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Brocklehurst, the headmaster and treasurer at Lowood School where Jane is put as a child, attempts to control the bodies of his female students, 'bodies' that he views as vile. As he explains to the headmistress of the school:

> 'You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralized by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost,

[5] *Ibid*., p.135.

> thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of the institution. . . Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls'.[6]

Jane at Lowood is put in the dock so that she becomes a warning to other students to prevent them from becoming like Jane. Brocklehurst tries to control Jane's appetite hoping thus to punish her. He tells all the teachers to 'punish her [Jane's] body to save her soul.'[7] As she is humiliated, her body manipulated and displayed, Jane finds a moment of solace and empowerment when body and soul unite rather than remain separate entities. Thus when put in the Red Room, Jane is not subdued but very angry and rebellious, wanting and making a call for dignity. She overcomes the constraints of her body and the triumph of her spirit is evident thereafter in the way she graphs her life. Like Brocklehurst, Jane's aunt too wants to control her soul through controlling and over-powering her body and like the former, has to learn that such is not possible with Jane. Interestingly, Helen, Jane's schoolmate, subdues the body and in doing so believes that she can achieve spiritual elevation, and needless to say this is a stance very unlike Jane. Jane when she becomes more friendless, her childhood experience gives her a lifelong internal dictate that she will care and respect for herself. She states and accepts her experience thus: 'I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself'.[8] This serves as a moral guide through Jane's life. Jane has the determination to protest against those who punish her unjustly while Helen, her schoolmate is about all forgiveness. When a sick Helen lay on her bed, Jane expectedly says: 'How sad to be lying now on a sick-bed, and to be in danger of dying! This world is pleasant, it

[6] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), pp. 72-73.
[7] *Ibid.*, p.77.
[8] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p.360.

would be dreary to be called from it, and have to go who knows where?'[9] Jane has a frail body but a strong sense of identity too. It is this strength of retaining the respect as an individual, very early in life, that allows us to trust the honesty of a very young Jane Eyre. That Jane will do no wrong and will stand up for her rights in her life is clear at a very early stage.

The rebel streak in the young orphans and under-parented children in the novels of the Brontë sisters is stunning. Both Jane Eyre and Heathcliff are largely unwelcome in the household where they live. Heathcliff is brought to Wuthering Heights when Catherine is six and Hindley fourteen. The dirty, black-haired child Heathcliff spoke in a language that no one at the Heights understood. On the other hand, the angry Jane when put in the Red Room expresses herself violently; how Jane could have possibly expressed herself in such a manner is not understood by those around her at this time. When a Jane or Heathcliff uses foul language, they are still very different from the Reed children or the Murray children. Nonetheless, one cannot help but note that the position of the orphaned female child was a little more disadvantageous than that of the orphan male child. In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler does note that 'women are motherless children in a patriarchal society'.[10] This means that in the patriarchal society, the woman has neither the power nor wealth that she can hand over to her daughters. Chesler highlights of the disadvantageous position of the daughter or the girl child in the society. The girl child then has to live as dependent on men, just as children depend on women. The Jane Eyre that we meet first is not the governess but she is literally first addressed as the motherless and fatherless child. Her guardian, Mrs. Reed, despises and oppresses her. Young Jane is

[9] *Ibid*,p.91.
[10] Chesler Phyllis, *Women and Madness* (New York: Doubleday Publisher, 1972). http:// Phyllis-chesler.com.Web accessed on 5th January,2011.

subjected to physical trauma. Her economic state also sees her in a very vulnerable position in a highly class-conscious society. When John Reed subjects Jane to cruelty, her reaction is to fly at her cousin. She is punished and locked in the Red Room –

the room where her uncle had died and the one which was rumoured to be the haunted chamber. The powerless Jane has both physical and psychic violence pitted against her. The spirited child is punished so that she embraces the psyche of the victim. To young Jane, there are two reactions possible at this point: she can either give in to the self-destructive hysterical bouts or, secondly, she can conform to the image of the victim. In the Red Room, as she is isolated and powerless, she says what cannot be usually expected of a young girl in her position. Jane thinks:

> Unjust – unjust! said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die. [11]

The young girl who says this is still dependent on the household where she stays for physical support. But even then she is thinking of other alternatives, even if they seem impossible for her that point. She is determined to survive with dignity and pride. When young Jane falls ill, her illness is the 'female illness' and the comfort that she needs at this point strangely comes from the sharp-tongued servant Bessie. The latter's affection for Jane at this point helps young Jane not to fall into a state of depression. This newly acquired self-respect is what can be identified as the rebel streak in Jane. She would retain her self-respect and the spirit of rebellion and confront her aunt:

[11]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p.18.

> Shaking from head to foot, thrilled with ungovernable excitement, I continued –
>
> 'I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.'
>
> …Ere I finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, and with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty.[12]

This outburst of a powerless and young Jane makes her feel elevated. The depressive and self-punishing reaction sets in; she is only pulled out of it by Bessie's appearance and a confirmed sense of Bessie's affection and respect for her. Bessie tells young Jane that she must not be afraid of people because that would make people dislike her – an odd bit of counsel, yet Jane's precocious courage is able to respond to it.

At Lowood institute for the poor or orphaned genteel females, Jane is destined to become the governess. This all-female world is presided over by Mr. Brocklehurst who represents sexual double standards. The hypocrisy of the powerful, using religion, charity and morality, to keep the poor and the women under repression, is central to the behaviour of people like Brocklehurst. Though Miss Temple, the teacher in charge at Lowood Institute and the only one to protect the girls, had no power in the world of Brocklehurst and though Helen Burns, her friend, becomes the pure face of religion, Jane gains from Helen and Miss Temple a valuable knowledge. She learns from Helen that love has to be earned through self-sacrifice and suffering. (This is

[12] *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

where Heathcliff begins to differ from Jane). Jane combines the moral and intellectual force of Helen and Miss Temple to realize her own worth and this helps her to move into the realm of experience with more conviction.

True, torture is not something unknown to the young children even in Wuthering Heights. Hindley beats Heathcliff; the former boxes Hareton in the ears even as Nelly tried her best to save Hareton from his father. Similarly, right from the Reed Household to Lowood, Jane had faced violence in some form or the other. When she arrives in Thornfield Hall, her need is not for a man but she still wants to gain experience. Violence is not something that will leave her in Thornfiled. In the Victorian England of the 1840s, Jane's sense of herself as a woman is equal to insanity. Jane, the child in the Red Room, and Jane, the governess who has a mad woman existing as her opposite in Thornfield ─ both try to curb imagination within the limits of what was deemed possible to bear for a powerless woman in England. Jane's future course of action is guided by that sense of survival with dignity, something that she stood up for even when put in the Red Room.

Catherine Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and Jane Eyre as young rebel children do not acquire the tag of being vain. But Adele, the daughter of Rochester by his French mistress, and Rosalie (*Agnes Grey*) are initially introduced as young vain children. Adele, under the tutelage of Jane, is tamed. Adele's taming involves taking away much of the girlish penchant for jewellery, small talk etc. So, on one hand, the teaching of Adele involves rebelling against the image of woman as a piece of mere decoration for man, and at the same time, conforming to the sense of feminine grace. Agnes Grey would unfortunately fail to impress upon young Rosalie the need not to be driven by the glitter of the outside. Interestingly, both Rosalie and Adele do lack the strength of a young Jane Eyre or Agnes Grey. More often than not, the reaction

and reception to the environment around them determine the nature of these children. Any violation or departure from their core nature proves to be problematic in the case of the young children. An Oliver or Jane, as young children, are frail and lack physical strength and comfort and this lack contrasts with their immense sense of dignity and it never prevents them from asking for their rights. They refuse to be corrupted by circumstances and even when there are temptations. Adele is under-parented but she is no Jane Eyre and also does not lack physical comfort. Rochester, who is hardly a father to Adele, lets her indulge in her vanities of dresses and jewellery. The case of Rosalie is not very different; she has her comforts about her and does not need to feel the financial constraints of her governess, Agnes. At one point in the novel, the children of Wuthering Heights came down with measles and Nelly took charge. She finds Heathcliff uncomplaining and patient but soon realizes that it is hardness, not gentleness, which makes Heathcliff so forbearing. Heathcliff shows a rare ability to bear and one has to agree that all of the requisite strength is not only physical but also in the mind. Caroline Helstone of *Shirley* is also under-parented. True her case is unique, she is no Jane Eyre or Shirley but she is also not vain like Rosalie:

> Caroline had never known her mother, as she was taken from her in infancy, and had not since seen her; her father died comparatively young, and her uncle, the rector, had for some years been her sole guardian. He was not, as we are aware, much adapted, either by nature or habits, to have the charge of a young girl He had taken little trouble about her education; probably he would have taken none if she, finding herself neglected, had not grown anxious on her own account, and asked, every now and then, for a little attention, and for the means of acquiring such amount of knowledge as could not be

> dispensed with. Still, she had a depressing feeling that she was inferior, that her attainments were fewer than were usually possessed by girls of her age and station…[13]

Unlike Jane, Heathcliff is a robust child but his physical strength does not save him pain as a child. The violent trait in Heathcliff or Jane is an expression of a sense of wrong they feel and are subjected to. On the other hand, the violence of the Reed boy or the Murray boy is simple sadistic enjoyment. There is also another side of the picture of the wealthy children. While the wealthy children may have been spoiled and had a much better life than their poor counterparts, they, the wealthy children too had what would seem to be a sad, redundant and affection-less existence. Children were mostly raised by a nanny who would teach the child what was proper and what was not. Day to day living was nothing more than a lonely monotonous routine and very formal. Wealthy Victorian children rarely communicated with their parents except for a specified time each day. Winston Churchill, the erstwhile Prime Minister of United Kingdom once said that he could count the times he had been hugged by his mother as a child. These wealthy children like the Murrays in *Agnes Grey* were often encouraged to cultivate violence and they uninhibitedly indulged in cruel actions. Violence is present in the world of the children in the novels of the Brontë sisters but the reason why and what leads the child in question to be violent determines our reaction to the said children/child in turn. So there is sympathy and even empathy for a Jane or a Heathcliff when they become violent but we feel the need to chide the Murray children. The texture of violence that Heathcliff indulges in is not devoid of cruelty yet behind his violence there is always a sense of having been wronged in the past. Heathcliff looked physically different from the other children of the Heights and yet initially begins with a preferred position in the Heights. This preferential treatment

[13] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.75.

of Heathcliff makes Hindley jealous. Critics have attributed Heathcliff's preferential position to the fact that he was possibly an illegitimate child of Mr. Earnshaw. Heathcliff threatens Hindley with that he would tell Mr. Earnshaw of Hindley's ill treatment of him. When Heathcliff enters the Heights, he is unwelcome to the members of the Earnshaw family except for Catherine who is the first to befriend him. This explains his violent love for Catherine throughout his life. Heathcliff finds himself extremely betrayed when Catherine chooses the civilized Linton over him. Heathcliff unfortunately is never allowed to be good. When Hindley ill-treats him, he has to retaliate. Hindley makes Heathcliff go without the Christmas dinner when Heathcliff appears neat and clean before the Lintons. Hindley says that Heathcliff's manners are not suitable for the civilized society. The more he is made to feel as an outsider, the more aggressive Heathcliff becomes.

Mr. Earnshaw is unsuccessful like most parents portrayed in the literature of the time. Mr. Earnshaw understands that because he dotes on the young Heathcliff, many in the household hate the child, including Hindley. Mr. Earnshaw sends Hindley to college. This action only widens the rift of jealousy between Hindley and Heathcliff. When it comes to taming his daughter, Earnshaw again fails, as also does Joseph who tries to moralize upon Catherine who expectedly refuses to abide by the lessons taught. One day, her father tells Catherine: 'Nay Cathy, I cannot love thee; thou'rt worse than thy brother'.[14] Mr. Earnshaw was unpredictable as a parent that further alienated little Catherine:

> Now, Mr. Earnshaw did not understand jokes from his children: he had always been strict and grave with them; and Catherine, on her part, had no idea why her father should be crosser and less patient in his ailing condition than was in his prime.[15]

[14] Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (New Delhi: Fingerprint Classics, 2016), p. 40.
[15] *Ibid.*,p.39.

As a parent, Hindley too is no good. After the death of his wife, Hindley treats Hareton either with immoderate fondness or with a madman's cruelty. He boxes Hareton's ears and carries the screaming child upstairs and holds him over the banister. Heathcliff at that moment happens to enter downstairs, catches the falling child, and sets it on its feet. Almost ironically, Heathcliff transfers his power of survival to Hareton. It is Hareton who would be a truer copy of Heathcliff than his own son. When Heathcliff first looks upon his son Linton, he tells Nelly: 'what a lovely, charming thing! Haven't they reared it on snails and sour milk, Nelly?'[16] Heathcliff claims ownership of his son only to use him as a tool in the scheme of his revenge: 'Yes, Nelly, my son is prospective owner of your place, and I should not wish him to die till I am certain of being his successor. Besides he is mine, and I want the triumph of seeing my descendent fairly lord of their estates: my child hiring their children to till their father's lands for wages'.[17] Heathcliff later refers to his child as 'it' just in the way Nelly had when Heathcliff had arrived in the Heights as a young child. Contrast this with the fact that Heathcliff appreciates Hareton who is boorish and clumsy and compares him with his own son: the former is 'gold put to the use of paving stones' while his own son is 'tin polished to ape a service of silver'.[18]

It would perhaps help to note that, as members of the gentry, the Earnshaws and the Lintons occupy a somewhat precarious place within the hierarchy of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British society. At the top of the British society was the royalty, followed by the aristocracy, then by the gentry, and then by the lower classes who made up the vast majority of the population. Although the gentry, or upper middle class, possessed servants and often large estates, they held

[16] *Ibid.*,p.185.
[17] *Ibid.,* p.186.
[18] *Ibid.,* p 192.

nonetheless a fragile social position. The social status of aristocrats was a formal and settled matter, because aristocrats had official titles. Members of the gentry, however, held no titles, and their status was thus subject to change. A man might see himself as a gentleman but find, to his embarrassment, that his neighbours did not share this view. A discussion of whether or not a man was really a gentleman would consider such questions as how much land he owned, how many tenants and servants he had, how he spoke, whether he kept horses and a carriage, and whether his money came from land or 'trade'– gentlemen scorned banking and commercial activities. Considerations of class status often crucially inform the characters' motivations in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine's decision to marry Edgar so that she will be 'the greatest woman of the neighborhood'[19] is only the most obvious example. The Lintons are relatively firm in the gentry/gentleman status but nonetheless take great pains to prove their status through their behaviour. The Earnshaws, on the other hand, rest on much shakier ground socially. They do not have a carriage, they have less land, and their house, as Lockwood remarks with great puzzlement, resembles that of a 'homely, northern farmer'[20] and not that of a gentleman. The shifting nature of social status is demonstrated most strikingly in Heathcliff's trajectory from that of a homeless waif to a young gentleman-by-adoption, to a common labourer, to a gentleman again (although the status-conscious Lockwood remarks that Heathcliff is only a gentleman in dress and manners). As a child, Catherine had not been affected by such social status, it is her affectation that creates Heathcliff and, ironically, she also fashions the later Heathcliff by her rejection of him.

When, after Mr. Earnshaw's death, Hindley comes to power, Heathcliff loses his preferred position. Heathcliff becomes the outsider. Interestingly, to the Lintons, Catherine would become Miss Earnshaw and Heathcliff would be referred to as

[19] *Ibid.*,p.72.
[20] *Ibid.*,p.7.

'brute' and 'savage'. This position of the brute or the savage would become a reason for Heathcliff's disqualification in the civilized world represented by the Lintons. Interestingly, Heathcliff is said to be dark and this physical contrast is also deliberately created to negate his position in the mostly white people's world of Wuthering Heights. This also begins the Marxist reading of Heathcliff's position. It is this position as the outsider that would see Heathcliff as the violator, the disruptive force bordering on the line separating good and evil. The circumstances push Heathcliff to embark on a path that would only bring harm to him and to others.

In using these child couples, the playmates of the opposite sex, Emily Brontë is following the conventions of the nineteenth century. The boy and girl couple allows a type of innocent mating – little Adams and Eves in a prelapsarian state – and literature is full of such examples. In this world, the adult is in the periphery or the older generation neatly and quietly dies off before the main action begins. Here the progenitors and descendants alike are absent. Wuthering Heights thus has no contact with the past or present. Young Cathy too is an unwelcome infant 'wailing while nobody cared a morsel'.[21] The parents are notoriously absent, indifferent, or lost to death. When Catherine is ill, she is brought to the Grange by Mrs. Linton and on Catherine's second stay itself, the death of the older generation at the Grange has taken place. When Heathcliff arrived at Wuthering Heights, he directly or indirectly heralded the end of Mr. and Mrs. Earnshaw. When the new Mr. and Mrs. Linton begin their life at the Grange, they too complete the cycle. Nelly claims that the young couple were threatened and lost when they had just begun their new life.

As children, Catherine and Heathcliff had planned revenge. They had vowed to grow up as rude as 'savages'. This was of course a kind of assertion whereby they had refused to grow up at all. Their revolt then is like Satan against a religious

[21] *Ibid.,* p.147.

regime: like not spending Sundays reading sermons. The exiled pair of angels, that is Catherine and Heathcliff, is outside the warmth and comfort of the sitting room of the house at Wuthering Heights and exiled to the washhouse! So when the two children escape from the Heights to go to the Grange, it is like exiled Satan going from Hell to visit Eden. They visit the Paradisiacal Grange. The Satans, that is Heathcliff and Catherine, are imperfectly bad and the inhabitants of Paradise that is, the Lintons are imperfectly good. Also, the paradise itself, with quarrelling inhabitants, is less than ideal. It is because the invaders and inhabitants are imperfect that the Fall is not restricted to any one soul. If Catherine and Heathcliff's entry into the Grange is disruptive, so is Edgar Linton's entry. In fact, with his civil manners, Edgar Linton does not fit in the restless world of Catherine and Heathcliff. Nevertheless this isolation of Heathcliff leads him to believe that to become a part of the world of Catherine, now he has to become like the Lintons and be in possession of wealth. To Heathcliff, this means acquiring wealth but this journey of Heathcliff is tinged heavily with a sense of wrong and injustice and Heathcliff is eventually driven always by a sense of bitterness that does not allow him, or those whose lives he controls, to live in peace.

Predictably in Emily Brontë's novel, the complications start for the children as they move from innocence to knowledge. In *Wuthering Heights*, the Fall only occurs when the children move to some kind of awareness. The cost of knowledge is loss of innocence. So when young Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff look through the window of Thurshcross Grange, they find Edgar and Isabella quarrelling. Catherine and Heathcliff laugh, not really knowing that the world of the Lintons would disrupt their world. So if Heathcliff is to disrupt the life of the Grange later, even Edgar Linton's arrival and coming to Wuthering Heights is equally disruptive to the inmates of the Heights. Catherine Earnshaw does fall for the charms and the ways of the

Lintons. Falling to such a temptation does not change Catherine so as to have a lasting effect on her. In entering the world of Thurshcross Grange, young Catherine does allow worldly values and class consciousness to guide her relation with Heathcliff; vice versa, the entrance of Catherine and Heathcliff, at separate points into the Grange, will ultimately lead to the collapse of the Linton privilege and complacency. In the context of the Eden story, it is perhaps possible to understand better how Catherine and Heathcliff become rebel children – individually and as a couple. When Edgar Linton arrives at Wuthering Heights, it is through proper invitation and by the day. Catherine and Heathcliff are trespassers and come uninvited and with the intent of mischief, invading the world of Thurshcross Grange that is clearly suggestive of Paradise. When Catherine says she has more of Heathcliff in her, her argument is as weak as Eve's who, after the temptation, tries to justify herself to Adam.

The motherless children are powerless but struggle to keep up to the sense of being an individual – trying to be human in a man's world. Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, Heathcliff, and even Catherine Linton, as young children, refuse to accept any dictation. Jane Eyre refuses to break down in the face of violence that she is subjected to while Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff are determined to grow up as savages.

Nevertheless, just opposite to Jane, children like John Reed and his sisters exist. They have over indulgent parents and the brutishness in them is somewhat encouraged and when they torment children like Jane, far from being reprimanded, they are often encouraged. This stark contrast between the two types of children, that is those with parents and those without parents, is deliberately developed in the novels of the Brontë sisters.

A third category would be the illegitimate child. If Heathcliff is seen as the illegitimate child, then he reminds us in a way of Caliban (*The Tempest,*

Shakespeare). If one looks at the portrayal of Caliban, his bestial image is evoked mostly through the responses of other characters in the play. Others refer to Heathcliff as a brute; it is only Catherine who does not think so. When Caliban answers back to Prospero, he does so in the language that his master understood; so it is with Heathcliff. When Heathcliff feels betrayed, he decides to retaliate in the language that he thought would be understood by those who had wronged him. Heathcliff feels angry and hurt when his isolation is completed after Catherine too deserts him. True, his plan of revenge does not fail unlike Caliban's! Caliban and Heathcliff have a colonized background or such a feeling is given and they are subject to the judgment of the White Man and his psyche. So both Caliban and Heathcliff are victims and in the latter's case, the sense of having been wronged evokes a reaction that unleashes a series of destruction in Wuthering Heights.

When Heathcliff returns after a number of years, virtually as the fatal invader, the focus slowly turns towards another pair of children – first Cathy and Linton, and then Cathy and Hareton. Everything in the novel then is related to the primary event of the *fall* and *separation* of Catherine and Heathcliff. So all the hopes, temptations, failures of their childhood give rise to the temptations and failures that we get to see during their adulthood. Interestingly, we can never leave behind the children as we proceed to the adult stories. One is reminded of the vision of Catherine as the ghost child and even Nelly has a vision of Hindley as a child. The persistent childishness in the now grown-up characters does not allow them to change. So the assumed adulthood of Heathcliff and Catherine is stripped at some point and the course of action that follow forces us to think that things would have been better had Catherine and Heathcliff remained children or had retained their child-like innocence. Catherine is strikingly indifferent to her pregnancy. When Catherine Linton is born, she is like the by-product of her mother's death. This generation of Cathy Linton too is under-

parented. Linton, the son of Isabella and Heathcliff, loses his mother young and his father uses Linton more as the pawn in his plan of revenge. Linton remains a trapped and unwanted creature in the world ruled by Heathcliff, like his mother. Linton looks like the extension of the helplessness of his mother. If Charlotte Brontë saw the growing up of the *motherless* child as the growth of and into maturity of a motherless child in *Jane Eyre,* Emily sees that children when invaded by the adult world have an *undesirable fall*. Interestingly, it is the *coming to awareness* that forms the focal point of understanding the children in most of the Brontë novels.

A fourth category of children would be the haunted and uncanny children. In Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* we see children who are uncanny. Lucy Snowe, on facing little Polly says: 'When I say child I use an inappropriate and undescriptive term – a term suggesting any picture rather than that of the demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette, that might just have fitted a good-sized doll'.[22] Lucie Armitt rightly points out in the light of the above statement:

> This sense of the projection of uncanniness onto Polly, however, also works as an early piece of mirror identification, for though Lucy is several years older than Polly and, by the end of the book, Lucy is in her mid-twenties where Polly is in her late teens, Polly's main narrative function is to cast reflected light upon Lucy's past. In actuality, Lucy's frequently voiced criticism of Polly for her determination to hold onto childish ways, reminds us that Lucy's own partially erased family history leaves her, too, stranded in the role of abandoned child. Hence, in a second face-to-face encounter, this time with an 'adult' apparition, she considers, '[Was] that strange thing [. . .] of this world, or of a realm beyond the grave; or [was it . . .] only the child of malady, and I of that malady the prey [?]'.[23]

[22]Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), p.12.
[23]*Ibid.*,p.258.

> As the phrase 'child of malady' implies, Lucy's own relationship to her past has come in some sense sickened, pathological perhaps even 'haunted'. [24]

Villette is about treating childhood as something uncanny and as an indeterminate space of identification. Like most novels of Charlotte, mothers are absent but their effectual presence is felt as in the novel presently under discussion. Interestingly, Lucy is mostly surrounded by children in this novel: little Polly is followed by Madame Beck's daughters (Fifine in Chapter 10, Georgette in Chapter 11) and finally there are the demanding pupils of Madame Beck's establishment. The children hinder, obstruct, and deny Lucy her autonomy leaving her feeling restless mostly. Lucy never becomes a surrogate mother or near mother figure to the children who come in contact with her. Polly is particularly disturbing, both strange and estranged from all. So acute is this strangeness that, at the beginning of the novel, one is left wondering who she is. The concept of childhood here is different from other Charlotte Brontë's novels.

Incidentally, Charlotte and Anne had enough experiences as governess and these experiences had hardly been enjoyable. These experiences are definitely part of the novel *Agnes Grey*. This latter novel was published at the same time (1847) as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Family concerns drove Agnes Grey to leave home, first for Wellhood, the home of the Bloomfield family. In *Agnes Gr*ey, Agnes found it impossible to teach the children of the Bloomfield family because she found all her efforts to discipline the children were undermined by Mrs. Bloomfield who thought and felt that her angels were always right. Agnes Grey's perception of the children here works to formulate the view that children were not angels always but could be

[24] Lucie Armitt, *Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë's Villette.*www..usir.salford.ac.uk/1299/1/321217. Web accessed on 18th March, 2014.

little devils. That the concept of childhood, as presented in the novels of the Brontë sisters, begins the debate whether the children were angels or little devils is now widely accepted.

Agnes then came to the Murray family who were sophisticated but hardly the pious and warm family that Agnes had hoped to encounter. Sixteen-year-old Rosalie was interested only in flirting and fourteen year old Matilda was interested only in horses and stables. Of course, Agnes found herself treated badly and the girls under her tutelage hardly had the good sense to take what she had to offer. Through Rosalie, 'frailties' and 'feminine fancies' stand rejected. Rosalie is what Adele would have become if Jane had not moulded her through her education. This is where Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey are different as individuals and as governesses. Agnes becomes a governess forced only by financial concerns but to Jane, the governess-ship is an escape from Lowood. In the novel *Agnes Grey* a large space is devoted to the experiences of Agnes as a governess while *Jane Eyre* does not merely deal with the experiences of the governess but that of an individual. Agnes Grey talks about her experiences and points out the flaws of her students, creating a distance and eventually proving how well groomed she is in comparison with her students. The whole episode emphasizes that it had been futile to actually try to liberate and improve the children whom she had been called to be governess of. On the other hand, Jane does take on the role of the surrogate mother because of her relationship with Rochester and later because of her marriage to him. In a way, even Adele is under-parented, with her mother dead and her father hardly taking more than a passing interest in her. Her fancy in fine things is seen as frivolous but thankfully for Adele there is no John Reed (*Jane Eyre)* or Tom (*Agnes Grey)* to torment her. Strangely, none of the students of the protagonists Jane on Agnes excel or outdo their

governesses. Even with disadvantages, Jane as a child fares better with a much more strong sense as an individual than Adele!

It seems that it is entirely the credit of the characters such as Jane or Agnes or Lucy Snowe that they had grown up to be such fine women. Jane is an orphan and ill-treated. Agnes did have her parents, warm and kind, but their presence is fragile and without strength. Agnes goes out to earn for herself and also for her family. Agnes found herself being coldly received and realized that the Bloomfield children were anything but noble and well behaved as their mother persistently claimed.

This is significant because Heathcliff would torture his son Linton who would be similarly helpless as Hareton had been earlier. It is Hareton, expectedly, who takes after Heathcliff. When Lockwood comes to Wuthering Heights, he finds a heap of dead rabbits. Later when Isabella is fleeing the Heights, she sees Hareton hanging a litter of puppies! Heathcliff's favourite sport is to torture to death cats whose claws and teeth have been pulled out. In her deathbed delirium, Catherine recollects how she and Heathcliff had seen a bird's nest full of skeletons. Violence on helpless animals is common and almost has a symbolic significance in *Wuthering Heights*. Dogs are especially used to indicate violence and the uncivilized and brutish side of man. The dogs are shown savaging someone or as savages themselves. Even Isabella and Edgar quarrel over their dog and almost tear it to pieces! The world of children of the Heights shows a lot of violence.

'Parenting', then is itself a big issue in the novels of the Brontë sisters and consequently the study of childhood as presented in their novels becomes quite interesting. Who can forget the fact that Heathcliff was delighted when Linton, his son, died or the indifference of Catherine when she was expecting Cathy? Edgar Linton takes over completely in looking after his daughter after the death of his wife

but he fails as a parent. Cathy is rebellious and refuses to take instructions from Nelly when asked not to go to the Heights. A young Heathcliff, it can be recollected had threatened to tell Mr. Earnshaw if Hindley did not give in to his demands; similarly, Cathy is found warning Nelly that she would complain to her father if she was not allowed to proceed with what she desired.

One text that is slightly different in temperament, in depicting parenting, than what has been discussed above is Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall.* Social historians have noted a change in England in the nineteenth century in which women were increasingly defined less by their sexuality and more by their roles as mothers. Helen Huntingdon's self-definition as mother, first and foremost, validates this general trend. Preliminary to the social critique of Victorian familial mores, Anne highlights the impact of maternal absence on the future of a child. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* the young Helen initially makes a foolish love marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, who we learn is alcoholic, adulterous and verbally abusive. Anne Brontë suggests the orphaned Helen's lapse in judgment regarding marriage is caused by a lack of maternal presence or care. Maternal absence, moreover, had a particularly poignant resonance for Anne Brontë whose mother died when she was less than two years old (1821). She was raised by a strictly religious, dutiful, but not very warm aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, who corresponds to Helen's Aunt Maxwell of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Brontës (Charlotte, Emily, Branwell and Anne) lamented the loss of their mother and blamed many of their personal misfortunes on her absence. In literature and folklore, however, maternal absence 'can also signify women's powerlessness . . . The maternal absence in eighteenth-century fiction might be said to represent this essential powerlessness, displaying in high relief the solitary heroine in

a field of patriarchal forces'.[25] Helen's own motherless situation may be read as symbolic of her persistent sense of isolation throughout the novel, an emotional solitude which initially renders her vulnerable to the false flattery and superficial charm of Arthur Huntingdon. And so, without maternal advice and protection, Helen finds herself deluded about the attractiveness of Huntingdon as a spouse.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, there is also an explicit defense of a virtuous mother's methods of child-rearing. Helen faces constant criticism from neighbours upon her manner of raising her son and also about the fact that she was raising him all by herself. Mrs. Markham felt that the child Arthur was too much with his mother and that she was likely to 'ruin' him by spending so much time with him: 'even at his age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it,'[26] Mrs. Markham lectures Helen thus. This accusation is repeated by Reverend Millward, the Vicar, who believes that consuming alcoholic beverages is manly and should be encouraged rather than restrained. Both Mrs. Markham and the Vicar will be proved wrong in predicting young Arthur's future, since the boy grows up into the ideal adult man – a loving husband, and unlike his own father, not alcoholic or adulterous or misogynistic. Markham narrates that 'pretty child is now a fine young man: he has realized his mother's brightest expectations, and is at present residing in Grassdale Manor with his young wife, the merry little Helen Hattersley, of yore'.[27] This attitude of Anne Brontë can be said to be anticipatory of Adrienne Rich's argument against maternal complicity in patriarchal motherhood in her classic feminist text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich has been cited as one of the first feminists to have recognized and subverted the

[25] Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1784 -1818* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), p.371.
[26] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.30.
[27] *Ibid.,* p. 375.

ways in which women raise boys to a sense of patriarchal entitlement; but with a sense of wonder we realise that Anne Brontë reached the same conclusion more than a hundred years before Rich had. In the novel, in spite of her misguided neighbours, Helen successfully nurtures in Arthur Jr. positive moral values and proper respect for women. She does so despite her lack of interest in and her 'lamentable ignorance' of housework, which provokes Mrs. Markham's judgment and pity.

One of the reasons why maternal authority and power increased throughout the nineteenth century was because of the influential Romantic literature, most notably the poetry of Blake. Also, in Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley's works, children came to be idealized and valued in new ways. Hence, the relationship of mother and child in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not merely a reaction against the corruption of alcoholic paternity; rather, the mother-child bond is presented positively as a norm against which the biting social satire of prejudice and injustice becomes all the more effective. Anne Brontë portrays the friendship between Helen and her son with genuine sensitivity and poignancy. Helen is by no means the 'perfect mother', as she herself points out. In her diary Helen admits: 'I am not well fitted to be his only companion, I know; but there is no other to supply my place. I am too grave to minister to his amusements and enter into his infantile sports as a nurse or a mother ought to do'.[28] But Helen is, despite her deficiencies, undoubtedly more qualified for the task of educating and raising Arthur than anyone else because of the depth and intensity of her love. One of the first moments where she is with her son is described thus: 'she stooped to kiss the child, and fondly clasped her arm round his neck'.[29] Again while she speaks to Markham, she continues to stroke Arthur's head. Helen welcomes Markham into her life solely because he provides pleasure for her son: 'her

[28] *Ibid* ., p.253.
[29] *Ibid* .,p.28.

son derived a great deal of pleasure from the acquaintance that he would not otherwise have known'.[30] That such maternal displays of affection are not for show is indicated by the moments of affection in which mother and son behave themselves unobserved: 'her little boy on the other [side], who stood leaning his elbow on her knee, and reading to her, with wonderful fluency, from a small volume that lay in her lap; while she rested her hand on his shoulder, and abstractedly played with the long, wavy curls that fell on his ivory neck'.[31] In this description, the mutual love of mother and son is underscored while it is implied that Arthur's great ability at reading is in some way a result of his mother's caring nurture. Although Helen's initiation into motherhood is a mixed blessing because of her unhappy marriage, we are shown that Helen's attachment to and love for her son remains constant and unchanging. Despite unhappy circumstances, Helen's response to Arthur Jr., from infancy, is filled with love and delight:

> My little Arthur! there you lie in sweet, unconscious slumber, . . . He wakes; his tiny arms are stretched towards me; his eyes unclose; they meet my gaze, but will not answer it. Little angel! You do not know me; you cannot think of me or love me yet; and yet how fervently my heart is knit to yours; how grateful I am for all the joy you give me! [32]

Unfortunately, this newfound maternal love is a further source of marital disharmony. Helen's husband denounces the baby because of his jealousy: 'Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely

[30] *Ibid.*, p.48.
[31] *Ibid.*, p.56.
[32] *Ibid.*, p.192.

infatuated about it'.[33] In fact, the father's neglect is a reason that escalates the mother's love since Helen 'gave [her] little one a shower of gentle kisses to make up for its other parent's refusal'.[34] However genuine Helen's love and attachment to her son, she cannot help but be aware of the dangers of over-attachment and over-indulgence, 'for I never knew till now how strong are a parent's temptations to spoil an only child'.[35] Therefore her maternal love is tempered and strengthened by rational principles, and this combination of discipline and devotion serves to vindicate her maternal vocation. Even in the middle of her misery, Helen cannot fail to be delighted by the time spent with her son, 'forgetting, for the moment, all [her] cares, laughing at his gleeful laughter, and delighting [her]self with his delight'.[36]

What we have discussed above are idealizing vignettes of childhood that remain widespread in nineteenth-century literature. However there was also a completely different perception that had existed as far as attitude towards children was concerned. The pervasive belief of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century was that evil was inherent in children and required strict and even harsh handling in order to be eradicated.[37] Beginning with Rousseau and moving through English Romanticism, the opposite view gradually gained prominence: the idea that children were purer and closer to God than their fallen adult counterparts. Thus Helen's closeness to her offspring can be seen as symbolic of her greater purity, her religiosity, her moral virtue and even her essential goodness. These contrast sharply with Annabella Lowborough's (*The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall)* heartless indifference to her children, which may be seen as symptomatic of her general moral depravity.

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[33] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), p.192.
[34]*Ibid*., p.192.
[35]*Ibid*.,p.232
[36]*Ibid*., p.195.
[37] Christina Hardyment, *Dream Babies: Three Centuries of Good Advice on Child Care* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p.8.

While Annabella lay 'on the drawing-room sofa, deep in the last new novel,' Helen on the other hand 'had been romping with the little creatures, almost as merry and wild as themselves'.[38] While we are brought to pity by Helen's lack of custody rights to her child, Anne Brontës seems to imply that Annabella deserves the hard fate of being separated from her daughter. Helen writes, 'that mother never loved children, and has so little natural affection for her own that I question whether she will not regard it as a relief to be thus entirely separated from them, and delivered from the trouble and responsibility of their charge'.[39] Such a demonization of the fallen woman, altogether typical of Victorian sexist ideology, weakens the otherwise compelling vindication of maternal rights, for one sexist prejudice that Brontë refuses to break is the taboo against female sexual desire. Annabella Lowborough, the sensual woman, is construed as morally irredeemable. Yet, it is only supposed, not known, by Helen that Annabella may be happy to be rid of her children, and this supposition is self-congratulatory and self-serving on Helen's part. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, arguably then, seeks to polarize mothers into a dichotomy of 'bad' (Anna Lowborough) and 'good' (Helen Graham/Huntingdon), but it does so subversively by attributing the 'good' to a single mother, a rebellious mother, an independent-minded woman, a wage-earning mother, and a literal outlaw. We cannot fail to notice that Annabella serves as a contrast to Helen's chastity; she is used as a scapegoat for Helen's conscience, and as an ironic commentary on Helen's own reputation in the society around her that she is a fallen woman. In conclusion, Anne Brontë issues a complex and sophisticated challenge to the society's laws, institutions, and expectations, through her heroine, Helen, who asserts her maternal autonomy heroically in the face of legal, social and economic restraints that were placed upon a single mother of her

[38] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.187.
[39] *Ibid*., p.264.

time. Although Helen does not suffer physical abuse, she leaves her husband and takes her son with her. Through this emancipating act of her heroine, Anne Brontë comes to critiques a host of Victorian norms and customs in her sympathetic portrayal of marital and maternal apostasy. Anne Brontë, like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, makes the suggestion that in the nineteenth century, in some cases, the only moral way to raise a child was to break the law, to become a mother outlaw in a way.

In *Shirley,* this acquires a special significance as the discovery of her long-lost mother is the crucial factor in Caroline's recovery from an apparently hopeless illness: 'My own mamma,' Caroline says, 'who belongs to me, and to whom I belong! I am a rich girl now: I have something I can love well, and not be afraid of loving.'[40]Caroline had been ill, recovered soon under the observation and care of her mother. Caroline later confesses to her mother that she suffered from the apprehension that her mother was not perfect but having found her, the only fault she finds with her mother is that she is old-fashioned. Caroline hopes she will be able to cure her mother of it. One notable thing about Caroline after she finds her mother is that she is more cheerful and confident than before.

Ironically, not many of the female protagonists in the novels of the Bronte sisters are shown to become mothers. If they do become mothers, they are not there to perform the roles of mothers. The only notable exception is Helen Huntingdon (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). Jane Eyre's recurrent dream of a child who obscurely threatens her suggests her fear of child-birth, consequent to matrimony. Jane, as she was growing up, was not to exactly have an adult whom she could look up to. On the other hand, in a conscious way, the Brontë sisters were following the conventional presentation of parenting in the Victorian Age.

[40] Charlotte Bronte, *Shirley,* (London: Penguin Popular Classics,1994),p.455.

Schooling and schools are definite concerns in the Victorian society. It is true that the Victorian schools had not been always portrayed in the best positive light by the Victorian authors themselves. In *Villelte* too Victorian education is hardly applauded.

Patrick Brontë, the father of Charlotte, who had written many pieces for school children, often dealt with the unpleasant subjects like dead children, dead mothers and execution. A typical story was *Child in a pet*:

> Do look at that bad child. She is the pet. She would have her own way. Oh! How cross she looks. And oh! What a sad tale have I to tell you of her. She was in such a rage, that all at once God struck her dead. She fell down on the floor, and died. No time to pray. No time to call on God to save her poor soul. She left this world in the midst of her sin. And oh! Where do you think she is now? I do not like to think of it. But we know that bad girls go to hell when they die, as well as bad men. I do not think that this poor girl's rage is now at an end, though she is in hell. She is in a rage with her-self. She is in a rage to think of her bad deeds here on earth.
>
> My child, take care of such sins. Pray that you may be meek and low-ly in heart, like your dear Lord and Sa-vi-our. [41][sic]

One wonders how much these stories might have influenced his young daughters who read them. A former pupil of the Cowan Bridge School who had complained about Maria's consumption had later written:

[41]Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London:Weidenfeld and Nicolson,1994), p.136

> I suffered so severely from the treatment that I was never in the schoolroom the last three months I was there until about a week before I left and was considered to be far gone in consumption. My mother (whose only child I was) was never informed of my illness and I might certainly have died there without her being informed of it had not a severe illness of her own caused her hastily to summon me home. She was so much shocked at my appearance that she refused to allow me to return although pressed to do so. It was some time before my constitution recovered the blow it then received.[42]

Many of the books at the school reveal the same attitude towards and preoccupation with infant mortality. Strangely, even the prize books that the children at Cowan Bridge were given happened to be morbid in nature. In the little library at Cowan Bridge, amongst the many books there had been a newly purchased copy of Richard Baxter's *Dying Thoughts, with Meditations from Owen*; a seventh century Puritan divine, Baxter's works cannot have made for easy reading for young schoolgirls. The prize books awarded in the school were equally unsuitable. A book with the title: *Hymns for Infant Minds,* awarded to one Isabella Turner 'for attention to Spellings' in the second class, in December 1826, might look innocent but the frontispiece of the book had a woodcut illustration of a little girl weeping over her mother's grave in the churchyard with the caption: 'Oh! If she would but come again, I think I'd vex her no more'. True, death and especially death in childhood was an ever-present threat but the rector Carus Wilson and his school seemed to have shared an extreme and even unhealthy obsession with it. So the Brontë sisters who had their schooling at Cowan Bridge could not be completely unaffected by the atmosphere around them.

[42] *Ibid.,* p.135.

The strictness of Jane Eyre's school at Lowood can be called cruel in the extreme. If *Jane Eyre* is taken as an accurate description of life at Cowan Bridge, then the girls rose before the dawn, dressed by rush-light, washed each morning in basins that was shared between six girls and went downstairs to an hour and a half of prayers before being allowed to breakfast; then there were a period of recreation and exercise in the garden before dinner. Lessons then commenced and went on till five in the evening, when there was a short break for half a slice of bread and a small mug of coffee, followed by half an hour's recreation before they went on to study. On Sundays, there was a variation in the routine. The girls had to walk for two miles to their patron's church for the morning service. Since the school was far away from the church, the girls had to eat a cold packed lunch in the church before enduring the afternoon service and then walk back the whole distance again. The reward for the whole exercise would be again a slice of bread and butter. Ironically, the whole of the evening would be spent in repeating by heart the catechism and biblical texts and listening to the sermon read aloud by any one of the teachers at the school. The fictional account provided in *Jane Eyre* is rooted in fact. At Cowan Bridge, the girls attended Sunday services at Tunstall Church, where Carus Wilson was the vicar. The church was two miles away from Cowan Bridge. Also in Jane Eyre's school, the punishments ranged from wearing badges, for being untidy, to beatings in front of the whole school. When seen through the eyes of the passionate Jane, these are acts of unwarranted cruelty, especially when they are inflicted on the very gentle Helen Burns.

The sisters quite often in the school felt the need for privacy. The confining atmosphere of the school took its toll most severely on Emily who became literally ill. Charlotte Brontë later explained the reason behind Emily's illness:

> Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils; without it, she perished. The change from her own home to a school, and from her own very noiseless, very secluded, but unrestricted and inartificial mode of life, to one of disciplined routine (though under the kindliest auspices), was what she failed in enduring. Her nature proved here too strong for her fortitude. Every morning when she woke, the vision of home and the moors rushed on her, darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. Nobody knew what ailed her but me – I knew only too well. In this struggle her health was quickly broken; her white face, attenuated form, and failing strength threatened rapid decline. I felt in my heart she would die if she did not go home, and with this conviction obtained her recall.[43]

This need for liberty is quite evident in Emily's portrayal of young Catherine Earnshaw. When Catherine and Heathcliff romp about the Heights, they are hale and hearty. Yet when, as Catherine Linton, she is confined to the Grange, she is seen to lose health and soon it is realized that she would not live for long. Catherine becomes somewhat an extension of the agony of *confinement* that Emily herself knew so well.

The need for private space was always intense in someone like Emily Brontë and this is demonstrated through her novel, *Wuthering Heights*. All problems for Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff begin when there is an intruder in their lives and this comes in the form of Edgar Linton. If Cathy later falls for the charms and the ways of the Lintons, that eventually lead to the isolation of Heathcliff, then Heathcliff has drawn his own conclusion about his rejection. When Heathcliff suddenly returns in the month of September, he is a transformed man. He looked athletic, intelligent,

[43] *Ibid.*, p.236.

dignified and yet stern. Yet when Isabella gets deeply attached to Heathcliff, Catherine warns her about Heathcliff:

> He's fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. He'd crush you like a sparrow's egg if he found you a troublesome charge. He'd be quite capable of marrying your fortune.[44]

It could not be just jealousy that prompts Catherine to say such things about Heathcliff. The almost raw animal-like quality that she uses to describe Heathcliff speaks of her awareness of those wild days that she and Heathcliff had spent together. She realizes it was just the exterior of Heathcliff that had changed but the awareness of the manipulative ways of the civilized world had left the once *untamed* Heathcliff bitter. Both Catherine and Heathcliff suffer in trying to accommodate themselves in the *adult world*. At one point Linton abuses Heathcliff and tells him: 'Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous'.[45] The words of Edgar agitate Cathy and she locks herself into the room and throws the key in the fire so that the servants cannot enter the room. Cathy dashes her head hysterically against the sofa and grinds her teeth. Even Nelly feels strongly about Heathcliff's flirtation and calls him 'Judas! Traitor!'[46] Heathcliff's parentage is unknown. Calling Heathcliff a 'Judas' only reinforces his position as the outsider who is capable of doing harm and more. Only one wonders, if like Judas, Heathcliff too would be driven by a guilt consciousness and end his life finally. Heathcliff is not driven by a sense of remorse but his final (phantasmal) union with Catherine brings to our minds the memories of the wild children running about the Heath unhindered and not caring about anything or anybody. Leo Bersani rightly suggests:

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[44]Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights,* p.93.
[45]*Ibid.,* p.103.
[46]*Ibid.*,p.100.

> The characters of *Wuthering Heights* teem with childhood animosities, allegiances and obsessions; they brawl, taunt, mock, manipulate, weep and play their outdoor and indoor orgiastic games within the vice of a terrible paradox. They are children liberated from the deterrent adult guardians who fence and chasten the outset of human life, but their liberation derives from the conditions that orphan and expose them.[47]

These childhood conditions affect the tastes of the characters. It gradually becomes clear analyzing how the preferences and tastes of the characters is necessary in understanding them. For the orphaned young Jane Eyre, survival itself had been a challenge. It is her simplicity and honesty that is her strength. Such simplicity had been celebrated in Victorian Literature. Jane Eyre is an orphan and alone but circumstances fail to diminish her spirit. Jane Eyre is ultimately destined for happiness because her sense of honesty and simplicity is something that she carries from her childhood to her adulthood. Unlike Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë allows her characters to grow. Charlotte Brontë does not see the movement from childhood to adulthood as an awareness that brings about The Fall. Rather, Charlotte Brontë allows Jane Eyre to carry on with her sense of simplicity and honesty, which Jane had demonstrated even as a young ten-year-old child. The issue of Helen Burns receives a different treatment in the hands of Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte Brontë had herself suggested that her own sister, Maria, was the inspiration for Helen Burns. Charlotte had later told her editor, William Smith Williams:

[47] Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 203.

> You are right in having faith in the reality of Helen Burns' character: she was real enough: I have exaggerated nothing there: I abstained from recording much that I remember respecting her, lest the narrative should sound incredible. Knowing this, I could not but smile at the quiet, self-complacent dogmatism with which one of the journals lays it down that "such creatures as Helen Burns are very beautiful but very untrue".[48]

If Helen Burns is a literal portrait of Maria Brontë, then Maria was a true model of fortitude. Juliet Barker in *The Brontës* records how Maria Brontë had patiently borne her long painful illness. Helen Burns too bore the casual cruelties inflicted on her by Miss Scatcherd, the history and grammar teacher at Lowood, in a spirit of martyrdom. When Miss Scatcherd made her wear the *slattern* or the *untidy* badge or whipped her for not having clean fingernails, she refused to see this as persecution, admitting that she had been careless, untidy and forgetful. Her punishment is thus justified by Helen who is ready to bear the consequences for her misdemeanours; 'it is weak and silly to say you cannot bear what is your fate to be required to bear,'[49] Helen told the rebellious Jane Eyre.

Once Maria, the elder sister of the novelists, had been so ill that the doctor had applied a blister to her side but because of her fear of Miss Andrews, her teacher at Cowan Bridge, she had slowly begun to dress. Before she could do so, Miss Andrews pounced upon the sick Maria for her untidy and dirty habits! Maria had gone back to dress slowly in pain, gone downstairs and there she found herself punished for being late! Reverend William Carus Wilson, the rector, did not intervene in the way Miss Andrews functioned. He was an Evangelist as well as a Calvinist and believed in

[48]Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* , p.135.
[49]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.64.

predestination: that only a small band of 'the elect' had been chosen by God for salvation and that, even before they were born, most men were condemned to eternal damnation. Such a doctrine left no place for the individual to earn a place in heaven and it is clear that the emphasis of his religion was on sin and the certainty of punishment, not on conversion or the hope of salvation. He did not feel the necessity to soften the message for the children. One of the children at Cowan Bridge had been a girl named Sarah Bicker, aged eleven, who died of an extremely painful inflammation of the bowels but her faith in Christ never faltered. When Sarah was asked if she would like to die, she answered 'Not yet' because 'I should wish to have time to repent, and be a better child'.[50] Carus Wilson ended his account of her elevating death scene with the comment:

> I bless God that he has taken from us the child of whose salvation we have the best hope and may her death be the means of rousing many of her schoolfellows to seek the Lord while he may be found. [51]

This is the biographical context which influenced how the Brontë sisters perceived the world of childhood – sometimes believing in the simple perception of life by the child; sometimes viewing them as rebels; sometimes perceiving the child as brutish; and in some cases they even celebrated the wild nature of the child. The childhood that the sisters present is both conservative and rebellious. Jane as a young child rejects adult authority, so does Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff or Cathy Linton. Helen's young son in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is perhaps the only picture of what a child ought to be like, growing under the watchful eye of a caring parent. Childhood in the novels of the Brontë sisters is often about celebrating the spirit of the

[50]Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* , p.129.
[51]*Ibid.*, p.137.

self that is a rebel, a self that resists when it finds itself tutored or doctored by the conventions of the time, and thus childhood sometimes is an anxious state.

It is known that tragedy struck the Brontë family in 1825, when the two eldest daughters – twelve-year-old Maria and ten-year-old Elizabeth – died of consumption. Grieving for their dead sisters, the four remaining children banded together and found comfort by creating stories about two imaginary fantasy worlds, *Gondal* and *Angria*, which they populated with their toy soldiers (who they pretended were famous men). They wrote these stories in miniscule handwriting in miniature books, which they sewed together by hand, in imitation of the small print newspapers and magazines of the time. As Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith suggest, the miniature form not only allowed the children to conserve paper (which was expensive), but it also ensured that their father and aunt couldn't read their writing. Except for the young Brontës who were short-sighted, the tiny hand-printed script is actually difficult to read without a magnifying glass, making the manuscripts essentially illegible to adult eyes. This preservation of the miniscule script throughout the extensive Brontë juvenilia helped to maintain a secret shared imaginative world that was only theirs as children. Scholars today study the Brontës' juvenilia, produced in the authors' youth to trace how the children apprenticed themselves to become writers. It is evident as young growing children, the three sisters had wanted to keep their imaginary world out of the purview of any adult gaze, an obvious exercise of asserting their individuality, a quality that we definitely identify in a number of independent children portrayed by the sisters in their novels.

"I Do"– before and beyond the marriage vow: an understanding of marriages in the novels of the Brontë sisters

When talking of characterization in a novel, it is elementary to that we look into the mental fabric of the author who created the characters. It is almost a certainty that Charlotte Brontë was obsessed with the notion of her physical unattractiveness. This could be the reason why in the paintings made by her, the author seemed uninterested in portraying anything that was less than a certain notion of physical perfection. Many of the portraits painted by her, early in her life, are associated with one of her favourite poets, Lord Byron. In one such painting, she paints Byron himself and his patroness, the beautiful Countess Blessington, Lady Jersey. What is interesting is that the women in Charlotte's paintings are invariably large-eyed, long-necked, ringletted and bejewelled; the men are effete in feature and form, with elaborately curled hair and military dress. There is a strong suggestion in her paintings that the concept of the Byronic hero appealled to her (this was of course nothing unusual for a young girl of her time). This appeal translated into her portrayal of many characters in *Angria.* The Duke of Zamora, one of the characters in *Angria* was given by Charlotte a number of amorous relationships with some of the most beautiful women and is shown to have travelled far and wide. In the early juvenilia, Zamora is more like the young Apollo, noble and talented, a poet, soldier, and the statesman who happened to be fatally attractive to women. Unfailingly and recognizably the shades of the Duke of Zamora are there in Rochester, the Byronic hero in *Jane Eyre.* Though often the Byronic traits are visible in the heroes of the novels of Charlotte Brontë but the large-eyed beautiful woman goes missing in the works of Charlotte, with the notable exception of Shirley. The absence of beautiful women in her mature works can be analyzed in this manner: by the time Charlotte Brontë was writing her novels,

she had encountered more pressing realities of life. When Charlotte came to portray her women characters, she was not unaware of the fact that the not-so-beautiful and the not so wealthy girl setting out to marry did not actually have many opportunities available in the marriage market. Undeniably in the early nineteenth century, a woman's role in a family or society was fairly determined by male thought and perception. Claiming one's private space and rights within the boundary of what was allowed for a woman was itself a challenge and hard to achieve. An elementary or perhaps almost the only means to claim her dignity in society for the woman was in and through marriage. A few decades before Charlotte, Jane Austen was aware of the exact impact she intended to create when she famously opened *Pride and Prejudice* with the lines: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'. It seems that things had not changed much by the time the Brontë sisters were writing though governess-ship/ teaching in a private school had opened a small door of financial independence for the woman. In reality, marriage still remained a passport to social and financial stability for the woman in the nineteenth century. It is this reality that the three Brontë sisters come to deal with varyingly in their novels. Undeniably, it does become an interesting study to see how the female protagonists in the Brontë sisters' novels try to hold on to their sense of identity as an individual within the sphere of marriage.

Before beginning to talk about the kind of marriages that are presented in the novels of the sisters, it is necessary to understand what kind of thoughts affected the sisters as far as the role of a woman in a family or society was concerned. The women sketched by the sisters in their novels would develop from the perceptions of a number of things about them. The sisters were affected for sure by the status of the woman and views expressed by the society in which they lived. One such

contemporary view of a woman's role is perfectly echoed through one of the characters of Patrick Brontë, the father of the Brontës in his *The Maid of Killarnery*:

> The education of female ought, most assuredly, to be competent, in order that she might enjoy herself, and be a fit companion for man. But, believe me, lovely, delicate, and spirited woman is not formed by nature, to pore over the musty pages of Grecian and Roman literature, or to plod through the windings of Mathematical Problems; nor has Providence assigned for her sphere of action, either the cabinet or the field. Her forte is softness, tenderness, and grace. [1]

Is it not very likely that Patrick's daughters had read what he had written? Patrick Brontë as a father seemed to be aware of the limitations as far as the future plans for his daughters were concerned; after all, not many options were open for the daughters of an impoverished clergyman. The most likely option was a suitable marriage but Patrick seemed to realize that without money behind them, his daughters were unlikely to attract men of substance. True, if his daughters moved in better circles, then their chances of marriage could improve; right education could be beneficial but fortune was still an important angle in the marriage market. He knew it was unlikely that all his five daughters would marry or rather marry well. If the option of marriage was not open to them, then a career as an option had to be considered. So it is with and under the influence of these ideas and notions that Patrick sought the advice of Elizabeth Firth who recommended her own old school, Crofton Hall, near Wakefield, as the ideal place for Patrick's daughters. As the sisters gradually grew up, the harsh realities of being a woman pressed upon them. Lonely

[1] Juliet Barker, *The Brontës,* (London: Wedienfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p.127.

and intelligent, the sisters were caught in the world of womanhood and its dilemmas. These are reflected strongly in their novels.

To an extent women can retaliate. A woman can pretend to regard a man as just a grown-up child. Charlotte Brontë, on the threshold of marriage generalizes from her fiancé's behaviour:

> Man is indeed an amazing piece of mechanism when we see, so to speak, the full weakness of what he calls his strength. There is not a female child above the age of eight but might rebuke him for spoilt petulance of his willful nonsense. (Letter to Ellen Nussey, 27 May, 1854) [2]

As a novelist she can show man satirically:

> Surrounded only by women and children, there was nothing to cross and thwart him; he had his own way and pleasant way it was. [3]

She can not only cut him down to size, she can also cut him up: maim him (Robert Moore), drown him (Paul Emamnuel), blind him (Rochester). But it is from a position of weakness; it is like a cornered animal spitting and snarling.

The female protagonists of the Brontë novels do not become the reflections of the sisters in ditto; however, they become mouthpieces of the sisters' beliefs, dilemmas and articulate their questions. Interestingly, except for Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, almost all the women protagonists of the novels by the sisters show some amount of tenderness, softness and grace. Yet, Catherine who looks born

[2] Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London: Little Brown, 1997). https://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=1408708302. Web accessed on 10th Feb., 2015.
[3] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, p. 392.

to rebel finds herself trapped and in pain only when she puts herself in the mould of being a woman in the worldly sense. She not only ends up messing her life but also makes Heathcliff embark on a revenge spree. Catherine's non-conformity is in tune with the thesis of love that Emily Brontë wishes to propagate. To begin with, when one talks about dignity in the sphere of marriage, it is understandable that love is an important aspect and that surely needs discussion. All the three sisters explore and look beyond the so-called conventional notion of love. There is a Jane Eyre who clearly detests the conventional courtship of Rochester and does not want to be just another trophy in the memory of Rochester:

> I felt the truth of these words; and I drew from them the certain interference, that if I were so far to forget myself and the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as ─ under any pretext ─ with any justification ─ through any temptation ─ to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory. I did not give utterance to this conviction: it was enough to fill it. I impressed it on my heart that it might remain there to serve as aid in the time of trial.[4]

To Jane, love is beyond mannerisms or formulas or a set format. Though in a different way, Emily Brontë too throws some conventions about love to the winds. Catherine and Heathcliff begin life celebrating the state of being in love uninhibited till the young Catherine chooses the politeness and suaveness of Edgar Linton over the savageness of Heathcliff. Ironically, Catherine's choice of Linton is equivalent to denying her own nature. Cultivated concept of love versus natural love is the dilemma that rocks Catherine and even Jane Eyre. The rejection of Blanche Ingram (*Jane Eyre)*

[4] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012),p.352.

or Zoraide Reuter (*The Professor)* or Rosalie (*Agnes Grey)* as possible heroines of the Brontë novels also goes to show that there is no necessary need for a beautiful princess in these tales of fairy tale romances. Incidentally, these women in possession of physical beauty are shown using their beauty as a weapon to win men. They not only fall flat in Huntington (*The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall)*, Lucy Snowe (*Villette)*, Frances Henri *(The Professor)*, Shirley, Catherine Earnshaw, all heroines in the novels of the Brontës, are no beauties in the conventional sense.

Early in the chapter, it has been suggested that young Charlotte had been growing up with a Byronic sense of romance not very different from the young girls, of her time and age. For many young girls, the Byronic sense of romance meant breaking away from their limited world even if it was on an imaginative level. Charlotte was someone who had not given up this sense of romance even as she grew up but then she was more conscious of the position of the woman now that she was herself a young woman. Her Byronic sense of romance allowed her to visualize the fairy tale like endings of her romantic tales wherein the man and his woman lived happily ever after. Yet, Charlotte was not so limited as to believe or think that the rescuer always, in such a tale of romance, would invariably have to be a man. This Charlotte had in mind when she tells the tale of an orphaned but strong individual, Jane Eyre. The fairy tale structure is retained in Charlotte's most famous novel, *Jane Eyre*, yet within this very novel the author goes to invert a number of conventional situations expected in fairy tales or tales of romance. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is not the provider but emotionally and, most importantly, financially dependent on Jane Eyre. Gender inequality is generally more often than not a result of varying financial positions of the man and the woman. The financial position of an individual happened to be a determinate factor in the status quo in a relationship

especially between man and woman. The novels of Charlotte as well her sisters use this truth and thought consciously. There is no denying that in the novels of the sisters, it is only Shirley who displays a certain assertion because she is wealthy from the very beginning of the novel. Beauty and wealth were two important things necessary for marriage. The magic wand of wish fulfillment could not make one beautiful (fairy tales usually had beautiful women as the heroines and they had no makeover; also in the fairy tales the protagonists were shown to have achieved a change in financial status through marriage) and the sisters notably did not attempt to make their heroines beautiful but made them real common women.

The question that we will now address is then how did the sisters come to deal with the not-so-wealthy state of their heroines. The Victorian society was a commercial society. In spite of the famous Victorian prudery and an attempt to hold on to aristocracy, the dynamics of social position was also changing because after all commercial ventures undertaken in England or in colonies had the potential to change the financial status of any person. It was possible to have a stroke of luck with money. Jane Eyre comes into an inheritance because of an uncle who lived in Africa and she shares her fortune with her newly found cousins too!

Let us look again how the fairy tale format works in *Jane Eyre.* Jane, just before her marriage to Rochester learns that Rochester's first wife is alive and locked up in the attic even as the Byronic hero, Rochester, without any inhibitions is preparing to walk down the aisle with her. Jane's sense as an individual and her morality tells her to walk out on Rochester. She does so and in turning her back on Rochester, she leaves him with two options: either he can carry on with his colourful life or he could undergo purgation. Of course, Jane herself has no such expectations nor does she expect anything from Rochester at this point when she walks out on him.

This is not the first time that Jane is seen standing up for what she believes is right. Jane, we know, was an orphan and without wealth. Even as a young child, Jane sticks to her sense of integrity in the Reed household, alone but strong. Jane follows her heart when she decides to leave Rochester but then Jane has never been afraid to face life alone. Rochester reminds Jane that in living with him, she would upset no friend or relative:

> You make me a liar by such language: you sully my honour. I declared I could not change: you tell me to my face I shall change soon. And what a distortion in your judgment, what a perversity in your ideas, is proved by your conduct! It is better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach? ─ for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me.[5]

Conventionally, it is the shrew that is tamed and not vice versa. All this worked on the convenience that the woman happened to be usually financially dependent on the man and thus was expectedly to toe the line delineated by her man. Here, in *Jane Eyre*, there is no shrew that needs to be tamed but the hero does need some taming – this message is loud and clear right from the beginning of the novel. Jane, towards the end of the novel, returns to Rochester who had by then gone blind and more importantly had lost his wealth that had allowed him his earlier state of independence and command. Once again, Jane's financial status at that time threatens to invert the equation in this relationship. Rochester in the last part of the novel is physically and financially dependent on Jane. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that when Jane comes back to Rochester, she considers it her duty to play the perfect devoted and caring

[5] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.359.

wife. She derives more pleasure in informing her readers how Rochester had regained partial eyesight. We need not be told in too many words that this becomes possible because of Jane's care for Rochester. In what is one of the few novels of the time where the narrator invites us to the world after marriage, Jane is seen not deviating from the image of the conventional good wife. Even if for a moment, one wonders where is the Jane who had crossed the boundaries of her school in search of experience; marriage seems to have ended her quest or desire to know the outside world and Jane in the end is happy being the wife. Yet, there is a point to be noted in this conventional ending; Jane does not lose her sense of individual identity in having become the wife. On the other hand Rochester, even if as a result of circumstances, from the feisty Byronic hero becomes the ideal husband by the side of Jane. Further, Jane returns to Rochester when she chooses to; she is no damsel in distress rescued by her Prince in the end. When Jane returns she knows why she is coming back to Rochester and the latter has not moulded or twisted things to ensure her return to him. This then is a tale that ends with 'and they lived happily ever after…' but with the differences from the regular fairy tales.

The financial dependence of the woman is one of the major reasons that thrust upon the woman the secondary role in man-woman relationship in a marriage as well as in society. Money ironically could often become the determining factor in a marriage. It probably helps to understand to some extent the spirited portrayal of Shirley (*Shirley*) who was able to exercise a certain amount of power because she was wealthy. Even then Shirley seemed to be aware that her completeness as a woman lay in marriage. Money mattered when it came to marriage. Did not Rochester marry Bertha Mason (*Jane Eyre)* because the marriage would bring him a wealthy inheritance? Rochester probably after some time learnt not to look beyond the

financial gain in his marriage with Bertha. In his second marriage, Rochester's wife, Jane Eyre, could have called the shots in the marriage after she had come to inherit wealth but Jane takes to playing the willing devoted wife. Charlotte Brontë at the end of the day allowed Jane Eyre to be the ideal woman who, according to conventional standards, was expected to be the wife, mother, and perfect home maker. I wonder if Jane's willingness to settle down had much to do with the truth that the outside world had not completely opened for the woman and marriage was still the only option for a woman trying to secure her future. Aware of this truth, the author, Charlotte Brontë, conveniently weaved her stories in a way where she tried to give her female protagonists a sense of respect within the boundary of marriage.

When it came to marriage and life, Charlotte herself, it is said, personally experienced a divided self. Many described her state as a mixture of self-doubt, intellectual strength and poetical idealism. She suffered in her own life the fragmentation or contradictions that the heroines in her novels are often shown to experience. Charlotte loved Haworth where she lived most of her life but she often longed for the wide range of freedom that the outside world provided; at the same time, she was unremittingly obedient to the dictates of the family and domestic responsibilities. Though she was someone who instinctively loved pleasure, she taught herself to endure what she thought Providence had in store for her. Charlotte was not exclusive in her isolation and distresses as there were many amongst her contemporaries who suffered similarly. Yet, at any given point, Charlotte was unable to conform and adopt the strident feminism like her friend, Mary Taylor. Nevertheless, Charlotte realized the dangers of narrow preoccupation within marriage but she was also driven by the strong desire to be loved and thus could not bring herself to abandon the belief that happy wifehood was the greatest fulfillment for

most women. It would not be going overboard if one commented that this is perhaps the reason why the heroines of Charlotte's novels are shown settling into happy matrimony with the exception of *Villette* (the novel ends on an ambiguous note). Charlotte's biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, seemed to be aware of this sense of duality in the novels of Charlotte. Gaskell agrees that once Charlotte began to write, her life was divided into two: Charlotte as the author, Currer Bell, and Charlotte, the woman. This duality of Charlotte is intrinsic to her art as well to her life. Many of Charlotte's letters shows her hesitance to make definitive assertions about female roles and the author confessed that she was unable to resolve her own dilemmas about the importance of romantic fulfillment. The early Charlotte correspondence shows more skepticism than idealism about marriage and romance. This is a marked movement from the Charlotte who endorsed Byronic romantic tales in the later years. In her letters to her publisher, W.S. William, or her former teacher at Roe School, Miss Wooler, Charlotte is found communicating the relative advantages of marriage and romance; perhaps, these reflected her own morbid awareness of her own sexual unattractiveness. Marriage by then was just not a pretty picture of settling into happiness for Charlotte. In a letter in 1836, the youthful Charlotte is found to be showing scorn for a social system which brought up girls on the notion that matrimony was their sole secure future. Interestingly, at this point, a recollection of Patrick Bronte's thoughts as he was thinking of the education for his daughters could help us to understand the stand and belief of the sisters as far as the role of a woman was concerned.

Now the question is: what kind of women did the sisters themselves respect and consider were good as wives or lovers. In *Jane Eyre*, Blance Ingram, the beautiful and somewhat vain mistress arrives with Rochester at Thornfield and an immediate

contrast is drawn between the simple and intelligent Jane Eyre and the vain Blanche. The latter's inclination to deck up herself with jewels is judged as her frivolity and hence she is a mere tool in the hands of her man. Women like Blanche dress to become toys in the hands of their men yet ironically they fail to gain the respect of their men (Charlotte definitely wanted us to believe this). This is proved by the strong attraction that Rochester feels for the apparently plain Jane even when Blanche is very much present in Thornfield. If one argues that it was the habit of the Byronic Rochester to court women (this argument cannot be completely overlooked), even then Rochester's decision to marry Jane over Blanche is striking. It is to be noted that the process of courtship is not absent in the Rochester-Jane relationship. Rochester in the disguise of the gypsy fortune-teller tries to woo plain Jane. Interestingly, Charlotte Brontë, who as a child painted women as beautiful and bejewelled, was seen choosing in her novels (significantly), heroines who were otherwise. Significantly, beautiful women do not usually become the heroines of the novels of Charlotte Brontë neither are they given the dynamism of their plain looking counterparts. The act of too much dressing up is not looked upon very positively. In the early stages of their courtship, Jane Eyre rejects immediately the attempt of Rochester to dress her in jewels and other fineries. This is not an exclusive presentation in Charlotte's novel only; we get to see how Agnes Grey does not appreciate young Miss Murray's dressing up and indulgence in gossip and, as the novel progresses, these acts of frivolity in Miss Murray are criticized strongly. Almost expectedly, Miss Murray's marriage is shown to be a failure. She is later found confiding in Agnes, and telling her that marriage had become an agony for her. When Murray relates all her marriage woes, she is a very different picture from the carefree, fun loving girl that we had initially encountered.

Young Miss Murray had enjoyed the process of seducing men during her maiden days. One day Miss Murray had come up to Agnes and related the following:

> Yes; and another thing is, that I've humbled Mr. Hatfield so charmingly; and another - why, you must allow me some share of female vanity; I don't pretend to be without that most essential attribute of our sex – and if you had seen poor Hatfield's intense eagerness of making his ardent declaration and his flattering proposal, and his agony of mind, that no effort of pride could conceal, on being refused, you would have allowed I had some cause to be gratified.[6]

A not so gratified Agnes had responded: 'The greater his agony, I should think, the less your cause for gratification'.[7] Indeed this conversation can be used as a premise to support the idea of the kind of women the sisters did not think highly of. Agnes's restraint and austerity is contrasted with the frivolous attitude of Miss Murray. 'The deliberate indulgence in the art of seduction' – the Bronte sisters did not think that this was appreciable quality in men or women. Love is mostly a pure emotion in the works of the sisters and not affected by the exterior circumstances but usually celebrated as a bond that is deep which brings souls together. The most sensational culmination of this notion occurs naturally in the novel of Emily Brontë. Heathcliff as a death wish wants to be buried virtually in the same grave as Catherine under the sky. This becomes a motif that translates as an act that celebrates love and union beyond body and earthly constructions. Through Heathcliff, Emily defies social sanctions on the emotion of love and on marriage. Here, like Shakespeare, it is possible to say:

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[6] Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), pp.194-95.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments. Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove – (Sonnet 116)

It is possible to say that the Brontë sisters came close to realising their beliefs about marriage and love as they walked through life and encountered various experiences. Possibly the greatest influence on Charlotte Brontë as a writer and as a person was the time she spent in Brussels; on Emily Brontë it is impossible to see the effect of the stay. Mary Brontë, the eldest of the Brontë children, clearly considered that Emily's acquired advantages in Brussels had been purely social rather than academic. It cannot be denied that Monsieur Heger improved Emily's French and opened to her a new world of German Literature. Yet it is the stay in Brussels and the relationships formed in the place that would more profoundly affect the life and works of Charlotte rather than Emily. The vexed question of Charlotte's relationship with Monsieur Heger has haunted Brontë scholars since the revelations of the letters, at the beginning of the twentieth century that she wrote after her return to England. The passionate and frank admissions of attachment might suggest that there was even an adulterous affair but particularly as Monsieur Heger's side of the correspondence is missing, it is difficult to say this with surety. Decades later, Monsieur Heger had written to one of his pupils about the deep intimacy between himself and Charlotte (it is largely believed that the following was written with Charlotte in mind):

> I often give myself the pleasure when my duties are over, when the light fades. I postpone lighting the gas lamp in my library, I sit down, smoking my cigar, and with a hearty will I evoke your image – and you come (without wishing to, I dare say) but I see you, I talk with you – you, with that little air, affectionate undoubtedly, but

> independent and resolute, firmly determined not to allow any opinion without being previously convinced, demanding to be convinced before allowing yourself to submit – in fact, just as I knew you, my dear L-, and as I esteemed and loved you.[8]

The conversation reminds us of Rochester speaking to Jane during their courtship. It is also possible to conclude from many of the letters between Heger and Charlotte that Heger had seduced her mentally and morally if not physically. A close look will tell us that even Jane's seduction by Rochester had been on the above lines.

Another point of interest in the novel that I think we ought to note is the moment when Rochester tries to deck Jane up with ornaments and she refuses. Jane is completely unwilling to accept the kind of bondage that Rochester wants to put on her by giving her the external feminine trimmings. To Jane, the very attempt to deck up a woman was a man's way of engaging her interests and preventing her from venturing outside her limited role : i.e. *to attract the male attention* and thereafter be limited to performing that role. It helps to recollect here that Emily Brontë is able to make the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff so fascinating only because she gives an earthy animal feel to it; both of them are wild. Catherine never feels the need to beautify herself for Heathcliff and the latter presumably is not bothered about what she wears. Both together celebrate the uninhibited natural love free of social conformations; but, as expected, unfortunately this love crumbles when it comes in contact with civilized ways of life and notions. In the novel of Anne Brontë we do see that the plain and simple Agnes Grey or Helen Huntingdon for that matter is more appreciated for their beauty that is within. It is hence possible to conclude simple and good at heart heroines dominate the world of the novels by the sisters.

[8] Quoted in Helen Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The self-conceived* (New York: The University of Wisconsin, 1994), p.69.

Now let us look at a novel where marriage between the protagonists is left ambiguous. If *Jane Eyre* in spite of everything propagates bliss and happiness within a marriage, then a novel like *Villette* explores the alternative possibility. The end of the novel, *Villette* is left open ended. It is not clear in the end if M. Paul Emanuel did return; hence his relationship with Lucy Snowe stands on this ambiguous note. The ambiguity at the end of the novel makes one thing clear that marriage is significantly not being shown as the only option for the woman. I wonder if the publishers of the time found the end too radical. Victorian society was comfortable with matrimony and Charlotte's novel seemed to challenge that. Lucy Snowe, the heroine, is attractive though not beautiful, and like Charlotte's other heroines, is someone determined to make her place in the world.

It is significant to note that *The Professor* was Charlotte Brontë's first novel that stood rejected by her publisher and it is then that she went on to write *Jane Eyre*. *The Professor* is an unusual love story placed in a society in which the relationships between men and women have been reduced to power struggles. Zoraide Reuter, with whom William Crimsworth flirts, is a woman who stands to be rejected because she fails to be morally impressive and is said to be jealous of Frances and tries to frustrate the courtship between Crimsworth and Frances. In the given light, it is safe to conclude that women like Blance, Zoraide, and Miss Murray are rejected against the ideal prototypes of women that the sisters intend to finally celebrate in their novels. Within the novels, the marriages of the first two women mentioned above do not take place. Though Miss Murray does get married, she is no good as a wife nor does she find an ideal husband. Significantly, the sisters have marginalized all these beautiful women in the marriage market through the various portrayals in their novels. The

plain Janes win hands down and make good and beautiful marriages in most of the novels of the sisters.

Charlotte Brontë made assertions that wholly domestic notions of womanhood must be replaced by a creed of female self-help; yet she could not ignore the powerful counter claims of emotional needs that a single life failed to meet. Charlotte wrote in a letter to Williams in the year when she suffered the agonizing sense of loss following the deaths of Barnwell, Emily and Anne. Early in the letter, Charlotte declares that for unmarried women:

> An education secured is an advantage gained – a priceless advantage. Come what may it is a step towards independency – and one great curse of a single female life is its dependency.[9]

Charlotte insisted that the mental and moral health of a woman could be secured only by employment. Yet, a little later in the letter, she betrays the brisk affirmation of self-reliance and we feel what she had said was a mere diversion from the emptiness of singlehood:

> Lonely as I am, how should I be if Providence had never given me courage to adopt a career…. something like a hope and motive sustains me still. I wish all your daughters ─ I wish every young woman in England, had a hope and a motive. Alas! There are many old maids who have neither.[10]

Charlotte's various letters indicate that she was hesitant to make any definitive assertions about female roles and confessed herself that she was unable to resolve her

[9] Letters to W. S. Williams, 3 July 1849, in *The letters of Charlotte Brontë*, Margaret Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Vol. III, p.226.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

own dilemmas about the importance and the need for romantic fulfillment. In her early letters, Charlotte is skeptical about romance and marriage. She had dismissed strongly the wretched society that encouraged girls to regard matrimony as their sole future. This reaction comes from Charlotte Brontë because she was much aware of the wide gap between the inculcated matrimonial ideal and the actual circumstances for most of the women of her time. It is perhaps with a sense of bitterness that Charlotte wrote to Ellen, her friend on 26 August, 1846:

> Not that it is a crime to marry – or a crime to wish to be married – but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt – for women who have neither the fortune nor beauty – to make marriage the principal object of their wishes and hopes and the aim of their actions- not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive – and that they had better be quiet and think of other things than wedlock.[11]

Such bitterness perhaps stemmed from Charlotte's own awareness that husbands were often cruel and often wives discovered too late that they have trapped themselves in an intolerable situation. She knew of many such cases. She was voicing a common feminist sentiment of the time when she said: "It is a terrible thing to be driven by a sort of despair from the evil of a solitary single life to the worse evil of an uncongenial married one".[12] At around the time Charlotte wrote this letter, she was being courted by her publisher's partner, James Taylor, and perhaps through such an argument she was trying to answer her own hesitancy about this particular bothersome affair. On another occasion, Charlotte in writing to her ex-suitor, Henry Nussey

[11] Margaret Smith ed., *The Brontës*, Vol.I, p.315.
[12] T.J. Wise & J. A. Symington ed., *The Brontë: Their lives, friendships and correspondence* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Brontë, 1932), Vol..I, p. 175.

(brother of Ellen Nussey), said that his concern for the marriage prospects of his sister was misplaced:

> We know of many evils are escaped by eschewing matrimony and since so large a proportion of the young ladies of these days pursue that rainbow – shade with such unremitting eagerness, let us respect an exception who turns aside and pronounces it only a coloured vapour whose tints will fade on close approach.[13]

Did the sense of neglect and pain in marriages that Charlotte talks of in her letters get portrayed in her novels? In this regard, if we look at the Rochester-Bertha relation, then we can see neglect. How Bertha had arrived at the present state of madness is not clearly stated in the novel but there is no denying that the Byronic Rochester does not care for his wife and has not been caring for her for quite some time when we meet Bertha. Her state of madness is just an alibi for him to go from one romantic venture to another. There is no remorse or feeling of guilt when Rochester courts Jane even when Bertha is present, locked in the attic room. But then one wonders if things would have been very different had not Bertha become mad. The masculine attributes of Bertha and her physical strength have been used to portray her as unattractive to Rochester. We all know how Bertha, on the night before the marriage of Rochester and Jane, had entered Jane's room and had torn the wedding dress; the dress as a sign of matrimony and bondage is figuratively and literally rejected by Bertha through the act of tearing it. There are some who believe that here Bertha becomes the alternative self of Jane. Jane, if she had been allowed to express her anger, would have behaved no differently from Bertha. Under normal circumstances and mental state, Jane cannot protest like Bertha but her sense of rejecting any kind of bondage that she is subjected to, is symbolically as strong as

[13] *Ibid.,* Vol. I, p. 224.

Bertha's. This belief gains ground especially when one recollects that a young Jane, locked in the Red Room, is not helplessly lamenting but very angry. Incidentally, when a 13 year old Charlotte was writing her tales in *Angria*, she would eventually kill off her beautiful heroines. But a 24 year old mature Charlotte created Elizabeth Hastings who had wan complexion, expressive features and dark smooth hair. She possesses strong morals and refused to submit to passion without the prospect of marriage. Does this description remind us of 'poor obscure plain and little' Jane? A girl who falls for a married man and, in order to keep her integrity, fights against her heart and soul to conform to what she thinks is correct? Undeniably, Elizabeth Hastings is Jane Eyre in a parallel universe.

Ill-treatment in marriage is not restricted to the Rochester-Bertha marriage; in *Wuthering Heights*, we see Heathcliff's ill-treatment of Isabella which stems from the personal motive of revenge. After her marriage to Heathcliff, Isabella writes in a letter to her brother: 'He is ingenious and unresting in seeking to gain my abhorrence…. A tiger or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakes….'[14] Incidentally, Isabella had been warned amply by Catherine about Heathcliff: 'He's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. He'd crush you like a sparrow's egg if he found you a troublesome charge. He'd quite capable of marrying your fortune'.[15] Isabella realizes the truth only too late and she says: 'Don't put faith in a single word he speaks. He's a lying fiend, a monster and not a human being …. The single pleasure I can imagine is to die or see him dead'.[16] Needless to say Isabella is led to tell all these because Heathcliff's treatment of her had been brutal. Heathcliff himself declares he found pleasure in tormenting Isabella: 'I have no pity! I have no pity! The

[14] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New Delhi: Finger Print Classics,2016), p.87.
[15] *Ibid.*,p.93.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails'.[17] In *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall*, a drunkard Arthur because of his violent temper does not make life any comfortable for his wife Helen. (It is largely believed that the character of Arthur is based on Branwell, the only brother of the Brontë sisters.) Helen flees with her son and is determined to live an independent existence. Though soon Helen becomes the victim of local slander, her creator, Anne Brontë, stands by Helen and ensures that she lives with a sense of dignity. Yet a bad marriage does not shake Helen's faith in the institution of marriage and by the close of the novel, Helen had found true love, a husband who was caring and respected her.

Most female protagonists in the novels of Charlotte and Anne do get married and live happily ever after. In spite of what she propagates, Charlotte time and again did show admiration for the woman who was single. She is also found expressing contentment and admiration at Miss Wooler's retirement:

> It seems that even 'a lone woman' can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers – I am glad of that – I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be married women nowadays, and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly persevering – without support of husband or brother, and who, having attained the age of 45 or upwards – retains in her possession a well regulated mind – a disposition to enjoy simple pleasures – fortitude to support inevitable pains, sympathy with the sufferings of others, and willingness to relieve want as far as her means extend.[18]

[17] *Ibid.,* p.136.
[18] Margaret Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*s, Vol. I, p.448.

Charlotte was not able to resolve the dilemma whether it was best to remain single because she herself felt the need to be loved and to love. In fact Charlotte's passionate letters actually prove how she waited for Heger's answers and what those letters and his affection meant for her. Such duality in thoughts is visible in Caroline Helstone (*Shirley*) who concludes that she might not marry and thinks over the question 'which old maids are puzzled to solve'. To solve the puzzle of such women living without husbands and children, Caroline visits two spinsters, Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, to find out how these women make their lives meaningful. Yet Caroline is shown to debate on the status and condition of the single women and she later comments somewhat bitterly:

> The great wish – the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, and they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them to ridicule…. The matrimonial market is overstocked.[19]

With passing time, Charlotte herself became increasingly aware of the negative side of non-matrimonial existence. So in September 1850, when Charlotte was writing to Ellen to refute rumours that she was about to be married, she was not so elusive or bitter about marriage as she had been in her earlier letters:

> Who do I marry? …Doubtless there are men whom if I choose to encourage might marry, but no matrimonial lot is even remotely offered to me, which seems to me truly desirable.[20]

[19] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin,1994), p. 402.
[20] T.J. Wise & J.A. Symington ed., *The Brontës*, Vol. III, p.157.

It is such questions like ‘ Who do I marry?’ in the mind of Charlotte Brontë that I think prevents her from letting Jane Eyre accept the offer of vocational marriage with St John Rivers. Jane also rejects Rivers because she recognizes that just like Rochester had tried on earlier occasions, Rivers too was trying to force a false identity on her that went against her self. She refuses to give up her identity and become the *useful tool* of St John. St John found her docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant and courageous, gentle and heroic. He thus invites her to accompany him as his fellow-missionary to India, where he intends to live and die in the service of God. He wanted a helpmate to work among the Indian women and so he offered a marriage without love, a marriage of duty and service to a cause. St John explains patriarchal religion as the reason behind the marriage proposal: self-denying, stern, prideful and ascetic. In a way, he offers her the destiny of Milton’s Eve: ‘He for God only, she for God in him.’ What St John offers remains perhaps the greatest lure for a spiritual woman, that of adopting a man’s cause and his career as her own. After all, the existence of the woman is still diffuse; the man presumes to define it for her and such an option did happen to be often the most confusing temptation. Here St John as the man tries to give shape to Jane’s search for meaning, her desire for service, her feminine urge toward self-abnegation: in short – as Jane becomes soon aware – he will use her to further and give shape to his own beliefs. St John offers to give *meaning* to Jane’s life under the rubric of marriage and from this *use* of herself she draws back in healthy repulsion:

> Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent? Can I bear the consciousness that every endearment he bestows is a sacrifice made on principle? No: such martyrdom would be monstrous….

> As his curate, his comrade, all would be right: I would cross oceans with him in that capacity; toil under Eastern suns, in Asian deserts with him…admire and emulate his courage and devotion …smile undisturbed at his ineradicable ambition; discriminate the Christian from the man; profoundly esteem the one, and freely forgive the other…. But as his wife – at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked – forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low…this would be unendurable….
>
> "If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now."[She tells him].His lips and cheeks turn white-quite white. 'I should kill you – I am killing you? Your words are such as ought not to be used – they are violent, unfeminine and untrue…' [21]

Jane refuses to be part of such a cause but interestingly in the meantime she has inherited an income; she has become independent. Jane's refusal speaks of her sense of integrity. Nevertheless, her newly acquired financial status allows Jane to resist marriage for sake of financial support. The money gives her a new power in the man's world. She is now equipped to make choices not exactly expected of a woman and yet not face an uncertain future and insecurity.

The physical unattractiveness of herself that Charlotte talks about did not stop her from having four marriage proposals but her own sense of ambiguity always stood in her way of taking a decision on these proposals. Incidentally, this ambivalence and ambiguity translates into the novels of Charlotte Brontë. When the novel *Jane Eyre* opens, Jane is an orphan and isolated. Yet as the novel proceeds, Jane neither shows the vulnerability nor the unease of her single, isolated status. Even as Jane as a child makes the rejection of Brocklehurst, she was completely aware at that time that she has nowhere to go. At that time when Jane looks at the frail Helen Burns, her response

[21] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre, p*p.459-460.

to Helen Burns' smile is 'like a reflection from the aspect of an angel'. Jane is more influenced by the likes of Helen Burns and Miss Taylor in her life. In Thornfield, Jane will encounter certain powerful and influential images of femininity in the form of the bevy of fashionable female guests of Rochester who associate much significance with appearance. Though Rochester gets attracted to the plain Jane, he would make every attempt to beautify Jane and initially view Jane in conventional terms. Jane herself is unwilling to accept it. This is where Charlotte Brontë successfully challenges the traditional notions within sexual relationships. Jane refuses to accept the artificial mechanism of courtship by Rochester; her assertion is that their relation must be based on mutual respect and not on 'turtle – dove sensibility'. This approach of Jane looked unconventional to Rochester. It can be recollected that it was Jane who proposed marriage to Rochester and it is her decision to leave Rochester when she thinks that Rochester is about to marry Blanche or when she learns of the presence of Bertha. Each of the decision of Jane is guided by her sense of self-respect. In one of her earlier meetings with Rochester, Jane declares:

> Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart. Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart.[22]

Jane here, in a definitive manner, talks of the need to be addressed as an individual and not as a representative of her sex – weak and in need of help. Jane's need and demand for respect in the relationship is exactly not unheard of in literature before, though perhaps none had declared it thus in Jane's position or in her manner.

[22] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.287,

A similar stance had been taken in *Pride and Prejudice* where Mr. Bennet tells his daughter, Elizabeth, just before she is set to marry Darcy that a successful marriage has to be based on mutual respect between the partners. Jane Eyre too wishes to respect and receive respect in a marriage. Jane's mistrust of Rochester's offering of jewels and clothes is not exactly unfounded. She sees them as symbols of servitude and says of Rochester's gifts: 'a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched'.[23] In this mocking tone, Jane rightly rejects the probability of enslavement in the Mediterranean villa of Rochester. Charlotte Brontë's ambivalence towards marriage is expressed in the Thornfiled episode through Jane's repeated declarations of independence. Jane shrinks away from a new name or bride's clothes that marriage would bring. *Independency* becomes such a primary concern for Jane that before her marriage she writes to her uncle that marriage would reduce her to a doll-like kept situation. Ironically, it this concern for self-reliance that saves Jane from a destructive union as her letter brings Briggs and the brother of Bertha Mason to stop the marriage of Rochester and Jane at the eleventh hour.

Jane Eyre can be eventually read as the celebration of orthodox romance achieved through artistic convention. On the other hand, the slowly evolving position of power that is given to Jane can be seen as the final vindication of female assertiveness. In the context, it can be effectively said that *Shirley* is overtly more propagandist than *Jane Eyre. Shirley* is not a simple tale that attempts to record the exploitation of women in the male dominated society. *Shirley* is a historical novel set in the uneasy era of Luddite riots, bad harvest and social unrest because of industrial changes. Within the various situations, the novel is able to deal more profoundly with

[23] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.305.

the assumption that marriage provides a woman the highest possible fulfillment. In the novel, Shirley and Caroline discuss the state of women a number of times. They debate whether it is better for a woman to be unhappily unmarried or enjoy the respect and joy of being single – respected and independent. With Shirley, such a choice exists because she has wealth but for Caroline it borders on the line of necessity. Caroline reminds us, in a way, of Charlotte Lucas who marries Collins more out of necessity. If Caroline explores the option of not being married, then it is because she cannot marry. Mrs. Pryor, the mother of Caroline, voices a different opinion from her daughter. Mrs. Pryor is unwilling to believe that love is important in marriage; to her, marriage is the need of the woman to gain social security. In a way, she was voicing a social reality and the way marriages work or worked. Mrs. Pryor does echo what Mrs. Bennet had told Elizabeth, her daughter, when the latter had turned down the marriage proposal of Mr. Collins. On the other hand, when Mr. Yorke and Robert Moore *(Shirley*) converse, they treat romantic love more sympathetically though still from a complacent male viewpoint. One of the most memorable episodes in the novel is the heated debate amongst Mrs. Yorke, her daughter, Rose and Caroline about the extent to which women can fully implement their talents within the domestic sphere of matrimony. Rose Yorke (*Shirley)* too argues that the female energies must not be confined within the narrow constraints of domesticity:

> I am resolved that my life shall be a life…. And if my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred…. I will not commit it to your worktable to be smothered in piles of woolen hose. I will not prison it in the linen-press to find shrouds among the sheets…. least of all will I hide it in a tureen of

> cold potatoes, to be ranged with bread, butter, pastry, and ham on the shelves of larder. [24]

These debates and conversations cannot be subjected to analysis only within the context of the novel; it must be remembered that during this time Charlotte was bearing the agony of being the sole survivor amongst the Brontë children. Also at that time, Charlotte was attacking the common assumption that the ultimate role of her sex was to marry. Caroline Helstone questions the respect accorded to matrimony but denied to celibacy or spinsterhood. In her novels Charlotte Brontë explores the various options and attitudes of spinsters. Miss Ainley (*Shirley)* is almost the saint like figure as is Helen Burns (*Jane Eyre*) and in that way these single women represent but a stereotypical image. Miss Ainley's self-sacrificing attitude leads her to bear suffering that no one else can and this brings her closer to the life of Christ than anyone else. This is something that even Helen Burns believes in too. The kind of ambiguities about singlehood and marriage that Charlotte debates in her letters is to be found also in the characters of her novels. Miss Mann and Miss Ainley are lonely and Caroline Helstone concludes about them as being 'pure and active' as it was 'so loveless-to her ideas, so forlorn'. This view is something that the author of the novel too shares. The initial descriptions of Miss Mann come very close to the kind of caricature found in the fiction of the early nineteenth century:

> To avoid excitement was one of Miss Mann's aims in life: she had been composing herself ever since she came down in the morning, and had just attained a certain lethargic state of tranquility when the visitor's knock at the door started her, and undid her day's work.[25]

[24] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley,* p.407.
[25] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley,* p.187.

It strikes us that Charlotte was not hesitant to point out the delusions and snares of marriage. Mrs. Yorke (*Shirley)* is shown to be a woman soured by marriage and consequently she is herself indifferent to the needs of women. This example illustrates the crushing effect on a strong female character when it wills its own resignation to the constraints of married life. Mrs. Pryor too is a picture of unhappy wifehood, more hopelessly resigned. With vigour, she warns her daughter against the perilous creeds of romantic love; she claims bitterly:

> They are not like reality: they show you only the green tempting surface of the marsh, and give not one faithful or truthful hint of the slough underneath ……[Marriage] is never wholly happy…. It is as well not to run the risk: you may make fatal mistakes…. let all the single be satisfied with their freedom.[26]

Neither Charlotte nor her two novelist sisters wholly reject marriage though they wade through numerous debates about it.

Class awareness adds an interesting dimension to many a relationship in the novels of the sisters. In *Wuthering Heights,* Heathcliff, from being a friendless waif, turns into the ruthless master of Thurshcross Grange and Wuthering Heights just since he believed that Catherine had refused him because his social standing. Jane Eyre, who is of more elevated birth than Heathcliff but with just as poor prospects, ultimately becomes the wife of Rochester, once courted as the prospective son-in-law of Baroness Ingram. In *Agnes Grey*, Agnes's mother, in marrying a clergyman, is disinherited by her father. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* the yeoman Gilbert Markham succeeds the squire Arthur Huntingdon as the husband of Helen, and the contrast is stressed when Gilbert arrives at Staningley and feels that Helen is too

[26] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley,*p.389.

grand to marry anyone but a nobleman. In *Jane Eyre*, we see very little of Bertha Mason; she is rather sensed than heard. Her presence is revealed by three acts when she escapes into the inhabited part of the house. Two of these acts are violence against men – Bertha attempted to burn the bedchamber of Rochester and tried to stab her brother when he visits Thornfield. The third act is the visit to Jane's bedroom on the night before the wedding and tearing of the wedding veil, the symbol of matrimony (Interestingly, Bertha does not attack Jane). Jane comes to know of Bertha when the latter's existence is revealed and Jane is taken to the madwoman's chamber and sees again, 'waking, that purple face, the bloated features'. Bertha finds herself described by following adjectives such as big, corpulent, and virile, with a *grizzled mane* of hair like an animal. If one recollects, Jane's hair too had been described as the 'foul German spectre – The Vampyr'.[27] Jane is presented as the antithesis of Bertha as Rochester points out:

> 'That is my wife', said he. "Such is the sole conjugal embrace I ever to know – such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And this is what I wished to have" (laying his hand on my shoulder) "this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon".[28]

In the long account, Rochester says that his father arranged the marriage between him and Bertha for financial reasons but he undertook the marriage because he was attracted by Bertha's dark and sensual beauty and Rochester makes no pretense that he was not acting out of lust. Rochester repeatedly asserts the coarseness of Bertha, calling her 'at once intemperate and unchaste' and then later he states this as the central reason for loathing Bertha. Once she is pronounced mad, Bertha is locked up

[27] Charlotte Brontë, *JaneEyre*,p.338.
[28] *Ibid.*,p.333.

and Rochester goes forth on a life of sexual adventures, one result of which was the child Adele, daughter of his French mistress. Rochester's story is part Byronic but at the same time it is based on a social and psychological reality: the nineteenth-century loose woman might have sexual feelings but the nineteenth-century wife did not and must not. Rochester's loathing of Bertha is described repeatedly in terms of her physical strength and her violent will – both unacceptable qualities in the nineteenth-century female – raised to such a level that she becomes a virtual monster. Rochester is seen as the romantic Man of Fate, Byronic, brooding and sexual. He comes as the fate of Jane but he is not the fate that Jane has been seeking. She had been introduced to Rochester as the one who helps him when he falls from the horse and in the end of the novel, she must lead the blind Rochester. Through- out the courtship, Jane is uncomfortable with the way Rochester tries to court her. Her growing passion for Rochester and her dislike of the method of courtship only show that Jane will not fall to the temptation of the large horizon that Rochester could provide her – travel, riches and brilliant society. She will not become a part of the harem of Rochester. All these make Rochester strive to win Jane by any means fair or foul. He becomes arrogant enough to lie to her. During the house party, Jane as governess has to suffer the condescension and contempt of the ladies of the neighbourhood and it is here that Rochester, disguised as the gypsy woman, comes to the door to read fortunes and he attempts to trick Jane into revealing her feelings for him. It is clear in this scene that Rochester is well aware of the strength of Jane's character. Rochester too is not sure of the outcome of the courtship and the kind of union he would propose to Jane. Disguised as the gypsy, he tells her:

> … that brow profess to say – 'I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me to do so. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me

> alive if all the extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give'. [29]

The scene ends abruptly and Rochester continues to flirt with Ingram in order to rouse the jealousy of Jane. He pretends till the last moment that he intends to marry Ingram, till Jane, in turmoil at prospect, confesses her grief but there is also anger at the position that she had been placed in:

> 'I tell you I must go!' I retorted, roused to something like passion. 'Do you think I am 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 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! [30]

*Jane Eyre'*s final chapter opens with 'Reader, I married him'. Jane returns to a blackened ruin called Thornfield; she discovers Rochester with his left arm amputated and his eyes blinded by the fire in which he vainly attempted to save the life of his mad wife. The end state of Rochester made a Freudian critic say that he has been symbolically castrated. Well, that would be a different argument but the question that remains before us is: what kind of marriage is possible for a woman like Jane Eyre? Certainly and surely, Jane would not marry a castrate, psychological or physical. It is undeniable that St John repels Jane in part because he is emotionally castrated, an argument that Adrienne Rich uses in her essay 'The Temptations of a Motherless

[29] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.228.
[30] *Ibid.*,p.287.

Woman'. Throughout the novel, the current of sexual equality, be it spiritual or practical, can be perceived. The passion for equality that Jane as a twenty year old girl and then as a thirty-year old woman feels are the same. After ten years of marriage, Jane writes: 'I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine'. It remains the only novel of the Brontë sisters where a picture of a post marriage situation can be seen. The feeling that Jane generates at the end of the novel is not only that of romantic love or romantic marriage:

> To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk – I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. [31]

Jane returns to Rochester when she is economically not dependent on Rochester and this independence allows her to be a wife without sacrificing her identity and integrity. Charlotte sets the possibility of a different kind of relationship early in the novel when Jane arrives at Thornfield. Right from the very beginning, Jane and Rochester act very robustly and refuse to act out according to the paradigms of Romantic Gothic fiction. The marriage of Rochester and Jane leads us to believe in the intellectual sympathy of the marriage because of Jane's refusal of marriage under circumstances that would have been mythic, romantic or sexually oppressive. Interestingly, the last paragraph of the novel concerns St John and his ambition:

> The high master-spirit, which aims to a place in the first bank of those who are redeemed from the earth – who stand without fault before the throne of God, who share the last victories of the Lamb, who are called, and chosen and faithful. [32]

[31] *Ibid.*, p.512.
[32] *Ibid.*,p.513.

It would not be very wrong to say that the patriarchal arrogance of St John is used by the novelist to suggest that human relations require something quite different: a transaction between people where there is no shame or humiliation and nobody becomes the object of use of anybody else. In fact, marriage for Jane was not a goal or a solution. It is not a typical patriarchal marriage where the woman finds herself diminished but Jane's marriage is a continuation of this woman's creation of her self.

Another marriage that is affected by the class politics is the Catherine Earnshaw and Edgar Linton marriage. Heathcliff is described by Nelly as 'a prince in disguise' but this prince finds himself increasingly losing out to the educated and sophisticated Linton. Catherine lives a dual life by this time: that of the refined lady before the Linton and the free spirit in Heathcliff's company wild and untamed. Though Catherine initially rejects Heathcliff and marries Linton, she soon realizes her mistake. In a conversation with Nelly, Catherine speaks of the difference in her love for Linton and Heathcliff:

> My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it; I am well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, *I am Heathcliff*. He's always in my mind. [33]

Catherine is well aware of what Heathcliff is like. When she chides Isabella for falling in love with Heathcliff, she denounces Heathcliff as an un-reclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation, while Isabella speaks of Heathcliff as an 'honourable soul and a true love'. Isabella loves Heathcliff on a mistaken assumption while Catherine loves him in spite of knowing his cruel and pitiless self. Heathcliff returns

[33] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.76.

with the intention of winning back Catherine. It is his presence that leads to the quarrel between Edgar and Heathcliff and consequently it leads to mental agitation and estrangement with her husband. Catherine wishes to be a faithful wife but is continually drawn towards Heathcliff. Edgar rightly points out to her that she cannot have both and this dilemma results in her nervous breakdown. Soon Catherine realizes the spiritual violation she had committed in marrying Edgar. When she is sick, she tells Edgar: 'I don't want you. Return to your books. I'm glad you possess consolation, for all you had in me is gone'.[34] The arrival of Heathcliff caused a rift in the married life of Catherine and Linton. Needless to say, Edgar was not happy about his wife's enthusiasm on Heathcliff's return. Edgar cannot even bring himself to treat Heathcliff on equal terms. Sensing this, Catherine rather sarcastically tells Nelly: 'Get two tables here, Nelly: one of your master and Miss Isabella, being gentry; the other for Heathcliff and myself, being of the lower orders'.[35] It is to be noted here that Catherine prefers Heathcliff to her husband and mocks the upper class sensibilities of her husband. Catherine is convinced that Heathcliff's return is a reward for all her past sufferings. Speaking of Heathcliff's return to Nelly, Catherine says: 'This event of the evening has reconciled me to God and humanity'.[36] But then Edgar cannot accept Heathcliff's presence in his wife's life and abuses Heathcliff: 'Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous'.[37] Edgar believes that Heathcliff is the outsider in his marriage; of course he had not heard Catherine's declaration: '*I am Heathcliff*'. Catherine has a premonition and tells Edgar that she would like to be buried in the open air with a headstone and not amongst the Lintons. She is as Heathcliff expresses his anguish thus:

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[34] *Ibid.*,p.115.
[35] *Ibid.*,87.
[36] *Ibid.*, p.91.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

> Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you. Haunt me, then. Be always with me – take any form – drive me mad. Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you.[38]

Heathcliff and Catherine cannot live without each other and it is here that Edgar becomes the outsider. When Catherine is sick, Edgar nurses her lovingly but he cannot touch the soul of his wife. Catherine has risen above the bond of marriage that she had entered by choice. When Catherine married Edgar Linton, there had been one redeeming feature and that is Linton's love for Catherine but this is frustrated by Heathcliff's presence. Emily explores love of a different kind, that is, love free from any kind of social dictate or constraint. This is best understood when Heathcliff on his deathbed tells Nelly*:* 'No minister need come; nor need anything be said over me. I tell you I have nearly attained my heaven, and that of others is altogether unvalued and uncoveted by me'.[39] Heathcliff's love for Catherine achieves a kind of superhuman quality. Though Edgar had said Heathcliff was a kind of 'moral poison', we cannot help but say that there is some kind of rough justification in the way Heathcliff and Catherine are finally united. A close look will show that Emily had given a superior moral position to Heathcliff over the Lintons. When Nelly tells Heathcliff that Catherine is perhaps going mad, he reacts thus:

> You talk of her mind being unsettled. How the devil could it be otherwise in her frightful isolation? And that insipid paltry creature attending her from duty and humanity! From *pity* and *charity*! He might as well plant an oak in a flowerpot, and expect it to thrive, as

[38] *Ibid.*,p.150.
[39] *Ibid.*, p.296-297.

> imagine, he can restore her to vigour in the soil of his shallow cares![40]

Heathcliff, through this conversation, reveals what he stands for. He virtually claims that the kind of life he could have provided to Catherine would have been more natural and more moral than the world of Thrushcross Grange. Finally, regarding the marriages in *Wuthering Heights,* one has to discuss the Catherine Linton and Hareton relationship. Heathcliff moodily in a conversation confides to Lockwood that Hareton reminds him more of Catherine Earnshaw than he does of Hindley. Then there is a scene where Cathy mocks Hareton's attempt to read. Hareton's redemption can only end the world of revenge and it becomes possible only when Cathy Linton becomes willing to reach out to Hareton.

In some cases Charlotte presents a very striking antipathetic picture of female subjugation to male tyranny through the stand and attitudes of misogynists like Helenstone or through dogmatists like Joe Scott who do not shy away from mouthing a total authoritarian view of martial relations: women are to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics and religion and this is good for them. Even the more liberal Moore brothers cannot be totally excluded from the fact that they too have limiting preconceptions as far as women are concerned. In spite of what has been stated, it is also true that Charlotte still retained belief in the true blessings of emotional fulfillment in matrimony. Charlotte successfully uses Caroline Helenstone and Shirley Keeldar to create the said effect. Shirley has a position as landowner and landlord. She also says that her parents were expecting a son and so she explains her parents' giving her such a name: 'they gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is

[40] *Ibid.,* p.137.

enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood'.[41] Indeed through this masculine role-playing, Shirley is not expressing her power, rather her powerlessness. Moglen in her essay, 'Charlotte Brontë', says that Shirley is driven to pretend that she is a man and continues the old pattern of sexual dominance. At the same time, given her position, Shirley is scornful of the childish egoism of men. She fires at Mrs. Yorke when the latter taunts her about her matrimonial plans and defies her bullying uncle by asserting her right to choose her own husband. Shirley ultimately rejoices her individualistic self:

> If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under the illusion about women…their good women is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad women almost always a fiend.[42]

Caroline, on the other hand, is much more conventional as a woman compared to Shirley. Caroline bitterly resents all charges of being unwomanly and at the same time she enacts the positives of self-reliance. She speaks movingly on the plight of the single woman but soon seems to be crushed by the adversity of singlehood and fades away in hopeless resignation. Caroline unwaveringly believes in the idealism of love and hence reflects the idealism of her creator. It would not be wrong to say that Caroline is obsessed with romantic fulfillment. If Caroline works, then it is merely to obliterate the pangs of disappointed affection. She cannot think that other than marriage there can be any source of happiness. At eighteen, Caroline feels life holds nothing for her and is coloured by adolescent self-pity: 'an elegy over the past still rung constantly in her ear; a funeral inward cry haunted and harassed her: the heaviness of a broken spirit, and of pining and falsifying faculties, settled slow on her

[41] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 205.
[42] *Ibid* ., p.360.

buoyant youth'.[43] Caroline is unable to overcome emotional uncertainty unlike Shirley. It cannot be very wrong to say that the contrast is used deliberately to show how Caroline remains conventional in her belief of happiness, even though she seems sometimes to work up the rebel image as a woman. Unlike Jane Eyre, Shirley and Caroline finally look *mastered* and tightly bound in matrimonial chains. This impression dawns on us, as we have seen both of them raise their voices against the restrictive sexual ideologies in the past. In *Jane Eyre*, we not only see the harmonization of male and female polarities but also of the conflicting impulses in the heroine.

Charlotte's dichotomy, between the desire for emotional fulfillment and urgings of individuality, seems to have resolved itself into unquestioning acceptance of romantic orthodoxies. In the light of this comment, it can be said that Charlotte accepted matrimonial unions as partial compromises. The novelist, when talking of marriage, takes into consideration the different female needs. Thus each case of marriage is to be treated as a certain response of the individual and with the acknowledgment that specific circumstances permit no other equal desirable alternative. So Caroline, who is the more traditional female, has moments of rebelliousness that do not prevent her from accepting a subservient role in marriage. Robert Moore is regenerated through suffering like Rochester but he continues to retain a totally conventional view of women. Robert imagines women as angels who inspire in men 'pure affection, love of home, thirst for sweet discourse, unselfish longing to protect and cherish, replac[ing] the sordid cankering calculations of …trade'.[44] In describing Caroline, Robert compares her to pictures of Virgin Mary. Caroline cannot change his intent to improve the Hollow's Mill environment and she

[43] *Ibid.*,p.199.
[44] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, p.346.

will have to remain content to adore and obey. Though all these show the female powerlessness, it has to be comprehended that it is possible for a character like Caroline, who needs and looks forward to the support of matrimony, to still be an individual. The women, then, in the novels of the sisters are not against matrimony, although they are at times questioning the kind of marriage options that are available. However time and again they retain their sense of being a woman – so, yes, they are conservative, they are anxious about singlehood and sometimes even about marriage, and they question certain conventional ideas and beliefs about love and matrimony.

Liberty, Equality, Peace and Happiness: A journey of Religion

Religion, one would agree, is an interesting aspect of Victorian England. David J. De Laura and a number of other historians of Victorian intellectual life have noted that many Victorian atheists and agnostics abandoned Christianity for a particularly Victorian reason: they found it immoral! In the given times of the changing face of religion, Evangelical Christianity in the nineteenth-century Church of England appeared as a profoundly emotional faith. Its exponents were tireless in exhorting believers to give their hearts to God. Discoursing on Divine love, Isaac Watts, another household name in Haworth Parsonage where the Brontës grew up, stressed that one passion that is God's love for mankind was the fundament upon which all religious commitment and activity rested. This was one emotion that affected all other emotions. Time and again, an Evangelical divine would remind his readers that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'.[1]

Thus to suggest that the loss of religious faith in early Victorians such as F. W. Newman (John Henry Newman's brother), J. A. Froude (brother of Newman's close friend, Hurrell Froude), and George Eliot, was not due to the usually suggested reasons – namely, the rise of evolutionary theory in geology and biology and the Higher Criticism of the Bible – would not be far-fetched. The set of interrelated doctrines of Christianity, namely Original Sin, Reprobation, Baptismal Regeneration, Vicarious Atonement, Eternal Punishment, were slowly losing their hold on public imagination. During such a time, George MacDonald, for example, left his Congregationalist pulpit because he could not accept that God could actually damn all

1 John 3:16, chapter 3, King James Version. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/John-3-16. Web accessed on 10th January,2016.

babies for eternity if they were not baptized! Why just MacDonald; John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold also seemed convinced that God could not be cruel.

Let us understand foremost that this insistence on Divine love was not just exclusively an Evangelical phenomenon. A reader of early nineteenth-century devotional literature would be able to visualize a close and living communion with God. In fact, a communion involving the whole human personality with God was encouraged. Religious despair and depression would be mental states that would arise out of loss of that essential nearness with the Divine. Hence, often the concern of the nineteenth century theologian would be to enquire how the human mind could come to win God. A loving and kind God and the human mind in communion with God are also features that we do encounter in the novels by Brontë sisters.

A heart that intends to stay on the path of unfaltering love for God cannot expect a smooth journey. The Brontë sisters seem to be aware of obstacles in such a journey and address them in their novels. The first of the hindrances faced is naturally the injustice of this life that includes the suffering of the innocent (Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*); and the second is the fear of death and damnation. Christianity does provide a combined solution by proposing that those who mourn or suffer in this world will essentially find comfort in the next world, with a kind God waiting to welcome them beyond death. Thus this plan of God for mankind tainted by sin has been designed to augment belief in this merciful God. Further contemplation of the Divine should assuage grief as well as take away the terror of death or any kind of fear. Our essential gesture as human beings is then to believe in this vast design of grace that can make our earthly sorrows bearable to the extent that even death would not seem to be a fearful proposition. All said and done, complete surrender to the Divine Grace is never an easy task; thus doubt and anxiety is bound to constantly

confront the idea of Divine Grace. There are many characters in the novels of the Brontës who face crisis in terms of religious faith while there are other characters dipped in staunch faith and this faith in times of acute distress bestows them with the necessary strength to deal with the impending crisis.

Interestingly, the Brontë sisters who have been accused of not having much interaction with the larger outside world do resemble some of the leading religious thinkers of their time, notably Thomas Erskine and F. D. Maurice. To the Brontës, like Erskine and Maurice, religion was the concern of the individual soul guided by God. Thomas Erskine of Linlathen (13 October 1788 – 20 March 1870) was a Scottish advocate and theologian in the early nineteenth century. Erskine, with his friend the Reverend John McLeod Campbell, attempted a kind of revision of Calvinism. Erskine was an Episcopalian, self-taught in theology, who advocated the loving side of God's nature, believed the universal atonement of Christ, and expectedly remained critical of the typical federal theology of the Scottish Calvinism of his time. Calvinistic doctrine of the time went against human experience and the real message of the Scriptures – such was the belief amongst many. Calvinists suggested that good and evil strive within every person's soul. It is the 'elective will' in one that determines if one will side with good or with evil. Thus, primarily, a Calvinist believes that God inwardly encourages us to choose the good, the true and the beautiful. We are not agents of our own good decision making, but rather we do choose that which God has already chosen for us. As Erskine studied the Bible, he became convinced that religion intended to confer peace, joy, and eternal glory and to animate hope in man. In a letter to a friend, Erskine speaks of his idea of God:

> The upper hemisphere of the circle of Deity gives us the spirit of Father, Giver, Master; the lower that of Son, Receiver, Servant. There

> must be a divine in all moral truth; obedience is as divine as command, both proceeding from love and duty. This you may say is a human thought about God, but I cannot think of God otherwise than as an infinitely good man, therefore, I conceive to have deep root in God, and thus I am forced on the idea of something like a duality in God's unity, to escape from the terrible thought of an eternal solitude before creation, and from the idea that God was driven to create in order to have an object of love. [2]

The reason of attempting to portray the idea of God in the above paragraphs is to trace a similar resonance in the works of three sisters who are our concern. The works of all three Brontë sisters, that also includes their poetry, reflect the conviction that the passion of love is never simply bounded by the span of human life on earth. One is bound to come to the conclusion that passion, variously conceived, lies at the heart of the Brontë novels and resists whatever forces that are marshalled against it. Needless to say that the oppositional forces are often evil and can manifest themselves in the selfish desires of the proud, the weak or the misguided, or in the machinations of the envious and the actively malevolent that remain obvious in the novels of the Brontës. Similarly, the power of love is well informed and sustained by strong goodness that can be called supra-human. The operations of coincidence may fit into the providential designs, as we encounter in *Jane Eyre* (Rochester's purgation qualifies him finally as the partner for Jane). Even in *Wuthering Heights*, we get to see love finally triumphing over hatred!

Thus to suggest that love draws its power from beyond earthly existence, in all the Brontë novels, would not be exaggeration. Obviously we must put to scrutiny the nature of that 'beyond earthly existence' in the works of the three sisters. Perhaps it is

[2] William Hanna, ed. *Letters of Thomas Erskine of Linathen*, (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1878), p.83. https://books.google.co.in/books?id=pbOklku0278C. Web accessed on 8th March, 2015.

safe to comment that the three authors believed in afterlives and explored them from different standpoints.

Let us first look at Emily, perhaps the most reclusive of the three sisters. Emily Brontë's spiritual belief and secular spiritualism is symbolized by her love of nature and typified by 'shadows of the dead' which she saw around her. Gilbert and Gubar see Emily Brontë's poetry and beliefs as threatening the rigidly hierarchical state of heaven and hell, and suggest that Emily believed that the dead remained on the earth and moved around her.[3] Emily apparently saw dead friends and dead family members watching her at night, and this strange reality bears some similarities with Christina Rossetti's 'soul-sleep', the latter had strong evangelical influence showing in her works. The doctrine of 'soul sleep' is often used as the most enabling force in Christiana Rossetti's poems. Many of Christiana's early poems use soul sleep as a metaphorical starting point from which to examine the relative values of profane and the divine. Christiana attempted to position the female in her poems less than an object, a displacement beyond the text into the realm of the sleeping soul that anticipates the second coming. The dream metaphor often becomes dominant in Christiana's poems. Emily Brontë does use in her only novel, dream, the sleeping soul that transcend worldly experience. Even after the Catherine Earnshaw is dead, he invokes her asking her to haunt him:

> Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living. You said I killed you – haunt me then. The murdered *do* haunt their murderers. I believe –I know that ghosts have wandered the earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad. Only do not leave me in this

[3] Sandra Gibert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imaginatio*n (Yale:Yale University Press, 2000), p.225.

> abyss, where I *cannot* find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I cannot live without my soul![4]

Interestingly a little before Catherine died, she envisions a heaven. Catherine said: 'I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there: not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart, but really with it, and in it'.[5] It is as though she had in mind a heaven that was like the moors in every way but without the constraints of physicality: the spirit of natural freedom pervading everywhere. Heathcliff on the other hand cannot imagine how Catherine can be happy with her soul in the grave, alone and away from her Heathcliff.

Edward Chitman, Emily's biographer, wrote that Emily Brontë's religious symbolism showed no hope for everlasting life and her spirit languished in 'dead despair'. Her poem 'I'll not weep' echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet 'No Worst' and as she claims, the 'summer's day' will end 'in gloom' and life will end in the 'tomb'.[6] True, Hopkins's and Emily's diverse beliefs required different types of religious symbolism but both experienced deep feelings of anguish and isolation. Emily believed in the 'soul' that was crushed by worldly experience. It is death that released the soul to peaceful oblivion rather than everlasting life, so Emily concluded. Emily desired freedom and 'liberty' for an unconfined and 'chainless soul'.[7] Emily Brontë's derisive view of patriarchal heaven suggests that it cannot contain or even partially fulfill her wild desires and experiences. She does not fear hell or its perennial fire because her 'will' is strong. It is then safe to conclude that Emily's frustration and secular spirituality blended uniquely with the Evangelist doctrine. The three gods that

[4] Emily Brontë', *Wuthering Heights* (New Delhi: Fingerprint Classics, 2016), p. 150.
[5] *Ibid.*, p.143.
[6] Edward Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë (*Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), p.141.
[7] *Ibid.*, p.146.

war within Emily symbolize the trinity. This triumvirate is stronger than orthodox spirituality because it resides within her and was to stay with her till death or after-life. This unique individualized pantheistic ideology and spirituality is central to understanding the religious symbols in her work.

Emily yearns for a peaceful sleep, vibrant with imagination and thought, with no earthly woes disrupting her. The moors where she lived and nature all around are intrinsically linked to her spiritual beliefs, but this adoration is unlike Hopkins's. Hopkins visualized nature as an essential part that reflected God's glory, while Emily seems to concentrate on the mystical aspect of nature and the moods produced, rather than bothering herself about the precision and details of nature's contours. Obviously, Emily's poetry becomes a mirror reflecting the changing faces of faith. They also reflect the changes in belief within her society as this was the time when Victorians began increasingly to see a separation of the 'moral sense from the religious institutions that had once expressed it'.[8] The religious symbolism in her poetry proves that Emily Brontë believed that a god or celestial being resided in nature. It is clear that orthodox religion and its hierarchical structure had no place in her mind. Emily considered imagination to be more important than the word of God. Critics suggest that the romantic aspects of her nature generated a powerful male muse, and the 'favourite characters' incorporated into romantic situations were manifestations of aspects of Brontë herself.[9] Emily's individual spiritual mysticism highlights her deep longing to create new forms in thought as well as writing, while her masculine muse gave wings to her deep yearnings and desires. She remains aware of the presence of the soul. Emily, who cannot bring herself to accept the patriarchal and ordered

[8] Robin Gilmour, The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890 (London: Longman, 1993), p.93.
[9] Gilbert and Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.254.

concept of Christianity, comes to reflect upon some of the processes of doubt in Victorian Britain. No wonder, she allows Heathcliff literally to stare at his death and share the same grave with Catherine. The sky above and the wild nature all come to endorse this union of Heathcliff and Catherine. It is this that makes Emily Heathcliff cry out in lamentation thus:

> Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan inflict would have parted us, you, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart – you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine. [10]

On a slightly different footing from Emily, as far as religious sensibilities are concerned, is her elder sister Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte believed in the benevolent power of heaven. She strongly wished that Branwell, her brother, would find forgiveness in Heaven. Needless to say, Charlotte was deeply agonized by the change that she had seen come over Branwell during the last days of his life. As death approached, Branwell Brontë's unquiet mind was no longer bohemian but repentant and looking for the grace of God. As she envisaged God's pardon for the brother, who had brought such misery on his family, Charlotte felt she would be able to forgive him too.

The necessity of repentance is something Charlotte had realized as necessary to receive the Divine Grace. But, she also realized that anyone wanting Divine Mercy must also make his peace with his fellow creatures. The Lord's Prayer makes it clear that God's forgiveness is conditional and is subject to the penitent's ability to exercise mercy in his turn. Human reconciliation, as an essential method to achieve Divine

[10] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, (New Delhi: Fingerprint Classics), p.144.

Grace, features prominently in the fiction of the Brontës, especially in the works of Charlotte.

Critical and biographical works on the Brontës have mentioned how the Brontë children were affected by the literary qualities of the two romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. But Marianne Thormählen, in her book *The Brontës and Religion,* says that whether the sisters had read the poetry of Coleridge is not known. However, Thormählen suggests that she is sure the sisters would have responded to the intense spirituality associated with Nature in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. In spite of their difference, Wordsworth and Coleridge affected a break with the eighteenth century tradition regarding Nature as a repository of Christianity. Instead, to the poets, Nature is an expression of God and through Nature God conveys his messages and inspires the deepest thoughts in human beings. In the novel *Shirley*, the chapter in which Caroline recovers after a long illness is named "The West Wind Blows" by Charlotte Brontë. Caroline Helstone, when she recovers from illness, finds that the hot and arid summer is terminated by rain and replaced by a genial sunshine. It is further described how Mother Nature sent the west wind to recover her languishing energies. Here not only is the curative power of nature demonstrated but we get to see how nature is the messenger of God and His blessings.

One striking aspect is that both Coleridge and Charlotte talk about truth in the most uncompromising terms. Coleridge in *Aids to Reflection* says that 'Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation; but a Life – not a Philosophy of Life, but a Life and a living Process'.[11] Coleridge and Charlotte Brontë hated clerical controversy but that does not essentially mean that they were against the standing of the Established

[11] Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.95. https://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=1441165959. Web accessed on 11th March,2015.

Church. However, what becomes interesting is the observation that the Brontë heroines receive Divine assistance in the open air far away from God's house or church. In fact, all the Brontë sisters satirize unsatisfactory church services in their works in some form.

One arresting passage in the novel *Shirley* is where Nature is equated with Eve in Paradise. Shirley refuses to spend a beautiful evening cooped in a church when 'Nature is at her evening prayer'.[12] Shirley wishes to join 'mother Eve'[13] in her devotion, even as Caroline is worried that her uncle will not take Shirley's absence from Church kindly. Caroline is partly amused, partly censorious when confronted by Shirley's mingling of Judeo-Christian and pagan mythology in their conversation. The idea of considering nature as mother is as ancient as the Greeks and Charlotte does not seem to disagree with the idea.

One can look into the only supernatural event in *Jane Eyre*: when Jane is at the verge of making a commitment to St John, she hears the voice of Rochester calling out to her: 'Jane, Jane, Jane!'[14] She is later told by Rochester that just as she had heard his voice, he too had heard her answer. This makes Jane realize that there was some force beyond nature that made all this happen. Thus clearly nature becomes the carrier of the grace of God in the works of Charlotte.

When we further examine religion in the fiction of the Brontës, we realize that the authors also address the question of how Christianity was the very substance of daily life. Interaction with and obligations to one's fellow-creatures form a part of everyday existence for any human being, fictive or real, and the issue of the functions of the individual in his/her relations with other people is often raised in the novels by the sisters. Though many Brontë characters are keenly aware of, and labour honestly

[12] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.327.
[13] *Ibid*,p.328.
[14] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p.476.

to fulfill, their duties both to people in their immediate circle and surrounding, their prime concern remains their self. Jane Eyre can think of accompanying St John to serve mankind as a sister but will not marry him because she knew the marriage would kill her emotionally.

As a young author of the juvenilia, *Angria,* Charlotte gave the character of Alexander Percy a powerful and quick mind that mastered Greek, Latin, modern languages and mathematics. Alexander, when sent to St Patrick's College on the Philosopher's Isle, applies himself so single-mindedly to his studies that he becomes the Senior Wrangler. Alexander is possessed by the ambition that he should become first in whatever he does. In addition to his intellectual gifts, Alexander has a sensitive ear for music. Alexander, it is said, burst into tears as a child when he heard an Italian flute player and saw visions when he played the organ. He was an example of extreme piety and would be found spending hours reading his Bible and questioning his tutor, John Bud, endlessly: 'Mr. Bud where shall we go when we die?', 'What are the spirits like Sir?', 'why doesn't the judgment day come now when men are so wicked etc.'[15] As a result of the impassioned melancholy and the unbridled questioning mind, young Alexander Percy encountered the expected: a crisis in faith and then he fell into a state of hopeless atheism that marred the rest of his days with melancholia and fear of death. Alexander Percy's atheism that became more explicit with passing time in the juvenilia is one of the few indications of rebellion amongst the Brontë children against the very religious atmosphere they were growing up in. Percy's case is often cited to suggest that Branwell too was an atheist but that I believe is a bit too far stretched. In fact the attraction for such piquantly shocking characteristics in their

[15] Christine Alexandar ed., *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal: Selected Early Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.244.

creations was because the Brontës were somewhat alien to the conventionality of life at the parsonage.

Again let us take another leaf out of tales of *Angria.* The scenes in the counting house, in which Edward Percy bullied his spirited but weak brother and his grovelling clerk who had been reading poetry and Wesley's hymns instead of working at their ledgers, were later to be lifted by Charlotte for her first novel, *The Professor*. Also, Charlotte's conversion to the less glamorous world of her own experience, in her novels, can be seen as a reaction to the extravagances of Branwell. *Angria* has the story of Zamora which can be seen as the reversion of the stories of the old world of magic, omens and mysterious strangers. Zamora almost dies because of a curse put on him at birth. Later, it is revealed that Zamora has an identical twin evil brother called Vandacella, who is the one responsible for all the arbitrary and cruel deeds and the sudden change in character of Charlotte's hero. In the mentioned episode, it is possible to see the influence of James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a book they might have read as children. Although the daughter of an evangelical clergyman, Charlotte was not afraid to explore the pagan form of practices, that can be called a kind of primitive religion.

Angria proved to be an outlet for Branwell's deepening sense of disgust at religious hypocrisy. Branwell was convinced that hypocrisy was the exclusive preserve of those outside the Established Church, especially the inspirational sects. In 'An Historical Narrative of the War of Aggression' (a tale in *Angria),* Branwell makes Alexander Percy deliver an ironical impromptu prayer, aided by his wicked confederates, Death and Montmorenci.

Tales of assumed piety are many in the world of *Angria.* Timothy Steaton, the clerk in *The Wool is Rising* conceals his villainy behind the veil of pretended piety.

The association between evil and a façade of religion is developed most skillfully in the character of Sedath in 'The Life of field Marshal the Right Honourable Alexander Percy', another tale in *Angria.* Though Sedath had been a faithful servant of Edward Percy for thirty years, his attitude towards the father and son (Alexander Percy) is ambivalent, and he is seen to encourage the father and the son to plot against each other! After one quarrel between them, Sedath tells Alexander to kill his father, justifying the murder on scriptural grounds:

> Thaw mun look to the lord man and abide by the will. Theres a Providence ower were heads which alluss provides the best and what says the Scripture –come unto me all ye that are heavy laden and I will give you rest - and agean though your Sins be as scarlet et they shall be as white as wool. Naw them texts were never intended for ought but the help of the needy and Ae hev often and often thought on Em as aw read that blessed book…[16]

The powerful combination of religious cant and Yorkshire dialect that we see in the lines quoted above, which Emily was later to use as her model for Joseph in *Wuthering Heights,* was probably derived as much from the servants John Barnet in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner,* and Andrew Fairservice in Walter Scott's *Rob Roy,* as from a personal observation of the Haworth Methodists.

Alexander Percy's own atheism is curiously aligned with the fact that he identifies himself with the devil. Interestingly, Percy is always dressed in black rather than the brilliant dress of the other Verdopolitan and Angrian nobles. Percy reminds one of Milton's Satan, of great physical beauty, but depraved and always scornful and

[16] Quoted in Edward Frederic Benson, *Charlotte Brontë* (London & New York: Longmans, Green, 1932), p.51. Project Gutenberg Canada ebook #1074.
This ebook was produced by Delphine Lettau, Pat McCoy & the Online Distributed Proofreading Canada Team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net. Web accessed on 10th January,2015.

driven by overweening ambition. Percy confesses before his wife Augusta that he is like Satan. Thus, as young children, Charlotte and her siblings explored sin, depravity, and stringent moral concerns through the characters in their juvenilia. Nonetheless, it is clear that the sisters were not to follow a conventional path as far religion is concerned; religion was not about set rules but personal realization.

Even Charlotte Brontë's women characters differ greatly from each other where religion is concerned. Caroline Helstone, the rector's niece and a Sunday school teacher, is without question a devout girl. But the misery she undergoes through her disappointment in love, and her loneliness and frustration in life, is a trial quite unassuaged by the consolations of religion. And the two old maids Miss Ainley and Miss Mann (*Shirley*) whom she tries to emulate are not very inspiring in this respect. Miss Ainley's self-abnegation seems negative and depressing. Miss Ainley's good works are necessarily done within the framework of the church and hence not given much glorification nor do they seem good for Caroline to follow. God or the idea of God in the novel comes out interestingly through two dialogues: Mr. Helestone says: 'God defends the right!' while Robert Moore: 'God often defends the powerful!' Shirley in conversation with Mr. Sympson rejects the traditional notion of God even at the cost when she is called an infidel and atheist by Sympson:

> Your god, sir, is the World. In my eyes, you too, if not an infidel, are an idolater. I conceive that you ignorantly worship: in all things you appear to me too superstitious. Sir, your god, your great Bel, your fish-tailed Dagon, rises before me as a demon. You, and such as you, have raised him to a throne, put on him a crown, given him a sceptre. Behold how hideously he governs! See him busied at the work he likes best – making marriages. He binds the young to the old, the strong to the imbecile. He stretches out the arm of Mezentius and fetters the

> dead to the living. In his realm there is hatred – secret hatred: there is disgust – unspoken disgust: there is treachery – family treachery: there is vice – deep, deadly, domestic vice. In his dominions, children grow unloving between parents who have never loved: infants are nursed on deception from their very birth; they are reared in an atmosphere corrupt with lies. Your god rules at the bridal of kings – look at your royal dynasties! Your deity is the deity of foreign aristocracies – analyse the blue blood of Spain! Your god is the Hymen of France – what is French domestic life? All that surrounds him hastens to decay: all declines and degenerates under his sceptre. Your god is a masked Death.[17]

Lucy Snowe (*Villette)* is a Protestant before she is a Christian. Her acid bigotry is sectarian rather than spiritual. Her jabs at Roman Catholicism are unedifying and even comic. On the other hand, Paul Emmanuel is a Roman Catholic, bigoted, but he definitely is full of Christian kindness. Fascinatingly, at the end of the novel, each respectfully allows the other the freedom of worship. This freedom is not shown in the course of a normal family life – could that be the reason why Paul had to be drowned? The Protestant/ Catholic conflict is a strong theme in the book and there are not many novels that can compete as far as the depiction of sectarian conflict is concerned. One thing that strikes us is that Charlotte Brontë does not make the status of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism a debating point in the novel, which would have been reasonable to expect from a Protestant. Lucy Snowe says in the novel that happiness cannot be cultivated, it is pure and divine:

> No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to cultivate happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure. Happiness

[17] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley,* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), pp.570-571.

> is a glory shining far down upon us out of Heaven. She is divine dew which the soul, on certain of its summer mornings, feels dropping upon it from the amaranth bloom and golden fruitage of Paradise.[18]

The religious content of *Jane Eyre* is misleading. At three important points in the plot, Jane apparently turns to God for support: at Lowood, under the influence and admonitions of Helen Burns; at Thornfield, when Rochester tries to persuade her to live with him; and at Marsh End, when St John Rivers urges her to marry him and go with him as a missionary. But in all three cases common sense is as much at stake as morality. Rightly, it has often been noted in respect to Jane's flight from Rochester that sheer prudence is her guide. At best, we can say she is led by intelligent observation. She is aware of Rochester's contempt of his mistress and applies it to herself and concludes she could land in a similar situation. At Lowood, too, the Christian virtue of meek endurance fits in with what common sense tells Jane. She knew staying at school was her only way of staying away from Gateshead and then education came with an added perk – independence. Next let us look at the St John Rivers episode which is particularly ambiguous. What St John was offering to Jane was 'moral' marriage and he suggested that such a marriage and missionary work both were ordained by God. Jane's denials are not dictated by religious idiom as they were in her opposition to Rochester's proposal; they belong rightfully to the realm of romantic ideology. Jane clearly does not love St John when she appeals for supernatural aid in her struggle – she is invoking a different kind of religion against conventional religious ideology.

Laurence Lerner made an interesting study of Jane Eyre and posited the following assumptions:

[18] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.256.

> Is not Rivers a double for Jane? More insidiously and more dangerously than Helen [Burns], he represents the urge toward duty from which she needs to free herself in order to act out of pure love. Rivers quite consciously represses his sexuality, knowing his love for Rosamund Oliver, and putting it aside in order to be a missionary and demand a wife toward whom he feels no sexual attraction. Jane similarly repressed her own sexuality in placing duty before her love for Rochester.[19]

Whether one agrees with the suggestion quoted above, but we have to note that St John Rivers, unlike Bertha Rochester, plays a dominant role throughout a sizeable part of the novel. It is surprising, however, that generations of readers have not found St John memorable enough. Jane had found her heaven in her love, but the novel ends with St John having found his not through scriptures but through purgation and realization where death is no longer something that he fears, it is merely something that he crosses to be with his Maker:

> He entered on the path he had marked for himself; he pursues it still. A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers. Firm, faithful, and devoted, full of energy, and zeal, and truth, he labours for his race; he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it. He may be stern; he may be exacting; he may be ambitious yet; but his is the sternness of the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon. His is the exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says – 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow

[19] Quoted in Marianne Thormahlen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1999), p. 204.

> me.' His is the ambition of the high master-spirit, which aims to fill a place in the first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth – who stand without fault before the throne of God, who share the last mighty victories of the Lamb, who are called, and chosen, and faithful.
>
> St John is unmarried: he never will marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil, and the toil draws near its close: his glorious sun hastens to its setting. The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown. I know that a stranger's hand will write to me next, to say that the good and faithful servant has been called at length into the joy of his Lord. And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded, his heart will be undaunted, his hope will be sure, his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this –
>
> 'My Master,' he says, 'has forewarned me. Daily He announces more distinctly,
>
> "Surely I come quickly!" and hourly I more eagerly respond, – "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!" [20]

The creation of the Jerusalem Protestant bishopric in 1841 was symptomatic: representatives of King Frederick William's Lutheran Prussia and leading bishops of the Church of England jointly supported the appointment of a converted Jewish rabbi. It is possible to view this as a striking episode in the 1840s Britain, and most importantly to note that the Brontë family was probably affected by it. The Bible and Tract Societies in which Patrick Brontë had been active from his young manhood onwards were inter-denominational, and in the mid-1800s many English people shared Lucy Snowe's dreams of a 'Holy Alliance':

[20] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), pp.513-514.

> I went by turns, and indiscriminately, to the three Protestant Chapels of Villette – the French, German, and English – *id est*, the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian. Such liberality argued in [Père Silas'] eyes profound indifference – who tolerates all, he reasoned, can be attached to none. Now, it happened that I had often secretly wondered at the minute and unimportant character of the differences between these three sects – at the unity and identity of their vital doctrines: I saw nothing to hinder them from being one day fused into one grand Holy Alliance, and I respected them all, though I thought that in each there were faults of form, incumbrances, and trivialities.[21]

Lucy Snowe is openly critical of the church that clothed and fed 'poverty' so that one remained bound to the church or the fact the sick was tended to so that the person might die after the 'formula' and 'ordinance' of the church. She says all these in a chapter that the author aptly titled as 'The Apple of Discord'.

Charlotte's concept of religion is best understood in the letter she wrote to W.S. William on 6th October, 1948. The following extract from the said letter in which she comes to terms with the loss of her only brother, Branwell is quiet revealing:

> When the struggle was over – and a marble calm began to succeed the last dread agony – I felt as I had never felt before that there was peace and forgiveness for him in Heaven. All his errors – to speak plainly – all his vices seemed nothing to me in that moment; every wrong he had done, every pain he had caused, vanished; his sufferings only were remembered; the wrench to the natural affections only was felt. If Man can thus experience total oblivion of his fellow's imperfections – how

[21] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.430.

> much more can the Eternal Being who made man, forgive his creature! [22]

Clergymen and churches appear a great deal in Victorian fiction and careful reading can establish an ambiguity in the usual authorial attitude towards them. The clergy are either like Mr Chadband (*Bleak House*), who are bad to the extent that the only remedy was that Chadband be replaced by a good minister who would be genuinely concerned for the plight of people like Jo the crossing- sweeper; or they are good in the way that Mr Hale in *North and South* or Robert Elsmere are good, but they lose their faith. Treatment of the clergy is either totally secular or subject to scrutiny. Churches tend to be either decaying or out of place or in some other way wrong! Looking at the fiction of George Eliot and of the Brontës will easily give us half a dozen charitable and consistently devout clergymen, and an equal or more number of less admirable ones. This establishes an important point: there are a great many unappealing and/or unsuccessful churchmen in Victorian fiction.

The novelist sisters were children of an evangelical clergyman. Let us briefly understand what it meant to be an evangelical and what were the primarily beliefs guiding them. The Evangelicals implicitly, sometimes explicitly, repudiated both pietism that denied the importance of the physical society and morality. Their most prominent centre of influence happened to be the London suburb called Clapham, where a number of Evangelists lived, and so their opponents called them Clapham Sect. Interestingly, the group's best-known members happened to be in the parliament and were derided as 'the Saints'. In addition to Clapham, there was this important group at Cambridge led by Isaac Milner and Charles Simeon. At around this time,

[22] Margaret Smith,ed.,*The Letters of Charlotte Brontë,Vol.2 1848-1851*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.124.

near Bristol, there happened to live one of the most prolific writers among the Evangelicals, Hannah More. As a young woman from the provinces, she had made a brilliant entry into the London intellectual society. Samuel Johnson is said to have regarded her as the finest woman poet writing in the English language, and they soon became close friends. These Evangelicals, only the most prominent of an increasingly numerous and influential part of the church, remained true to their Anglican roots, although for many years its members had close relationships with Dissenters, thus they sometimes faced taunts about being Methodists.

From their various centres, the Evangelicals were seen working to restore the church and also the country to a semblance of morality that was in keeping with the standards appropriate to a revived national church. Their attempt was concrete and public. Hannah More's book, the pointedly titled *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*, argued that the national public morality would remain in the pits until there was a true reformation of morality among the rich and powerful:

> Reformation must begin with the GREAT, or it will never be effectual. Their example is the fountain whence the vulgar draw their habits, actions, and characters. To expect to reform the poor while the opulent are corrupt; is to throw odours into the stream while the springs are poisoned. [23]

With her sister Martha, Hannah More started an undertaking to bring education and health to poor people in a backward rural region against the opposition of almost every- one of means and reputation. This project had its beginnings when William

[23] The Complete Works of Hannah More, Vol. 1,(New York: Harper Brother,1932),p.224. https://books.google.co.in/books?. Web accessed on 10th January,2016.

Wilberforce (24 August 1759 – 29 July 1833), an Independent member of the Parliament and an Evangelist, and his sister visited the More sisters and, at their urging, went for a drive to visit the cliffs of Cheddar. When they returned Wilberforce looked shaken, and the More sisters noticed that the lunch of cold chicken and wine given to him was not touched. Later he came down from his room and related his surprise and dismay at seeing the brutal and lawless state of life in the surrounding villages. He urged the sisters to set their hands to work as a matter of Christian charity, promising to put money in the work. For many years thereafter, Wilberforce and his friend's money helped the sisters to establish schools, religious services, women's clubs etc. Wilberforce even made provision in his will so that in the event of his early death the work would not come to a halt. As young evangelist women, the Brontë sisters did not find it entirely difficult to visualize an individual thinking woman and examples from their works are many that include Jane Eyre to Shirley, Cathy Linton to Agnes Grey. It is this spirit of seeing women empowered that the Brontë sisters imbibed from the likes of Hannah More. True the sisters have not written anything on Hannah More but it was also unlikely that they were not aware of her work. In a way Evangelicalism advocated a humanist approach towards religion. Hence, it becomes easier to conclude that the Brontë sisters believed in a religion that reached out to people in the genuine sense of charity. The sisters advocated a kind of religion that allowed one to be true to oneself/ one's soul. Again there many characters in the novels of the Brontë sisters who follow only the dictates of their hearts like Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone, Helen Huntington, Catherine Earnshaw etc.

The Victorian ideal of the 'Angel in the House' contains a religious subtext that consigns women to the domestic sphere and places a premium on their moral purity. Women were expected to act like angels so much so that female desires for true love

and equality in a relationship were absolutely subordinate to religious obligations. Independence, a cornerstone of feminism, was expectedly incompatible with the patriarchy supported by the Church. Be it in *Jane Eyre* or *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* or *Wuthering Heights*, Christianity is seen as a pervasive social force that seemingly undermines the heroines' feminist visions. Early condemnation of these novels as being anti-Christian, or even vulgar, only mirrors the judgment faced by the protagonists when they pursued feminism at the expense of conformity. The heroines' feminist ideals are inextricably tied to their identities, and this sense of self is compromised when their desires come into conflict with their religious duties. In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine's ideal of genuine love is clear when she exclaims that '[enduring] all the forms of love' while '[knowing] that the spirit was quite absent' is a 'martyrdom' of 'monstrous' proportions.[24] This ideal runs counter to the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice when St John Rivers, the vicar, urges her to become a 'missionary's wife'. Jane's choice of the word 'vocation' shows that it is a purely functional undertaking: a marriage founded on religious duty rather than love. She argues that 'if [she] were to marry [him], [he] would kill [her]'. A suppression of her ideals is equivalent to the death of her individuality and this indicates the intricate link between her feminist ideals and identity. St John's assertion that Jane 'must – shall be' the generic 'missionary's wife'[25] reinforces the primacy of her perceived religious role, which essentially will replace her identity. His claim that the quality distinguishing her as a female individual – her 'woman's heart'– is deficient and 'would not do' indicates his complete disregard for her feminist desires. In the perspective of St John, he argues that a woman should look beyond her 'insignificant

[24] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre (*New York: Penguin, 2012),p.455.

[25] *Ibi*d,449.

private individual' as she is merely a 'useful tool'[26] to facilitate spiritual plans. Feminist desires are inconsequential weaknesses that do not align with religious duties. Jane's compromise, to agree to be his 'fellow-missionary' instead of his 'wife' is compared to 'mutilated sacrifice'. [27] One thing is clear that maintaining a balance between religion and feminism will pollute both. 'Formed for labour, not for love'[28] pointedly differentiates Christian virtues from feminist desires. According to a religious authority like St John, the pursuit of feminism amounts to a religious betrayal.

If Jane's identity is threatened by the conflict between her feminist ideals and religious beliefs, then Helen Huntingdon's sense of self is conflated with her religious identity in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Women are biologically the weaker sex but have to be paragons of moral virtue and duty. This sweeping identification of women as morally upright created their societal role as being the domestic angel. Thus, Helen's identity is centred on the collective religious role she shares rather than a self-identity free from external influences. Her identity as a 'wife' and 'domestic angel' is dependent on her social function and this is seen most clearly when Arthur's affair obliterates her role as his 'wife'. She comes to occupy the rudimentary roles of being his child's mother, of course the housekeeper and 'nothing more'. 'Nothing more' reverberates with the absence of a self-identity – it has been hollowed out by the imposition of socially constructed roles. The absorption of Helen's identity into a collective one moulded by religious expectations, hinders the formation of her true identity.

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[26] *Ibid*,449..
[27] J. Jeffrey Franklin. "The Merging of Spiritualties: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love". *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 4, (California: University of California Press, 1995) , p. 475.
[28] *Ibid*,428.

Nancy Armstrong has stated that the perception of women as moral guardians put them specifically in the domestic sphere. Religion, it was believed, empowered women by investing them with superior morality. Helen's (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall)* belief that she can 'unfold' the goodness in her husband is an indication of her belief in oral guidance, a conviction that arises from the social attribute of moral purity. The very verb 'unfold' suggests an active agency that does not function in a public space. Arthur too accepts Helen's specific authority within the domestic boundary by calling her an 'angel monitress'. Arthur poisons their son into calling her 'wicked' but Helen's identity as a 'domestic angel' rests on her moral authority in the domestic sphere and through her influence over her son. Anne Brontë's subversion of the conventional ideal presses before us the reality that attainment of feminist ideals is extremely difficult as well as vulnerable. The equal standing that Helen enjoys is dependent on male consensus and ironically it stands shattered by the inherent patriarchy. Thus it is possible to suggest that religion apparently promoted feminist ideals by granting women influence, but this empowerment was ineffectual or mostly illusionary.

The deceptiveness of religion in *Jane Eyre* is subtler when analyzed with respect to Helen Burn's naïve hopes with reality. To begin with, Jane and Rochester's relationship is marked by religious undertones. Rochester expectedly used religion as a weapon to weaken Jane's feminist convictions. Maria Lamonaca cites the instances where Rochester talks of his affection as 'a product of God's will' and proposes in an 'Eden-like' orchard. His claim that their 'Maker sanctions what [he does]'[29] clearly shows that Rochester cloaks his personal agenda under a religious facade, hoping this would appeal to Jane. Conventionally, it should have. Rochester reapplies the tactic

[29] Maria Lamonaca. 'Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre'*. *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2002, p. 249.

when he makes an attempt to have Jane as his mistress. The proposal is outright rejected because it stands against her feminist ideals. Jane wishes to respect 'herself'; hence, Rochester's proposal to her is a call for an immorality that goes against her wish to 'keep the law given by God'.[30] Furthermore, Jane looks at the illicit role as the one flouting societal conventions which was bound to provoke strong societal judgment. As Dutta observes, 'her need for legacy justifies her rejection of the role' – it would be impossible for her to extricate her identity from the negative shades of 'Rochester's mistress'.[31] Aware of Jane's religious and feminist reservations, Rochester leverages on her piety. He blackmails her citing his spiritual corruption and his threats that he would die a cursed being become intense when Jane continually refuses him. Cleverly, Rochester plays with Jane's desire to uphold her feminist ideals against her religious obligations to him, creating a sense of religious duty through the elevation of her identity. She is his 'good angel', powerful because of her moral piety. His claims that if Jane left him; he would be flung into a moral abyss is again an attempt by Rochester to exploit his helpless state. Jane's superiority and Rochester's powerlessness actually accent the possibility that the latter's spiritual rebirth is to be brought about by Jane. Religion is used to persuade Jane to abandon the beliefs that anchor her identity but Jane who is determined to leave Rochester after the discovery of his first wife advises him to live a sinless life and die in tranquility.

Religion in *Wuthering Heights* is of a different texture. One is likely to assume that the primitivism of religion in *Wuthering Heights* leads to an even greater clash, but this is not the case. Lockwood's subconscious characterization of Joseph – arguably the most fervent Christian – as a 'ferocious assailant' in his dream builds the

[30] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.340.
[31] Sangeeta Dutta. 'Charlotte Brontë and the Woman Question' *Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.26,*No.40, 1991. p. 2315.

conviction that civility is absent in religion, a contrast to the convention of religious order and enlightenment.

Miller argues that 'every moral or religious law […] has been transformed into an instrument of aggression'. 'Pilgrims' staves' morph into 'clubs' that can be construed as tools of barbaric power. The vicar Branderham brutally 'executes judgment'; there is an overwhelming emphasis on religion's punitive aspect and its compassionate tenets are wholly disregarded.[32] Thus early in the novel, the condemnatory element of Catherine Earnshaw's religious experience is established. With Catherine's mother dead and with no positive female model available, Catherine is a victim of oppressive patriarchy. Hindley, obviously a religious tyrant, and Joseph, quite dominating, are the two people who are there to instill religious discipline, eventually leading Catherine to rebel against Joseph's moral instruction. Tytler observes that Joseph 'mingles his appeals to the Deity with virtually blasphemous interjections', as seen in 'Whear the divil, […] The Lord bless us! The Lord forgie us!' Joseph pronounces 'Christmas" as "Churstmas' and the syllable's similarity to 'curse' only goes to underscore the negativity of Catherine's religious exposure.[33]

Jane is ironically also exposed to similar oppression in the religious institution Lowood that causes permanent disillusionment with religion as far as Jane is concerned. The girls are 'quiet and plain';[34] the uniform is a suppression of individuality. However, Jane's traumatic religious experience with Brocklehurst is countered by the constructive influences of Helen Burns and Miss Temple. When on her deathbed, Helen tells Jane that there is 'nothing to grieve about'.[35] Helen, even in

[32] Joseph Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* (Illinois: Illinois University,1963), p.168.

[33] Graeme Tytler, "The role of religion in *Wuthering Heights", Brontë Studies*, Vol.32, 2007, p.32.
[34] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* , p.93..
[35] *Ibid.*, p.94.

her fragile state, continues to advocate the freedom and 'happiness'[36] of religion. Her goodness is compared to the 'brightness of the orb',[37] a picture that proposes religious enlightenment. Helen's picture is a sharp contrast to that of Brocklehurst, a 'black marble clergyman',[38] tainted, spiritually corrupt and virtually inhumane. Helen Huntingdon's aunt too is a negative influence in terms of religion and warns Helen that 'principle is the first thing'.[39]

Catherine Earnshaw, unlike her counterparts Jane and Helen, does not find any positive influence as far as religion is concerned and there comes a point when she rejects all religious influences. Her physical retreat to the moor with Heathcliff, after Joseph's three-hour church service, signifies a metaphorical escape from religious confines that finds her enjoying and comfortable. Tytler writes that the 'erotic experience seems for Catherine […] a kind of religion',[40] and, indeed, liberation and sanctuary are found in her romance rather than in religion. The spiritual experience that she derives from the romantic ambience is seen in the apocalyptic imagery she uses when she differentiates Edgar Linton's 'soul' to her own as 'frost from fire'.[41] *Wuthering Heights* is full of religious imagery and language – Heathcliff compares 'existence, after losing her' to 'hell' [42] and he envisions Catherine as an 'angel in heaven'.[43] Impassioned love consumes her and her identity is intrinsically tied to Heathcliff: 'whatever our souls are made of, [Heathcliff's] and mine are the same'.[44] Catherine is assertive of her identity and compassionately declares: 'Nelly, I am

[36] *Ibid,* p.94..
[37] *Ibid,*p.84.
[38] *Ibid*., p.83.
[39] *Ibid* ,. p.68.
[40] Graeme Tytler. "The Role of Religion in Wuthering Heights." *Brontë Studies,* Vol. 32, 2007, p. 45.
[41] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights,* p. 71.
[42] *Ibid*., p.131.
[43] *Ibid.,* 144.
[44]*Ibid.,* p.73.

Heathcliff' and '[he is] my own being'.[45] Clearly a religious heaven is replaced by a romantic heaven. Catherine too then attempts to build her religious beliefs upon her own individual experience.

Catherine's displacement of religion allows her to avoid the potential conflict with the feminist ideal of true love. On the other hand, Helen (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall)* copes with the conflict in a way that allows both to coexist. Though Helen accepts the illusory empowerment accorded to her within the religious perimeter of a patriarchal society, religion also propels her to step out of these boundaries to develop her self-identity. Helen's fear that her child's spiritual integrity will be tampered by his father's corrupting influence becomes the impetus for her escape. At the time when Helen decided to leave her husband, the very act was looked upon as something that was against the ideas of female submission. Helen is seemingly aware of this and hence tells her aunt to pardon the step that she had taken. The meekness of Milicent Hattersley is used as a foil to Helen's boldness in the novel that further augments the efficacy of religion as a tool of true empowerment.

Helen's escape gives her the license to develop her self-identity and this process is captured by the motif of painting. Gilbert and Gubar single out Helen's turtle dove painting,[46] which Arthur interprets as an expression of her desire to be 'won like that pretty hen-dove'.[47] Helen's feminist desire for love is mirrored in her artwork and she uses the medium to assert her individuality. Helen writes that she wanted it to be a masterpiece and she proposes herself as a painter. After marriage, it is clear that she is not much into painting. Her journal speaks more and more of her role as a mother, mirroring the dissolving of her own identity and the growth of a

[45] *Ibid.*, p.74.
[46] Gilbert and Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 81.
[47] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics), p.122.

societal one. Her individual identity falls into danger when Arthur sort of displaced her painting apparatus. The tools symbolize the possibility of financial independence. So by destroying them, Arthur wants to ensure that in no way she achieves financial self-security. In spite of whatever was happening in her life, Helen thought religion to be crucial. She is egged on by this concern for her son's spiritual well-being and justifies the feminist assertiveness of her escape from her husband's domination. Only when she has escaped, does Helen come to asserting her feminist self.

Even though Helen is able to balance religion with feminism, she has to suffer because she gives too much priority to her sense of individual self. Catherine Earnshaw's stance of non-conformity to conventional religion allows her to achieve the romantic ideal. By contrast, the solid religious foundation of her formative years only complicates things for Helen. She cannot break away from her sense of duty towards Arthur. Similarly, Jane's choice of embracing both religion and feminism results in great tension. Her faith makes her more susceptible to the use of religion as a tool of coercion. She 'felt veneration so strong'[48] for St John's moral authority that at one she point thought of giving up the struggle. Lamonaca rightly suggests that St John's religious agenda is a vehicle for 'masculine self-aggrandizement and domination'.[49] St John ends up objectifying Jane and does not want Jane to remain her owner any longer. The warlike imagery of a 'conquest'[50] and an 'iron shroud'[51] uses religion again as a weapon against the vulnerable female. Religion is used to vindicate his patriarchal mind-set. It lends legitimacy to his professed right to her: 'I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service.'[52]

[48] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2012), p.473.
[49] Maria Lamonaca. "Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre''*. Studies in the Novel, p. 245.
[50] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* , p.459.
[51] *Ibid*,460.
[52] *Ibid*,462.

In *Jane Eyre* religion is just not a tool of empowerment for Jane. She goes further than Helen Burns, forging what Franklin terms a 'revised Christianity'.[53] Charlotte Bronte challenges the Evangelical model of female subordination portrayed in *Paradise Lost* [54] when Jane tells St John that 'were [she] but convinced that it is God's will [she] should marry [him]'[55] and she would be happy becoming the missionary's wife. This contradicts the traditional belief that women are 'incapable of discerning God's will'. Jane's Christian worldview is such that she will not depend upon male assurance, rather she is to be self-reliant. In this light, she interprets the calls of 'Jane, Jane!' that she hears as a call to moral duty, allowing her to spurn the missionary call of St John without regret.

Such mutual reinforcement of religion and feminism is conspicuously absent in *Wuthering Heights*. To begin with, Catherine's rejection of religion seems to liberate her from the religious expectations of society but as we proceed through the novel, it increases her vulnerability to societal expectations. Unlike Jane and Helen of *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall,* Catherine cannot utilize the support of an alternative religion when feminist ideals are subjected to societal pressure. Catherine marries Linton not for love but because she wanted to be the greatest woman of her neighbourhood and this she does dangerously by rejecting Heathcliff. The imagery of Catherine as a 'thorn' vis-à-vis the 'honeysuckles' is a sign of her inferiority to the Lintons. It parallels the imagery of Heathcliff and Linton, with the 'bleak, hilly, coal country' juxtaposed to the 'beautiful fertile valley'.[56]

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[53] . Jeffrey Franklin. "The Merging of Spiritualties: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love". *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 4, California: University of California Press, 1995, p. 475

[54] Maria Lamonaca. "Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*". *Studies in the Novel*, p .247.

[55]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. p. 462.

[56] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.64.

Consequently, Catherine, who is described as being on more equal terms with Heathcliff, then begins on an unequal footing in her marriage with Linton which is bound to suppress her individual self. One cannot wholly blame Catherine for her decision because apart from Frances, the weakling wife of Hindley, she has no other example before her. All Frances does is to aid her superficial development by getting Catherine to like fine clothes. Catherine's return from Thrushcross Grange in a 'feathered beaver' and ornaments befitting of her social status leads Hindley to exclaim that he hardly recognized Catherine after her transformation as the lady. This makes her also physically different from Heathcliff. A class divide has been superimposed and Catherine's marriage to Linton stems from her inability to resist the societal pressure of class-consciousness. This rejection of Heathcliff translates to a rejection of her self-identity, as echoed in an accusation addressed to him: 'You have killed me'.[57] Her estrangement from her identity makes her exile from her core nature, and this protracted suppression of her feminist ideals is a degenerative act that ends in the disintegration of her psyche.

On her deathbed, Catherine begs for 'one breath' of wind that 'comes straight down from the moor'.[58] Her childhood romping about on the moor with Heathcliff is the essence of her identity. In the novel, Nature is symbolic of the freedom Catherine desires: bliss achievable only when she remains true to her nature. Only her release from the world endows her with features of 'perfect peace' like an 'angel in heaven'[59] and she attains a freedom reminiscent of happier times. Catherine is liberated from the burden of societal expectations only in her death.

Unlike Catherine, Jane's religious background supports her feminist ideals and this helps her to resist the pressure to conform. Jane's threatens that she would wear

[57] *Ibid.*, p.71.
[58] *Ibid.*, p.109.
[59] *Ibid.*,p.144.

only 'old frocks' at Lowood is in keeping with according to Brocklehurst's idea that the first Christian ideal is disdain for vanity. Later, she sees Rochester's lavish gifts as attempts to impose superficiality upon her true identity. She prefers sober black satin and pink. Rochester has become the sultan, a typical Byronic hero, but Jane refuses to be his trophy. She is suspicious of Rochester's effort and will, under no circumstances, become his slave. The religious principle of consistency complements her feminist ideals, helping her to retain her identity that is not subjected to any societal definition of economic status or beauty. It is then possible to suggest that the conflict between religion and feminism in *Wuthering Heights,* which arises from Catherine's lack of religion, contrasts with a balance that Jane Eyre, is able to find.

Although the withdrawal of Jane and a crippled Rochester into the reclusive manor suggests that their unconventional relationship dynamics is unaccepted in mainstream society,[60] Jane's Christian-feminist *bildungsroman* allows her to achieve her religious and feminist ideals. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* structure subsumes Helen's voice within Markham's narrative, thus not making it exclusively her narrative. Nonetheless, religion allows Helen to bridge the public and domestic sphere. Even for Catherine, whose impassioned frenzy parallels Bertha's madness, Miller points out that 'her rejection of religion is an attempt to be self-sufficient'.[61] Although this backfires, it is still an assertion of feminist independence. All these above discussions lead us to the conclusion that heroines cannot transcend societal boundaries always but the successful synthesis of religion and feminism, once seemingly mutually exclusive, can accord them a measure of true happiness.

[60] Sangeeta Dutta. "Charlotte Bronte and the Woman Question". *Economic and Political Weekly*,p. 2312.
[61] Joseph Miller. *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-century Writers*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1963, p. 158.

Fortunately, the wealth of secondary literature gave me some insight to develop the connection between feminism and religion. Upon reading Tytler, Stevenson and Miller, who explore Catherine's rejection of religion, I was able to see the connection between religion and feminism in *Wuthering Heights*. It is Stevenson's attention to Catherine's identity that also set the ball rolling, consequently leading to the study of the conflict of religion and feminism in the three heroines' individual identities, namely Jane, Catherine and Helen. Franklin and Lamonaca's works on the religious and feminist influences in *Jane Eyre* further suggested that the two forces are not necessarily conflicting. Catherine's choice to pursue her feminist desires without inhibition is a stark contrast to the coping mechanisms of Jane and Helen, who seek to reconcile the conflict and use religion as a source of support.

A study of religion and feminism in the nineteenth century has been naturally undertaken, given the context of the time and the expectations of a deeply religious society, one that gave rise to the conflicts that the heroines experienced. All this allows me to conclude that the heroines of the Brontë sisters envisioned their own religion where the heart and matters close to the heart, are given priority over conventional religion that stifled individual growth. Religion, then to them was self-liberating; it is about growth as a good individual and the refuge where the soul finds happiness and peace.

Social Commitment and Constructions in the novels of the Brontë Sisters

In 1840 the graphic artist George Cruikshank produced a caricature entitled *The British Beehive* that showed the English society divided by class and occupation, with the royal family at the top of the hierarchy, a broad middle class that included booksellers, mechanics, weavers, jewellers, tea dealers and inventors; and at the bottom were cabmen to dustmen. Cruikshank chose deliberately the rigidly structured beehives to showcase the class divisions at work in British society, thus suggesting that such a division was natural and unchanging. It was also a time when the aristocracy no longer had the traditional unfair advantage; in fact, the middle classes had begun to campaign energetically for electoral reform and free trade. By creating the conditions for healthy competition, the Victorians believed it should be possible, in theory, for any man to succeed in the world through his own efforts no matter how humble his origins. Author Samuel Smiles coined the term 'self-help' which he used as the title for his best-selling book *Self-Help* (1859). In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens tells the story of Philip Pirrip (Pip) who is transformed from a blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman. However, we know that Pip had not worked for his wealth, so a sense of guilt is woven into the plot and in the end Pip is determined to stay in London to earn his living. Dickens' father had been to the debtors' prison and he had learnt the hard way that self-help and hard work were essential for success. Those who did not work were responsible for their poverty; only the old and disabled were expected not to work. For those not working, there was the workhouse that had been created by the New Poor Law of 1834. Conditions inside the workhouse were desperate. Families were split up, the food offered

was meagre and the inmates had to work several hours a day and do unpleasant jobs like breaking stones. Strangely, even if a middle class man came to have worldly success, it did not guarantee social security; rather, rapid upward mobility created anxieties. Class distinctions now worked on different parameters and created distinctions like the 'old', middle-class of professional men such as lawyers and doctors as distinct from the 'new' businessmen. With so many more people coming to live in the cities, men who had risen from humble beginnings worried about fitting in. This brings us to a body of literature written on lifestyle around this time. People could choose from scores of manuals with titles like *How to behave* and *Hints from a Gentleman*. One could learn anything from these books, including how to shake hands to how to converse politely, how to style one's beard or conducting oneself at a dinner party or even at a church, and much more. Thus it was a time of social and class consciousness. Needless to say, the Brontë sisters were not unaffected by it.

The setting of the story at Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange provides a clear example of social contrast. While the Heights is depicted as simply typical and domestic, the Grange is described as a 'scene of unprecedented richness'.[1] Each house is associated with behaviour fitting the description. For example, when Catherine is taken into the Grange, she experiences drastic changes, thus evolving from a 'savage' to a 'lady'.[2] While at this house, she rises in status, learns manners, and receives great privileges such as not having to work. Heathcliff, on the other hand, learns to classify himself as a member of the lower class, as he does not possess the qualities of those at the

[1] Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.231.
[2] *Ibid.*, p.231.

Grange. Catherine is the daughter of Mr & Mrs Earnshaw and Heathcliff is a boy picked up by Mr Earnshaw from the slums of Liverpool city; he is named Heathcliff Earnshaw by Mr Earnshaw. Earnshaw's treatment towards Heathcliff is like a father's treatment towards his own child. But the social contrast creeps in when Hindley returns to Wuthering Heights and forces Heathcliff to work in the fields.

Wuthering Heights opens in 1801, a date Q. D. Leavis believes Brontë chose in order 'to fix its happenings at a time when the old rough farming culture, based on a naturally patriarchal family life, was to be challenged, tamed and routed by social and cultural changes; these changes produced Victorian class consciousness and "unnatural" ideal of gentility'.[3] The Industrial Revolution, in 1801, was of course a strong presence and by the time Emily Brontë was writing her novel in 1847, it was a dominant force in English economy and society, and the traditional relationship of social classes was being disrupted by an upwardly-aspiring middle class and people coming to new fortunes because of many business ventures. A new standard for defining a gentleman, i.e. money, was challenging the traditional criteria of breeding and family. It is the changing dynamics of society that makes Heathcliff believe that once he comes into wealth, he will be able to have Catherine in his life again. Also, newer avenues of earning had opened up that allows Heathcliff to come into wealth. Is Emily Brontë then supporting the status quo and upholding conventional values? A number of novels of the 1830s and 40s deal with the abuses of industrialism and overbearing individualism; *Wuthering Heights* may

[3] Quoted in Christopher Heywood, *Emily Bronte* (Canada: Broadview Press, 2004) Q.D.Leavis '*A* Fresh Approach to *Wuthering Heights'* in F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Essays in America* (London : Chotto & Windus,1969), p.142.

not be an exception but it cannot be denied that the novel advocated the necessity of preserving traditional ways. The Marxist critics like Arnold Kettle argued that the basic conflict in the novel is social in origin. Kettle suggests that Catherine and Heathcliff's show of affinity in the (class) rebellion is a result of the injustice meted out by Hindley and his wife, Frances, on them as young children:

> He, the outcast slummy, turns to the lively, spirited, fearless girl who alone offers him human understanding and comradeship. And she, born into the world of Wuthering Heights, senses that to achieve a full humanity, to be true to herself as a human being, she must associate herself totally with him in his rebellion against the tyranny of the Earnshaws and all that tyranny involves. [4]

In Kettle's view, Catherine's death inverts the common standards of bourgeois morality Heathcliff is morally ruthless as he analyses why Catherine chooses Edgar Linton. Heathcliff's revenge design is ruthless too, but, as readers, we sympathize with him because he uses weapons and values (arranged marriages, accumulating money, and expropriating property) of Victorian society against those with power; his ruthlessness strips them of any romantic veneer. Heathcliff only realizes the futility of his revenge when Cathy and Hareton show love towards each other. Kettle concluded his analysis rightly when he suggests that it ‘is an expression in the imaginative terms of art of the stresses and tensions and conflicts, personal and spiritual, of nineteenth-century capitalist

[4] Arnold Kettle. *An Introduction to the English Novel,* Vol. I (New York: Routledge Revival,2016), p. 168.

society'.[5] Writing nearly twenty-five years after Kettle, Marxist Terry Eagleton posed a complex question and by showing the contradictory the relationship between the landed gentry and aristocracy, the traditional power-holders, and the capitalist, industrial middle classes, who were pushing for social acceptance and political power. Simultaneously with the struggle among these groups, an accommodation was developing based on economic interests. The landed gentry and aristocracy still were not comfortable marrying into first-generation capitalist wealth but there was a certain willingness to mix socially and form economic alliances with the manufacturers and industrialists. The Brontës, who lived in the town of Haworth in West Riding, seemed particularly affected by these social and economic conditions as West Riding had a concentration of large estates and industrial centres. This allows us to understand why Emily, who did not move much or have much social exposure, was able to weave the complex socio-economic conflicts in her novel.

Eagleton is clear about the fact that he saw both class struggle and class accommodation in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff, who is brought by Earnshaw to the Heights, has no biological connect nor social connect. Eagleton says that this Heathcliff offers Catherine a non-social or pre-social relationship that is far removed away from the conventional restrictions and material comforts of the upper classes, represented by the genteel Lintons. This relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, according to Eagleton, which is outside society, is 'the only authentic form of living in a world of exploitation and inequality'.[6] Eagleton further elaborates that Heathcliff's expression of a

[5]*Ibid.,* p.144.
[6] Terry Eagleton. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës (*London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p.108.

natural non-social mode of being gives the relationship its impersonal quality and makes the conflict one of nature versus society. Thus Eagleton suggests that Heathcliff's connection with nature is manifested in his running wild as a child and in Hindley's reducing him to a farm labourer. But it is Catherine's marriage and also Hindley's abuses that transform Heathcliff and his meaning in the social system, a transformation that zooms in a reality about nature – i.e. nature is not really outside society because its conflicts are expressed in the society. Catherine does not consider personal feelings when it comes to choosing Linton but, instead she focuses on her outward appearance to society. 'Edgar Linton will be rich and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood whereas if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars'.[7] It is obvious that wealth justifies social class, and Catherine strives to achieve high status and that is why Cathy says to Nelly: 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff, now'.[8]

> The adult Heathcliff is different because, as a capitalist, an expropriator, and a predator, he uses the tools of the ruling class i.e. property accumulation and acquisitive marriage against them. Eagleton speaks of Hareton as a Yeoman who had been degraded and needs to be civilized/ tamed. When it comes to his relationship with Hareton, Heathcliff is no different from the capitalist Linton as he adopts the behaviour of the exploiting middle class against the yeoman. Having been raised in the yeoman class and having acquired his fortune outside it, he comes to represent both pungent capitalism and the rejection offered by capitalist society. Using this argument, Eagleton says that the capitalist class, being no longer revolutionary, failed to provide expression for Heathcliff's rejection of society in favour of a pre-social freedom from society's restraints. From this impossibility comes what Eagleton calls Heathcliff's personal tragedy: his conflictive

[7] Emily Brontë. *Wuthering Heights.* p.186.
[8] *Ibid.*, p.186.

> unity consisting of spiritual rejection and social integration. Heathcliff relentlessly pursues his goal of possessing Catherine, an obsession that is unaffected by social realities. In other words, the novel does not fully succeed in reconciling or finding a way to express all Heathcliff's meanings.

Eagleton acknowledges that though ultimately it is the values of Thrushcross Grange which prevail, but Emily sympathies with the more democratic, close to nature Wuthering Heights. The capitalist victory over the yeomanry is symbolized by the displacement of Joseph's beloved currant bushes by Catherine's flowers, which are in Marxist terms ‘surplus value’. In this context, the death of Heathcliff is essential. It may be a regrettable death but it is a necessary death because the future requires a fusion of the gentry and the capitalist middle class, not a continued conflict.

The Victorian period is synonymous with bringing about dramatic changes right across British society. Britain expanded into a global empire that saw a massive inflow of wealth from the colonies. Further, the ongoing Industrial Revolution in the country gave the middle class lucrative opportunities to gain wealth while also creating a new labour class which struggled with issues of job security and living conditions. Charlotte Brontë explored the crisis and progress of such a society and the reforms it led to. The uprisings, revolts, strikes, riots, as well as the representation of these in literary works, and the awareness they generated, slowly caused the well-established aristocratic framework to dissolve and give way to a new flexible social and economic order. This dissolving of the feudal system and the resultant effects

on the class hierarchy also led to a number of changes in the laws. These reforms find a subtle manifestation in the novels of the period. The novelist's views on the socio-economic relations extended considerably beyond those on the political economists, who refused to acknowledge the area of unpaid work, including much housework and care of dependents, or widespread but illegitimate work, such as prostitution. Fictional works with great psychological depth like Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) or *Jane Eyre* (1847) find economic relations constitutive of the individual's psyche – as the governess or teacher, whether it is Lucy Snowe or Jane Eyre; she is confined by her class as in an iron cage.

Most noticeably, the recurrent problems of class hierarchies can be traced in *Jane Eyre*. One has to acknowledge that Charlotte was far-sighted enough to foresee how things were going to be at the turn of the nineteenth century, based on observation of the society around her and the transformation that it was likely go through. One such future insight allowed her to see that class boundaries would not be rigid for long in the society and this would slowly permeate the Victorian society, consequently leading to the breakdown of the aristocracy machinery based on feudalism. This idea is explored in Charlotte's first published novel, *Jane Eyre.*

On the surface, *Jane Eyre* is a romance which explores a Victorian dilemma – an intelligent young woman's right to love and be loved, and yet retain her independent spirit. Jane, who wants to get a job as a governess, is of course wanting to escape her school, but as an orphan, she also looks at this job as an opportunity that would give her economic and personal independence. It is in her struggles that we find Jane touching upon the issues

of class hierarchies, economic structures, and gender roles that affected Britain at large. Let us look at Jane's journey through the novel. At her birth, Jane is vulnerable because of her economic location as well as her gender. Jane Eyre slowly gains social position and economic stability of a lady and an heiress respectively; thus she moves between economic classes and drifts among the lower, middle and upper classes of Victorian England. Through her story she is able to hint at the legal, social and economic issues which haunted the era; being the daughter of a clergyman and a lady, Jane's class status at birth is ambivalent. Her mother, we learn, had been disowned by her family for marrying out of her class and Jane's circumstances at Gateshead Hall are no better; in spite of living a life amongst genteel people, she is an outsider. It is her hard work at Lowood School that allows her to become a governess and Bessie, the maid at Gateshead, rightly recognizes Jane as a lady. Jane is not content with the opportunity at Lowood though it offers respectability. In terms of the next rung in the 'status' ladder, Jane rises to the position of a school mistress at Morton but rustic pupils leave her low. It is only after having inherited Uncle John's wealth and after finally marrying Rochester that Jane is able to secure status in society as well as gain economic autonomy. Not only Jane but also other women characters in the novel, such as Rochester's illegitimate daughter Adele, his mad wife Bertha, the Rivers sisters, the Reed sisters, Rosamond Oliver and Mrs. Fairfax, have ambivalent status. Some of them do have a social position and respectability but no money to support them, while others have money but not class, whereas a few have none of them. The flexibility that Charlotte Brontë gave her heroine Jane allowed her to move between the classes but Charlotte knew that the society was not

classless and she depicted the realities of her time when she shows Jane being judged time and again, because of her social position, by others who are believers in a rigid social hierarchy.

It was not that Charlotte Brontë showed only women affected by the class hierarchy. She knew very well that the class rules for the men too were not all in their favour, for instance, the younger son's fortune and employment did not correspond to the grandeur of their birth and education due to the unjust law of inheritance that allowed only the eldest son to inherit the wealth as well as the title. One of the reasons why Rochester married Bertha Mason was to succeed to her property because, as the younger son in the family, he could not inherit any portion of his family wealth. Charlotte interestingly gives a twist to the male protagonist's circumstances as she had given to the female protagonist's. When Rochester's elder brother and their father die and Bertha goes mad, Rochester lands with the opportunity to lead a life neither bound by the economic deprivations that is the usual lot of a younger son, nor tied down by a wife whom he had married for money. Undeniably, in real life, the conditions were of course different and difficult, especially for the women till the reforms took place. A few of these reforms such as – better political representation, working conditions and education, had immediate effects for women, who earlier would have very limited status in Victorian society.

Both Charlotte and her sister Emily Brontë 'turned to literature because they found their work as governess and teacher unendurable'. [9] It offered a lonely and sad existence and they sought relief in the world of imagination

[9] William Long. *English Literature: Its history and its significance for the life of the English speaking world* (New York: Ginn and Company, 1964), p.514.

through their writing, but it was the cause of the initiation not an end in itself. Charlotte aimed to make her novel a realistic picture of society. Her novels are not 'products of immense solitude, of the imagination turned inwards upon itself, and of ignorance of world outside Haworth and literature'[10] but an intelligent portrayal of the society that she was living and breathing in. In spite of spending much of their life at the Haworth parsonage, Charlotte and her sisters, along with thousands of other women, were victims of the characteristic nineteen-century dilemma – too poor to live without working, yet they were also ladies, a fact that severely limited what decent society would allow them to do without the loss of caste. Luckily for them 'in the Victorian age, publicly at any rate, the law for man and for woman became the same law'. [11]

Women inherited no property and if they sought employments qualified for a lady, it would be ill-paid, exhausting as well as humiliating. Due to the lack of respectable professions, many educated but poor gentlewomen would earn very little by teaching in charity school (as Jane Eyre does), and be left mostly dismayed by the experience. Unequal matches, like the one we see between Bertha and Rochester, were often a reality of the times when marriage was looked upon as an economic instrument. Although, legal reforms and changes in public attitude would transform the institution of marriage by the end of the century, no significant legal reforms had yet taken place when *Jane Eyre* was written. On the other hand, to marry out of class was considered unacceptable; even for Jane it is literally the stuff of fantasy as

[10] Walter Allen. *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1954), p.187.
[11] *Ibid.*, p.143.

Mrs. Fairfax remarks: 'Gentlemen in his [Rochester's] station are not accustomed to marry their governesses'. [12]

Things were not good even for women of class who had no inheritance but had to seek an escape through marriage. Blanche Ingram courts Rochester for this reason, and as soon as the news reaches her that his fortune is not even half of what it is believed to be, she immediately turns away her glances and advances. Although all marriages were no longer arranged by families, most were negotiated with at least half an eye on practicalities. It was one of the few ways by which a poor gentlewoman could escape the trap of poverty and degradation.

Marriage had severe pitfalls especially for a woman of independent spirit, whether impoverished or not. A husband became the master of her person and also of her property and income – a situation that would be remedied only by the Married Women's Property Act from 1870 onwards. A wife was expected to submit to her husband's will, adopt his opinions and run the household in such a way that he remained free from domestic worries, and in this light, we can understand Rochester's famous '. . . I mean shortly to claim you – your thoughts, conversation, and company – for life'. [13] In fact, Charlotte Brontë herself was already a famous writer when she married Arthur Bell Nicholls but he was allowed to interfere in her correspondence with Ellen Nussey (her school friend), and it is well known from various biographies that the last few months of her life saw her spending more time in her husband's parish duties than in devoting time to her own writing. Charlotte Brontë had

[12] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* ((New York: Penguin Drop Caps, 2012), p.237.
[13] *Ibid.,* p.240.

earlier received a proposal from Henry Nussey, a curate who had told her clearly that he was about to take in pupils and needed a wife to look after them. So to say that the proposal of St John Rivers to Jane is far-fetched would be a case of social obtuseness. Both the fictional and the real life offers were refused, but there were plenty of girls who were more down to earth in their expectations and accepted such marriage proposals for the sake of social security.

In theory, gentility and wealth were supposed to go hand in hand, but in reality there were many women who were obviously genteel but lacked means to support their class or needed a man to maintain them. For example, Mrs. Fairfax in *Jane Eyre*, who is the housekeeper at Thornfield, in spite of being a lady of class (she is a distant relative of Mr. Rochester), has no means of livelihood and thus is a dependent. Often ladies took up jobs, as Mrs. Fairfax does, because the family fortune had collapsed. The Victorian economy was unstable because of Victorian enterprises that saw people taking to alternating speculative manias and there were bank failures, booms and slumps. The children of paid professionals, with no stable family wealth, had uncertain prospects in the event of the death of the breadwinner, a circumstance which might have haunted the Bronte sisters because of their clergyman father. It was obvious that if Patrick Brontë died, the parsonage would be taken over by another person and the sisters would face destitution, a circumstance that is presented in *Jane Eyre* through the state of the Rivers sisters – Diana and Mary – who, after the death of Mr. Rivers, were forced to leave the Moor House and work as governesses.

Economic disparity forced even women of class to work. John Reed, who is modelled upon Charlotte's brother Branwell, is seen as someone wasting the family resources thoughtlessly and bringing everyone in the family to ruin and destruction. This was the thought that probably gripped Charlotte Brontë who realized that her drunken brother would never be able to support any of his sisters. John Reed is no different. One of his sisters, Eliza, opts to live in a nunnery while another sister, Georgiana, takes up residence with her relatives in London. Living with relatives was one obvious option for the impoverished gentlewoman. Sometimes she was welcome and wanted, but often the impoverished single relative might also be reduced to the family drudge, made humiliatingly aware of her dependency, as little Jane had been through the bullying by her cousin John Reed : 'You are a dependent, Mamma says, you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's children like us'. [14]

According to the Victorian ideology 'the female sphere' – a woman's proper place – was at home, whether she ruled as its mistress or laboured in it as a servant. The profession of dress-making, though considered 'genteel', offered mearge pay. Of the employments now thought of as traditionally feminine and respectable, even nursing was out of the question then; nurses were working-class women with bad reputations until Florence Nightingale's Reforms took effect in the 1860s. Before that, young ladies were expected to play the piano and sketch prettily. Jane can also play 'like any other English School girl'[15] but Rochester recognizes rightly that Jane is an artist of rare talent; even then there was hardly any scope for gifted women to exhibit their

[14] *Ibid.,* p.6.
[15] *Ibid.,* p.108.

talent on a larger platform. In spite of her talent, Jane could no more be a teacher or a governess. The job of a teacher was not glamorous, nor was it desirable, as she was lonely and excluded from the friendship of her masters as well as the servants. Jane's experience at Thornfield Hall is a typical example of what really happened – the governess was not privy to or part of the parties at home; she could only hear their gaiety as Jane narrates: '. . . light steps ascended the stairs; and there was tripping through the gallery, and soft cheerful laughs, and opening and closing doors and, for a time, hush'. [16] The portrayal of Jane Eyre and of Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, as governess, is extremely realistic as they were modelled upon Charlotte's own experiences early in life.

Governesses also meant, by extension, teachers. Such women would work for boarding or charity schools. The standards of these institutions varied greatly as depicted in the novel in the form of Lowood School. Charlotte herself taught at Yorkshire schools in the mid-1830s, but her work could be compared to that of a slave. Later Charlotte was offered a post at Large Manchester boarding school with a remuneration of £100 per annum but she was unable to take up the job because of her father's illness. Unlike her novel *Villette* where the protagonist establishes a school of her own and becomes independent, the reality was grim for governesses who were underpaid and overworked. The governess's status had inherent contradictions; she was a lady, on the one hand allowed into the drawing and the dining room when her employers wanted to show her off but she was not good enough to eat with her employers. She had to make herself unobtrusive so that her mistress should

[16] *Ibid.,* p.145.

not feel rivalled. Such a circumstance which does feature in the novel as Rochester's wife is mad and confined in the attic. But we still get a glimpse of the same when Jane asks Rochester to guarantee that Adele and she would be out of the way before he marries Blanche Ingram. Charlotte Brontë's resentment of the slights she endured as a governess is also reflected in the novel when Mr. Rochester's beautiful fiancée', Blanche Ingram, recounts the cruel fun that she and her brother had at their governess's expense. The governess's life was singularly isolated and stressful. The low salaries received by them ensured that those who outlived their usefulness would save little or nothing, and end their days in the work house.

Victorian novels and reports on the condition of the governess encouraged public concern and as a result, in 1843, the Governess' Benevolent Institution was founded. It set up a home for those in temporary difficulties, awarded annuities to aged governesses and even kept a register of available employment. But a more significant episode was the founding of Queen's College in London with the intention of giving governesses proper training for their profession. With this institution and the wider job opportunities provided by social change and intelligent agitation began the transformation of the impoverished gentlewoman into the educated, efficient, modern woman.

Apart from having tried their hands at being governesses, the Brontë sisters became successful writers. Apart from teaching, literary writing offered the possibility of an extraordinary advance in affluence and status but obviously this gateway was not for all. Men were never too keen to see women taking up writing as a profession but women had long been accepted as novelists, partly because the novel itself was originally regarded as a light

weight literary form, requiring no great specialised knowledge or talent. Writing continued to be a respectable profession for ladies, partly because it could be carried out at home, though by the nineteenth century, great restrictions had been placed on the language and subject matter permitted to writers, especially women writers that made novelists like the Brontës take up pseudonyms so that their work might not be judged on its own merits and not pre-judged as the work of a women.

The readers of the Victorian novel did want to be entertained, and in a sense they wanted to escape the drudgeries and monotony brought about by the Industrial Revolution, but they wanted to be entertained with a minimum of literary convention, a minimum of 'aesthetic distance'.[17] They wanted to be close to what they were reading about that is to have as little 'suspension of disbelief' as possible. Charlotte Brontë provides exactly what the readers wanted – *Jane Eyre* is as much literature as the story from the pages from life. The same is true of Charlotte's other novel *Shirley* (1849). Set in Yorkshire, during the Luddite machine breaking riots, this is perhaps her most socially aware novel. The riots which occurred in the north of England in 1811-13, were popularly supported – the labour intensive wool industry was in decline and industrialization was threatening jobs and driving the dispossessed to desperation. Charlotte had heard about the stories of anti-machine riots in her youth and hence *Shirley* was an attempt 'to write a novel that should give a picture of a certain society at a certain time'.[18] Through the character of Shirley Keedlar, Brontë gave subtle hints that 'industrial reform and

[17] David Daiches. *A Critical History of English Literature* Vol. 2 (London: Ronald Press Company, 1960), p.1048.
[18] Walter Allen. *The English Novel: A Short Critical History (*Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1954), p.60.

legislations to curb the worst excesses of the factory system were often first prompted by mill-owners themselves, who had not made the industrial system so much as inherited it'.[19]

Shirley and Jane are both independent and spirited heroines who write their own destinies. The difference is that Shirley was born an heiress, a mill owner, while Jane finally inherits her uncle's wealth. Nonetheless, this shows that economic independence was a crucial necessity for social status and the liberty to make one's own decision, especially in the case of women. Rightly does Jane remark: 'I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress'.[20] *Jane Eyre* is based on the society in which the novelist lived, and provides us glimpses of the same. The rapid transition in the economy and society which Britain witnessed in the Victorian era is intricately woven within the fabric of the novel. It hints at the fact that economic classes and social classes were not as concrete as certain people wanted them to be and that economic relations constituted an important part of the psyche of the people and the society as a whole. Hence it presents a realistic picture of the changing dynamics of the class structures in Victorian England.

The real function of a middle-class wife was to display her husband's financial success by stocking her home with material possessions – what's been called the 'paraphernalia of gentility'. Carpets, pianos and paintings, the fancier the better, were all advertised in the new women's magazines, such as Sam Beeton's *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine,* and this was sent a message not only also about their owners' wealth but also their patriotism.

[19] *Ibid.*, p.144.
[20] Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*, p.385.

Buying luxury goods boosted domestic trade and bound the growing British Empire together through the importation of precious materials and expensive fabrics from the other side of the world. Being a consumer had become a civic duty. [21] The lady of the house herself became a walking billboard for her husband's material success. She might change her clothes several times a day, wearing different outfits for breakfast, while making social calls, and dinner. Her body, too, conveyed an important message about her social class. Her smooth white hands and cumbersome crinoline skirt hinted that she had not been busy with housework. This is what Blanche Ingram aspired to be and what Rosalie (*Agnes Grey*) looked like.

Clothes not only make a style statement but the novels we are discussing here augment the belief that the clothing style reveals much more about a character's taste and preferences. That the personal lives of the Brontë sisters, found their way often into their novels has been proved again and again. It was evidently in Brussels that Charlotte Brontë had learnt to adapt to a style of dressing that would suit her tiny figure. Charlotte abandoned her old-fashioned dresses with their high waists and large sleeves and collars and soon she started to wear plainer clothes, neatly waisted with narrow sleeves and small, contrasting, embroidered collars. In taking after this fashion, Charlotte was clearly imitating the Belgian girls and her future heroines, from Frances Henri (*The Professor*) to Lucy Snowe (*Villette*), all of whom would win approval for the neatness and plain simplicity of their dress even if these heroines lacked the advantages of personal beauty. By contrast, Emily Brontë obstinately refused to

[21] Kathryn Hughes. 'The middle classes: etiquette and upward mobility'. British Library (web). Accessed on 10th Jan., 2015. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-middle-classes-etiquette-and-upward-mobility#sthash.qqQ0qAG2.dpuf.

abandon her old style of dress, persisting in wearing leg-of-mutton sleeves, which had long gone out of fashion and did not suit her tall, ungainly frame. Emily's petticoats too lacked fullness and her skirt clung to her legs, accentuating her height and thinness. The oddity of Emily's figure and dress brought her taunts from her schoolfellows, bringing out the angry response, 'I wish to be as God made me'. [22] It also becomes clear from various biographies of the Brontë sisters that even Anne Brontë preferred a simple style of dressing and this is also reflected in the dressing sense of the heroines of her novels. In fact, in a way, the dress of the heroines becomes a reflection of their character. There is a scene in *Jane Eyre* where Rochester tries to dress up Jane. Jane is not only against it but she felt that in dressing up differently, she was virtually losing her sense of identity. Being in love with Rochester had never meant losing her sense of dignity or her sense of individuality. The way the characters dress up in the novels of the Brontë sisters also reflects their nature, taste, and become an aid to analyzing the characters. Both Rosalie (*Agnes Grey*) and Adele (*Jane Eyre*) are said to take a fancy to fashionable dressing and jewellery and are called *frivolous*. Blanche Ingram's (*Jane Eyre*) beauty and her fancy dresses do not find appreciation. Rochester is attracted to the plain and simple Jane Eyre, even though Blance was very much present in Thornfiled Hall. It would not be wrong to say that these so-called decked up women fail to hold the attention of Rochester for long and this virtually become an excuse for him to move from one woman to another. It is finally the plain Jane Eyre who is not only able to hold his attention but also bring about a transformation in him. It can be recollected that in spite of everything, Rochester and Blanche Ingram do

[22] Edward Chittman, *A Life of Emily Brontë* (London: Blackwell Publishers,2010), p.74

not marry. On the other hand, Rosalie (*Agnes Grey*) is virtually destined to make a wrong choice and regret it later. As we learn, she is not happy in her marriage and her desire for glitter becomes an impediment to her achieving happiness in life. Agnes Grey, Rosalie's governess, will find true love and happiness and the triumph of simplicity will once again be seen. The spirited Shirley Keedlar (*Shirley*) is never said to be overtly fashion-conscious and neither does she indulgence in jewellery and such fancy things. Rather, we are dazzled by her wit. Caroline Helstone, the cousin of Shirley, fails to use her simplicity as a statement unlike Jane Eyre or Agnes Grey. This also has to do with Caroline's position. She had no wealth or position yet her uncle would not allow her to go out into the larger world. He wanted Caroline to be satisfied with her present situation. Yet, Caroline Helstone is not without a voice; she has her own opinions and convictions; though she might not look as beautiful as Shirley, it becomes clear that Caroline's simplicity has its own flavour.

Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared in the historically volatile year of 1848, sometimes called 'the year of revolutions' because of insurrections that erupted all across Europe in France, Italy, Austria, Germany and Hungary. While England saw no violent revolution, Anne Brontë's novel, through its 'radical vigour' and 'searching reappraisal of orthodoxy',[23] attempted a quieter sort of revolution by challenging the very foundations of English upper-class society through a scathing critique of laws and ideologies governing the family, marriage and mothering. Anne Brontë's story presents a significant subversion of English Common Law and the normative practices and ideologies surrounding the institution of motherhood

[23] Elizabeth Hollis Berry. 'Anne Brontë's Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness'. Victoria: University of Victoria's English Literary Studies, Vol. 62: 1994, p.71.

in England in the early Victorian period (1832-48). Anne Brontë vindicates the outlaw 'single' mother through her challenges to marriage and child custody laws, child-rearing practices, and attitudes towards maternal authority.[24] Anne Brontë's can be seen as part of the trend in Victorian thinking and practice which validated the mother's moral and spiritual role in the life of her children, [25] while, at the same time, she thwarted ideologies of female subservience within the patriarchal marriage which still took precedence over that maternal role.

Social historians in nineteenth century England noted that women were increasingly defined less by their sexuality and more by their roles as mothers. Helen Huntingdon's identity as mother first and foremost, in an 1848 novel, goes to instantiate and validates the general trend. Again in Anne Brontë's work, even if absent, the mother happens to be a major influence on the development of the individual. Preliminary to the social critique of Victorian familial mores, Brontë highlights the impact of maternal absence on the future of a child. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the young Helen initially makes a foolish love marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, who is later shown to be morally corrupt – alcoholic, adulterous and verbally abusive. Anne Brontë suggests the orphaned Helen's lapse in judgment about choosing her partner in marriage is caused by a lack of maternal care. Helen's own motherlessness may be read as symbolic of her persistent sense of isolation throughout the novel, an emotional solitude which initially renders her vulnerable to the false flattery and superficial charm of Arthur Huntingdon. And so, without maternal advice and protection, Helen

[24] Robert B. Showmaker. *Gender in English Society, 1650 - 1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), p.1.
[25] *Ibid.,* p.126.

finds herself deluded about the attractiveness of Huntingdon as a spouse. On a legal level, despite her obvious agency in selecting Huntingdon, Helen is also an object of commercial exchange between her lover (we know Arthur covets her fortune and is actually in love with Annabella Lowborough) and her uncle. Brontë provides many hints in her narrative that Arthur's wooing of Helen is influenced by the combined wealth of her uncle and her father, but the naive Helen refuses to consider the idea of a settlement or jointure – one of the ways in which women of the upper classes bent (without breaking) the English law that their property would automatically become their husband's property upon marriage. The technical term for the husband owning all a woman's possessions was 'coverture' with her legal personhood in suspension as the legal theorist William Balckstone (1732-80) has mentioned. A married woman could own no property, no money, incur no debts, sign no contracts, could not keep her wages, and could never contradict her husband in financial matters, even if they involved the property or assets she brought to the marriage.[26] In practice, the laws of coverture were not always followed, and middle and upper class women found they could occasionally control property through the use of 'settlements' whereby a male relative would officially own the property or money (since a married woman could not legally own anything), but permit her to use it at her discretion.[27] This measure of protection, which did not benefit working class women, is what Helen's uncle means when he raises the question of 'settlements'.[28] Her response to her uncle when he introduces the idea is : 'pray don't trouble your head – or his, or mine about that; for all I have will be his,

[26] Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789 – 1918* (Toronto: Pearson Education, 2002), p.126.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 251.
[28] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.168.

and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require?' [29] Helen's youthful idealism about marriage, her acceptance of the patriarchal laws of coverture, and her faith in her future husband, have serious and unhappy consequences for Helen and her child when she later discovers that her son, also named Arthur, is being harmed by his father's moral and physical influence, and that her only way of protecting him is to raise him as a fugitive in poverty: 'my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father'. [30] Hence when Helen, in a seemingly touching expression of faith in the paternalist benevolence of her husband, rejects a settlement, a crucial turning point in the unfolding plot of marital incarceration and escape is established. Berry aptly describes the 'over-determined quality of nuptial impossibility' [31] in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and the readers, along with Helen, and the implied readers, are educated in the foolishness of wifely innocence and blind faith.

Helen embarks on her career as outlaw as the narrative progresses. First, she denies Arthur her body: 'I will exact no more heartless caresses from you – nor offer – nor endure them either',[32] something which under the laws of coverture, she has no right to do. This moment is self-defining for Helen: 'I am your child's mother, and your housekeeper – nothing more'.[33] The words chosen are hardly emancipating, since she makes no claims for self-determination here, only that she absolves herself of the duties of the marriage

[29] *Ibid.*, p.168-169.
[30] *Ibid.*, p.336.
[31] Elizabeth Hollis Berry. *Anne Brontë's Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness (*Victoria: University of Victoria's English Literary Studies, Vol. 62: 1994), p.32.
[32] Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* , p.285.
[33] *Ibid.*, p.285.

bed. The heroic tone, however, is unmistakable, and the choice to give herself a physical and emotional divorce from her husband echoes a similar passionate moment in Wollstonecraft's *Mary, or the Wrongs of Woman* when Mary takes off her wedding ring, and, despite legal marriage persisting, proclaims herself unmarried.[34]

While Helen is willing to suffer an acrimonious marriage marked by insults, drunkenness and adultery, she is not willing to see her child morally corrupted and so she plans to escape. On the surface, this self-abnegation is another mark of Victorian repressive ideologies of motherhood which assume that a child, especially a male child, should take precedence over the mother.[35] We might well challenge Helen's acceptance of her own degradation while she refuses to accept her son's: 'I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer'. [36] Nonetheless, Helen's ensuing act of rebellion is, in a nineteenth-century context, both heroic and radical; her attitude imitates the Romantic and Promethean rhetoric of many nineteenth-century heroines. She is defiant and proud: 'I have no cause to fear; and if they scorn me as the victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn'[37] Historical connections between Promethean rhetoric, the Chartist and Owenite women of the 1830s, the French Revolution and women's rights, both in the 1790s and the 1830s, are the backdrop against which this isolated domestic drama

[34] Mary Wollstonecraft. *Mary, or the Wrongs of Woman* (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2007), p.169.
[35] Drew Lamonica. "We Are Three Sisters": *Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontës*. (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2003), p.5.
[36] Anne Brontës, *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall*, p.336.
[37] *Ibid.*, p.236.

unfolds,[38] informing the domestic scene with the hint of danger and a whiff of the political that was indeed detected by Victorian readers. Helen's defiance of social prejudice extends to her attitudes towards the combination of mothering and waged labour. During the nineteenth century, paid work and mothering were increasingly seen to be at odds. As a social ideology, the notion of 'separate spheres' was by 1848 dominant, [39] not least because it served as a way of securing full-time unpaid domestic help in the home.[40] Helen makes the point to her husband that he cannot afford to manage without her free services as a housekeeper. Nevertheless, the reality of women's lives was quite distinct from the ideology, since 'in 1851, 75 per cent of married women performed paid work'[41] Anne Brontë explodes the false dichotomy between mothering and paid employment by demonstrating the reality that working for pay was in fact a part of mothering, even for the upper-class Helen. Helen says of her decision to work: 'oh, how I longed to take my child and leave them now, without an hour's delay! But it could not be: there was work before me – hard work that must be done'.[42] A lady belonging to the gentry, however, had more of a taboo against her working than did a woman of the working class because she, unlike most working-class women, had the option of allowing her husband to support her financially. But Helen Huntingdon resists the dominant ideology of 'separate spheres' and embraces the attractive prospects of both employment and ownership:

[38] Linda. M. Shires. "Of Maenads, Mothers, and Feminized Males: Victorian Readings of the French Revolution" in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*. Ed, Linda M. Shires. New York: Routledge, 1992: (147-65).
[39] Marjorie Levine-Clark. *Beyond the Reproductive Body: The Politics of Women's Health and Work in Early Victorian England (* Columbus: Ohio State University, 2004) p.118.
[40] Lynn Abrams. *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789 - 1918* (Toronto: Pearson Education, 2002), pp.12-15.
[41] *Ibid.*, p.12.
[42] Anne Brontës, *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall,* p.336.

> I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own. [43]

Notably, Helen considers her wages legitimately hers, while under British law, they are not. She considers that her aunt, uncle and brother must not know of her plan to escape, for even if she told 'all her grievances . . . [her brother] would be sure to disapprove of the step'.[44]

We must realize as well that many of Helen's actions, though morally justifiable, are in fact illegal. Although an Infants and Child Custody Act had been passed in 1839, which allowed non-adulterous women to ask for the custody of children under 7, courts still favoured paternal custody over maternal custody. The law, in any case, would not have applied to Helen Huntingdon, since she had abandoned her husband in October 1827 [45] and it would not even have benefited her in 1848 when the novel was published, because she had separated from Huntingdon illegally. Therefore, knowing that under the law of coverture, she has no legal right to the custody of her child, Helen realizes she must break the law covertly to deliver young Arthur from his father's influence. She begins to save her money in order to make a secret escape and 'steal' her son from her husband. This movement marks the second phase of Helen's maternal and marital rebellion: the attempt to move out of domestic incarceration and into an alternate role as a professional single mother.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 377.
[44] *Ibid.*, p.337.
[45] Drew Lamonica. *"We Are Three Sisters": Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontë,* p.136.

There is still another aspect that we must look into in this novel by Anne Brontë. It is simply assumed by most people that a secretive single mother must be licentious. Lynn Abrams writes that the single mother was represented as deviant, irresponsible and dangerous. Envisaged as either a fallen woman or a prostitute, the unmarried mother was held up as the archetype of the sexual woman; 'a woman who was not subject to a man within marriage'.[46] In defiance of this stereotype, Helen Huntingdon, however, is portrayed as strong-willed, morally superior to her husband, utterly chaste, entitled to her freedom, and defiant in the face of social opposition. She is the antithesis of the social reputation foisted on her by a judgmental society, since the situation for widows in Victorian England was also harsh and unfair: many women – widowed as well as deserted – lived for years as single mothers, a position that was extremely difficult economically. This was especially true from 1834 to 1845, when the new Poor Law in its first and harshest incarnation made it almost impossible for unmarried mothers to get support from their children's fathers. Helen Graham, virtually a freed slave, acts as a corrective to negative stereotypes of widows and single mothers, both of whom were popularly regarded as sexually voracious and morally corrupt social outcasts. Helen is morally strong and able to exist without marriage; in fact, she blossoms as a mother and as a worker simultaneously, without the support of a husband, friends or even the neighbours and acquaintances she meets in the neighbourhood of Wildfell Hall.

[46] Abrams, Lynn. *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789 – 1918* , p.118.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as in *Agnes Grey*, 'Anne Brontë follows the aims of domestic advice literature in criticizing mothers for relinquishing the responsibility to educate their children's minds as well as mould their characters'[47] In this way, Anne Brontë anticipates Adrienne Rich's argument against maternal complicity in patriarchal motherhood in her classic feminist text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976).[48]

Widows were suspected of having sexual motivations if they remarried. Given, then, that remarriage for widows was subversive and that marrying far beneath one's rank was suspect, there remains substantial apostasy in this *seemingly conventional ending. Such a conclusion is entirely consistent with* Anne Brontë's gynocentric domestic ideology. All the Brontë novels adopt a pattern of movement from 'a family that cannot accommodate the self to one that can',[49] with the family unit ultimately redeemed. In conclusion, Anne Brontë issues a complex and sophisticated challenge to her society's laws, institutions, and expectations, through her heroine, Helen Graham, who asserts her maternal autonomy heroically in the face of legal, social, and economic restraint.

Needless to say, the world of the Brontë sisters is fascinating. They, who have often been accused of not dealing with issues of the larger outside world, were not so blind to what was happening around them. The sisters were well read, had access to magazines that discussed contemporary issues and formed their individual opinion on them. Since their writings were the only

[47] Drew Lamonica. "We Are Three Sisters": *Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontës*., p.126.
[48] Andrea O' Reilly, ed., 'Mothering Against Motherhood' in *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's 'Of Woman Born',* (Albany: State University Press of New York,2004), pp.159-74.
[49] *Ibid.*, p.145.

place where they could express themselves, we can see much reflection of the contemporary times, with their problems and issues, in their narratives. A deep analysis opens before us a fascinating world where the sisters do not sound that non-committal about some aspects of society. True, sometimes, the rebel flare blinds us and then there are times when they take a conventional stand like endorsing the idea that it is a priority for a woman to be a good wife and mother. I am left to wonder: were there many things the sisters wanted to comment on, or express a stronger opinion on, but restrained themselves? We will probably not know much because their letters have not been very indicative about their commitments to larger social issues.

Conclusion

More than hundred and fifty years after the publication of their novels, the Brontë sisters are still read with enthusiasm. This truth has been a driving force of the thesis, especially when, as a research fellow, I did know that a huge body of critical work already existed on them. For nearly 170 years, Brontë criticism has become almost an industry.

In the year 1847, the three sisters published a novel each that created quite a flutter in the literary circles. *Jane Eyre* (1847), which was published by Charlotte Brontë under the masculine pseudonym Currer Bell, had received great acclaim as well as harsh criticism. The conservative Lady Eastlake commented that if the book was by a woman, 'she had long forfeited the society of her own sex'.[1] To Eastlake, the book was not only unfeminine but in the novel she also saw a spirit of rebellion which she likened to the working-class uprisings of the Chartists, with their demands for votes for the working people, as well as to the political revolutions that were sweeping Europe at that time. *Jane Eyre's* unsettling views as to how women should act and behave suggested, in Lady Eastlake's eyes, almost an overthrowing of the social order. On the opposite pole, were more favourable views about Charlotte's first published novel, *Jane Eyre*. The year in which *Jane Eyre* had been published another popular book *Vanity Fair* was also published. The author of *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray who found the second edition of *Jane Eyre* dedicated to him, had been

[1] Shuttleworth, Sally. 'Jane Eyre and the 19th-century Woman', Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians. The British Library. Web accessed on February 12, 2016. www.uwgbcommons.org/archives/32698.

sent the volume by Charlotte's publisher. Not only did he pay rich tribute to the language of the novel but also acknowledged that he did spend a whole day unable to lift himself away from the book. Thackeray was someone Charlotte looked upon as a literary giant but she did not anticipate that dedicating her book to him would set gossip rolling, suggesting that Thackeray and his mentally ill wife were the model for Rochester and Bertha and that Charlotte had worked as a governess with the Thackerays. This began an awkward literary acquaintance but Thackeray published Charlotte's fragment *Emma* posthumously in his *Cornhill Magazine* (March 1860), with a personal tribute to her. On the other hand the initial reaction to *Agnes Grey* was subdued while *Wuthering Heights* was thought to have been written by a man.

The heroines of the mature novels of Charlotte were markedly different from the long-suffering heroines of Charlotte Brontë's early writings, in *Angria,* who pine away for the dashing, promiscuous Duke of Zamora. Jane, we see, demands equality and respect. 'Do you think', she demands of Rochester, 'I am an automaton? ─ a machine without feelings?'[2] She speaks to him as one spirit to another, 'equal ─ as we are'.[3] Both Shirley and Caroline are strong individuals with sensible opinions. In chapter 12 of Charlotte Brontë's second novel, Shirley in her conversation with Caroline talks of the different types of men and who amongst them could be a desirable companion:

> Caroline: 'I often wonder, Shirley, whether most men resemble my uncle in their domestic relations; whether it is necessary to be new

[2]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 287.
[3] *Ibid.,* p. 287.

> and unfamiliar to them, in order to seem agreeable or estimable in their eyes; and whether it is impossible to their natures to retain a constant interest and affection for those they see every day.'
>
> 'I don't know: I can't clear up your doubts. I ponder over similar ones myself sometimes. But, to tell you a secret, if I were convinced that they are necessarily and universally different from us – fickle, soon petrifying, unsympathising - I would never marry. I should not like to find out that what I loved did not love me, that it was weary of me, and that whatever effort I might make to please would hereafter be worse than useless, since it was inevitably in its nature to change and become indifferent. That discovery once made what should I long for? To go away ─ to remove from a presence where my society gave no pleasure'.[4]

Then there is Lucy Snowe (*Villette)* who is not afraid and shaken even if her future is uncertain:

> Perils, loneliness, an uncertain future, are not oppressive evils, so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed; so long, especially, as Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star.[5]

The Professor, though the first work written by Charlotte, was not published till two years after her death. It is an interesting book because it is her only book where she attempts to tell a tale from a male narrative point of view. Yet in this novel, the female protagonist has a strong voice. It is the story of William Crimsworth, a working man who

[4] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 94.
[5] Charlotte Brontë,. *Villette (*London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 102.

becomes a teacher in Brussels, where he meets and eventually marries Frances Henri, an Anglo-Swiss student and (later) teacher. Their marriage is highly unusual, as Frances accepts his offer on the condition that she can continue to work as a teacher, allowing her to have professional independence and a satisfying intellectual life:

> Well monsieur, I wished merely to say that I should like, of course, to retain my employment of teaching [….] Think of my marrying you to be kept by you, monsieur! I could not do it; how dull my days would be! [….] I like a contemplative life, but I like an active life better. I must act in some way, and act with you.[6]

Agnes Grey and Helen Huntington both subvert expected notions of womanhood. Helen is strong enough to leave her drunken husband and think of individually looking after her only son, all by herself. Agnes Grey is also uncomplaining of her status and is willing to face life all by herself:

> Though riches had charms, poverty had no terrors for an inexperienced girl like me. Indeed, to say the truth, there was something exhilarating in the idea of being driven to straits, and thrown upon our own resources. I only wished papa, mamma, and Mary were all of the same mind as myself; and then, instead of lamenting past calamities we might all cheerfully set to work to remedy them; and the greater the difficulties, the harder our present privations, the greater should be our cheerfulness to endure the latter, and our vigour to contend against the former.[7]

[6] Charlotte Brontë. *The Professor* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), p.190.
[7] Anne Brontë. *Agnes Grey* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), p.87.

A large section of this thesis has been devoted to show how the women in the novels Brontë sisters have asserted their individuality, their strong thinking self, in various relationships including marriages. The female protagonists have been vocal about sensitive issues like religion and they even make the suggestion of formulating a religion close to their heart, where religion is about establishing a communication with the self and God.

Another aspect of this thesis has been also to look at the early writings of the sisters like *Angria* and *Gondal,* and trace their influence on the later novels written by the sisters. One can clearly find elements of rebelliousness in the early writings, which cover a period of Charlotte Brontë's life from early adolescence to her late 20s. In 'Visits in Vedropolis' (1830); the noble woman, Zenobia, who is deeply learned in the classics, is subject to ridicule by various males. The Duke of Wellington suggests that women are like swans, graceful in the water, but when they presume to leave their natural element, the home, they have an 'unseemly waddle' which entitles everyone 'to laugh till their sides split at the spectacle'.[8] Interestingly, Zenobia is also prone to fits of rage or madness, and is described as having a West Indian, or Martinique complexion, which makes her also a forerunner of the mad wife Bertha whom we see in *Jane Eyre.* Despite the spirit of rebelliousness which flows through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë was not a regular radical as far as her social views are concerned. On reading an article in the *Westminster Review* (1851), which argued for the cause for women's rights to vote and to work, Charlotte confessed in a letter to her biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell that while she approved of many of the writer's arguments, she believed that they are lacking in 'heart'

[8] Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, (Oxford: Published for the Shakespeare Head Press by Basil Blackwell, 1986), Vol. I, pp.313-4.

and tender feelings.[9] Charlotte Brontë probably was not very forthcoming about women voting but she was clear that she wanted women to work and be independent financially and individually. In the novel, Jane Eyre makes a passionate plea for women to be allowed to use their talents, and not to be confined to the home 'making puddings and knitting stocking … playing on the piano and embroidering bags'.[10] Though Charlotte had worked as a governess and a teacher, the experience had not been a pleasant one. Her views become further clear when she wrote to her brother Branwell that while she was teaching in Brussels how things were not pleasant for her. There is also another letter to her editor, W. S. Williams, in which she suggests that women who take on the role of a live-in governess can never be happy.[11] The plight of the governess was one which was drawing considerable social attention at that time. It was virtually the only occupation that was considered respectable for a middle-class woman who had no family to support her, but the experience was often far from pleasant. The problem was that the governess was neither one of the servants, nor one of the family, and ended up being looked upon with contempt by both sides. Anne Brontë wrote of her unpleasant experience as a governess in her first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847):

> ...if one civilized man were doomed to pass a dozen years amid a race of intractable savages, unless he had power to improve them, I greatly question whether, at close of that period, he would not have become, at least, a barbarian himself. And I, as I could not make my young companions better, feared exceedingly that they would

[9] Margaret Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, . (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), Vol. II, pp.695-6.
[10] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre.* p.67.
[11] Margaret Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, . (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), Vol.II, pp.63-66.

> make me worse ─ would gradually bring my feelings, habits, capacities, to the level of their own; without, however, imparting to me their light-heartedness and cheerful vivacity. Already, I seemed to feel my intellect deteriorating, my heart petrifying, my soul contracting; and I trembled lest my very moral perceptions should become deadened, my distinctions of right and wrong confounded, and all my better faculties be sunk at last, beneath the baneful influence of such a mode of life.[12]

Jane Eyre is, in comparison, very fortunate in her relationship with Mrs. Fairfax; it is her relationship with her employer which helped her to break all the rules of social hierarchy.

The women presented in the novels of the Brontë sisters mostly assert a strong sense of individuality, a kind of conspicuous consumption that ran contrary to Victorian values such as humility and thrift. The truth was that the lady of the house was expected to play an important role to resolve tensions at the home front. Sarah Stickney Ellis, author of the very popular *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839), says in her book that women were morally superior to men. It was one of the primal jobs for the women to create an oasis of peace and virtue to which their husbands could return at the end of the day. Such a home would naturally absolve and clean men of the immoral taint of the market place: the sins of greed, envy and even lust that might have been used to survive in the outside world would be cleaned in the virtuous home world. Other female advice

[12] Anne Brontë. *Agnes Grey* (London: Penguin Classics,1994), p.91.

writers accepted were that women were obliged to inhabit a separate sphere from their husbands, fathers and brothers, but women writers still found ways of empowering women. In her *Book of Household Management* (1861), Mrs. Beeton opened with the famous statement that the mistress of the house should consider herself as 'the commander of an army'.[13] Mrs. Beeton's intention had been to make middle-class women feel that the domestic sphere was just as important as the public world to which their husbands went out every day. Women be been different from men, argued Mrs. Beeton, but they were definitely equal. My thesis has argued that the Brontë sisters allowed their heroines to be in complete control of the domestic sphere and men complied with the idea. Jane Eyre, Shirley, Lucy Snowe, Helen (in the second half of *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall)* and Agnes Grey can be taken as examples. On one hand, they are pictures of piety and moral convictions and, on the other; they look poised with the strength to usher in the new woman – thinking, pragmatic and self-aware.

The Brontë sisters who have been often seen as writers who shied away from committing or taking a side on larger social issues; I think is a judgment that is way off the mark. The final chapter of this thesis does strive to show how sisters were not blind to what was happening around them and used the characters in their novels to demonstrate their views on some contemporary issues.

[13] https://mimimatthews.com/.../isabella-beetons-book-of-household-management. Web accessed on 14th July,2015.

The Brontë sisters lived at a time when not many opportunities were available to women. Thiers was a life marred by many tragedies. Yet what remains fascinating is the fiery soul that burned within them. It is said that on the day she died, Emily came down to the drawing room of her house to finish some household chores. Anne, the youngest of the Brontë sisters, has been often not given her due as a writer nor is she taken as seriously as her more famous two older sisters. I have made a humble attempt to read her two novels and show that she is quite a radical and had strong opinions on a number of issues so that it would be wrong to read *Agnes Grey* as a mere tale of the experience of a life of a governess. Her other novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* subverts a number of conventional thoughts and expectations regarding womanhood/wifehood.

In the given light, I see no reason not to call the cult of the Brontës a religion. I would use the following quote to prove my point. 'Since 1857, when Elizabeth Gaskell published her famous Life of Charlotte Brontë, hardly a year has gone by without some form of biographical material on the Brontës appearing – from articles in newspapers to full-length lives, from images on tea towels to plays, films, and novelizations,' wrote Lucasta Miller in *The Brontë Myth*, her 2001 history of Brontëmania.[14] The Brontë sisters have captured attention for such a long time for the reason that they are rebels but conservative too; the paradox in them is what engrosses one. As one proceeds in the journey of understanding the Brontë sisters, their anxiety about many things not only raises empathy but also a number of questions, which, given

[14] www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/the-brontes-secret/480726. Web accessed on 17th June, 2015.

their time and situation, are quite bold and reveal their foresightedness. Thus this thesis has attempted to capture the myriad facets and the fiery spirits of the sisters through the novels that continue to capture our imagination and thoughts.

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