

VOICE OF PROTEST IN THE BRONTE FICTION

Dr Poonam Kumari

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Snagp Syiem College

Mawkyrwat, Meghalaya

Abstract:

This is the crucial and thematically the central chapter of the thesis "Voice of Protest in the Bronte Fiction: An Integrated Feminist Study" where women in the Bronte novels are portrayed as crying and protesting against the male-constructed hegemony in all its possible ramifications. More often than not, women express their grievances through silence or through body language. Men should psychologically read and redress it, which left unheeded, constrains them to cry in agony; remains unheard, women rise in revolt and raise their feminist Voice of Protest in opposition to all that could be masculinist, and create an equitable world for the sexes—called the Bronte world.

Keywords: thematically, crying and protesting, male—constructed hegemony, ramification, grievance, body language, psychologically, left unheeded, cry in agony, masculinist, feminist voice of protest, equitable world for the sexes.

The sensitive Brontë sisters could not keep themselves aloof from women of their economic status, who had to suffer agonies--socio-economic and emotional-- in the then male-dominated Victorian society. We are sometimes moved to construe them as identifying themselves with those women suffering in pain and agonies. Charlotte Brontë ensures in her fiction a rare touch of intimacy with which she sadly and satirically projects the baneful lot of women under age-old bondage of patriarchal ideology:

A lover masculine can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can speak nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish,... Nature would brand such demonstrations as a rebellion against her instincts. Take the matter as you find it; ask no questions; utter no remonstrance; it is your best wisdom, you expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and do not shriek because the nerves are martyred.¹

This was the doleful, unpleasant lot of women in a society of snobs. Without any assertion they should endure what came to them from men. They need not at all complain. And if they did, that should be an ignoble slur on their tribe. But bitter truth, we know, lies the other side. Men had taken undue advantage of women's obedience, submission and forced dependence. Therefore, it is important to hear here the pervasive undertone of the feminist (not the feminine) voice which Charlotte had already rung in *Jane Eyre*, and with which the sky is now always rent. Though it is for the sociologist to record how far the situation has since then changed for better in favour of women, yet it cannot absolutely be denied that women's heart is not aching.

As a Protestant writer, Charlotte Brontë supported the right of the individual conscience against the authority of the church. And so did the two younger sisters. In the same way they also fought for conditions for support for the right of the individual women against men in authority over them. The sisters also believe that God created a partnership of Adam and Eve in Eden. As such, they further believe that He must have allowed freedom of conscience and equal opportunity to both the halves. But here *Shirley* presents a milieu where woman are denied all freedom. The milieu so projected is the actual one, and which squarely reverses all that they believed in and fought for.

Though Charlotte Brontë creates in the novel such situations which allow the fulfilment of her ideals in the end, the actual makes the heart bleed, for we see women in agonies suffering for want of economic support, emotional fulfilment and social security. They are tortured by their husbands to leave home and are never allowed to retouch its threshold. They disguise their identity as a shield against social insecurity and infamy, and take to the servitude of a governess for a living. Mrs Pryor in *Shirley* represents them:

It [Mrs. Pryor] was a name in my mother's family. I adopted it that I might live unmolested. My married name recalled too vividly to my married life: I could not bear it. Besides, threats were uttered of forcing me to return to the bondage: It could not be; rather a bier for a bed – the grave for a home. My new name sheltered me: I resumed under its screen my old occupation of teaching.²

Her married name was Agnes Helstone, and the disclosure of her pathetic past she makes above is to her own daughter Caroline who too is seen suffering in alienation from her lover. The maltreatment and destitution of love meted out to women could only be removed by letting them realise that they are humans with the presence of conscience in them, and also by allowing them work opportunities. And men need to love them as soul-mates and allow them freedom that they themselves enjoy.

Love was the greatest concern of the Brontë sisters. Without it they could not be what they wanted to be. "Love was the breath of life to Charlotte Brontë; the be-all and end-all of human life."³ We can extend this remark as applicable to Anne, and also to Emily but with a difference, for in the world of her *Wuthering Heights* there could be marriage without love, and love without marriage. It is ultimately Heathcliff's world where he is the ultimate object of ultimate love. And Emily Brontë through the medium of Catherine aspires after that love. Her aspiring in the novel is as full of spiritual agonies as her aspiring in her poetry. Though the passion of love described in the novels and the poems of the eldest and the youngest sisters' passes through a series of emotional and spiritual agonies, they do not attain the height of Emily Brontë's. Their emphasis is on the fact that love must station itself in the institution of marriage sanctioned by society and sanctified by God. Charlotte Brontë in the main champions this principle of love and marriage in the larger interest of women.

An unmarried woman was to the Victorian mind an incomplete and unnatural being who could often be viewed as a blight on creation. What the Victorians thought then sounds true today and would sound so possibly tomorrow, not only scripturally but biologically as well, for without love and marriage, with all the claims of feminism, she remains incomplete. Marriage for a woman, though not a profession, was and is a passport to the financial security, respectability and worthy womanhood. So "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," for "the matrimonial market is overstocked."⁴ Charlotte sobs to see this pathetic situation, which was a social reality, and which as a feminist writer she would always disapprove and defy. Yet the old maids as a class themselves remained neglected as old maids in the Victorian society. This was yet another social reality. Charlotte Brontë bewails their lot:

Old maids, like the houseless and the unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and occupation in the world: the demand disturbs the happy and rich: it disturbs parents.⁵

The old maids reconciled themselves to their destiny. But the young marriageable women if remained unmarried would be a blight on the creation. But Charlotte and Anne, though pained at heart, would not intellectually agree to this view. They were un-Victorian in this respect. Specially Charlotte Brontë would not relish the spectacle that the young marriageable girls should do manoeuvring to snare husbands as it had been the practice. So she makes a hearty appeal to fathers, the guardians of society, to bring about a healthy change in the attitude and judge the issue on its own merit:

Fathers! Cannot you alter these things? Perhaps not all at once; but consider the matter well when it is brought before, receive it as a theme worthy of thought: ...you would wish to be proud of your daughters, and not to blush for them-then seek for them interest and occupation, which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvre, the mischief-making tale bearer. Keep your girls' mind narrow and fettered – they will still be a plague and a care, sometimes a disgrace to you: cultivate them – give them scope and work – they will be your gayest companion in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness; your most faithful prop in age.⁶

This is a feminine, reflexive writing, welling up from the depth of a woman's heart. But the message is feminist. With these few poignant and touching words the authoress has tried to arouse and awaken their consciousness on the predicament of women, 'a theme worthy of thought'. Charlotte Brontë herself does not suggest here a direct solution to the malady; she leaves it with men who are for the most part masters of society. If men worked as per her appeal, the inferior status of women would considerably improve, and father would be proud of their daughters who would be their 'tenderest nurses in sickness; [and] most faithful prop in age.' The sisters had made their father proud of them by establishing their reputation as celebrated writers through perseverance, and by championing the women's cause, through writing mostly in agony. So long as they lived they were their father's tenderest nurses in his old age.

And therefore, it would not be unfair for us to surmise that the sisters were consciously or unconsciously influenced by the following stirring words written in agony by Wollstonecraft: Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast thou created such a being as women... who can believe that she was only made to submit to men, her equal, a being, who like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue? – can she consent to be occupied merely to please him; merely to adorn the earth when her soul is capable of reaching thee? – and she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with him the arduous steep of knowledge?⁷

The rhetorical question so posed deftly affirms that woman, like man, her equal, was sent into the world, not just to submit to him but to acquire virtue, because she is equally capable of acquiring it. Because she is virtuous, her soul can tend itself upwards to God and therefore she is not only a show-piece to beautify the world and gratify the pleasures of her man. She is not just a dependant on him, but an equal partner with him to scale the heights of knowledge, and especially of reason, which is the gift of heaven, but the important thing to mark here is that the affirmation is a cry in agony; it is not without tears, because as Wollstonecraft seems to be feeling, woman is not born so as she is made by man. God creates woman, and civilisation makes her inferior to man whose mother she is. It was intolerable as with Wollstonecraft so with the ionic Brontë sisters.

It is in the second novel, *Jane Eyre*, her most celebrated and satisfying work, that Charlotte is seen at her best in her struggle for equality and individuality and independence of women. Outwardly Jane looks poor, plain, obscure, a little governess, but inwardly she is 'a resolute, wild thing,' 'a soul made of fire.' Precisely speaking, she is a downright assertive and indomitable character, vindicating her cause, and thereby vindicating the position of womankind-- on two decisive occasions--firstly while preparing for their marriage and secondly on the impediment to their marriage-in the novel.

After the dissolution of the settled marriages, Mr Rochester requests Jane to soothe him, save him and love him, and stay at Thornfield with him as his mistress, for there is none to care for her, nor is anybody there to be injured by her being his mistress, whereas only he so desperately needs her. Normally, other women of her status and circumstances would have consented. But she would not sacrifice her womanly honour and independence for lust and pleasure. And so she gives an emphatic and straightforward reply: " I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself."⁸

Mr Rochester is shocked and surprised at this unexpected, un-Victorian reply, and so he says, "Never, never was anything so frail and so indomitable."⁹ He perhaps thinks that her small stature and her homelessness are responsible for her frailty: the indomitable will and courage in her appear to him as something unprecedented and extraordinary--unexpected of woman. He is under perpetual illusion, because Jane is in fact more than what Phyllis Bentley calls her "the modern emancipated woman, the first in English fiction, struggling with age-old basic human problems."¹⁰ Jane's problems are womankind's problems.

The issue of vindicating women's status and assigning them proper place in the society, with which Charlotte Brontë was concerned as a crusader, dates back to the eighteenth-century. Mary Wollstonecraft (whose short life was comparable with Charlotte's), for instance, had published *A Vindication of Rights of Women* in 1792. She challenged the traditional notion that women as an inferior species (to men) exist only to please men, and, therefore, she demanded that "women should receive the same treatment as men in education, work opportunities and politics, and that the same moral standards should be applied to both sexes."¹¹

The theme of equality between the sexes invites our attention once again to Anne Brontë's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The popular notion that Anne was reticent and reserve, gentle and shy with the innate grace of her sex is apparently confirmed by her first novel *Agnes Grey*. But because she was a Brontë, free from the popular prudery and snobbery of her times, she had, like her elder sisters, something revolutionary and violent to offer to the Victorian reading public. Her quick switching over from *Agnes Grey* to *The tenant* is an indication of the fact that she had already experienced during the intervening period some serious change in her outlook on man-woman relationship in the Victorian society, and to this effect she unlocks her heart in a self-revealing poem, 'Self-communion' written in all probability at the same time as *The Tenant*. The relevant stanza from the poem is quoted hereunder:

God alters not, but time on me
A wide and wondrous change has wrought;
And in the parted years I see
Cause for grave care and saddening thought.¹²

Though while as a wife she serves and nurses her sensualist husband Huntingdon, she also, as she ought to, makes sometime out to devote herself as an independent individual to her Lord, he then complains to Helen that she is so absorbed in devotion that she cannot spare a glance when he wants her attentions. And then instantly retorts Helen, "What are you, sir, that you should set yourself up as a God, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and I am..."¹³ She exercises her spiritual right that might have gone against the male mindset of her day. Again, it is in direct opposition to what Milton had said, "He for god only, she for God in him"¹⁴ some two centuries before Anne was writing. Helen is a woman, spiritually, educationally and intellectually grown-up.

Therefore, to believe women incapable of education and to subscribe to the myth that women need protection from the harsh realities of a competitive business world is to leave them, ironically, vulnerable to an inescapable domestic hell of violence, coarseness, and brutality such as a man like Huntingdon can create and inflict upon a woman like Helen. It is Helen's education and reason that help preserve her self-respect and self-reliance, the power, or the will to watch and guard herself. And her developed talent as an artist ultimately gives her the means of escape and self-support. The outside world in which Helen succeeds as an artist is far less threatening than her home at Grassdale. With freedom denied, she lives petrified in that stultified prison-like home.

And this is Mr. Huntingdon's home where he invites mistresses right before his wife. The haughtily dirty practice of equating mistresses with wife and vice versa in wild orgy is the sign of a morally degenerate stratum of society. But what could be more amazing if the practice is viewed as an opportunity for displaying masculine valour and virility. And then it is most disgusting and distressing if the wife is to be bargained away by the husband in the wild orgy. But for Mr. Huntingdon it is an occasion to show off his masculine status: "My wife! What wife? I have no wife... or I have, look you gentlemen, I value her so highly that any one among you, by Jove and blessing into the bargain."¹⁵ Anne Brontë exposes the masculine rot and defies it openly.

But the greatest defiance is displayed in that interview Helen had with Huntingdon just after she caught him in the shrubbery with Lady Lowborough in his arms "with the moon shining full upon them."¹⁶ When he refused to let her take her child and leave him, she delivered her ultimatum to him: "Then I must stay here, to be hated and despised. But henceforth we are husband and wife only in name."

"Very Good."

"I am your child's mother and your housekeeper – nothing more."¹⁷

Unlike Richardson's chastity-conscious tragic Clarissa, Anne's Helen speaks in her full conviction that if men cannot maintain and honour the sacrament of marriage with dignity and equality, women should be free to walk out of the prison-like matrimonial bond, and establish a second sweet home afresh.

Helen's decision to flee an unhappy (failed) marriage with her son violated Victorian social convention and law. In 1855, seven years after the publication of Anne Brontë's novel, *The Tenant*, Caroline Norton, a later advocate for amendment of these laws suffered from a situation analogous to that of the protagonist in Anne's novel. Norton enumerated the injustices all of which stemmed from the fact that a married woman in England had no legal existence. She had no possession, her property is 'his property', she cannot legally claim 'her own earnings', 'she may not leave her husband's house', he may 'take her by force' from the house of any one who may 'harbour her', and she may not divorce her husband 'however profligate he may be.'¹⁸ But Helen flouts these legal restrictions because she finds them suffocating and stultifying. She is a radical feminist, self-reliant, living on the proceeds of her painting. She is, therefore, a successful 'new woman' without any confinement.

What Helen achieves is a fictional reality against what Caroline Norton lost which was the reality of life,- social, legal and psychological. Women in general felt and lived imprisoned in Victorian England. Imprisonment is thus a central thematic metaphor in Victorian fiction in general and in the Brontë fiction in particular. Dickens's women characters, such as Rose in *Oliver Twist* and Louisa in *Hard Times*, to name only a few, feel caged and suffocated in a murky and mercenary male-dominated society. They, therefore, yearn for release and liberation into a freer, healthier and lovelier milieu. But they yearn only, they do not struggle to break open their confinement as do the Brontë heroines to liberate themselves from their "spiritual imprisonment in a hostile environment which is shaped and controlled by men...Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents a more radical attempt to achieve liberation from a confining, vindictively judgemental religious scheme."¹⁹ As the greatest lover of liberty in her family, Emily's longing for liberation is not so much in the form of protest against the hostile world as with a wish to attain something better, higher and superior. Her Catherine in the novel discloses that

I am tired of being enclosed here. I am wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there, not seeing it dimly through the walls of an aching heart but really with it and in it.²⁰

The ionic Bronte sisters could break open all sorts of confinement—intellectual, socio-economic, emotional and spiritual. Therefore, the Bronte world is far brighter than the mercy world of Dickens and Thackeray.

Confinement of any sort, be it the denial of religio-spiritual freedom, or domestic or social freedom, or be it the denial of educational or professional opportunities, or the likes, confinement in any form is a regress and regress is a degenerative disease that goes against the progress of humankind in general, and, as the sisters believe and Charlotte does emphasise, of womankind in particular. Therefore, if the confinement is not removed, woman would raise the voice of their protest against the despotic patriarchs of society, more so, because many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses. Most of these rebellions are formed of feminist women, for women and by women against the cruel cage of Western patriarchal culture.

Charlotte Brontë then talks of calmer side of women's nature and says, "Women are supposed to be very calm generally...but...it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex."²¹ Yes, it is the man-made custom that serves his interest and assigns women gender-specific role and responsibility. The Brontë sisters' heroines break the age-old confinement open, act like new women who are career women, and who exercise control over their own lives, be it personal, social or economic. They are named after Henry James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. These new women live at liberty with their men they love and marry. Though Sir Sidney's Pamela, who had 'Eagle-like' vigour and vision, was kept confined 'in a cage', the unbound in the sisters' world need not be bound by middle-class masculinity because the very act of binding them may be liable for the failure which is discussed in the chapter called "Failure of Middle-class Masculinity."

Notes and References

1. Shirley, P. 128
2. Ibid., P. 414
3. A.C. Ricket, *A History Of English Literature* (Universal Book Stall, Kanpur, 1984) P. 521
4. Shirley, P.377
5. Ibid., P. 377
6. Ibid., P. 378-79
7. Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985) P.67
8. *Jane Eyre*, P.319
9. Ibid., P. 320
10. Phyllis Bentley, *The Brontës and Their World* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1989) P. 68
11. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. X P.732
12. (Eds) T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, *The Complete Poems of Emily and Anne Brontë* (Oxford, 1923) P.91
13. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, P.169
14. *Paradise Lost Book IV* (cited in Introduction)
15. *The Tenant*, P.290
16. Ibid., P. 247
17. Ibid., P. 250

18. Caroline Norton, 'A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor's Marriage and Divorce Bill' in *Victorian Fiction: A Documentary* Hallerstein (Ed), (Stanford University Press,1961) PP.258-59.
19. (Ed) Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period* 1830-1890 (Lungman Literature in English Series, London, 1985) P.10
20. *Wuthering Heights* P.138
21. *Jane Eyre*, P.111