

Study of Jane Eyre's Rebellion Spirit from the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: The novel *Jane Eyre* is a monumental work penned by the esteemed British female author, Charlotte Bronte. The present analysis delves into Jane Eyre's indomitable spirit of rebellion and the underlying factors that fuel her defiance, adopting a feminist lens. The protagonist, Jane Eyre, owing to her orphaned status, education-induced intellectual awakening, and religious skepticism, and moral autonomy, experiences a burgeoning, stirring, and eruptive feminist consciousness. Thus, throughout her life's journey, she persistently combats various social injustices, strives for her economic self-sufficiency and marital independence.

Keywords: Jane Eyre, Feminism, Rebellion, Independence.

1. Introduction

In 1847, British female writer Charlotte Bronte published *Jane Eyre*, the first feminist work in British history. Upon its publication, the book attracted attention from all over the world. Over the past century, numerous scholars have conducted research and analysis on it, focusing mainly on the analysis of Jane Eyre's image, Jane Eyre's feminist consciousness, and comparative studies of Jane Eyre with other characters. This article will delve into Jane Eyre's rebellion spirit from the feminist perspective and the factors contributing to her awakening of feminist consciousness.

1.1. About Jane Eyre

The novel commences with a portrayal of Jane's childhood, wherein she is subjected to maltreatment and neglect by her cruel aunt and cousins. Subsequently, Jane is sent to the harsh environment of Lowood, where she endures immense hardships. Despite these adversities, Jane excels academically and cultivates a robust sense of self. Upon completing her education, Jane assumes the role of a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she encounters Mr. Rochester, the enigmatic and brooding master of the house. Jane is captivated by Mr. Rochester's elusive personality, and the two forge a profound emotional bond. However, revelations from Mr. Rochester's past threaten to annihilate their blossoming romance. As they prepare to solemnize their union in the church, Jane is devastated to uncover that Rochester has a deranged wife. Consequently, Jane departs sorrowfully and embarks on a solitary new life. Subsequently, her uncle John, who had been estranged from her for many years, passes away and bequeaths her a substantial fortune. Unable to erase Rochester from her heart, she returns to her former abode, only to learn that the insane woman had perished in a fire months prior, and Rochester had been rendered sightless while attempting to rescue her. Jane unburdens her feelings to Rochester, and the duo ultimately unite in matrimony. Later, Rochester regains sight in one eye during a sojourn in London, and he and Jane are blessed with a son. They live contentedly ever after.

The preeminent theme of this novel is the rebellion of female spirit. It is vividly portrayed through the tempestuous life experiences of a solitary girl, sculpting a female archetype that is discontent with the status quo, unwilling to suffer

indignity, and courageous enough to struggle. It resonates as a cry and accusation of an oppressed soul, embodying the aspiration of a seemingly insignificant individual to achieve greatness. As Chen(2012) articulates in *The Eternal Charm of Women in an Era*, *Jane Eyre* is not only a product of the Victorian era but also epitomizes the nascent consciousness of women during that period. This "heroic female" character, who has traversed hardships yet continues to defy fate, has paved a novel path for women's literature. The author channels the voices and pleas of women from that era through *Jane Eyre*, affirming the personality and dignity of women, allowing the radiance of female essence to illuminate the world and exude an everlasting charm.

1.2. About Feminism

The feminist movement, which emerged in the 19th century, has been a powerful force in advocating for women's equal rights and status. This movement has evolved through various stages, including the first wave of feminism from the late 19th to the early 20th century, the second wave from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the third wave from the 1990s to the present. At its core, feminism aims to challenge gender discrimination, promote gender equality, uphold women's rights and freedoms, and address the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, and sexism. One of the most influential works in the feminist canon is *Jane Eyre*, which has played a significant role in propelling the development of feminist thought. In this book, we see the immortal fighting spirit of the heroine-Jane Eyre, who has challenged against social discrimination, strived for financial independence and equality in love and marriage. Despite receiving mixed reviews, the novel's contribution to the application of feminist ideals in literature and the liberation of women's thinking, as well as the fostering of an independent spirit, cannot be underestimated (Cai, 2015).

When the author penned *Jane Eyre* in 1847, England had already established itself as the world's foremost industrial power. However, despite this advancement, the status of women in England remained stagnant. They continued to exist in a subordinate and dependent position, with their primary objective being to secure a marriage into a wealthy family. Even if they were not born into affluence, they still had to endeavor to acquire wealth and status through

matrimony. The only option available to them in terms of career was to become an exemplary wife and mother. Women who opted for a career in writing were considered to be transgressing the norms of femininity and faced vehement criticism from their male counterparts.

2. Representation of Jane Eyre's Rebellion Spirit

As a female protagonist in this book, Jane Eyre experienced various unfair treatments and oppression imposed on her in the social environment at that time, and her resistance is a clear reflection of feminist ideas. In this part, the author will analyze Jane Eyre's spirit of resistance from three aspects.

2.1. Challenging Social Discrimination

Jane Eyre's brave spirit of challenging social class permeates the entire narrative. In the Victorian era, societal inequalities were rampant, with one's class dictating their social standing. Wealth equated to power, and gender determined the extent of respect or subjugation one received. Consequently, it is evident that for a penurious and solitary woman like Jane Eyre, survival in such an era was fraught with challenges.

In Gateshead, Jane was an orphan who lost her parents at a tender age and resides under the roof of her uncle and aunt. The demise of her uncle, Mr. Reed, exacerbates her already challenging life. Her aunt, Mrs. Reed, harbors prejudice against her, isolating her from other children at home. Her cousin, John Reed, arrogant and bullying, torments her relentlessly, and even the servants treat her with disdain. Confronted with relentless harassment from John, Jane can no longer endure and vehemently accuses him, "You are like a murderer- you are like a slave-driver- you are like the Roman emperors!" Her defiance escalates to physical resistance. In the silent night, Jane sits in the chilly, dilapidated nursery, where the pain of her enslaved-like rebellious emotions inspires her. "Unfair, unfair!" her reason cautions, as the sense of rebellion quietly grows within her heart. Although moments of fear and even thoughts of self-annihilation surfaced, she promptly repudiated such despairing notions. Despite being at odds with nearly everyone in her household, she courageously confronted the discrimination directed towards her.

At Lowood, she was an oppressed student, enduring the dual affliction of corporeal and psychological persecution by the institution's head. The students were forced to subsist on meager, unappetizing fare, wear bizarre and tattered attire, and face reprimands or even corporal punishment for transgressing stringent regulations. Under Mrs. Reed's misleading, the arbitrary headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, prejudged Jane as a deceitful, misbehaved child, publicly maligning her and isolating her from her peers. However, Jane did not falter before the headmaster due to her status as a pupil. She sought the compassionate Miss Temple to vindicate her name. Confronted with the passive Helen Burns, she felt helpless and indignant, admonishing Helen that if they consistently submitted to cruelty and injustice, becoming subservient and cowardly, the perpetrators of such evil would remain unrepentant and exacerbate their behavior. Her words constituted the most potent retort against the injustices perpetuated by her societal standing. As Zheng(2022) said her resistance is infused into her very being, unaltered by environmental changes. Though her adoptive aunt, her older

cousin and the school principal Mr. Brocklehurst consistently exerted their so-called authority to oppress and malign Jane, falsely accusing her, Jane remains unyielding, rising against such injustices with defiance and fortitude.

At Thornfield, she was employed as a governess by the Rochester family. When faced with the initially belligerent Mr. Rochester, she asserted, "Sir, I do not think just because you are older or more experienced than me, that you have the right to command me." Upon mistakenly believing that Mr. Rochester intended to marry Miss Ingram and retain her as his mistress, she retorted, "Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am a machine without feelings? Do you think, because I am poor, humble, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! And if God had given me some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now by the standards of custom and the world. It is my spirit that address your spirit, as if we stood before Good, equal, as we are!(Bronte, p.372)" Despite Mr. Rochester's noble status, Jane Eyre remained true to herself. She did not demean herself due to her station and believed in the inherent equality of all individuals. Thus, Jane Eyre's struggle against her assigned identity is elevated.

Through struggle and determination, Jane Eyre liberates herself from the constraints of family and school, ardently pursuing her independence and autonomy. In an era where women were often perceived as appendages, Jane fights against injustice, striving for education and committing to becoming a woman capable of independent thought and living. This stance of challenging authority and seeking independence aligns with the feminist principle of autonomy. As Huang(2009) notes, a character of profound empathy and extraordinary spirit emerges on the page. She is akin to a small blade of grass growing in a crevice, encountering life's hardships prematurely, yet it is the pressure for survival that fortifies her growth.

2.2. Striving for Economic Independence

The spirit of resistance in Jane Eyre is also reflected in her refusal to rely on others to live, and she has always strived for economic independence. In the 19th century, women did not have independent economic status and needed to rely on their husbands or families to support themselves. However, Jane Eyre did not succumb to the constraints of others. She worked hard and kept a firm belief of maintaining economic independence.

After finishing her education in Lowood, Jane chose to work at Lowood Boarding School as a teacher to earn a meager income to support herself instead of returning to Gateshead to seek the protection and financial support of her aunt Mrs. Reed, which is the first indication of her pursuing economic independence. Later Jane left Lowood and worked as a governess at Thornfield where she fell in love with the master of the manor, Mr. Rochester. Notwithstanding the vast economic disparity, Jane remained steadfast in her position, persisting as a governess in the household and earning a monthly wage to support herself. When Mr. Rochester proposed marriage, she rejected the conventional role of female dependency, upholding her integrity and self-respect. Even though Mr. Rochester possessed wealth and status, Jane was unwilling to relinquish her independence, insisting on an egalitarian union rather than becoming his "possession."

Having departed from Thornfield in a state of despair, Jane Eyre ultimately found refuge with St. John Rivers. In this new

setting, she did not rely on him but rather sought employment as a rural teacher, securing her own means of sustenance. Despite facing the trials of destitution, Jane steadfastly upheld her principles and resisted any semblance of surrender; she remained committed to maintaining her financial autonomy.

Through her unwavering diligence and determination, Jane Eyre ultimately secured her economic independence. She held steadfast in her belief that she was entitled to equal treatment and opportunities. In securing her financial autonomy, Jane challenged conventional gender roles, embodying a profound assertion and safeguarding of women's rights and status.

2.3. Striving for Equality in Love and Marriage

Set against the backdrop of the Victorian era in the 19th-century England, the novel *Jane Eyre* portrays a society where marriage was a grave commitment and responsibility, often dictated by familial arrangements. Marriages were typically engineered based on social standing, affluence, and lineage, aimed at preserving family wealth or elevating social status rather than pursuing personal joy and romance. Within this construct, traditional marital structures were patriarchal, with wives expected to submit to their husbands' authority. The role of a wife was confined to managing the household and nurturing the family, while the husband was the economic pillar and decision-maker. Jane Eyre's defiance against traditional marital conventions can be segmented into five distinct phases, primarily manifesting in two major aspects. On one hand, her profound and sincere affection for Mr. Rochester is evident; on the other, she rejects St. John's proposition of a so-called "suitable" union.

Jane Eyre's love for Mr. Rochester radically diverges from the conventional marital ideals of that period. As Yan(2009) articulates, Jane Eyre did not conform to the "ladylike" aesthetic standards of her time, yet it was precisely her rebellious spirit and relentless pursuit of freedom and equality that earned her Rochester's admiration and affection, culminating in a classic tale of romance that has its place in British and even global literary history. As a governess at Thornfield, Jane belonged to the working class, whereas Mr. Rochester, as the estate's proprietor, was her superior. Despite their stark social disparities, Jane, having surmounted her own feelings of inferiority, chose to love Mr. Rochester regardless of their status differences. Her love for him was unadulterated and heartfelt, as Wang(2010) observes, transcending customs and traditions, Jane Eyre's perspective on love is like a pure flower that blossoms within the hearts of readers. This constitutes her initial act of resistance against the traditional marital norms.

Although Jane's position as a governess at Thornfield afforded her a respectable income, it was negligible compared to Mr. Rochester's affluent status as a nobleman. When they fell in love, Mr. Rochester lavished Jane with expensive garments and jewels, which she declined, recognizing that accepting such gifts would compromise her independence and subjugate her to a man. Jane declared to Mr. Rochester, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will."(Bronte, p.373) She insisted on maintaining her financial independence by continuing her work as a governess. Jane's quest for economic autonomy represents her second challenge to conventional marriage.

Mr. Rochester grew increasingly attracted to Jane's independent and self-aware demeanor, and they fell in love, soon planning to wed. However, their idyllic romance was

disrupted by the emergence of Bertha, the lunatic wife hidden in the attic, rendering their prospective marriage null and void. Despite Mr. Rochester's attempts to salvage their relationship, Jane chose to depart, understanding that staying would reduce her to the status of a married man's mistress, affronting her dignity and principles of equality in love and matrimony. Jane's departure signifies the pinnacle of her opposition to traditional marriage.

After leaving Thornfield, Jane endured numerous hardships but eventually reunited with her cousin St. John. A devoutly religious man, St. John sought to convert Jane and desired to marry her due to her suitability as a religious spouse. Although Jane appreciated St. John's care, she recognized her love for Mr. Rochester and not for St. John. Thus, she refused St. John's proposal. Inheriting a significant sum from her uncle, Jane shared her wealth with St. John and returned to Thornfield, unable to relinquish her love for Mr. Rochester. Her rejection of St. John's "suitable" match marks her fourth act of resistance against traditional marriage.

Upon her return to Thornfield, now unrecognizable and nearly in ruins due to Bertha's arson, Mr. Rochester had also lost an arm and his sight in a failed attempt to rescue Bertha. Facing Mr. Rochester who not only lost his property but also became blinded, Jane confessed her enduring love for him. The two ultimately reconciled. Jane's unadulterated love for Mr. Rochester facilitated her ultimate triumph over traditional marital constraints.

Through her experiences and actions, Jane Eyre challenged the traditional roles women were expected to fulfill in family and marriage, prompting a reevaluation of women's rights and status. She advocated for greater autonomy and equal status for women in society and the family, opposing the confinement of women to conventional domestic roles. Jane Eyre's spirit of transformation and ceaseless exploration reflects feminist aspirations for equality and justice.

3. Factors Contributing to the Awakening of Jane Eyre's Feminist Awareness

The process of Jane Eyre's resistance is a concrete manifestation of her awakening feminist consciousness which is influenced by multiple factors.

3.1. Orphaned Status and Resistance Consciousness

Jane Eyre's personal ordeals profoundly influenced her burgeoning feminist consciousness. Orphaned in childhood, she was taken in by an aunt whose cruelty and prejudice against her were stark. Her formative years were marred by the ill treatment from so-called family and domestic staff, enduring a surfeit of injustices. The seeds of her feminist awakening were sown by the baffling maltreatment she received; as a child, she could not fathom why everyone sought to oppress her despite her innocence. Thus, she bristled against the subjugation she faced, rising to contest all biases directed at her.

Subsequently, she was dispatched to Lowood, where the headmaster's prejudice against her, rooted in her unfortunate station, led to further harassment. It was here that she gradually gleaned the reasons behind her unjust treatment, fortifying her resolve to combat all actual inequalities. This period marked a significant escalation in Jane Eyre's evolving feminist consciousness.

At Thornfield, Jane Eyre's feminist consciousness reached maturity. Amidst her blossoming romance with Rochester, she maintained her financial independence, declining the lavish jewelry he offered and insisting on sustaining herself through her governess wages. Confronted with the traditional marital norms of her time, she responded with a resolute "no," championing the belief in equality and wholeheartedly accepting Rochester's love.

Jane Eyre's life was full of ups and downs. She endured numerous injustices and oppressions, yet it was these very wrongs that fueled her resistance against all biases and her repeated challenges to social stratification. These injustices ultimately became the catalyst for her feminist awakening, sculpting her into a staunch advocate of women's rights. Her experiences and growth epitomize a woman's journey in exploring and actualizing feminism. Through her narrative, readers are granted a lens into the courage and persistence women display in their quest for equity and autonomy.

3.2. Education and Intellectual Awakening

Education played an integral role in the awakening of Jane Eyre's feminist consciousness. From a tender age, her love for reading was evident; books became her constant companions during her tumultuous time under her aunt's guardianship. In that unfriendly household, where antagonism surrounded her, literature offered both solace and her first taste of education. The knowledge she gleaned from books, while not fully comprehended as a child, provided the foundational spark for her resistance. It emboldened her to publicly denounce John Reed's cruelty with the words: "Wicked and cruel boy! You are like a murderer - you are like a slave-driver - you are like the Roman emperors!" (Bronte, p.7).

At Lowood Boarding School, Jane Eyre balanced her fervent pursuit of knowledge against her opposition to the institution's oppressive regime. With Miss Temple's guidance and her own efforts, she secured a teaching position at Lowood after graduation rather than return to Gateshead, demonstrating her capacity for self-sufficiency. After leaving Lowood, Jane Eyre secured a more prestigious position as a governess at Thornfield, further elevating her professional standing.

Through education, Jane Eyre underwent a metamorphosis, developing independent thoughts and a resolute spirit. Education facilitated her economic autonomy and self-sustenance. It endowed her with immense courage in her struggles, affirming that the blossoming of Jane Eyre's feminist consciousness and her education were inextricably linked.

3.3. Religious Scepticism and Moral Independence

Jane Eyre's personality traits are pivotal in shaping her consciousness as a woman. As an epitome of independence, bravery, and resolve, she has, from her tender years, relied on her own valor and acumen to overcome hardships without succumbing to external influence or manipulation. Possessing a skeptical view of religion and harboring autonomous moral convictions, these characteristics endow her with the fortitude to challenge the oppressive regime and psychological domination of Mr. Brocklehurst, enabling her to decisively reject traditional marital constraints.

In her discourse with Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane Eyre vehemently disputes his ascetic and suffering-glorifying beliefs, penetrating the headmaster's facade of piety and

unwaveringly upholding her personal ethical and religious stances. When Mr. Brocklehurst enthusiastically extolled the praises in the Bible and asked Jane if she liked them, she firmly said, "Psalms are not interesting." (Bronte, p.41). She contends that fidelity to conventional religious rituals and dogmas is unnecessary; rather, one should embody the genuine spirit of faith through purity of conduct and essence of soul.

Moreover, her distinctive persona fosters an unyielding resistance to male dominance and control, as she seeks parity and self-governance. Confronted with directives and expectations from men like Rochester, Jane Eyre chooses to preserve her autonomous thought and agency, rather than conforming to stereotypical female roles. This stance against male authority underscores her alignment with and endorsement of feminist principles. Her determination and courage empower her to champion her ideals and beliefs, fearlessly contending for her rights and honor without capitulation or compromise. In the throes of adversity and setbacks, Jane Eyre remains steadfast in her quest for freedom and equity, advocating for her independence and dignity.

As a fictional embodiment of feminism, Jane Eyre's autonomy, valor, and resolve enable her to navigate a patriarchal society, pursuing justice and equality, securing equitable relations in matrimony for herself, and ultimately achieving liberation and self-fulfillment.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the rebellious spirit of Jane Eyre vividly embodies in her challenging social discrimination, striving for economic independence as well as for equality in love and marriage. As a woman with a poor background in 19th century England, Jane faced many injustices and oppressions. However, she always held onto her own moral and religious beliefs, firmly believing that knowledge and hard work can change one's fate. These factors ultimately became the driving force behind her awakening to female consciousness, enabling her to challenge social discrimination, strive for marriage equality and economic independence.

As Wang (2015) observes, the protagonist Jane Eyre, though not hailing from nobility nor possessing extraordinary beauty, embodies the archetype of a new woman who spiritually pursues independence and self-respect, embracing feminist ideals of autonomy and self-improvement. She has the courage to love and hate, to challenge social injustice, and it is this portrayal that has earned the author enduring fame, securing a significant place in the annals of English literature.

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