



WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN 19TH CENTURY AS REFLECTED IN THE BRONTE'S NOVELS

APOORVA B RAJ

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kuvempu University, Jnana Sahyadri, Shankaragatta,
Shivamogga. Karnataka, India



ABSTRACT

This paper makes an attempt to explore the condition of 19th century women in the field of education and employment. It focuses on the characters of Bronte's novels in illustrating women's position with a brief historical backdrop. The characterizations in the novels have more autobiographical elements which act as an index to its contemporary period. The analysis will be done within the context of gender studies with the help of historical and sociological facts. The argument here is women were allowed to accomplish a limited knowledge and education, just to impress the male in the Victorian Marital Market.

Keywords: Women, Victorian Society, Patriarchy, Education, Employment and Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

The term education is derived from the Latin word 'educatio' means bringing up, a breeding, a rearing... (Wikipedia.org) it also denotes learning skills and knowledge under the guidelines of other. The forms of imparting education varies- it may be through the socially accepted norms or practices which is passed from one generation to another which is informal and through set of systematic rules and scientific study of subjects in formal institutions. Informal leads to socializing a child to become a responsible civilian. Formal leads to systematize a person to become knowledgeable citizen.

But in the history of women's education the process of educating a girl child was greatly hindered under religious belief. Women were considered as sinful creatures, the soul cause for the fall of mankind. She was deprived of receiving education, considering as an 'act of nonconformity'

(Solomon xviii). So she was confined to the life inside four walls. She was suppressed in all her walks.

Such women of Victorian England are taken here to account her sorrowful story. Thus a study of women's education in 19th century England is taken up in this paper to review her condition before indulging into Bronte's works. England during early 19th century was transmitting from the world of orthodoxy to the world of modernity. In this period the position of women was under great discussion and debate. Many responsible voices rose to strengthen the suppressed voice of women. Remarkable pamphlets, books were written and rewardable steps were taken by eminent writers and social activists like Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Florence Nightingale along with John Stuart Mill and William Thompson and many others.

The question, "why woman should be limited to domesticity"? Was raised everywhere. And the question of girl's education remained crucially important. Because they were educated in such a way that they should mechanically perform the duty of attending her husband's needs, rearing and caring of his children and managing his household chores. This monotonous condition continued till the late 19th century. No organized voice and legal reformation took place to improve her position.

Education was not considered important for girls and women. They were only given the opportunity to study subjects such as history, geography and literature. Then, needle-point and embroidery were encouraged. They would almost never be allowed to attend university and on the rare occasions they were allowed to take up employment, it was usually in the role of governess. In fact it was believed that too much education for women was unhealthy. So the Education during 19th century was not an equal one between male and female. A male had greater opportunity to perceive higher education. Especially the quality of life for a female dependence on the class level in society she was born into and her education was decided by her parents.

They were trained to be good wives and mothers by means of reading and writing arithmetic, bible study, needlework and domestic arts in Dame schools run by women under the Forster's Education act 1870 and the girls from wealthy family had governesses to learn all these. The movement towards improving girl's education began, when the Governesses' Benevolent Institution opened to ensure that governesses were properly qualified by providing a governess examination system and certificates. The Governesses' Benevolent Institution supported the foundation of Queens College, Harley Street, London. At Queen's, tutors from Kings College, London, taught the traditional boys curriculum to women (Wikipedia.org). However, extended education for women at this time was still slow to develop. Feminists in the 1880s supported Wollstonecraft's opinions but there were still very few schools in the country that provided education for girls. Likewise gradual development took place in

women's education. It shows "Everything seems against her, yet she goes forward".

So with other writers of 19th century, Bronte sister's works predominantly covers the importance of women's education through their main characters of the novels. Almost all the seven novels carry the issues of education and means of employment for women. The reason for this was the Bronte sister's preoccupation with teaching and learning in their personal life.

The condition of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre* is the very near image of 19th century educational institutions. This is derived from the real life experience of Charlotte as a student in Clergy Daughters' school at Cowan Bridge. As she said that the school's conditions were responsible for the deaths of her two older sisters.

The purpose of education is made clear by Charlotte Bronte through Lucy Snowe's education, in her novel *Villette*, which is shaped on the belief of 'ideal women' of Victorian society

I was vaguely threatened with, I know not what doom, if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband desire for unfeminine knowledge. (508)

M. Paul also censors Lucy's reading - "he generally pruned before lending his books, especially if they were novels" (501) - and Shirley Keeldar's enjoyment in reading "just what gentlemen read" (368) is derived partly from her knowledge that she is defying society's norms. Later, Shirley refuses to fulfill the morally improving role traditionally assigned to women, exclaiming, "Pah! my husband is not to be my baby!" (706). *Jane Eyre*, similarly, rejects Mr. Rochester's view of her as angelic. She asserts her independence: "I am not an angel., and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself." (327). In Emily's *Wuthering Heights* formal education is not given prominent place only the social etiquettes are upheld which were necessary for Victorian ideal women to be accomplished with. It is Helen Graham in *The Tenant of wild fell hall* who accepts the Victorian ideal, and enters marriage hoping to reform Arthur Huntingdon but ends up in remarriage. In *Agnes grey* Anne Bronte emphasises the powerlessness, isolation and social degradation

of the governess's position. Where Governesses were underpaid, overworked, and had no financial security.

And many more statements within the novels like Shirley complains that she and Caroline are both "ignorant as stone"(396), indicate that educational reform was slow. Shirley questions whether "all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls" (370) Then in Villette "such mere trifles as lessons in history, geography, grammar, and arithmetic, she left undone, or got others to do for her" (121) ironically shows the limitation of learning for women where there was no question of becoming an independent soul. In this way attaining full education to the higher level was deprived by the society for women in the name of an 'act of nonconformity' (Solomon xviii). Thus the 'means of moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power' which is said to be Empowerment according to the country report of the government of India was intentionally neglected in Victorian society in the matter of women's education to curb her development in the early 19th century.

Thus, this paper tries to analyze Victorian society as a constructed platform for the 'victorian marital market' because as we know in those days a woman was just an ornament in the hands of males. The process of socialization of women was done in a very systematic way to internalize the stereotypes as if it was by their birth they lack intelligence and not it was being implemented. For instance, *Alice in wonderland* is one of the best works which shows that the Victorian society expected a girl child should always behave like a responsible lady and forcefully tabooed on all her childhood pranks. So gradually these suffocating situations made them to accept the lifestyle as their own choice, but girls like Alice wants to escape to the world of dreams where they can be adventures and fulfill their real self.

Even though she was allowed to accomplish a limited knowledge and education, it was just a part which was crucial for her to impress a male in the Market of Marriage. To convince him that she can manage the household works and take care of his children in a good manner. Whatever she learnt never helped her to grow independently. Thus

patriarchal ideology played its dominant role in framing the lives of women.

Jane Eyre, although an independent soul, working as a governess- represents the suppressed voice of women but unknowingly stands as the victim of this ideology. She attracted the attention of Rochester and others because she is a prudent woman who knows more languages and the etiquettes of Victorian society. Then the daughter of Rochester was made to learn music, French and other languages because the society expects it more than she wishes to learn. Likewise Isabella and to some extent Cathy learnt music and mannerisms of Victorian society just to get married and not to build their identity. So marriage and love was treated in terms of artificial standards. Here educating a girl was something that could come in the way of her marriage prospects.

In this way the works of Bronte ironically reflexes the hidden play of Victorian patriarchal ideologies which was a great obstacle for women's growth and independence. So it labels a women like Bertha Meson who was not confined to the norms of the time as insane and uncivilized in the main stream of 19th century.

Then means of employment was very limited to the lower middle class people. They believed the divided spheres in between men and women would get closer, if women were allowed to earn. This made women to serve the male society rendering their servitude as housemaids or governesses.

In Jane Eyre, when Jane is wandering homeless she has the following conversation with a working woman she meets:

"What was the chief trade in this place? What did most of the people do?"

"Some were farm labourers; a good deal worked at Mr. Oliver's needle-factory, and at the foundry."

"Did Mr. Oliver employ women?"

"Nay; it was men's work."

"And what do the women do?"

"I knawn't," was the answer. "Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk men get on as they can." (C. Bronte 366)

It shows women's occupational choices were very less and denied of paid labor. So Bronte sisters and their female characters find out governessing as one of the few occupations open to the educated females. In fact they resembled majority of nineteenth century working women, who were domestic servants either as governesses or as housekeepers.

As Inga-Stina Ewbank in her monograph 'Their Proper Sphere' says women were held to occupy a 'sphere' 'distinct' and 'separate' from men. Which is also a direct quotation from Mrs. Sarah Ellis's 'The Daughters of England' (1842). Here Mrs. Ellis speaks of women's inferiority to men in several respects.

To start with Charlotte Bronte's first novel *The Professor* – who struggles for economic independence. He stands as a woman in the male society being powerless, subordinate, repressed, economically dependent and almost non-existent. So he is said to be 'a mirror image' of Charlotte's own Brussels experience – expressed in 'Bronte's and Their World' by Phyllis Bentley (1969). Charlotte visited Brussels, with the aim of returning to England and opening a school of her own. But by the failure of the scheme, Charlotte and her sisters redirected their ambitions from teaching to writing. This experience reflected even in *Villette*. And written in Gaskell's 'Life of Charlotte Bronte'

In all of Charlotte and Anne's novel teaching is the occupation which occupied the center of protagonist's life- Jane Eyre, Lucy snow of *Villette*, Prof. William Crimsworth and Agnes Grey, the desire of Caroline Helston to work as governess in Shirley and Helen Huntingdon as a professional woman artist in *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Here the question is why Bronte's novels are populated with governesses (or teachers), who are not more than servants of higher grade? – As Mr. Brown explained to Crashworthy "Professor here in Belgium, means a teacher - that is all" (C. Bronte 58).

The answer one can find for the above in the life and works of these sister's- it's their own life and struggle is just reflected in these novels. Being well educated including their father they thought teaching was the only alternative for middle class

people to attain self reliance. It is also to draw attention towards Victorian women's lives and to voice their innate desire for greater opportunity, independence, and self-determination; Bronte sisters used the figure of servitude rather than portraying their heroines as sitting ideally waiting for a perfect man to rescue them from all the miseries.

Thus to a greater extent their heroines are devoid of stereotypes. Through their works they all tried to attain independence. Jane Eyre as a governess of missionary who is self controlled and governed other characters. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne had given an identity for its heroine, Helen Huntingdon, as something other than an upper servant portraying her as a professional woman artist. But it is Agnes Grey and Nelly Dean subdued to typical servitude to lead their life. In other hand it is Shirley, Isabella Linton and Cathy assumed that marriage can be a prison, in which women are condemned to the hard labour of domestic service. So the denial of married life and rejection of the institution of marriage by Isabella and Helen after realizing the other phase of marriage and inhumanity of man shows rich women were not treated differently than poor servants in the hands of Victorian male. Then in the novel *Villette* where Lucy snow as a more matured, unmarried, independent spirit stands alone establishing a school, creating her own identity is the step towards female empowerment and rejection of victorian framework for female' marital market.

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