FEMINISM ENCOURAGES EQUALITY OF WOMEN IN SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JANE EYRE BY CHARLOTTE BRONTE

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Abstract: Charlotte Bronte is the writer of Jane Eyre, the main reference of my research paper. Charlotte Bronte is a feminist novelist as she believes in feminism and she also actively campaigns to bring changes in condition of women. She is the champion of the rights of women and she makes the feminism as a vehicle of equality of females in the male dominated society in her novels. There are a lot of feminist elements in this novel. The purpose of this paper is to identify the feminist elements in the novel ‘Jane Eyre’ written by the novelist Charlotte Bronte. She is one of the most expressive novelists of her time. She began writing in the era when the female authors were not permitted to write and as a result the ones who were interested in writing had to write under pseudonyms.

Keywords: Feminism, Equality, rights of women, changes in condition, Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte.

In the first section of the paper we will see that Why do we consider Bronte as a feminist novelist. She reveals some personal details of her own life. Moreover, she portrays the women’s views and the way they were treated by the society at that time. She left her education and opened a school with her sisters. And later in life, all the three sisters turned to writing.

In the second section we will see that how Bronte’s female characters were better than the male characters. Her female characters are bold and defiant and her female characters became the unforgettable heroines of our English literature. She is also called the champion of women’s rights of the 19th century.

Towards the end of the paper we will see that Jane Eyre, the protagonist of the novel becomes one of the strongest female characters of that time. Moreover, the difference in the attitude of the people of the society has changed with the time.

Feminism is the movement which advocates the rights of women and encourages equality of women. It stands for the upliftment of women who are weak economically, socially, mentally, physically etc. Feminists believe that men and women should have equal rights in the society. Feminism is about working against the systems built to keep certain groups of people oppressed and striving towards equality for everyone. It means taking a stand on injustices and standing up for inequalities, even if you are standing alone.

Charlotte Bronte is a feminist novelist as she believes in feminism and actively campaigns to bring changes in the condition of women. According to J.W Beach, the essential subject of Charlotte and Anne Bronte is the soul of women cramped by loneliness, poverty, and social insignificance but supported by a consciousness of her intelligence, her true gentility and above all by the generosity, elevation, candous and dynamic force of a superior spirit. The actual status of these women, as governess and teachers, as well as other causes of subjection and humiliation, is reflected in Jane Eyre.

Charlotte has delineated a very faithful record of her experiences in petty and snobbish middle class families in her novels. We also find that the heroines are united with their lovers in the end. In Jane Eyre, the virtuous governess is able to marry her blinded lover when the insane wife has perished in the house to which she has set fire.
Charlotte Bronte was an ardent proponent of the right of unmarried women to find an independent occupation and an interesting life outside the home. The strength of her novels lies chiefly in the development of powerful situations in which the modest desperate women must deny or suppress her deepest feelings. In Jane Eyre, these situations have much of the melodramatic tinge. The heroine of the novel has self respect and works as a teacher in the school where she got her education. She takes up the job of governess in Rochester’s house but she leaves the job as well as Rochester the time when her dignity is concerned. Diana and Mary, the sisters of St. John Rivers, also serve as governess to lead an independent life.

Charlotte Bronte is a champion of rights of women and she presents the cause of women emphatically through the character of Jane Eyre. Jane Eyre upholds the dignity of her sex when she forsakes Rochester on the day of her marriage with him because she comes to know that he is a married man, and kept her in darkness. She declines Rochester’s offer of living with him as his mistress and pays no heed to his pleading of his love for her. This exhibits her sense of dignity. Thus she upholds the dignity of her sex.

Charlotte has written of lonely, repressed womanhood with a passion and intensity unsurpassed in English fiction. In this regard, A Crompton Rickett observes: until she (Charlotte) began to write, no woman had dared to write, no woman’ had dared to write of her life from the woman’s point of view, as Fielding had done from the man’s. The masculine convention, that whatever a woman may feel, it is bad for her to express it, that while the man may do and dare, the woman must wait meekly and patiently. This convention Charlotte Bronte utterly broke down. She revealed woman as a human being. Thus, we find the agonies of a woman yearning for affection are exhibited in ‘Jane Eyre’. According to A Crompton Rickett, Charlotte Bronte is the pioneer of the novel of emancipation. She is insurgent just as a caged thrush is insurgent that beats itself against the bars of its cage. Modern civilization always provides cage for primal natures. Insurgent womanhood! The phrase is quite familiar today but it was very unfamiliar in early Victorian days. Yet Charlotte Bronte is the first to sound the note of sex revolt. She was a revolutionary, and her revolutionary sentiment is expressed in many ways. We find this revolt in the wonderful description of unhappy school life in the early chapters of ‘Jane Eyre’, where she heaps her scorn on mealy mouthed religionists, in her characteristic and obvious admiration for the rough, brutal, yet not attractive Rochester.

At last we can conclude with David Cecil’s remarks about Charlotte Bronte as a novelist. He says that Charlotte Bronte’s imagination is stimulated to create by certain aspects of his external life. As Thackeray was the first English Writer to make it the vehicle of personal revelation. She is our first subjective novelist, the ancestor of Proust and James Joyce. In ‘Jane Eyre’ and other novels, we find Charlotte’s personal views about women and their treatment by society. She is a staunch supporter of the empowerment of women, which is revealed in her works.

Charlotte Bronte presented ‘character’ rather than ‘characters’. She is interested in diving deep into human character. She is particularly interested in revealing a woman’s heart and soul. There cannot be a better depiction of a woman’s heart than ‘Jane Eyre’. Charlotte has drawn women characters better than the male characters. She has presented a new conception of the heroine who is vigorous and active, energetic and full of zest for life. Once Charlotte said to her sisters Anne and Emily, “I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” That heroine is Jane Eyre, a new heroine in English fiction because she is quite different from the conventional heroines.

Regarding Charlotte’s portrayal of women characters, J.W Beach says that “the essential subject of Charlotte is the soul of woman cramped by loneliness, poverty and social insignificance, but supported by a consciousness of intelligence and her true gentility, and above all by the generosity, elevation and dynamic force of a superior spirit. The actual status of these women, as governess and teachers is reflected in Jane Eyre and other heroines. A beauty neither of fine color Jane nor long eyelash, nor penciled brow, but of meaning, of movement, of radiance.”(7)

Jane Eyre has been portrayed according to Charlotte’s conception of the heroine. According to A Crompton Rickett, Charlotte Bronte is the first novelist to sound the note of revolt in the early Victorian days.

Charlotte Bronte is a revolutionary, and has unconventional attitude towards life, which we find reflected in the description of Jane Eyre who falls in love with Mr. Rochester who is not only physically unattractive but twice her age also Jane Eyre loves Mr. Rochester passionately even after her desertion of Mr. Rochester. At the end, she rejects St. John’s proposal and goes in search of Mr. Rochester. Eventually, she is united with him and leads a happy and contented married life.

There was great difference between man and woman during the Victorian age, and in the male dominated society, woman was considered inferior to man. Charlotte Bronte rose against the conventions of the society and upheld the dignity of women. E.A Baker corroborates it in his comments: ‘all the Bronte novel expounds the theme of self realization: this is the idea that spiritualises and ennobles the conception of love’. Bronte appears to be a champion of the rights of women and she illustrated through Jane Eyre. She exhibits the dignity of woman in the character of Jane Eyre who forsakes Mr. Rochester on the day of her marriage with him when she learns about his marriage with Bertha. She declines Mr. Rochester’s offer to live with him as his mistress. Thus, it is her sense of dignity which compels her to forsake Mr. Rochester though she has not ceased to love him. “I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give.”(8)

Jane Eyre is the true representative of Charlotte Bronte’s heroines as she embodies “gentility, intelligence, generosity, and dynamic force of a superior spirit.” “Oh! That gentleness! How far more potent is it than force!”(9) She is sympathetic and large hearted. That is why we find her devoted to Helen Burns, who is an embodiment of piety and humility but is suffering from tuberculosis. When Jane gets the legacy of
twenty thousand pounds after the death of her uncle, Mr. John of Madeira, she is generous enough to divide the amount equally with her cousins. This incident throws light on her affectionate attitude towards her relatives.

Another quality that Jane possesses is her fortitude. “I mentally shake hands with you for your answer, despite its inaccuracy.” –Jane to Rochester.(10) She faces life with courage and boldness. She is not deterred by misfortunes that befall her. When Jane decides to leave Thorn field Hall after the disclosure of Mr. Rochester’s wife and his act of committing the crime of bigamy, Rochester asks her to live with him as his mistress, but she spurns the offer boldly. An ordinary girl would have succumbed to the temptation of leading a comfortable life by living with Mr. Rochester as his mistress or accepted St. John Rivers proposal of marriage. She is enterprising and takes her own course of life.

Charlotte Bronte characterises the women characters as Jane Eyre. Jane Eyre is an intelligent and spirited woman. She is bolder and more daring than the majority of women and she is vigorous and active, energetic and full of zest for life. She is quite different from the conventional heroines. Bronte depicts her different from the conventional heroines to struggle for her rights in the unconventional times. She is the first novelist to sound the note of revolt in the pioneer of the novel of emancipation. She rose against the conventions of the society that has a great difference between man and woman, this revolt or feminism upheld the dignity of a woman. As we see, character of Jane Eyre is the true representative of Charlotte Bronte, the figure of dynamic force of a superior spirit. A critic describes, “Jane as one of the most unforgettable heroines of all times”, adding that “she is a penniless orphan of sharp wit and independent spirit, although outwardly of plain appearance.” Another critic observes that accept her appointed place in society with unusual frankness and with a passionate sense of dignity”.

“Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. 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.” (11)

-Jane Eyre

Therefore, through Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte encourages equality of women.

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