



Anatomical Discourse of Disability: Locating the Working-Class Gendered Subversion in Literature

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Abstract:

The idea of disability in the Victorian era rests on the survival of the fittest and the still prevalent faith in religion and sin. The chief intellectual analysis of the Victorian age challenged the very rigid norms of religion. Society slowly under the influence of the 'theory of evolution' and the new geological concepts under Lyell labelled the claims of *Old Testament* as invalid. Disability was an outward reflection of sin resting in the impure soul in the body. A person having disability meant having inner impurities accompanied by sin for the Victorians. In this purview, the paper analyses disability and gender from the Victorian text *Jane Eyre*. Disability in this paper covers intellectual disability of working-class Jane to see things clearly, Mr. Rochester's disability which makes him unable to see beyond the socially desirable creole woman Bertha accompanied with the dowry of thirty thousand pounds; to be utilized as capital in the wake of industrialization. Religious disability of the Lowood institution and their inability to protect the lives of girls during typhus fever, reflects the exploitation of working-class girls studying in a charitable institution. Locational deprivation and disability are portrayed through the burning of Thornfield Hall and breaking of chestnut tree into two, due to thunderstorm. Location of Thornfield Hall signifies the workhouse situated in the present-day London. The workhouse was the place of residence of orphan, disabled and working class abandoned women. Jane's deprivation has also been allotted a specific location. Rochester's blinding is physical but also psychological, portraying the bourgeois man's greed and inability to see beyond material profit.

The upward mobility of the working-class women was possible either through marriage in the nobility or either through acquiring education and performing roles of a governess. However, remunerations given to these governesses were very meagre. Jane's salary in the novel is revealed as pounds thirty per year, which is double her teacher's salary at Lowood (Kapadia 24). Around this axis, Bertha is backed by a dowry of thirty thousand pounds while facing Rochester in the marriage knot. Yet her disability and asexuality, leads to disintegration of her relationship with Rochester. Location is also a character; the bildungsroman evolves with different locations.

Keywords: Victorian, Rationality, Survival, Sin, Geology, Dowry, Subaltern, Anatomy.

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Introduction

Gender is a social construct. Since the appropriation of the surplus and development of monogamous family units, women and men have been identified binary opposites to each other. The development of society and family has taken place in a non-linear fashion. In such situations, disability also impacts men and women differently. *Jane Eyre*, published under the pseudonym of Currer Bell is the first marker of social disability, which women writers had to face in the Victorian era. As the name of the author during publication is hidden, therefore the text becomes a canon of class, gender and disability studies.

Bildungsroman evolves around different geographical locations in the text, and each location has its unique disabling character which evolves throughout the novel. Each location presents and represents; a unique and distinctive challenge through which the working-class Jane goes through and suffers. Nevertheless, at the end we are revealed that Janes' uncle had left property in her name but as an orphan child she suffers more than other Victorian females. The use of geography by Brontë symbolizes the sea exploration across the globe by Britain and its control over vast stretches of land. It also removes the tradition of unity of time, action and place, symbolizing that happenings in day-to-day life are not mathematical. The mathematics of life does not follow through the intellect of *homo sapiens*, but there are infinite elements determining a particular action happening at a particular point of time. However, Brontë was successful in incorporating the scientific elements, the gothic elements, the patriarchal elements and making a place in the minds of the readers. She can't be viewed only as an epitome of revolutionizing the customs of the society but she is successful as a writer because she takes over the mind of the reader and is able to control it at various junctures. However, she uses the existing resources and difficulties to enable the rise of a girl from a working-class background. She does carry material wealth in her name but it is never revealed, which makes her suffer; mirroring the difficulties in line to that of working-class girls during Victorian era.

The writing of the text is seen as a reflection of the way in which a marginalised and homeless woman is provided with a home and family. This home is finally located in a dark Gothic home and family. This home is finally located in a dark Gothic haunt-Ferndean manor- and the stabilizing marriage is with a lame and blind Rochester.

(Azim 178)

The text establishes itself, very strongly as a voice for the marginalised working-class women. Not only as a voice for the rights of a working-class female but also rises up to answers and simultaneously questions the dominant patriarch in the text and bends him according to one's own terms and conditions. Jane's replies, to her aunt's son John Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst signify how assertively she is raising her voice against oppression despite being a subaltern character in the text. The assertive nature of the protagonist is a political act. She asserts without using any coercive force or deterrence but the means and methods, used to fight arise from the minimal resources which surrounds her; inclusive of the knowledge and education which she carries within herself.

Oppression Under Female House head

Jane is introduced to us as an orphan in the house of Mrs. Reed. Being an orphan child in aunt's house with no property left in her name naturally makes her a sight of exploitation. Mrs. Reed is blind metaphorically as John is spared-off, for every wrong he commits against Jane. However, Jane is labelled as a mad cat and she is locked up in the gothic red room, "the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage" (Gilbert and Guber 78). Without a male head in Gateshead, the Victorian household instead of an enabling unit exploits an orphan girl, even the workers in the house do not offer any mercy to Jane; yet she possesses her own unwavering spirit of

unstoppable ability and she survives through the gothic red room. The exploitation by Mrs. Reed signifies that how women are responsible for the oppression within their own household. Gateshead, was supposed to be a sight of sweet and lovely memories for an orphan like Jane but it proves diametrically opposite. The other reason for this kind of attitude of Mrs. Reed can be attributed to, she being a mother of a son. If she had a daughter instead of a son, we could have seen more respect for Jane but the oppression, at such an early level by John symbolizes that the seeds of patriarchy mature at an early age. Jane faces a double colonial bind of first being an orphan and then being a girl.

Survival of the Fittest and Religious Disability

An institution meant for educating the orphan girls, Lowood under Mr. Brocklehurst couldn't save Helen Burns and other girls from typhus fever, "While disease had thus become an inhabitant of Lowood, and death its frequent visitor, Mr. Brocklehurst and his family never came near Lowood" (Brontë 66). Mr. Brocklehurst strictly paid emphasis on girl's not having curls implying his blindness, disabling him from seeing the real worth of a women in the society, Misses Brocklehurst wore false French curls implying hypocritical religious blindness. This implies that Brocklehurst viewed women as inheritors of sin and being disabled, thus women had to be properly groomed under the commandments to purify their souls of the sin inside them.

'Madam,' he pursued, 'I have a Master to serve whose kingdom is not of this world: my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel'

(Brontë 54).

Food and lodging conditions remain pathetic giving a clear picture that the academia of Lowood operates on "survival of the fittest" demanding "natural selection". This selection is

not only biological but also mental. The death of Helen Burns symbolizes the hypocrisy of them being treated as children of God. Religion has been the most ancient form of patriarchal control. Just like capitalism is based on profit, religion is based on adherence/obedience and moral policing. On the level of theory, capitalism operates on the notion of *laissez-faire*, but it actually rewards people with generational wealth. It is a mirage deflecting things from reality and showcasing what actually is not there. The sustenance of religion rests on faking 'morality'. Religion also holds the backing of 'patriarchy'. This patriarchal structure is a rigid water tight compartment which hardly allows mobility for the women and, capitalism also hardly allows any mobility between different classes. Marriage is the only device for upward mobility in the society based on capitalism.

Nevertheless, working class solidarity can be seen by a motherly figure of Miss Temple, a teacher who, Jane in later years tries to reciprocate. During the subsequent years of Jane's stay in Lowood, it is Miss Temple who acts as a mother for an orphan Jane. Thus, motherly care becomes necessary for the survival of a child in an orphanage. The orphanage has a dual nature; it is also the site of disability but, it also works as an enabling site for Jane.

Thornfield Park

Plain Jane's struggles proceed to an advanced stage in this locale which is also governed by being the fittest. She is primarily subverted because she belongs to a working-class background. Employed as a governess to Adele, her main source of competition comes from Miss Blanche Ingram. It is questionable that, Jane trained from a religious institution of Lowood tries to establish herself as a bodily entity in front of Mr. Rochester but to the reader's it showcases Jane's intellectual disability to see the real picture of propertied men during the Victorian period.

Victorian propertied man Rochester has an illegitimate daughter, a wife labelled as madwoman in the attic, inviting Mrs. Blanche Ingram for parties and he does not limit himself here. He then moves on to have a relationship with Jane. There is a triadic relationship first between Jane, Miss. Ingram and Rochester, and then Jane, Bertha and Rochester. Each time an individual has to be sacrificed and natural selection takes place. Clearly, it is the capitalist method of testing and eliminating products with low quality, unfit for the market economy. Rochester after acquiring money tries to a stable household with an angelic wife.

The Disabled Victorian Wife

The asexual dark Creole Bertha, is at the heart of text. With the introduction of Bertha along with the Gothic elements there is secrecy maintained and only the laugh of Bertha is heard. She is a toxic mix of empowerment since she paid thirty thousand pounds in dowry, “she challenges the dogmatic conventions, assumptions and does not conform to the Victorian idea of physiognomy” (Sinha 119). Bertha is a trophy wife and Rochester labels Bertha’s whole family as disabled yet Rochester was himself blind while marrying her. “The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too – a complete dumb idiot.” (Brontë 270) Rochester got blinded by her beauty and money but Brontë blinds him physically as well, for the sin he committed. Bertha being absently present shows the reality of a women’s life who does not fits into the binaries of the society.

Bertha’s disability was natural but the portrayal of her; signifies the stigma which people had about disability. Her locking up in a room due to her mental illness is the medical limitations present in the Victorian era. The stabbing and the tearing of the marriage veil are unwomanly traits which Bertha carries within herself, challenging the patriarchal norms and

regulations. Thus, a woman who challenges both patriarchy and religion needs to be eliminated because she is a direct threat and Brontë with social approval of the reader eliminates her.

Disability and Sin

The term hell is mentioned eleven times in the novel. The recurring imagery of hell in the text suggests that Victorians were much occupied by the notion of heaven and hell signifying they being clutched with the wires of religion. Rochester's blindness which was earlier metaphorical takes physical shape since he had inner sins as well, Brontë gave her a physical blindness during the burning down of the Thornfield Hall, there Bertha's madness is also very well depicted. 'She is the invisible, mere disable, inhuman not just ideologically but an intellectual other too.' (Sinha 118). The sins of Bertha of stabbing a houseworker and her inability to satisfy Rochester in every respect is rewarded with a gothic Shakespearian villain's death.

After a period of punishment when both Jane and Rochester meet, they both are successful in their attempt to cope up with their disabilities. Rochester who had lost sight was able to gain it up after some ten years and Jane who had lost trust due to blind faith, regained it by staying at the accommodation of St. John. There, she was able to get a clarity about whom she should get paired with. Her sisters who rescue her during starvation, the familial love and the longing for Rochester makes her soul pure and free of sins. Already, there was a child in the guardianship of Rochester but Jane gives birth to a son which gives a patriarchal heir to the household of Rochester. Brontë for entire life gives a position of authority to Jane. The birth of a son only after marriage gives a morally dignified position to Jane, which no one could question.

Conclusion

The union of Jane and Rochester takes place after both of them suffered equally due to their disabilities in various capacities. Fire changes the equation between Jane and Rochester and establishes a sort of equality between the two (Sinha 123). However, Brontë in this whole episode keeps Jane virgin and pure in spite of St. John Rivers intervention in the novel, yet no physical intimacy develops between St. John and Jane. Ultimately, the sin is purged; so is disability. The motif of fire to purge down the sin, might seem superstitious but in the medieval England this is how the society dealt with witches. The death of Bertha due to fire and opening of her mental anatomy is a naked parade to indirectly humiliate women who try to cross the patriarchal boundaries and are finally burnt through the process of witch hunting.

The colonial rise of the novel is also the rise of disability studies with proper logic and arguments. The curing of Rochester's blindness is the proof of new researches in field of medical sciences with the treatment of cataract now readily available. Religious institutions were unable to answer the questions nor was capitalism and money. With rapid industrialization and technological development, the society was under a rapid transformation, so were the social customs and traditions. What wins the heart of the reader's is that despite of all circumstance who wins is working class plain Jane. But actually, she was the fittest and Brontë wanted her to win. Her win reflects that mobility among classes after the arrival of capitalism was only possible by marriage. She denies marriage with St. John which demarcates the bold choices she makes for herself.

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