

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH LITERARY IMAGINATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MALE AND FEMALE AUTHORS' POINTS OF VIEW TOWARDS THEIR PROTAGONISTS' FAILURES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate two great English classics: Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*, and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to illustrate the impact of literary imagination on the intellectual development of readers as well as to empower women. In addition, it also intends to show how gender differences between the two authors' perspectives on women's problems can dominate their views on each protagonist's suffering, and their solution to the problems. The investigation is based on descriptive analyses of the two works with excerpts from the texts to give readers insights into the situations, in which the protagonists: Milly in *The Wings of the Dove*, and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, has encountered. For clarity, the researcher also provides an overview of the feminist movement in the past with reflections of some outstanding feminist leaders on issues that oppress women and eliminate their chance for advancement in society. Milly is willing to give in to her faith, and is doomed, whereas Jane is determined to fight for her freedom and independence. She has achieved her goal and found happiness in the end. What this reconfirms is that literary imagination can enhance readers' critical thinking skills. It also creates awareness of social issues that can solve gender problems and provoke understanding for peace and justice in society.

Key words: literary imagination, intellectual development, empower, oppression, critical thinking.

Introduction

This paper aims to compare two different views about women's positions in society by prominent male and female authors of the 20th Century: Henry James' *Wings of the Dove*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to reflect their concern about the problems women face and how they are solved. Through the struggles of the two protagonists: Milly and Jane, readers will understand what causes the downfall or achievement of each character as well as different nature of their struggles to get through the problems faced by both a high class and a middle class female protagonists, either in the form of death to escape the problem, or determination to survive with dignity. This paper will first provide an overview of feminism and key ideas with a brief review of related works, and then discuss each novel separately, beginning with *The Wings of the Dove*, and *Jane Eyre*. The last part includes the conclusion with citations from *Princess* by Jean P. Sasson, to reconfirm gender problems that still exist around the world even in North America and, especially, in the Arab world, where females are oppressed by social stereotypes, and religious institutes, and poverty allowing men, on their free will, to abuse women without taking any responsibility, while intelligent women try to voice out their need for education to be free and eliminate poverty.

Gilbert (2000: 20) remarks that "the ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel. From Virginia Woolf's point of view, the 'angel in the house' is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women." The notion about an angel in house reflects the inferiority of women's status in society. They are perceived to be kind, patient, gentle, devoted, and innocent. In other words, they are merciful servants in the household.

Judith M. Bennett, (1987: 6) describes:

Norms of female and male behavior in the medieval countryside drew heavily upon the private subordination of wives to their husbands as popularized by such saying as, "Let not the hen crow before the rooster". Femaleness was defined by the submissiveness of wives who were expected to defer to their husbands in both private and public. Maleness was defined by the authority of husbands who, as householders, controlled not only most domestic affairs, but also most community matters.

The norms of female inferiority cited above can still be seen in many countries in Asia, the Arab world, including Africa, and even in North

America and Europe where people are better educated. Our culture and tradition has distinctly divided masculine and feminine roles. Myths and archetypes consolidate our perceptions that men embody positive elements of self, but women are defined through the negativity for equal rights and other major concerns from the 18th century. Rendall (1984: 7) points out that:

The intellectual climate of Western Europe came to be dominated by the mood of optimism about the potential of individual human reason and about the possibility of understanding the natural environment of humanity: this mood of optimism came to be known as the EnlightenmentIt is often assumed that concern about the right of women springs from the 18th Century Enlightenment, from the assertion of individual natural rights in a period of revolutionary political thinking.

From the above, it is apparent that awareness of gender equity issues has been raised among the intellectual since the 18th Century. Consequently, one begins to wonder, why in 21st Century, this awareness has not yet made much impact on mainstream females, despite many advancements in terms of education, living condition, and technological progress. It is, therefore, valuable to closely examine barriers to gender equity issues from prominent male and female authors' perspectives to gain insights into male and female authors' view about women's problems. But before investigating the strength and weaknesses of each protagonist, I will provide some relevant background, reflecting social prejudices against women to underline social bias and mainstream implications of female inferiority, traditional taboos, and other historical and social underpinnings, beginning with a general overview of feminism imposed on women in general, including current circumstances of women, not just in domestic terms, but also the working lives of women in the 20th Century, and the early effects of industrialization on their well-beings.

Overview of Feminism

Gilbert (2000: xxxi) maintains that:

'the sexual ideology of the 19th century era was in many ways particularly oppressive, confining women, not just to corsets

but to the “Private House” with all its deprivations and discontents, but on the other hand, its aesthetic and political imperatives were especially inspiring, engendering not just a range of revolutionary movement but some of the richest productions of the female imagination.

Leading figures whose writing has had great impact on the feminist movement, or feminism, were John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Kate Millet, to name just a few. Jaggar (1983: 1) described the 19th Century women’s movement in the United States as an advancement of the women’s position. In other words, the term “feminism” is commonly used to refer to those who seek to end women’s subordination, and the idea of sisterhood has become increasingly important. Among many issues the feminist movement strives to achieve are equal rights to vote and employment opportunities, while putting education as their top priority. Yet, despite the struggle of the women’s liberation movement, Millet (1970: 4-75) pointed out that most education for women in the 19th century was just to make them better housewives and mothers. It can then be concluded that the illusion about the feminine mystique was the major cause of women frustration, which makes their lives empty. They had no identity, but once they were able to see through the delusions of the feminine mystique, it was easier to find the solution.

To encourage women to fight for freedom, Friedan (1963: 364) made the following comment in her book entitled *The Feminine Mystique*:

Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women’s intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? Who knows the possibilities of love when men and women share not only the fulfillment of their biological role, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are? It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete.

From the above citation, it is fair to hope that to solve the problem of inequality, there must be not only equal education and work opportunities, but also some other changes in our culture and society as well. Women

themselves must be aspired by their inner selves to end their subordination, and be reinforced by society outside in many political aspects.

Millet (1970: 23-24) provides the definition of sexual politics in the following:

The term "politics" shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. By way of parenthesis one might add that an ideal politics might simply be conceived of as the arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power over others should be banished, one must confess that this is not what constitutes the political as we know it ,and it is to this that we must address ourselves.

The above statement explains Millet's notion that sex is a status category with political implications, while liberal feminists put more emphasis on liberal values of individual dignity, equality, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. As a radical feminist, Millet strongly insists that sex is political, primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships. In sum, radical feminists try to eliminate theories of patriarchy that oppress women such as sex, gender, woman's biology, feminist sexuality, pornography, psychology, and lesbianism as paradigms for female controlled female sexuality.

Milly Theale: The Fall of Innocence

The Wings of the Dove is symbolic in its title. The 'dove' symbolizes peace and good will. Milly, the protagonist is dove-like in her nature, but she is fatally ill and needs to get away to England for a retreat, but found that she had been surrounded by pretentious people. James illustrates the polarities of good and evil that are subtly intertwined to provoke the impact of evil upon the innocent mind, and the most destructive kind of evil in this novel appears to be lying. The notion of lying is traceable from the beginning until the end of the novel. Kate's father lies about his past. Kate lies to Milly about her relationship with Densher, her fiancé, while Densher is also willing to join Kate in lying to Milly to get her money to marry Kate. Kate's aunt Mrs. Maud also shamelessly confesses, "I lie well, thank God." (p.44). Realizing that she has been cruelly deceived, wealthy Milly chooses to die to escape the chaotic material world. Through death, she can fly away and be at rest. In this novel, James presents how his female protagonist is trapped by all kinds of evil people around her. They are dishonest, deceitful, hypocritical and insincere. Kate Croy is an ambitious beautiful and intelligent woman who is secretly engaged to a poor journalist, named Merton Densher, due to poverty, which she hates, Kate is adopted by her wealthy Aunt Maud, who is powerful and cold-hearted. Kate has to play a game to survive with dignity in society. She cheated on her aunt, Mrs. Maud Lowder to gain her affection by lying, and being dishonest. When Milly visits London for a retreat to her fatal illness, Mrs. Lowder welcomes her warmly. Milly is introduced to Kate. As Milly is trusting and inexperienced, she takes appearance for granted and tells Kate everything. Kate then traps Milly to be in love with Densher, so that when she dies, Densher will become wealthy with her money. Both Aunt Maud, and Densher convince us that their selfishness and social integrity are at stake that they have exploited Milly. At the climax of the story, Milly is portrayed as being awoken from

her ignorant world to experience the cruelty of the real world. Below is her reaction to the Bronzio portrait (1984: 157):

...she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as Lord Mark had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and rowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all vents, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage - - only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognized her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. I shall never do better than this.

The above quotation reveals Milly's realization of her helplessness and despair like a perfect portrait of a lady to be viewed and admired, but has no life. She viewed her life like a living death. After she died, she has left Densher with a lot of money. James (1987, xxxi) however, has subtly commented on Milly's tragic flaw in his preface to the novel as follows:

The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamored of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to put in before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however, briefly and brokenly, 'the sense of having lived'.

On contrary to James' view of Mill's short life, Fowler (1984: 97) view Milly's death as her weakness to cope with reality. That means to compete with Kate to win Densher's love as she explains:

Milly's disease becomes a refuge from active participation in the world; in effect, Milly takes up her illness as a source of self-definition and security.

Fowler's view is quite relevant to Milly's final action when she found out that Kate and Densher were in love with one another, she turned her face to the wall. This news must have shocked her, and after that she has refused to see Densher, and remained silent and alienated herself from the pretentious people who had deceived her.

Tanner (1985: 114) remarks that in *Wings of the Dove*, lying the destructive, and James knows well how it is used to take advantage of one another in modern society, even among well-to

The problem of the lie is central to the book. No one knew better than James that society is maintained and structured on varying degrees of fiction, fabrication, suppression misrepresentation---a whole scale of collusion and duplicity .Yet, particularly in connection with human relationship, the lie can be ruinous.

The above statement reconfirms James' sound judgment of social hypocrites even among the high class who are pretentious and usually take advantages of one another to survive, but also pinpoints its destructive effect on friendship. Milly's relationship with Kate, allows Densher to deceive her. James is very consistent in his portrayal of the highly moral character like Milly, who is doomed to death in the end as Kate is determined to have Densher marry Milly, so that when she dies he can be rich and free to marry her. It is money that turns Kate and Densher into deceitful beings. Feminist writers also attack James for his bias against women, making them so innocent and eventually suffer psychologically. However, readers can see the flaw of Milly's innocence: her pride, her excessive reliance on money and her tragic end. Milly's suffering can awaken female audience to gain knowledge and empower themselves through reading. In *Princess Sassion* (2010: 281)reflected men's nature through Princess Sultana's revelation about the true characteristics of her husband, Karim as follows:

By appearance, Karim is gentle, gracious and intelligent, but at the core, he is crafty, deceitful, and selfish. I have slept by his side for 8 years, and I am now irritated to sleep with him. To me he is nothing. He is not a gentleman as he looks or tries to be. Both Densher and Karim are coward and weak. They are dependent on women to survive in the world.

Jane Eyre's Achievement through Self-Determination and Education

Charlotte Bronte portrays Jane as an independent and strong woman with self-esteem. Jane has been mistreated by the hypocritical people around her, but with her determination to survive with dignity, she has eventually achieved her goal in life, and can settle down with a loving husband and a child. Gilbert (2000: 337) remarks that Jane's life is "larger than life, the emblem of a passionate, barely disguised rebelliousness". From childhood up to adolescent, Jane has to fight for justice, and freedom. Since childhood, Jane realized she was badly treated, but had to be humble to win her way: *Jane Eyre*, (2010: 1)

I never liked long walk, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgina Reed.

The above quotation shows Jane's loneliness in the house full of unfriendly people, and abusive adults, even the nurse, Bessie can threaten her: (Ch.I: 1-2)

'What does Bessie say I have done?' I asked.
'Jane, I don't like cavilers or questioners: besides, There is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent.'

From the above, we can understand why Jane felt alienated and tried to find alternatives for her revolt, which reflects Charlotte Bronte's mythic abilities, and her powerful imagery to overcome oppression of girls and women in any patriarchal society around the world. With regard to Jane's experience in the red-room, and her struggle against John Reed's brutality, the reader can see how this bitterness has significantly forced Jane to become herself.

Violence and injustice against women and young girls are commonly seen in everyday life. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is also abused and tortured physically and mentally. For Jane, being locked in the red-room was worse than being imprisoned (Chapters 2, 8)

My seat, to which Bessie and the bitter Miss Abbot had left me riveted, was a low ottoman near the marble Chimney-piece; the bed rose before me; to my right hand there was the high, dark wardrobe, with subdued broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking-glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room. I was not quite sure whether they had locked the door and when I dared move, I got up, and went to see. Alas! Yes, no jail was ever more secure.

To Jane, being locked in the dark room is no different than being in jail. Abusiveness is seen everywhere in *Jane Eyre*. From the beginning, Jane is badly treated even among her rich relatives as reflected in Jane's memos:

'Hold her arms, Miss Abbot: she's like a mad cat.' For shame! For shame!' cried the lady's maid. 'What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master.' 'Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant? 'No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness.' (Chapter 2: 6)

The quote shows how Jane was treated by everyone at Gateshead.

Deception and Lies are also employed to illustrate how an innocent young woman can be misled by worldly men. At Lowood School Jane experiences hypocrites of the school head master Mr. Brocklehurst, but she befriends Helen Burns, her friend, and her teacher Miss Temple, who is like an angel to Jane. Feminist writing makes use of the bond of sisterhood to support one another. For Rochester, deception or trickery is part of his power that he uses, especially with women. Below is how he flirts Jane:

'Jane you look blooming, and smiling, and pretty,' said he: 'truly pretty this morning. Is this my pale little elf? Is this my mustard-seed? This little sunny-faced girl with the dimple cheek and rosy lips; the satin-

smooth haze hair, and the radiant hazel eyes? 'This is Jane Eyre, sir.' Soon to be Jane Rochester.' He added: 'in four weeks, Jane; not a day more. Do you hear that?'... 'You blushed, and now you are white, Jane: What is that for?' 'because you gave me a new name-Jane Rochester ;and it seems so strange.' 'Yes, Mrs. Rochester,' said he. (Chapter24: 261)

The above conversation reveals that Rochester thinks he can do anything even to take Jane as his wife without having discussed that with her. To him, she is just a young girl that he can do whatever he wants.

Srisermbhok (2003: 248) maintains that the nature of female oppression and resistance against social myths of femininity are visible in feminist writing. In her discussion of Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Marian, the protagonist's journey to self-discovery also had to struggle against stereotypes and confrontation with dominant males. But for Jane, her independent nature was seen at the outset of the novel.

At Thornfields, Jane was also deceived by Rochester, who never told her about his secret wife, and no-one had told Jane that Rochester has been married until her wedding day. As Rochester is rich, powerful and demanding, everyone has to be submissive to his authority. This reflects mainstream stereotypes which allow men to take advantages of women who are subordinate to them. However, after Jane found out that Rochester has already married and his wife is still alive, she decide to leave him no matter how much she loved him. This reflects her self esteem and moral courage and responsibility. Even when Rochester had pleaded for her kindness, Jane was determined to leave him:

'One instant, Jane. Give one glance to my horrible life when you are gone. All happiness will be torn away with you. What then is left? For a wife I have but a maniac upstairs: as well Might you refer me to some corpse in yonder churchyard. What shall I do Jane? What shall I do?

'Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven.

'Hope to meet again here.'

'Then you will not yield?'

'No.' (Chapter 27, p.320)

The citation above reveals Rochester's selfishness, who only thinks about how he feels if Jane leaves him without caring about her reputation as he has not divorced from his wife, but Jane is full of moral conscience and

determined to suffer rather than give in to her feeling.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert (2000: xxxvi) provides a brief discussion that '*Jane Eyre* reflects an ideology of "feminist individualism in the age of imperialism". That is in keeping Bertha Mason in the attic and claimed her madness is very inhumane. Jane's reaction to escape Rochester because of his inhumane activities and he also suffers the consequences of his action as his mansion was set fire by Bertha, and he got wounded and become dependent on Jane. Charlotte Bronte has given a happy ending to *Jane Eyre* as a precious reward to Jane for being true to her own feelings to live with dignity. In other words, believe in God may perhaps mean believe in dignity, justice, and morality. Although Rochester does not love Bertha Mason, he married her for wealth and social status. When Jane encountered Bertha, she described what she saw to Rochester as follows:

It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back....

'Did you see her face?'

'Not at first. But presently she took my yield from its place;

She held it up; gazed at it long, and then threw it over her own head, and turned it to the mirror....

'Ghosts are usually pale.'

'This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes.' 'It reminded me of the foul German spectre - the Vampire.' (Chapter 25: 286-7)

From the above, madness and death are forms of escape for women who were weak and dependent. As in the case of Bertha Mason, who was kept in the room alone and became mad and after she set fire in Thornfield. She was burnt to death, Jane came back and married Rochester, who became dependent on her strength.

Jane Eyre can be classified as a bildungsroman novel, a growing up story. Jane has learned to cope with all kinds of struggles due to poverty, injustice, violence, abusiveness, and social injustice. Due to her independence, moral strength, integrity, and self-esteem, she eventually finds happiness and settles down with true love and a happy family.

In conclusion, literary imagination is a good demonstration of how certain kinds of people behave through interactions of their characters. Good writers often show the reader what went wrong in their relationship.

This paper has discussed the female protagonists of selected works by prominent male and female authors of the 20th century to reflect their preoccupation with how each female protagonist is trapped by personal circumstances and how each of them copes with the situation and solves the problem. Although Henry James is insightful about men's behavior in patriarchal society, he does not provide any solution to his protagonist, except to accept her fate with dignity. Milly in *The Wings of the Dove* is from a high class background, but she is also abused by hypocritical people around her. Although she is fatally ill, snobbish people around her exploited her innocence for their gain, and since Milly is both physically and mentally weak, her only dignity to escape her fate is through death. This is how James treats his innocent female protagonist, making her responsible for her own fate. Charlotte Bronte, on the contrary, not only understands the ways people behave in patriarchal society, but encourages her protagonist, Jane, to fight for her freedom through education, independence, and moral values. In comparison to James Henry, Charlotte is a pioneer in her own will to fight for women, and *Jane Eyre* is an inspiring feminist novel.

Reading feminist works and literary imagination as has been illustrated in this paper can inspire female readers to develop their intellectual growth and moral strength to cope with the unjust world and lead a more meaningful life as demonstrated by Jane's courage. Education is also an important foundation to eliminate poverty and enhance the quality of lives. If all the under-privileged females whether they are in the wealthy or poor nations are educated, the world will be a better place for all. This is echoed by Princess Sultan (Sasson: 2010,149,162,249) 'Education for women will be the only way to bring them out of darkness'. In Saudi Arabia men have the right to total control over their daughters, and wives and their religious institute also encourages that kind of behavior. Further reading on feminist writing by and African American and Pakistan authors are recommended such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *I'm Malala* by Malala Yousafzai to understand how young girls and women are exploited due to their illiteracy and poverty.

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