

**Gender, Borders and Boundaries in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre***

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**Abstract**

The concept of borders and boundaries is one of the important themes in English literature. It might refer to national borders or divisions within countries or symbolize physical barriers, societal divisions or personal limitations. Metaphorically, borders and boundaries might mean the boundaries based on caste, color, creed or sex or represent expectations and prejudices or search for selfhood and identity. Writers from the marginalized communities take up the themes of construction of identity in their writing. Similarly, African-American writers, while addressing the issues of race, gender and class, illustrate their struggle and experiences. Their own lives serve as an inspiration to write about the trauma of displacement and slavery. The English novel in the 18th and 19th century largely focused on women primarily confined to the roles of wife, mother and homemaker. However, some novelists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Aphra Behn challenged gender stereotypes and advocated for greater female autonomy and intellectual freedom. Similarly, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Bronte etc. questioned the prevailing attitudes and provided a fresh perspective on gender issues. Whereas Jane Austen celebrates intelligent and strong-willed female characters who resist societal pressures, Gaskell delves into the lives of **working-class women and those on the margins of society**. Similarly, Hardy chooses the sub-title *A Pure Woman* for his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in order to question the Victorian norms. The paper discusses **Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and analyses how the novel** embodies rebellion against societal constraints by **presenting an unconventional** heroine who is able to move beyond boundaries and carve her path amid restrictions imposed by society in which she lives.

*Keywords:* Borders, boundaries, societal norms, gender, identity, challenge.

Literature has always been a powerful medium to bring out the realities of the world around us. By offering diverse perspectives, it presents contrasting realities and, in a way, celebrates the spectrum of human experience. During the Victorian age (1837-1895) in England, “Realism” was considered as the “spirit of the age”<sup>i</sup>(Dahiya, B.S., 2005,188). Termed as “a sort of renaissance in prose fiction”<sup>ii</sup>(Dahiya, B.S., 2005, 213), the novel as a form became popular and was considered as “the outcome of the assertion of Realism”<sup>iii</sup> (Dahiya, B.S., 2005, 189). The novelists became the literary representatives of the age. English novel primarily centered around the middle-class people and their mundane affairs. Dickens *Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Dombey and Sons, A Tale of Two Cities, The Old Curiosity Shop and David Copperfield; Thackeray’s The Book of Snobs, Vanity Fair, The History of Henry Esmond, The Virginians; Mrs. Gaskell’s Mary Barton, North and South, Cranford, Wives and Daughters, Cousin Phillis, Ruth, Sylvia’s Lovers, Disraeli’s Coningsby: Or the New*

*Generation, Sybil: or The Two Nations; Trollope’s The Warden, Barchester Towers, Dr. Thorne, Framley Parsonage, The Small House at Allington, The last Chronical of Barset* are “chronicles of the age of industrialism and utilitarianism”<sup>iv</sup>(Dahiya, B.S., 2005, 213). The late Victorians, such as George Eliot, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy showed “closeness with the modern concept of the novel as serious art with greater depth of thought and character”<sup>v</sup> (Dahiya, B.S., 2005, 217). The new elements in the “realm of realism was that of psychology, which George Eliot introduced in the form of analysis of character and situation; of poetry, which Meredith introduced in the form of rhythm, tone and structure; and of naturalism, which Hardy introduced in the form of character as destiny”<sup>vi</sup> (Dahiya, B.S., 2005, 217). The late Victorians made love and man-woman relationship as the central preoccupations of their novels such as Eliot’s *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss and Middlemarch; Hardy’s Under the Greenwood Tree, A Pair of Blue Eyes, Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the*

*Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, and Jude the Obscure; Meredith's The Adventures of Harry Richmond, The Egoist, and Diana of the Crossways* depict "stories of love"<sup>vii</sup> (Dahiya, B. S., 2005, 219) along with mirroring the middle class life.

The English novel during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century largely focused on the rigid gender roles prevalent in the Victorian society where women were seen as "social inferiors and not given a chance to develop their own identities or improve themselves for the respectable professions"<sup>viii</sup> (Paxman, J., 1998, 228). A woman was expected to be submissive, primarily confined to the domestic sphere. She was allowed to do only certain restricted works such as playing piano, drawing and writing etc. Paxman opines that a Victorian woman "would be stoical, motherly, submissive and chaste"<sup>ix</sup> (Paxman, J., 1998, 228). Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Princess" is an appropriate example to demonstrate the condition of women in the Victorian society emphasizing man as her master: "Man to command and woman to obey"<sup>x</sup>

[http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/lor\\_d\\_alfred\\_tennyson/poems/11635](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/lor_d_alfred_tennyson/poems/11635)). In this

respect, Lawrence Stone talks about the legalized law for a married woman: "A married woman was the nearest approximation in a free society to a slave. Her person, her property both real and personal, her earnings and her children all passed on marriage into absolute control of her husband. The latter could use her sexually as and when he wished and beat her (within reason) or conflict her to disobedience to any orders"<sup>xi</sup> (Stone, L., 1990, 13) Marriage was one of the essential obligations of the Victorian woman and purity was one of the most distinguishing traits of the ideal middle class woman. Even within marriage women were, "obliged to lead separate and unequal lives until they died"<sup>xii</sup> (Paxman, J., 1998, 212). The discriminatory attitude towards women becomes evident with the fact that though the writing as profession was opened to women since 1840s, yet many women writers such as George Eliot and the Brontë sisters had to use pseudonyms "in order not to draw attention to the fact that they were women"<sup>xiii</sup> (Carter, R., & John M., 1997, 261). However, despite these disparities some writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Aphra Behn challenged gender

stereotypes and advocated for greater female autonomy and intellectual freedom. Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Bronte etc. questioned the prevailing attitudes of the society towards women and provided a fresh perspective on gender issues. Whereas Jane Austen celebrates intelligent and strong-willed female characters who resist societal pressures, Gaskell delves into the lives of **working-class women and those on the margins of society**. Hardy chooses the subtitle *A Pure Woman* for his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in order to question the Victorian norms. Similarly, Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre (1857)* **presents a heroine who, despite barriers and boundaries, moves ahead to carve her own path.**

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855) was born on April 21, 1816 in Thornton, West Riding, Yorkshire. Eldest in her family, Charlotte along with her sisters, Emily (1818-1848) and Anny (1820-1849), often explores the themes of family, female empowerment and social justice in her writings. Charlotte published *Jane Eyre* at the age of 31. It was her first published novel and was “quickly accepted” and

“published with great success”<sup>xiv</sup> (Churchill, R.C., 1951, 117). A.A. Jack calls *Jane Eyre* a “unique Victorian book because in it, whatever the age might think it right to say, it was made plain to the most unwillingly convinced that purity could be passionate and that a woman could read the heart”<sup>xv</sup> (Jack, A.A., 1961, 408). Published under the pseudonym Currer Bell, the novel shows Bronte’s vision for women’s empowerment and holds relevance even after 170 years of its publication as it raises question about the defined gender roles in society at the time when women were considered as charming angels who were ideally “both decorative and useful”<sup>xvi</sup> (Calder, J., 1977, 9) The following lines from *Jane Eyre* are Bronte’s assertion of female rights:

“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, too 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” women "or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”<sup>xvii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 95).

The above lines **reveal the discriminatory attitude of the Victorian society towards women. At the same, the resistance of the heroine and strength of her character is also revealed** as she holds the courage to speak against the stereotypical roles assigned to women. This is what *Jane Eyre* is about. To quote, “...Jane Eyre comments on the morality and prejudices of the times, and ultimately tells the tale of Jane’s search for self.”<sup>xviii</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, Cover page). Charlotte herself writes, “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the crown of Thorns.”<sup>xix</sup> (Bronte, C., 1994, 3). Bronte’s aim was to represent a woman who could speak truth “with no thought of the consequences to herself or others.”<sup>xx</sup> (Cross, W.L., 1990, 229). The novel explores a woman’s search for identity and

depicts her struggle for independence and autonomy. Rejecting the concept of a beautiful heroine in the Victorian age, Bronte’s choosing a plain, simple looking girl as heroine reveals her strong assertion to break the conventional boundaries and step into a world that gives more importance to virtues than sex. She introduces the reader to “a difficult child and renders her very rebelliousness sympathetic. She also makes Jane interesting, because she thinks and indeed acts, in way we would not expect of a child, especially perhaps of that era.”<sup>xxi</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, X) Shelly Shuttleworth thinks the novel as an “overarching narrative of self-improvement through self-control” she finds “depiction of internal struggle cast in terms of both racial and class conflict”<sup>xxii</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 7).

The author exhibits Jane’s revolutionary spirit from the very beginning of the story. As an orphan in the Reed’s family and or as a student at Lowood school or as a governess or as a lover to Mr. Rochester in Thornfield Hall or in her relationship with John Rivers; Jane doesn’t compromise with her self-esteem

and is able to make her path amid societal and cultural barriers. She is shown as a rebellious, self-respected, outspoken girl and later as a self-dependent woman in the journey of her life from Gateshead Hall to Moor House. Her unconventional trait of personality is shown in her dealing with Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, Ms. Scatchered, Mr. Rochester and Mr. Rivers. The novel is a story of her capability of crossing barriers to achieve a respectable place in family and society. Though Jane's life since childhood has been subjected to discrimination and hardship, yet nothing can deter her spirit of revolt and resilience. An orphan and dependent on her aunt, her stay at Gateshead is a shocking tale of enduring tyranny and its impact on the young mind. Aunt Reed's glance expresses "an insuperable and rooted aversion for Jane"<sup>xxiii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 7). She feels herself as "...a heterogeneous thing... a useless thing"<sup>xxiv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 10). Undergoing constant oppression and bullied by her elder cousin, John Reed, she has to live there under threat and terror. "He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually: every nerve I had

feared him and every morsel of flesh in my bones shrank when he came near me..."<sup>xxv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 5). Even as a small girl of ten, she understands that she can never be the part of the Reed family and shows remarkable resilience and defiance in the face of oppression. She confronts John and faces him when assaulted by the book she was reading: "...I fell, my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded"<sup>xxvi</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 6). Exhibiting her strength, she calls him "Wicked and cruel boy!" "a slave-driver" and compares him to "the Roman emperors"<sup>xxvii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 6). Despite the cruel and discriminatory attitude of her aunt and the physical abuse she faces, Jane depicts extraordinary courage in facing her aunt's wrath. When Mrs. Reed refers to Jane's "tendency to deceit"<sup>xxviii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 27), "a passion of resentment ferments" within her and she resolves, "Speak I must..."<sup>xxix</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 29). She dares to retaliate at her "antagonist" by bluntly telling her, "I am not deceitful. If I were, I should say I love you; but I declare I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the

world except John Reed; ...I will never call you aunt again so long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up....<sup>xxx</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 29). Her defiance towards her aunt makes her feel triumphant at that moment as she regards herself as a “winner of the field.”<sup>xxxi</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 30). Mrs. Reed looks frightened. “It was the hardest battle I had fought and the first victory I had gained... I enjoyed my conqueror’s solitude”<sup>xxxii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 30).

Jane refuses to be a passive victim even at Lowood, a charitable school which represents a world of deprivation and tyranny. Describing Lowood, Sally Shuttleworth says, “Discipline is achieved both by mortification of the flesh, and the constant inspection and surveillance”<sup>xxxiii</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 18). Mr. Brocklehurst, the cruel headmaster and treasurer of the school with his inhuman and derogatory attitude has created an oppressive and harsh environment, but this cannot dampen Jane’s spirit though she has to face his ire. She feels ashamed and humiliated when charged of being a liar and is made to stand on a stool “displayed to the public gaze”<sup>xxxiv</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 18). But being calmed

and embraced by her friend Helen and soothed by Miss Temple, her school superintendent; she resolves to “pioneer her way through every difficulty”<sup>xxxv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 63), once cleared from the charges of falsehood. She doesn’t like Miss Scatchered who abuses Helen for dirty nails and ill manners. Showing her rebellion against injustice and oppression, she tells Helen, “And if I were in your place, I should dislike her; I should resist her if she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 46). Jane’s experience of being publicly condemned for defending Helen Burns marks a turning point in her development. She is able to learn compassion and forgiveness from Helen and imbibes “harmonious thoughts”<sup>xxxvii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 72) from Miss Temple. Thus, Jane becomes mentally stronger after each experience she passes through whether it is after the night in the Red Room or the disease that spreads in Lowood Institution causing death of many girls including her best friend Helen, who dies of consumption. With each passing misery, her determination to survive and face the situation becomes stronger and

stronger. Jane's defiance against Mr. Brocklehurst becomes symbolic of rebellion against oppression and injustice which motivates her not to stay in that tyrannical world after Miss Temple leaves the school. She grapples with the injustice of her situation, questions authority, and learns to stand up for herself.

Through her struggles, Jane emerges as a self-aware individual who refuses to compromise her values or sacrifice her dignity in the face of adversity. As a governess at Thornfield, though she has to face gender hierarchies due to social conditions coming in conflict with her natural desires, she never allows her position to compromise her integrity. Even in her relationship with Rochester, her employer; Jane's intelligence and strong will - not to lose her identity - is throughout visible. When Rochester calls her an angel, she asserts by saying, "I am not an angel;" "and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester. You must neither expect, nor exact anything celestial of me - for you will never get it..."<sup>xxxviii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 229). Nothing can stop her from speaking truth. When Rochester asks whether she agrees if he is "a little

masterful", "abrupt," perhaps exacting because he has a varied experience...; Jane shows her courage in articulating the words of equality, "I don't think so. You have a right to command me, nearly because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience"<sup>xxxix</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 117).

Bronte gives Jane a strong voice who stands up for her rights, who has an urge to explore and learn, who has an independent thinking and can take her own decisions. Sally Minogue in the Introduction of the novel says, "we must set the strength with which Bronte challenged convention..."<sup>xl</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, xix). When Rochester wishes to shower her with jewels, dress her in colored silks and diamonds, Jane feels that 'Rochester's smile was such as a Sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on his slave his gold and gems had enriched"<sup>xli</sup>(Bronte, C., 1999, 237). Crushing his hand, she says, "You need not look in that way..."<sup>xlii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 237). Jane's straight forwardness again comes to light when the secret of



Rochester's wife Bertha is revealed. Valuing self-respect and dignity the most, she refuses to stay there telling him that his wife was alive and if she lived with him as per his wishes, she would only be his mistress and "to yield was out of the question..."<sup>xliii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 268). Similarly, she has the courage to tell her feelings to Rochester for Bertha whom she considers an unfortunate lady, "you speak of her with hate- with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel - she cannot help being mad"<sup>xliv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 265). Her decision to leave Thornfield is a bold step in her fight for identity which she is afraid of losing in surrendering to Rochester's passion. "I am no bird, and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you"<sup>xlv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 223).

Thus, Jane's journey from Gateshead to Lowood to Thornfield becomes defining chapters in shaping her life and fueling her determination to break free from the psychological and societal barriers and constraints. Similarly at Moor house, though she has a secure future with Mr. Rivers, she again listens to the voice of her heart and takes decision not to marry

him or go with him on a missionary visit to India as his wife. Thus, rejecting the traditional notions of marriage as a means of female fulfilment, she seeks a partnership based on mutual respect and love, not financial security or social status. Her strong will and decision-making power are once again exhibited when she decides to marry Rochester only after becoming financially independent by getting an amount of 20,000 pounds as inheritance from her uncle. Jane tells her master emphatically that she is now both independent and rich, in a way her own mistress. When she learns about Bertha's death, the fire and about Rochester's disability, she decides to stay there as she truly loves him. It's an emotional reunion as Rochester cannot believe her coming back and accepting him when he is left "partially blind and partially crippled"<sup>xlvi</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 3). She too wholeheartedly accepts his marriage proposal. Jane and Rochester finally enter a marriage of two equals which was unheard of at the time. Charlotte makes marriage of Rochester and Bertha possible only when social barriers, class difference and psychological barriers are removed. Jane

considers herself “supremely blest - blest beyond what language can express...”<sup>xlvii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 399).

Glen calls *Jane Eyre* a “fairy tale” in which Jane is “the triumphant heroine - the Cinderella who surpasses her ugly sisters and stepmother and receives unlooked - for fairy gifts... the Beauty who finally tames the Beast”<sup>xlviii</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 168). In the end Jane finds her place in life: “No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am...” and “perfect concord is the result”<sup>xlix</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 399). She finds the love and kinship she longed for without sacrificing her own identity and independence. The essay, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress," by Gilbert and Gubar published in the book *Madwoman in the Attic* argues that the novel focuses on Jane's journey of self-discovery and rebellion against societal constraints. They argue that Jane like “everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End)”<sup>l</sup> (Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. G., 1984, 339). Throughout the novel Jane refuses to be silenced and defying

boundaries and barriers, realizes her dream of living an independent life. By the end, “she is paramount: those who have so Light to wrong her are punished, her decisions are vindicated, and her desires fulfilled”<sup>li</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 166). Thus, boundaries which defined a woman only in terms of man are transcended. Jane Eyre's “Reader, I married him”<sup>lii</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 397) close to the end of novel shows the reversal of roles and her decision-making capacity. In the ending of the novel, “Brontë has created the world she can imagine free of the forms of oppression against which the novel, most passionately protests, inequalities of gender and economic injustice towards the lower middle class...the ending as the echo of the French revolutionary slogan suggests, symbolically, enacts Brontë's conception of a social revolution on behalf of women and lower middle class.”<sup>liii</sup> (Bloom, H., 2007, 67). Her desire for “liberty” for which she “gasped” and “uttered a prayer”<sup>liv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 73) at Lowood is fulfilled at the end, when she stands as equal with Rochester speaking for those “millions ... in silent revolt against their lot”<sup>lv</sup> (Bronte, C., 1999, 95).

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