

“Scrutinize her actions, punish her body to save her soul”: The Figure of the Governess in Jane Eyre

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Abstract- *In 1840s the figure of the governess, particularly her sexuality became a subject of much concern to the periodical essayists. The Victorian period, as Foucault argues saw an immense proliferation of discourses about sex. Sexuality thus came into being as the ultimate open secret. This justified the attention devoted to the distressed governess by emphasizing the central role she played in reproducing the domestic ideal- on one hand she, as a teacher was to teach her students ‘accomplishments’ that would attract a good husband and later make them good wives and mothers yet at the same time police the emergence of undue assertiveness or sexuality in her maturing charges.*

The employment of women as governess also mobilized and engaged with two of the most important representations of women: the figure who epitomized the domestic ideal-the wife/mother, and the figures who threatened to destroy it-the working-class women/prostitutes.

It is within these contexts that the paper will try and place Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. The paper would also analyse the way this stereotypical representation of women throws light on the condition of women in general and working-class women.

Keywords- *Jane Eyre; Victorian period; governess*

The governess was a familiar figure to the mid-century middle class Victorians just as she is now to the readers of Victorian novels. The bank failure of the 1840s combined with the discrepancy between the number of marriageable women and men drove many middle-class spinsters, widows, and daughters of respectable bankrupts into work outside the home. At the same time the changing economic conditions gave rise to increasing number of middle class families who could afford governess who increasingly came to be a sign of economic and social success- and helped validate a family's membership in the rank of the leisure class. Hiring a governess implied that the lady of the house was now truly a ‘woman of leisure’-an idea made popular by the conduct book of the nineteenth century which obtained suggested “that the essence of a woman lay inside or underneath her surface[...] the material body of the woman was superficial” (Armstrong 76)[1]. Also, private teaching was considered the most genteel, largely because the governess's work was so similar to that of the female norm, the middle-class mother. During this era, a job as a governess was not a solution but a mere alleviation of a woman's dependency. Terry Eagleton points out that “she lived at that ambiguous point in the social structure at which two worlds-an interior one of emotional hungering and an external one of harshly mechanical necessity-meet and collide” (16). Salaries were meager- thirty to forty-five pounds per annum.

By 1840s the figure of the governess, particularly her sexuality became a subject of much concern to the periodical essayists. The Victorian period, as Foucault argues saw an immense proliferation of discourses about sex. Sexuality thus came into being as the ultimate open secret. This justified the attention devoted to the distressed governess by emphasizing the central role she played in reproducing the domestic ideal- on one hand she, as a teacher was to teach her students ‘accomplishments’ that would attract a good husband and later make them good wives and mothers yet at the same time police the emergence of undue assertiveness or sexuality in her maturing charges. At the same time she was also expected to fix another, “boundary”- that between “well-bred, well-educated and perfect gentle women” on the one hand, and, on the other, “the low born, ignorant and vulgar” woman of the working class” (Poovey 178)[8]. The assumptions implicit in these conjunctions was that only ‘well- bred’ women were morally reliable. So paradoxically the unfortunate circumstances that bankrupted some middle class fathers were “critical to the representations of the domestic ideal, for only such disasters could yield suitable teachers for the next generation of middle class wives” (Poovey 176) [8].

Theoretically the governess's position neutralized whatever temptation she, as a young woman herself, might have presented to the class hierarchies-to her male associates and to gentlewomen she was a ‘tabooed

woman', and to the male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady. Eve M. Lynch points out that "the relations between mistress and servant were often marked by suspicion and circumscribed by surveillance [...] Houses were architecturally fitted with a back stairs so that the mistress and her servant would not have to meet on the front stairwell" (97). This social isolation of the governess bred loneliness and neurosis. Attractiveness of a governess was a further threat as due to extreme class-consciousness, marriages with governesses were frowned upon.

Related to this were two other ideas—first a sound character which was an absolute requirement for those entering employment. In fact, the importance of cultivation and projection of character led to hundreds of books being written on the subject. An example of this is Smile's *Self-Help* which had a whole chapter on the importance of Character. The second is the phrase 'getting on' or 'self-help'. The phrase became established usage in the 1840s. It meant making a success of one's life, building a career, finding a place in the mainstream society, often from beginnings that were disadvantaged or isolated. But the kind of character the Victorians thought could get on in life was somebody who was young, energetic and male. The exclusion of women from Smilesian narratives of Character was then "an exclusion of women from the worlds of work, capital, and 'getting on'" (Rylance 158)[9]. *Jane Eyre*, then can be read as story of a woman who 'get on' in life. She strikes out courageously and shapes her own destiny.

The employment of women as governess thus mobilized and engaged with two of the most important representations of women: the figure who epitomized the domestic ideal—the wife/mother, and the figures who threatened to destroy it—the working-class women/prostitutes. It is within this context that the paper will try and place *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The paper would also analyse the way these stereotypical representations of women throw light on the condition of women in general and working-class women in particular. One can read Charlotte Brontë's novel as based on reconciliation of a set of conflicting values where on one hand there is a streak of rebellion directed towards the gentry and on the other hand a reverence for rank, heroism, tradition, social achievement and established conventions. Her heroines are also divided selves—outwardly demure yet inwardly passionate, full of an erotic and imaginative hungering which must be locked back upon itself in meekness, self-sacrifice and stoical endurance. In freeing Jane from the conventional trappings of femininity and granting her liberty to feel and express her feelings, Brontë created her first "anti-heroine" (Moglen 485)[7]. Orphaned, poor and plain, Jane comes across as demure and dissenting, ambitious and self-effacing, submissive and self-assertive; and the narrative by conveniently disposing of Rochester's mad wife, allows her to fulfill both her erotic desires and worldly aspirations without the social disgrace of committing bigamy.

The novel opens with Jane's famous act of defiance—her retaliation when her cousin John Reed throws a book at her for which she is imprisoned in the Red-room—a spatialized configuration of the Victorian notion of female interiority which also marks the onset of Jane's puberty. She is later sent to Lowood School. As an institute Lowood acts as an "asylum" for disciplining and controlling female energy" (Showalter 116)[10]. Lowood 'disciplines' its inmates by attempting to "destroy their individuality [...] and starve their sexuality" the purpose behind it being to make its inmates "Angel in the House" (Showalter 117)[10]. The 'sexuality' and 'vitality' of *Jane Eyre* which is suppressed in this place to make her a 'perfect' governess re-surface later at Thornfield—another 'asylum'—harboring Bertha Mason. Bertha comes across as a destabilizing agent who undermines all Jane's attempts at an integrated self-hood. The issue of 'sexual susceptibility' and 'social incongruity' that contemporaries associated with the governess and which the Charlotte Brontë herself faced are inextricably bound with each other in Brontë's representation of Jane's situation at Thornfield Hall but with a twist. She reformulates Jane's dilemma to make it an individual, moral, emotional problem rather than a function of social position or occupation so that Jane comes across as "the guardian of sexual and class order rather than its weakest point" (Poovey 178)[8]. In fact, as Poovey points out, Jane's origins and terms of her employment neutralizes the problem of her sexual susceptibility and social incongruity. The importance of her position as governess is constantly downplayed in the novel. On one hand Jane begins her earning for her bread because she has no one to support her but on the other hand the author also makes clear that the social incongruity generally associated with the governess precedes her taking up the same as her profession. From the beginning she is shown to be "less than a servant", "a discord", "an orphaned outsider" whose identity is at once dependent on and denied by her relatives (6).

With the entry of Rochester there is a further subsuming of the economic necessity that drives Jane to work into a narrative of elaborate courtship. In fact by the time Blanche Ingram and her companions ridicule the race of the governess in front of Jane, Brontë has already elevated her heroine above this 'race' by subordinating her poverty to her personality and to the place it has earned her in Rochester's affections. When Rochester proposes marriage to Jane, the problems of sexual susceptibility and class incongruity that intersect in the governess's role ought, theoretically, to be solved. But as the novel goes on to show, romantic love and spiritual affinity are not enough for a happy marriage. Some amount of economic equality and exorcising of the ghosts of the past is equally important.

As soon as Jane leaves Thornfield, she stops being a governess and this proves to be the first stage in her gradual recovery of kinship, independence, money and even enough mastery to write her story. But independence in this society, as Eagleton suggests, "involves attaining a precarious gentility that in turn entails a sharp eye for the

nuances of social distinction" (28)¹. In a degraded state, with her qualifications as a "lady" covered up by the dirt she has acquired, Jane turns to the townspeople to locate work: no longer able to secure a middle-class position as governess, Jane descends through the ranks of dependency, first seeking needle-work or plain-work, finally soliciting any work as a household servant. But she is so defiled by this point that even the cottage folk "recognize" her as bestial, fit only to eat the porridge their pigs reject. Bronte portrays this degradation as the crisis of Jane's fall from any social standing within a house. At the same time it also highlights her "essential homelessness"-the nameless, placeless and contingent status-of women in patriarchal society (Gilbert and Gubar 364)[5]. But her response to the students at Morton is also double edged. Though she finds their "unmannerliness distasteful, she 'must not forget that these coarsely-clad little peasants are of flesh and blood and the germs of nature's excellence, refinement are as likely to exist in their hearts as in those of the best born'" (Eagleton 28)[3].

This instability in Jane Eyre is resolved by making the governess the "wife" and a "mother" and thus re-enforcing the distinction between the lunatic Bertha Mason and the fallen woman Celine Varens, between women who cannot be legitimate wives and those who can be. At the same time, it also "subverts" the "putative differences" between the governess and the lunatic/mistress, between the governess and the wife as it extends the series of 'aberrant' women to include the figure who ought to be exempt from this series, who ought to be the norm the point being that the boundary between these two groups of women "collapse" in the figure of the governess (Poovey 180)[8].

The novel ends with the romantic contentment of a couple who represent an ideologically satisfying intermingling of partners from different social spheres. But the last words of the novel are about St. John Rivers. It is as if the novel is suspicious of their own resolutions and eager to note costs as well as benefits.

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¹Jane is furious with Hannah when she treats her as a servant when she is not one. So the moment she is not a governess she is linked to the 'Other' of the domestic ideal-the lunatic and the fallen women-Bertha Mason and Celine Varens in the novel respectively and hence to the sexual vulnerability and class uncertainty inscribed in them and thus bringing to light the unstable boundary between such 'aberrant' women as the lunatic, prostitute and the governess and the 'normal' woman who is a wife and a mother.