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## A Rereading of Charlotte Brontë's Female Characters: Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre

### Charlotte Brontë'nin Kadın Karakterlerinin Yeniden Okunması: Lucy Snowe ve Jane Eyre

#### ABSTRACT

Producing some of the classic novels of Victorian literature, Charlotte Brontë is celebrated for her exploration of several themes such as social relations, gender roles, morality, and religion. Brontë creates her works in an era which is dominated by the concept of "separate spheres," which enforces that women and men have distinct places in society. Within this context, the Victorian woman is often idealized as the "angel in the house," and expected to be virtuous, submissive and patient. Any deviation from these standards is regarded as unconventional and masculine. Questioning these rigid gender roles, Brontë challenges the dominant Victorian ideals of womanhood both in *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, and creates female characters who possess inner strength and strive to define their own identities. The aim of this paper is, thus, to reread Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of exceptional female characters and analyse how their forthrightness, independent travels and intellectual curiosity are regarded as masculine by Victorian standards.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, *Jane Eyre*, gender roles.

#### ÖZET

Viktorya dönemi edebiyatının en önemli kadın yazarlarından olan Charlotte Brontë, romanlarında, sosyal ilişkiler, cinsiyet rolleri, ahlak ve din gibi çeşitli konuları ele alır. Brontë eserlerini, kadın ve erkeğin ayrı alanlara ait olduğu ve toplumdaki yerlerinin birbirinden farklı olduğu düşüncesinin hakim olduğu bir dönemde kaleme alır. Bu anlayışa göre kadın, 'evdeki melek' olarak tanımlanmakta ve kadının her anlamda itaatkar, sabırlı ve erdemli olması beklenmektedir. Bu anlayışa uymayan kadınlar sıra dışı, hatta erkeksi olarak görülmektedir. Eserlerinde toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini sorgulayan Brontë, *Villette* ve *Jane Eyre* romanlarında, Viktorya dönemine ait olan ideal kadın anlayışına karşı çıkar ve kendi kimliklerini bulmaya çalışan güçlü kadın karakterleri okuyucularıyla buluşturur. Bu makalede, Charlotte Brontë'nin kadın karakterleri yeniden incelenecek, güçlü, bağımsız ve entelektüel kişiliklerinin Viktorya dönemi değerlerine göre nasıl erkeksi olarak tasvir edildiği ele alınacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, *Jane Eyre*, cinsiyet rolleri.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

To be powerless, without social, economic, or legal status; to be unconfident, dependent, , and vulnerable –is to be female (Moglen, 1984, p. 109).

Helene Moglen's definition of nineteenth-century women's reality highlights the importance of sexuality in the Victorian era. The issue of sexuality in Victorian culture and literature has been meticulously studied, and it is a subject that never loses its popularity and novelty. Whenever Victorian sexuality is under discussion, it is obvious that masculinity dominates the era and without a doubt women are repressed by a patriarchal society. Leonore Davidoff explains this as "man representing the ruling and governing group, was seen as the head of the social system as well as the head of his household which was in turn a society in miniature" (1979, p. 89). This is not a decision made by women, of course, but the conventional Victorian society dictates to women what they should do and they are repressed by a patriarchal system. It is also this patriarchal force that attracts Charlotte Brontë to write under a male name, Currer Bell. In the following quote, Nicole Plyler Fisk draws attention to the general attitude toward authors in the nineteenth-century:

The Brontës' decision to use pen names was validated when James Lorimer published a review of their novels, asserting, 'if they are the productions of a woman, she must be a woman pretty unsexed' and Charlotte seems to have been summarizing several reviews when

she wrote to W. S. Williams in August 1849, complaining that *Jane Eyre* is ‘praised [...] if written by a man—and pronounced “odious” if the work of a woman (2008, p. 223).

Based upon the quotation, it can be said that it is not considered acceptable by Victorian society for a female to write a novel but she is expected to cook, knit, raise children, etc. In his letter to Charlotte Brontë, Robert Southey puts it more directly and claims that literature should not be the focus of a woman’s life (as cited in Elizabeth Gaskell, 1997, p. 117). As could be concluded, Victorian society is dominated by very strict gender roles, which often places women in subordinate positions to men, and, within this context, any deviation from traditional feminine roles could be read as masculine. Despite all negative comments on women’s reality and women’s writing in Victorian society, Charlotte Brontë is successful in creating her masterpieces and some of the most famous characters in literature. Her novels and characters have been analysed from feminist perspectives by many scholars, such as Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert. The way her female characters are portrayed as masculine in the Victorian context, however, needs further exploration. Brontë’s female characters Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre speak forthrightly, travel independently, work and take control of their own lives, and it is the aim of this essay to demonstrate how these traits are regarded as masculine and non-confirming according to Victorian values.

## 2. THEY ARE NOT JUST PLAIN GOVERNESSES: AN ANALYSIS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S FEMALE CHARACTERS

Charlotte Brontë reshapes gender roles in her novels if we look at how she considers the characters and their traits. Susan Lydon suggests that “Charlotte Brontë begins to reshape gender roles more definitely in *Villette* than she does in *Jane Eyre*. *Villette* has a “share of motherly men in Graham and Monsieur Paul; a share of matriarchs in Mrs Bretton and Madame Beck [...]” (2010, p. 28). Lydon also suggests how Madame Beck and Lucy Snowe are women who are independent in their earnings and doings (2010, p. 28). Within this context, it is important to talk about the gender roles and the masculine and nonconforming traits the protagonists Jane and Lucy present in Brontë’s novels, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853).

In both novels, Brontë develops her heroines as independent, assertive, and self-reliant, challenging the conventional gender roles of the Victorian period. They are independent in expressing their ideas even if these kinds of ideas are not to be uttered by a female in Victorian society. Sally Shuttleworth suggests that Charlotte Brontë’s heroines are trying to find their identities and self-definitions throughout her novels. Their language and thoughts do not express the values appreciated in Victorian society. Furthermore, their behaviour was viewed as immoral (1996, p. 71). As Shuttleworth claims, these female characters are very confident in their discourse. They can strongly defend themselves when they are treated harshly. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Jane Eyre is an active character and her frankness is due to her “so-called feminism” which “horrified the Victorians” (2000, p. 338). Her “anger” stimulated by her repressed sexuality was found dangerous (Gilbert, 1977, p. 781). In *Jane Eyre*, there are many scenes where Brontë lets Jane use her expressive voice to defeat her audience: “Wicked and cruel boy! I said. You are like a murderer –you are like a slave-driver –you are like the Roman emperors!” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 11).<sup>1</sup>

In this scene, at the beginning of the novel, Jane shouts at John Reed, her cousin, who tries to master Jane because she is poor and she is a female. For a woman who is living in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, it was uncommon to raise her voice to a male. To the astonishment of the readers, Brontë draws a strong female character who can shout and is ready to argue with a male character. In this sense, Jane refuses to conform to the expectations placed upon her as female, thus, embodying features that are not considered feminine in Victorian society. In other words, she does not follow expectations of the typical Victorian ideal of a woman as passive and submissive. Geert Hofstede puts out that masculinity is defined with the words “tough”, and “pretentious” and concentrated on material success: but femininity is described with the words “modest” and “tender” (1998, p. 6). Jane is neither modest nor tender while addressing Mr Rochester, for example here:

“Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild, frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.”

<sup>1</sup> Future references to the novel will refer to *JE*.

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 (*JE*, p. 253).

Brontë's heroine is not afraid of expressing her ideas and her forthrightness when she speaks directly to the main male protagonist Rochester shows that she is not a conventional woman either. Sandro Jung describes Jane as a woman who expresses her ideas freely to her master viewed again as dangerous by Victorians (2007, pp. 21-22). In another conversation, Jane confesses to St. John, later revealed as Jane's cousin, that "God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would, I begin to think, be almost equivalent to committing suicide" (*JE*, p. 526). St. John finds her words "unfeminine" and this is not approved of in a patriarchal society (*JE*, p. 524).

Jane is not the only female character in Charlotte Brontë's fiction, who uses a sharp tongue to express herself freely in the patriarchal dominance of the discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lucy Snowe in *Villette* can be compared to Jane as she does not hesitate to break her silence in matters where she thinks she is right. She uses direct language and a sharp tone. In her dialogue with Dr Bretton, she stresses how poor and powerless he is when she says:

"Dr Bretton," I broke out, "there is no delusion like your own. On all points but one you are a man frank, healthful, right-thinking, clear-sighted: on this exceptional point you are but a slave. I declare, where Miss Fanshawe is concerned, you merit no respect; nor have you mine." (*Villette*, p. 189).<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Haller claims that Dr Bretton likes amusement and is flirtatious towards Lucy which leaves Lucy with hope (2010, p. 151). Haller's words imply that after flirting with Lucy, Dr Bretton dares to speak about his feelings towards another woman, after which Lucy cannot stay without expressing feelings and ideas. Brontë lets Lucy take the liberty of uttering strong words when she says, "You are but a slave" (*V*, p. 189). Since she does not see him as a master, Lucy's response could be seen as masculine by Victorian standards. Within this context, it could be observed that Brontë's *Villette* does not follow Victorian moral rules. These rules demand that a man can question a woman but here in the dialogue below, Lucy is questioning M. Paul without any hesitation:

"Matter! How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garcon, and look at that picture?"

"It is a very ugly picture, but I cannot at all see why I should not look at it."

"Bon! Bon! Speak no more of it. But you ought not to be here alone."

"If, however, I have no society—no party, as you say? And then, what does it signify whether I am alone, or accompanied? Nobody meddles with me" (*V*, p. 201).

Lucy and M. Paul's conversation raises another point about gender in the novel. Susan Lydon considers how both science and art as subjects are gendered and acknowledges that in *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë uses the association of science with male characters, whereas female characters are associated with art (2009, p. 21). While talking about medicine, Dr Bretton implies that science does not interest females: "[...] the disease being rare, and its treatment doubtful: I saw a similar and still finer case in a hospital in Paris; but that will not interest you" (*V*, p. 183). Regarding the attribution of science to men and the masculine, Lydon claims that Lucy constantly uses scientific words in her narration (*V*, p. 23). Brontë develops Lucy as a wise female character; she chooses words elaborately while telling her story. Her use of "reason" (*V*, p. 173) and "common sense" (*V*, p. 48) and her rejection of "poetic language" (*V*, p. 48) suggest that she is interested in science which contradicts Dr Bretton's claim that cases in hospital "will not interest" her (*V*, p. 183). In their dialogue with male characters, both Lucy and Jane achieve a sense of freedom in their speech and dominate the conversations. Jane's forthrightness comes to the stage mostly when she talks to Rochester while Lucy's is shaped by her interaction with M. Paul.

Brontë's heroines are also exceptional in the way they find work and gain financial freedom instead of searching for a husband whom they can depend on. In Victorian culture it is not conventional for a woman to work outside the home.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, "work" and "men" are accepted as synonyms, and the female labour is excluded from the scene. Therefore, masculine identity is formed in accordance with

<sup>2</sup> Future references to the novel will refer to *V*.

<sup>3</sup> See Poovey (1989) and Langland (1992).

the word “work” (Danahay, 2005, p. 1). Protesting against the Victorian concept of work, male domination and female decorum, Brontë’s characters set out on different journeys in pursuit of paid work. Jane, who does not want to stay any longer at Lowood School, leaves her dependent life and works as a governess at Thornfield, and she criticizes the deep-rooted structure of Victorian culture when she says:

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 constraint, 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 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 (*JE*, p. 109).

Jane’s teaching and earning gives her freedom which is seen as uncommon among Victorian society. Mary Poovey suggests that Jane is an independent woman once she earns money as a teacher in the charity school (1989, p. 142), and Jane’s struggle to develop her freedom through work can also be observed in the character Lucy Snowe. Lucy is feverish when she speaks of her plans to get a job. When she is questioned about where she is going, her reply is quite sharp: “Where Fate may lead me. My business is to earn a living where I can find it” (*V*, p. 55). Here, Lucy takes responsibility for her life; she is not dependent but strong enough to utter her ideas about her freedom. In Jane’s case, however, Brontë gives her the opportunity to lead the family. *Jane Eyre* ends with Mr Rochester’s blindness and Jane taking controls of the family, and, here, it could be concluded that Jane is given a masculine quality of being in control of the family.

Lydon suggests that in *Villette*, “on the ship, to Belgium, Lucy becomes a protector for Ginevra rather than a protected female [...] Later, she takes over a man’s job as an English teacher and becomes active rather than passive,” and also, she uses a “[...] masculine language for aggressive action” (2010, p. 28). Lucy’s active masculine behaviours are interpreted by Lydon as a guide for women who are outside of their traditional home (2009, p. 28). M. Paul’s disappearance towards the end of the novel paves the way for Lucy to run the school on her own. Margaret Shaw thinks Lucy gains the job as M. Paul’s “steward”, and if he turns back, she would lose her job and “Lucy’s independence would be seriously compromised” (1994, p. 831). Lydon observes that the way Lucy runs a school in *Villette* is explained as a “method” and a “system” by Brontë herself, and these terms are related to science which was aligned with men during 19th-century England (2009, p. 25). Thus, here, it could be suggested that Lucy’s experience of running a school is interpreted as masculine by Victorian standards.

Brontë’s heroines’ curiosity offers another way for them to challenge the conventional gender roles of their time. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are “curious to understand the world around them”; they question norms and “become aware of” themselves as well (Jung, 2010, p. 160). Lucy observes Madame Beck during their first meeting and concludes that she is trying to see how Lucy can be useful in the institution. Yet, Lucy can maintain her privacy without Madame Beck’s interruption. Jane’s curiosity lets her be an active character at Thornfield, and, like a detective, she tries to learn who is making the strange noises at night and who is responsible for the fire in Rochester’s room. In his novel *Bleak House*, Dickens objects to Brontë’s “female curiosity” and tries to re-confirm “the role of male detective” (Jung, 2007, pp. 22-23). Detective work is attributed to males, however, in both novels, Brontë constructs a notion of selfhood for Jane and Lucy to question and figure out answers to problems like men are expected to do.

Moreover, both Jane and Lucy are free to travel alone on journeys. After finishing school, Jane sets out for Thornfield to earn money and for the same reason, Lucy goes to Belgium. Both characters are determined in pursuit of freedom. When Jane learns about Rochester’s marriage to Bertha, she does not accept the scenario or obey the deceit of bigamy but flees Thornfield. Lucy does not lock herself indoors and wait for somebody to take care of her, and when she is alone, she sets out for a place, unknown and remote. Alone in the school, she moves around the foreign city without the company of men, rejecting what John Ruskin claims: “The man in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial [...] but he guards the woman from all this [...]” (as cited in Lydon 2010, p. 24).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Charlotte Brontë's novels are quintessential examples of Victorian literature and continue to be studied for their exploration of social and gender issues. Brontë's narration often deals with the harsh realities of life in Victorian England and criticizes the strict gender roles dictated by conventional society. These roles are characterized by a vivid division of labour, manner, and behaviour, and these are all based on gender. The Victorian concept of the separate spheres articulates the idea that women and men have distinct roles in society: men are seen as belonging to the public sphere whereas women are assigned to the private sphere. This division often idealizes women as the keepers of moral values in society and also limits women's opportunities for work and social engagements.

As has been discussed, Brontë's female characters challenge these social norms through their forthrightness, work experience, power and independent travels. In both novels, Brontë develops strong female characters who have a fighting spirit when they do not obey the rules of a patriarchal society. Their desire for equality and freedom could be read as a rejection of the typical Victorian ideal of a woman as passive, accordingly challenging traditional gender and social norms. Brontë develops both Lucy and Jane as exceptional female characters, ambitious to create an independent life for themselves, which contributes to a broader discussion of social and gender roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

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