

The Exploration of the Psyche through the Gothic in

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

Daisy Priya Gogoi

M.Phil. Scholar under the Department of English

Affiliated to Dibrugarh University

Email : carmeldaisy123@gmail.com

Postal address : Borpather Dighala Gaon, P. O – Rajabhetta,

Pin – 786004, Dibrugarh, Assam.

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Abstract

Since the introduction of the Gothic as a genre in literature with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, there have been many novels dedicated to this genre. However, Charlotte Bronte deviates from the traditional use of the Gothic and employs it not just as an element to create fear, but also to explore the inner turmoil and anxieties of her characters in *Jane Eyre*. With the help of the external portrayals of haunting noises, mysterious incidences, ominous occurrences, Bronte mirrors the workings of the psyche of the characters, especially the women characters. Extreme passions, repression of it and its repercussions are all represented through the setting of the novel. The eerie incidents and interactions of the characters represent the mental conflicts and the traumas of the past that the characters have to undergo. Moreover, it also highlights the social biases laid on women and the binary images of "angel" and "monster" that it creates. Thus, the aim of my paper in this respect, is to analyze the Gothic elements in the novel and portray how they reveal significant character traits, their mentality and also how it helps portray the societal norms and biases of the patriarchal society.

Keywords : Gothic, women, horror, societal norms, internal, external.

Introduction

Gothic fiction is a terrifying blend of horror and romance that excites, as well as repels. From Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* to the infamous *Dracula*, to the present contemporary times, the genre of gothic fiction has been popular throughout ages. Typically, such novels

take a dark and brooding mansion or castle as a setting for the actions in the novel. As one reads through, there would be presence of supernatural entities, multiple deaths and several elements of the supernatural that would incite fear and terror in its readers. However, with the passing time, there have been deviation from this traditional use of the genre and it's purpose. One such deviation is Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The primary aim of my paper is thus to show how Bronte makes use of the Gothic genre in a more psychological and symbolic manner, rather than just as a literary element.

Jane Eyre has been widely accepted as a novel that can be categorized in the gothic genre. However, instead of using the gothic elements to create fear and terror in the novel, Charlotte Bronte employs this genre to explore the psyche of the characters, especially the women characters in the novel. The psychological conflicts that the major characters in the novel undergo and their anxieties are all revealed through episodes involving gothic instances and signs. The eeriness that Bronte presents in the external environment might be a reflection of the haunting fear and uncertainty that resides in their minds. Moreover, the gothic elements also serve to reveal the Victorian norms laid for women, and what was thought of the women who tend to deviate from these. Thus, the novel does not only employ the Gothic simply as a stylistic, but also offers as a mirror to the psyche of the characters. Gothic in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is treated in a way that doesn't aim to create a tale of horror. Rather, it's use is more psychological and symbolic in this novel. Through my paper, I want to argue that Bronte uses the Gothic motif, not just to create a tale of horror, but to highlight certain pertinent themes in the novel such as the representation of women, the exploration of the female mind, the various social norms of conditioning and the explore the mental turmoils the characters, especially Edward Rochester, the anti-hero or the Byronic hero.

Bronte, from the beginning itself, introduces gothic elements as a backdrop to the novel. For instance, Jane loves reading Bewick's *History of British Birds* in her own way.

There's mention of "the fiend pinning down the thief's back", "black-horned things" among other things that scare ten year old Jane. This gives us an indication of the further eeriness and gothicness in the novel that will follow. Moreover, situations through which Jane is put through, like the red-room incident, further signify the importance of the gothic motif. Gothic elements employed to describe the red-room and Jane's experiences there give an insight into Jane's own psyche. The adjectives used to describe the room – "curtains of deep red damask", "crimson cloth", "dark", "subdued broken reflections" – and other such gothic features make the reader relate to how frightened little Jane might be.

...but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; (22)

The suppression and the desperate loneliness that Jane feels in the room might symbolically represent how she feels. She is an orphan living at her Aunt Reed's house where, except for Betty, she feels completely alone and isolated. She is mistreated by her cousins and also constantly rebuked by her aunt. Jane feels lonely and like a "slave" at Gateshead. While in the red room, Jane at last bangs on the door to be let out, no longer willing to suffer in the room. Later on in the novel, she leaves Gateshead too, unwilling to remain under her aunt's "tyranny".

The confinement and restraint that Bronte portrays through the eerie and gothic red-room might represent the constrictions placed on the female body and their submission in a Victorian male dominated society. By using the confinement theme, Bronte perhaps tried to reveal the expectations society held of women. It was either they be 'angel of the house' or a 'madwoman'. The mention of "square chambers", "red carpet", "crimson cloth" over pillows

- all seem to signify a women's female sexuality and passion that society wants them to suppress, lest they be termed as 'madwoman' or devilish. On the other hand, "white pillows", "snowy counterpane" – these symbols suggest an 'angel of the house' imagery. Bronte effectively uses these gothic descriptions of the red-room to highlight some prominent stereotypes held by the Victorian society. She slyly highlights their shallow and patriarchal mentality that is responsible for crafting an image for women as either submissive or insane in the world of men.

With its gloomy setting, multiple deaths due to disease, the underlying tone of eeriness that surrounds the description of place- all add to the trope of the gothic. Helen Burns is the primary example of an 'angel of the house' figure. The Lowood experience deals with the suppression of female passions to the extremes. Her binary opposite would be Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife. While Helen Burns is overly self-sacrificing, Bertha is portrayed as a powerful women with a thirst for revenge. Moreover, the issue of female suppression of female passions is more prominent through the character of Bertha Mason. Bertha becomes the supreme gothic representation in the novel through which the female psyche is explored. Bertha is described as a "clothed hyena", "foul German spectre", "the vampyre", and also as a "virile force". The portrayal of Bertha with such gothic descriptions might have been Bronte's attempt to reveal the notions Victorian society held about women with passions. As Elaine Showalter explains in her essay titled, "*Charlotte Bronte: Feminine Heroine*", there were several tales and lore on imprisoned madwomen in that time. "The legends themselves express a cultural attitude toward female passion as potentially dangerous force that must be punished and confined." – states Showalter in the essay.

Bertha can also be seen as a another version of Jane who let her passions consume her. The parallels drawn between Jane and the Bertha suggest that if Jane didn't repress her passions for Rochester, she might have become another "madwoman in the attic". Jane

admits to feel passionately for Rochester and has “fiery emotions” for him. Uncontrollable, passionate nature is externally portrayed by Bertha’s personality traits. Here madness, a primary gothic theme, is associated with female sexuality. Bertha is shown as someone who is passionate and cannot be controlled by the male. She becomes a force that Bronte states is almost equal in stature to Rochester. She is seen as challenging the gender hierarchy. Thus, her description as a vampire, a witch, a ‘thing’ might be the mentality of the society that Bronte is critiquing through her novel in a subtle way.

Along with the eeriness and mystery creating a Gothic undertone, there are various dreams and allusions that add to the gothic motif. Bronte employs it to represent the mental conflicts and anxieties that are present in the characters. For instance, Jane dreams of carrying a child in her dreams. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their essay, “Madwoman in the Attic”, argue that this might correspond to the anxieties that Jane feels while having an affair with Rochester. In another dream, Jane sees herself walking amidst the ruins of Thornfield. This serves as a foretelling for what would eventually become of Thornfield. Furthermore, Jane’s repeated hearing of the strange laughter in Thornfield and her curiosity show another shade of Jane. She doesn’t flee from Thornfield by the eerie and mysterious occurrences. Rather, Jane feels a thrill and excitement. In fact, Rochester’s presence brings out Jane’s feminine passions for the first time and she even states that she feels Thornfield as ‘home’. In a conversation with Rochester, Jane mentions seeing herself carrying a child wrapped in a shawl. She then climbs a wall with the child clinging onto her neck, almost choking her. Rochester fades away at a distance, and she and the child fall down. She describes it quiet vividly –

“I saw you like a speck on a white track, lessening every moment. The blast blew so strong I could not stand. I sat down on the narrow ledge; I hushed the scared infant in my lap: you turned an angle of the road: I bent forward to take a last look; the wall

crumbled; I was shaken; the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke." (249)

This dream might be symbolic of the fear that Jane hides from the world. She fears that her marriage to Rochester may result in the loss of her identity, as he overpowers her in class and power. Furthermore, the image of "child rolling down my knee" that Jane mentions might symbolize the disappearance of the younger Jane within her with uncontrollable passions. Bertha is a woman of passion. She expresses uncontrollable rage, violent actions and a hunger for revenge – intense passions define her. 'Madwoman', like Bertha, emerge "over and over again from the mirrors women writers hold up both to their own natures and to their own visions of nature," and they appear "from a silence in which neither [they] nor [their] author[s] can continue to acquiesce". (Gilbert and Gubar 77)

Little Jane too expressed such inability to control over her passions. However, the older Jane shows maturity and growth. Thus, the dream might symbolize her losing her uncontrollable passionate ego, which might have turned her into another potential Bertha. Only when the passions are controlled, thus there is a possibility of happy union. The gothic incidents like burning down of Thornfield Hall, the place which held multiple secrets; the punishment of Rochester, Bertha's death – all symbolize that the various passions in the novel has been brought under control. Through Bertha's death, Bronte signifies that the "lusts of the flesh" have been purged. As Elaine Showalter in her essay, "*Charlotte Bronte : Feminine Heroine*", states -

"Psychological dramas of the inner life are represented in dreams, hallucinations, visions, surrealistic paintings and masquerades; the sexual representation of female body are expressed spatially through elaborate and rhythmically recurring images of rooms and houses. Jane's growth is structured through a pattern of literary, biblical and mythological allusions." (Showalter n.pag)

Passions, if not brought under control, would lead to destruction. This notion is expressed through the use of the Gothic motif as well. In fact, it is only when the various passions in the novel are brought into control that Jane and Rochester union takes place. Bertha's death itself symbolizes the "purging of the lusts of the flesh" as stated by Showalter, and "must precede any successful union between Rochester and Jane". Jane too marries Rochester when she is successful in destroying her own "dark passion of her own psyche [and] has become truly her 'own mistress'." – states Showalter further.

While speaking about Gothic elements one cannot exclude the trope of a Byronic hero in the novel. A Byronic hero, unlike a traditional one, is rather amoral, dark, brooding, passionate. Rochester aptly falls into the character of the antihero or Byronic hero. He appears as man of mystery and contradictions in whom Jane takes a liking. His description is with Gothic adjectives, which help readers understand more about him. It also helps to reveal Jane's anxieties. Rochester is described as having "dark face, with stern features and heavy brow". This description itself is enough for the readers to wonder if he is someone who has indeed seen and faced much hurdles in life. Moreover, Jane states "Had he been a handsome heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will." (173) This shows that Jane too knows her limits and is conscious of her looks, as well as class position.

Gothic elements in the novel also help in the development of the relationship between Jane and Rochester. Incidents such as Jane saving Rochester from the 'mysterious' fire brings them closer, with Rochester even calling her his "cherished preserver". However, it also keeps them apart as Rochester has to build their relationship on the lie, hiding the truth about him and Bertha. Gothic elements are used by Bronte to show their tumultuous relationship and also it's failure. Several allusions to the mystical like the storm that rages on the day

Rochester proposes Jane, the chestnut tree breaking in half – all symbolize that their relationship will not last.

Rochester is by far the most complicated character in the novel, just like Heathcliff from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Both of them are passionate and would not hesitate to take amoral steps to pursue their love. However, they also have some dissimilarities. Heathcliff makes everyone who kept him from Catherine, suffer. He even seeks revenge on Catherine herself, although he loves her dearly. However, Rochester doesn't take cruelty to that extent and is quite understanding towards Jane. He also expresses a sense of guilt towards his actions. Both novels differ in its content as well. While *Jane Eyre* is Gothic in a psychological and symbolic way, *Wuthering Heights* portrays actual instances of the supernatural. For instance, Mr. Lockwood is woken at night by a sound, which he finds out to be Catharine's ghost. Heathcliff too hears dead Catherine's voice when no one else could and sees her ghost. Towards the end, Heathcliff and Catherine's ghosts are seen by a shepherd. All these show presence of supernatural in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. However, *Jane Eyre* doesn't have any such mentions of the such fantasy genre. Apart from Jane hearing Rochester's ominous call, there is no supernatural entity in it. Also, the sufferings on the part of the Byronic heroes of the two novels are also different. Heathcliff keeps seeing Catherine's ghost and cannot eat and his health continues deteriorating. Thus, in a way, he is punished by the supernatural. However, in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is wounded when Thornfield burns down, which was done by Bertha while she was still alive.

There is difference in the two heroines of the novels as well. Jane is more calm and mature as compared to Catherine, who shows rebelliousness and deep passions throughout the novel. Catherine would even go to the extent of starving herself to make Heathcliff and Edgar suffer and realize their mistake of ignoring her. However, Jane doesn't seek revenge when Rochester betrays her. Instead, she silently leaves Thornfield. In fact, Catherine can

relate more to Bertha than Jane. Just like Bertha, Catherine is more impulsive and passionate, in contrast to Jane who is rational and understanding. Apart from this, both the sisters, Emily and Charlotte Bronte show a deviation to the traditional gothic heroines who are portrayed as innocent girls, eventually placed between two lovers. Such heroines act submissive and are in need of rescue. However, Catherine and Jane are both more assertive and rebellious. The Bronte sisters use the gothic motif in a different way to portray a heroine who doesn't remain suppressed. Catherine is shown to be rebellious from childhood and "manipulates people around her". (Solveig n.pag). Neither are both Cathy and Jane self-sacrificing. Jane learns and matures with the help of Helen Burns, but she doesn't completely adopt her self-sacrificing nature. If she would have done so, she would have probably never got out of Gateshead. Jane always is assertive and stands by what she thinks is right, as the famous phrase quotes – "Speak I must!". Thus, the gothic motif is used in a new variation to portray a rebellious female heroine in the novel by Bronte.

Conclusion

Jane Eyre, no doubt, is a novel of the gothic genre. However, the employment of the motif of the 'gothic' makes it different from the rest of the gothic novels of the age. Instead of aiming to create a tale of horror, Bronte weaves a romance tale between two individuals with traumatic pasts. She efficiently uses the gothic theme to reveal the conflicts that goes on in the minds of the characters and the anxieties that run rampant in their minds. Instead of stating everything in a monotonous straightforward way, Bronte makes use of various dreams, allusions, illusions, eerie and forebidding signs and symbols to bring the hidden secrets into light, and also to keep the interest of the readers. Jane's character, from the beginning till the end cannot be understood without reading through the various gothic instances that she comes across. It is through them that one can see how Jane manages to strike a balance between her passions and her spiritual compassion. Hence, Bronte's use of

gothic elements in the novel is of great importance to understand as well as to analyze the novel and uncover the plot.

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