

CHARLOTTE BRONTTE'S JANE EYRE AS REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE ISSUE IN THE MID-VICTORIAN PERIOD (1848 -1870)

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan representasi isu hak perempuan pada era pertengahan Victoria (1848 – 1870) melalui novel *Jane Eyre* karya Charlotte Bronte. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa Charlotte Bronte melalui karya *Jane Eyre* tidak hanya berusaha keluar dari opresi dan subordinasi kaum laki-laki saat itu, tetapi juga keluar dari seterotipe kaum perempuan pada masyarakat patriarki. Melalui karya ini ia juga menunjukkan bahwa perempuan harus menjadi individu mandiri yang dapat dibentuk melalui pendidikan untuk memperoleh kecerdasan intelektual agar eksistensi mereka di masyarakat menjadi bahan pertimbangan khususnya dalam kehidupan sosial. Ide penting lainnya adalah kebebasan dalam menentukan pasangan (*free love*), menikah berdasarkan cinta bukan berdasarkan pertimbangan kekayaan. Isu terpenting yang disampaikan dalam karya ini adalah wanita juga bisa menjadi subjek yang aktif – wanita, khususnya seorang istri, juga mampu menjadi penopang ekonomi dalam kehidupan keluarga.

Kata kunci: Hak Perempuan, Era Pertengahan Victoria.

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Mid-Victorian Period

Victorian Age is a period, which is not only established during Queen Victoria's reign, but also during the early 20th century, which is well-known as the Late Victorian period. During the Victorian age, England changed dramatically in all of its previous history. It was in nineteenth century that England reaches its heights as a world imperial power. Between 1837 and 1901, the population of London grew from about 2 million to over 6 million which showed unparalleled population boom. Changes in industrialization techniques had a profound impact on almost all aspects of life for every class citizen. Unregulated industrialization created great prosperity for a lucky few but great misery for the masses. Victorian era writers were mixed in their reactions to industrialization. Some celebrated the new age of promise, progress and triumph, while others challenged the so-called benefits of industrial growth when so many were being affected so negatively.

According to Midlebrook and Watt (1949: 786), some historians think that the beginning of this period can be set with the “*First Reform Bill*” in 1832; then, whole period can be divided into three main sub-periods which are “*Early Victorian Period*” (1830-1848) (Settlement), “*Mid-Victorian Period*” (1848-1870) (Expansionism), and finally, “*The Later Victorian Period*” (1870-1901) (The Decay). The last period is also known as the “*Nineties*”. But the detail explanation only focuses at the mid Victorian period.

Mid-Victorian Period (1848 – 1870) was known as expansionism. In this period, England began to enjoy economic prosperity, the growth of empire, and religious controversy happened. In this period, it could be found the “*Factory Act*” (1847), in which women and children’ work is regulated. It is important to add that the movement of population from country to the town will originate a new social class, which will be “*The working class*”. This working class will be organized into powerful trade unions and will get social reforms. In this second period the publication of “*The Capital*” by Marx and the “*Origin of the Species*” by Charles Darwin will cause changes in the social frame of the age. Thanks to the electoral reform, it will appear a new party, which will be known as the “*Labor Party*”. Then, the second part of the political situation of the period was dominated by J. Glad stone (Tory) and B. Disraeli (Whigs); meanwhile, Gladstone was the responsible for recognizing the trade unions; Disraeli took an important part in the law of compulsory education and in the expansionist policies of England in Canada and India too (Allen, 1970: 151). Greenblatt (2013: 1) stated that this second period is also known as the “*Expansionism period*”, in which Queen Victoria had an expansionist policy which went from Australia, India, and Africa to other countries. She sent people to other countries and that same people sent back goods as goods and manufactured products, which did that Britain was the power of Europe. Not only in Europe it was so important, but also it was the most important empire in the world in the nineteenth century. This was known as “*Civics Britam*”, which included from Gibraltar to Australia. Apart from the working class, it will appear during this age a new social class, which will be the rich people, not the royal society. This class will be known as the “*Middle Class*”.

Then, In England itself, debates about religion grew in intensity. By the mid-Victorian period the Church of England had evolved into three factions: a Low (or Evangelical) Church, a Broad Church, and a High Church. Each had their share of proponents and detractors. As a primary driver behind the industrial revolution, rationalist

thought destabilized religious beliefs. Groups like the utilitarian "Benthamites" came to see traditional religion as little more than outmoded superstition. Then, woman issues are also prominent in this age; this issue will be the focus of this paper.

In this period, woman issues are important to discuss in detail. Despite the fact that the *Reform Bills* of 1832 and 1867 changed voting rights by granting a political voice to many among the working class who had not enjoyed any such voice before, women were not included in these reforms. In fact, despite its having been an era of great social change, the Victorian period (particularly its early and middle periods) saw little progress for women's rights. Women had limited access to education, could not vote or hold public office, and could not (until 1870) own property. Debates about women's rights were referred to generally as "The Woman Question" (one of many issues in an age of issues). In 1848, the first women's college was established; women were otherwise excluded from England's three universities Greenblatt (2013: 9). It should be remembered that while the "Woman Question" often sought, at least in principle, rights for all women, it was primarily addressed to women of the middle class. In other words, while women argued for access to employment and bemoaned the stereotypical fate of the middle-class wife, who had to while away her time at home with insignificant trivial pursuits, hundreds of thousands of lower-class women worked in grueling industrial conditions in mines and mills Related to the larger "Woman Question," the problem of prostitution gained increasing visibility. Prostitution itself grew, in part to fill demand, of course, but also because it was actually a better choice for many women relative to the working conditions they would face in the factories Midlebrook and Watt (1949: 794). Importantly, debates about gender did not necessarily fall down gendered lines: many men argued adamantly for women's rights, and many women (like Queen Victoria herself) were not convinced that women should enjoy equality with men.

ANALYSIS

Jane Eyre: Woman Suffrage as Prominent Issues of the Middle Victorian Period

One of novels which reflect this age is *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte (1816 -1855) which was published in 1847. The setting was in Rural England of nineteenth century with fictitious names, such as: Gateshead, Lowood Institute, Thornfield/Millcote, the moors, Moor House/Morton, and Ferndean. *Jane Eyre* novel covers three structures of social classes in its characters: Lower class, middle class, and upper class. Lower class represents

by little Jane as an orphan who has nothing. Middle class represents by Jane as governess with her good education, and some characters such as: Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and his sisters. For upper class image represents by Mr. Rochester, Mrs. Reed, and her three children. The language use in Jane Eyre novel is refined, educated, precise, and intricate. It doesn't have to read very far to notice that the syntax and style of the sentences is complex; phrases and clauses are elaborately interwoven, but still feel balanced and exact. For example, at the very beginning of the novel Jane tells that she's glad she can't take a walk with her cousins: "*I never liked long walks, 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 Georgiana Reed*" (Bronte, 1950: 2)". Actually it can be conveyed the same information by saying: "*I never liked long walks. I hate coming home in the dark and having cold fingers and toes, and I hate getting yelled at and feeling pathetic compared to my cousins.*" But Jane's sentences are refined; it can be said that she's educated, that she never over-simplifies her ideas, and that she likes to give the readers a series of ideas in an interconnected web, instead of a group of short statements.

Morga (2007: 12) stated that one of prominent problem in Victorian age is women were treated only as "*angle in the house*" and never involved in public especially politics. That is why; feminists struggled to eliminate bias gender and negative stereotype of woman in this age. Charlotte Bronte is one of writers in this age. She also felt the woman subordination and role classification of gender. Even, a woman writer was afraid to publish her works in a real identity because there was a negative image for woman writer (Walker, 1997: 2). In publishing her novels, Charlotte Bronte use pseudonyms *Currer Bell*. The development of English literature was so great at that time especially for novels. Writers dominantly write a realist novel which contained strong characters and continuously plot. Most of the novels described real life which aimed to entertain middle class of society.

Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* was so strong in feminism ideas. Samekto (1998: 88) explained that Charlotte also stated some messages and description about her real life in *Jane Eyre* novel which themes covers moral, religion, social class, and gender. Through the themes, Charlotte wanted to eliminate woman stereotype in Victorian age. In short, this novel was based on reality, then over the reality itself to fullfill the writer's desire. Then, Thomson (1999: 4) stated that in Victorian age, it is true that women have only domestic roles nemely: doing daily houseworks and keep their beauty for men. Character Jane Eyre

was adequately represents Charlotte's desire to eliminate the women's oppression and subordination.

Through this novel, Charlotte Brontë shows that women in Victorian age can also be independence as a social critics for the age of patriarchal society where gender equality was not popular at the time. However, Charlotte in *Jane Eyre* has proposed feminism ideas since she lived in her aunt's house (Mrs. Reed), Gateshead Hall. This can be seen in the following quotation:

"He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent sufferings: these sensations for the time predominated over fear, and I received him in frantic sort. I don't very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me "Rat, rat" and bellowed out for Mrs. Red, who was gone upstairs; she now came upon the scene, followed by Bessie and her maid abbot (Brontë: 1950: 8)."

It shows that John Reed always tortures Jane. This makes her used to be obedient to John. This happens because the current stereotype that woman has different roles with man. Based on ideal stereotype at Victorian, man was more superior, rational, and dominated social activities. On the other hand, woman was described as a passive object that depends on man. Custom and culture required them to be surrendered and obedient as well as keep their domesticity. These made women left behind, oppressed, subordinated, and they were not independence in all aspects. However, Jane tried to break in these negative stereotypes. She shows her resistance to John Red who always insult and tortured her. Her resistance defeats her fear. This case shows that Jane tried to escape from man's oppression and subordination.

Another important idea is delivered since Jane studied in Lowood, where Jane was brave to interrupt Mr. Brocklehurst (school treasurer) who accused her as a liar. This can be seen from the following quotation:

"My dear children," pursued the black marble clergyman, with pathos, "this is a sad, a melancholy occasion; for it becomes my duty to warn you, that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, but evidently an interloper an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun your example: if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. Teacher, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinize her actions, punish her body to save her soul: if, indeed, such salvation be possible, for (my tongue falters while I tell it) this girl, this child, the native of Christian land, worse than many a little heathen who says its prayers to Brahma and kneels before juggernaut – this girl is – a liar! (Brontë, 1950: 69)."

“Let her stand half an hour longer on that stool, and let no one speak to her during the remainder of the day (Bronte, 1950: 70).

The quotation shows that Jane was so embarrassed in front of 80 students of Lowood. Mr. Rochester accusation was not based on fact. It was only Mrs. Reed’s story, Jane’s aunt. In this case, Jane’s resistance was showed in symbolic (indirect resistance) because she wanted to obey the ethic of the school. However, she worked hard to struggle for her good image at the school. Finally, Miss. Temple helped her by sending a letter to Mr. Lloyd (Pharmacist of Reed’s family) to get exactly description of Jane as actual recommendation. Then, Miss. Temple gathered all students to announce that accusation of Jane’s bad image is not right based on her investigation. All friends looked so happy for this fact. How Jane struggle for her rights, struggle for her good image, and struggle for the truth are unusual things for woman to do in Victorian age. The fact that woman could only accept everything happened to her without resistance because the custom at this age required her to be an obedient girl. Jane’s action shows that she wanted to escape from woman’s stereotype in patriarchy society.

Even in her relationship with Mr. Rochester, she always tries not to depend on him. she often argues with Mr. Rochester in order to delivered her opinion and will. It can be shown in the following quotation:

“I drew out my purse; a meager thing it was. “Five shillings, sir.” He took the purse, poured the hoard into his palm and chuckled over it as if its scantiness please him. Soon he produced his pocket-book: “Here, said he, offering me a note: it was fifty pounds, and he owned me but fifteen. I told him I had no change.

“I don’t want the change: you know that, take your wages.”

“I declined accepting more than was my due (Bronte, 1950: 242).”

It shows that Jane did not want to depend on Mr. Rochester. She tried to refuse all things which were given to her freely. Even she attempted to have argument in order to defend her principle.

The idea which must be highlighted is when Jane refused Rivers’ family to take care her continuously, and she asked St. John Rivers to find a job for her because she wanted to be independent. This can be seen in the following quotation:

“I do: I have already said so. Show me how to work, or how to seek work: that is all I now ask; then let me go, if it be but to the meanest cottage – but till then, allow me to stay here: I dread another essay of the honors of homeless destitution (Bronte, 1950: 378).”

It explains that Jane Eyre did not want to depend on others too long. It proved that she was an independent girl for this age. To build independent image was not easy in this

age. In other words, Jane's independent were formed by her education where it can improve her intellectual and behavior so that her existence in society becomes an important consideration especially her existence in social concern.

Feminist idea which was concerned to an effort for avoiding sexism and woman subordination is Jane's refusal for St. John Rivers' proposal to marry her. It can be seen as the following quotation:

"Must we apart in this way, St. John? And when you go to India, will you leave me so, without a kinder word than you have yet spoken?"

"He now returned quite from the moon, and faced me when I go to India, Jane, will I leave you? What! Do you not go to India?"

"You said I could not, unless I married you."

"And you will not marry me? You adhere to that resolution?"

"...No, St. John, I will not marry you. I adhere to my resolution (Bronte, 1950: 449)."

Jane refused him because she knew that St. John did not love her. He only admired Jane's intellectual which can be his partner for his missionaries' missions in India. Jane was sure that her marriage status would only be assumed as an effort to avoid bad view of society when two people in different sexes lived together. Jane did not want to be his false wife. She wanted to be his missionaries' partner but not being his wife.

At the end of the story, Jane Eyre met Mr. Rochester who has been a poor and blind one. Jane asked him to marry her and live together although at that time Jane has been an independent woman because of her uncle's heritage. To prove this, see the following quotation:

"Ah! Jane I want a wife.". "Do you, sir?". "Yes: is it news to you?". "Of course: you said nothing about it before.". "Is it unwelcome news?". "That's depends on circumstances, sir – her loves you best.". "I will at least choose – her I love best. Jane, Will you marry me?". "Yes, sir.". "A poor blind man, whom will you have to lead about by the hand?". "Yes, Sir.". "A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?". "Yes, sir.". "Truly, Jane?". "Most truly, sir.". "Oh! My darling! God bless and reward you (Bronte, 1950: 485)."

It is obvious that, Jane accepted Mr. Rochester as her husband because she loves him. For Jane, Marriage based on truly love will be better than wealthy. This case is opposite from marriage concept of Victorian age. In that age, most of women tend to consider economic factor as the main consideration in finding marriage partner. A husband with good economic will give happiness to his wife. Through this novel, Jane was against the materialistic marriage concept of Victorian age. Even, Jane also showed that a woman

especially as a wife was not always depend on her husband, woman could also become the one who supports economic in her family.

CONCLUSION

Woman issue is one of prominent ones in middle Victorian period. The issues discriminated woman such as: limit access for education for women; women cannot vote for public; women cannot own property, and materialistic marriage concept. Through *Jane Eyre* Novel, Charlotte Bronte tried to critic social life of the age, especially the issues which concerned with women. In this novel, Charlotte shows that she tried to escape from man's oppression and subordination and escape from woman's stereotype in patriarchy society. Then, she also expressed that women must be independence which can be formed by education to get good intellectual in order that their existence in society becomes important consideration especially in social life. Another important idea are freedom in determining marriage partner (free love) especially marriage based on true love not based on wealthy consideration. The most important thing to be underlined is woman can also be an active subject; it means that woman, especially a wife, can also become the one who supports economic in her family.

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