



# LIBERATING THE SELF: *JANE EYRE AND MIDDLEMARCH*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Victorian women writers depicted their heroines as individuals trapped in the norms of patriarchy. They portrayed the struggle of these heroines to liberate themselves and achieve an emancipated, mature self. Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot are noted for their intellectually emancipated Victorian female characters. This paper tries to compare the struggles and journey of the two heroines Jane Eyre (Jane Eyre) and Dorothea Brooke (Middlemarch) towards their freedom from the patriarchal, gendered, domestic identities. The two novelists succeed, to a certain limit, in breaking away from the conventional portrayal of womanhood. However, their heroines end up in returning to their lovers, thus submitting to the patriarchal traps of love and marriage.*

**Keywords :** Victorian novelists, patriarchy, Jane Eyre, Middlemarch.

## INTRODUCTION

“Women feel just as men feel; they need to exercise for their faculties...as much as their brothers do... and it is narrow-minded in their own privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings.”(*Jane Eyre*, p. 141) Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*, George Eliot) are examples of the intellectually emancipated (Victorian) women who try to establish their own identity through a furious struggle against patriarchal conventions which limit their action and vocation within the gendered sphere of domesticity. The two novels depict development of their heroines into mature women.

**DR. SHRUTI JOSHI**

1 Page



Jane struggles to escape from an imposed seclusion of her childhood towards a free, matured 'self'. She is a poor, plain, orphan, little girl; too proud to submit to the injustices of the Reeds (and of the society in which she is unwanted). She rebels against the oppressions at Gateshead and Lowood. It is her extra-ordinary self-assertiveness that enables her to tell Mrs. Reed what she thinks of her. At Lowood, Jane learns to curb her anger and to achieve more harmonious thoughts through submissive spirituality from Miss Temple and Helen. Thornfield promises a new life for her, having "its flowers and pleasures, as well as its thorns and toils." (150) As a governess, she is allowed some liberty of action, though limited by her 'master', Rochester. Yet, Jane longs for freedom from the depressing secrecy of the locked rooms at Thornfield. "Restlessness was in my nature, it agitated me to pain sometimes." (166) Rochester is a typical patriarchal force which at the same time attracts and repels Jane who wants to gain independent maturity. Jane falls in love with him because he is the first individual who appreciates and criticizes her art and soul. As for Rochester, he is impressed by her independent spirit which is new for him considering his experiences with the Celines and Blanches. He needs her strength of self, respects "the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of Jane's eyes." (484) They become spiritual equals, as Jane says, "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom...it is my spirit that addresses your spirit...we stand at God's feet equal... as we are!" (386) Jane breaks herself away from the conventional idea of submissive feminine love. However, soon enough, Rochester begins to exert his own idea of courtship. He wants her to be his mistress. His new sense of power over her baffles her and his rich gifts fill her with annoyance and degradation. She resolves to keep him at a check. "I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester." (409) His secrets and concept of marriage makes her angry and her instinct of self-preservation forces her to escape this trap of patriarchal society. During her journey towards a new life as "a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook ..." (548), St John tries to force her into a loveless marriage that, she is sure, would 'kill' her. Once again, she refuses to endanger her free self to be "... his wife-at his side always and always restrained and always checked-forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low...this would be unendurable." (622) Having inherited her uncle's property, she is now free to go her own way and follow her own will. This gives her strength to reject a married future where she must live as her husband's helpmate. She marries Rochester for love; feeling that, after his misfortune, they are spiritually, financially and socially equal. Thus, she meets her goal of a matured, independent self.

George Eliot (1890-1880) was always against the stereotypical notion of female novelist. She preferred to write according to her own tastes, rather than writing the silly, unrealistic romantic tales expected of women writers.



In contrast to Jane, Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*) begins on a higher, more promising note; as an idealist young girl with much ardour and energy. She longs to live an ascetic life, like St Theresa, devoted to some great project for improving this world. She deals with the household confidently, looks after a school in the village, has plans for building cottages for tenants of Mr. Brook. She is eager for a time when with her own money, she can materialize her schemes. Her free spirit refuses to accept a marriage with Sir James where she might be restricted to a conventional domestic life of a lady. As her moral ideas and plans of action are not understood and are ridiculed (as 'fad') by others, she falls prey to self-doubt and indefiniteness "...which hung... like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective." (20) The unfriendly *Middlemarch* forces her to dream of getting away and she decides to marry Casaubon who promises her a new life with space, duties and entry into the realm of masculine knowledge (of Greek and Latin). Unfortunately, Casaubon wants a submissive wife, a ready helpmate with "the purely appreciative, un-ambitious abilities of her sex." The same qualities of intelligence and assertiveness, which he admires in Dorothea before marriage, make him unhappy, nervous and create doubts about his own efficiency as a husband. He finds an intellectual rival in Dorothea and being too rational, he refuses the emotional response that she demands from him. He refuses her assistance in his work and discourages all her schemes. Having nothing to do to fill up her time and space, Dorothea's sense of 'self' is invaded by a blank, self-doubt and a stranded self. Dorothea's failed vocation results in disintegration of selfhood and she feels being cut off from her former independent, free existence. Living a motiveless life, she finds satisfaction in Will Ladislaw, who admires her ardently. She needs his help to give her her own strength and impressive self; in order to escape from the stifling and depressing drudgery of her married life. Failing everything else, Dorothea falls back on the common yearning of womanhood.

Dorothea's journey into a matured selfhood is opposite to that of Jane's. In order to please Casaubon and to get some response from him, she starts constraining her own spirit and becomes silent. Jane also learns to repress her anger, but it enhances her harmonious self-assertion. After Casaubon's death, Dorothea inherits his wealth, rejects to continue his work and carries out some charity work. But her decision to marry again, does not justify her previous hunger for liberation. Already having enough experience of a married life where her faculties are stunted, it is expected that she continues her independent life as a widow. However, by marrying Will, she proves that at last she has discovered her true self as a woman who needs a man to love and to prove the impact of her existence. Her aspiration of having a great vocation is already smothered by the patriarchal convention which allows women to live only through their husbands. She feels, "I might have done something better, if I had been better." (601) Similar unexpected decision is taken by Jane. Having expressed a furiously free spirit in refusing Rochester and St John, she again goes back to Rochester from whom she has fled to save her independence. She accepts Rochester as her equal only after his mutilation and social downfall. Does this mean that her own faculties are never sufficient

DR. SHRUTI JOSHI

3 Page



to make her face Rochester on equal platform, when he is a full-fledged patriarch? Can her 'self' be liberated only through the submission of the 'other' (here, Rochester)? Both, Jane and Dorothea, fight against the unjust society to establish an independent self, to live a life of their own will. However, they fail to take radical decisions. Towards the end, they learn to submit their self to their feminine need of being loved by a man. Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, though successful to graph the development of their heroines towards maturity, seem to agree with the final fate of a (Victorian) woman-submission to the patriarchal trap of marriage. Unfortunately, they seem to agree that what makes a woman really happy is love and marriage.

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