

Assessing Feminine Endurance in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

- Kaisa Rosalind

Abstract: This paper presents the endurance of the woman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. With a frail exterior, women actually have the will of steel as seen in the novels of Charlotte Bronte, particularly *Jane Eyre*. The protagonist, Jane Eyre, endures much to achieve her goal. The more she loves, the more she endures; the more she endures, the more she loves. Charlotte Bronte lived in the Victorian Society that treated woman as mere objects. She dared to challenge the conventions of her time. Feminine endurance in her seems so powerful because they are lessons she has learned from her own life. An in-depth study of *Jane Eyre* pictures the inner life of a woman's spirit and makes a clear distinction between "Feminine" and "Feminism". The true characteristics of the woman such as grace, determination, perseverance and love are seen in Charlotte Bronte. In her life maltreatment and discrimination abound. Two paths lay before the woman steeped in this mire of persecution, and neglect. One is the path turning to God. Religious feelings learned from her family, come like a balm to her painful life. Charlotte Bronte's works are at times termed deeply religious. To escape persecutions she had nowhere to turn but to God. And the other path was the path of endurance. She did not allow her agony to overcome her. Endurance was the means to the final crown of glory.

Keywords: Consciousness, Endurance, Feminine, Patience, Perseverance, Determination, Forbearance, Poignant, Fortitude

In a society that was toeing the line of the husband or the father, where the name of the mother and the women in the family did not matter, we have Charlotte Bronte as a woman who did not need spokes-person, because her plays reveal that she was a trail blazer as a shining star and the first woman of her kind in the field of literature. The general picture frequently depicted about the woman in most literature is of vulnerability and weakness. She is susceptible to the temptations around. If there is any pain or misfortune in the family or in society, the cause is often attributed to her. It is this negative aspect that is magnified and one often tends to ignore and forget the magnitude within and the tremendous positive force that she propels. East, West, North or South, there is very little difference. "The amazing ability she puts in, and the strength and power of feminine endurance - no matter how she feels" ("How to become" www.aplacecalledananda.org) is something the world blissfully is unaware of. It is this "force within" the woman that is often focused in the novels of Charlotte Bronte, particularly *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Bronte gave a female voice to fiction, generating a new focus on the woman as the "central shaping consciousness" (Nestor 25) of the

novel. All her heroines have qualities of endurance, courage and forcefulness to equal a man's, yet all of them are denied self-fulfilment by the restrained society in which they live. Her expressed intention was to show that women's feelings and needs should be taken as seriously as men's had always been. The poet Matthew Arnold could find "nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage" (Welton 20) in the mind of the author of *Villette*. If there is "rage" in Charlotte Bronte's books, it is a rage against the humiliations and frustrations endured by many women of her class, and the few choices open to them (20). Critics were perhaps shocked by the way in which her heroines paid no attention to convention, but Charlotte Bronte consciously contradicted what was evil about the conventions of her time. She braved the social maladies of the time and through her writings gave room for women a breathing space.

The term "Feminine" refers to "qualities and behaviour judged by a particular culture to be ideally associated with or especially appropriate to women and girls" ("Feminine" <http://en.wikipedia.org>). Catherine Soanes states "feminine" as "having qualities associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness" (Soanes 328). "Feminine" thus refers to the attributes associated with the female gender and is not to be confused with "feminism" that has much to do with some movements, although there is no single accepted definition. Alice Jardine says: "Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women" (Jardine 15). It can also be defined as "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and a movement for socio-political change based on critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society" (Offen 82). Feminism had a historic beginning. Looking into the development of feminism, we can notice that it is usually divided into three stages or "waves" (Marthaler 671).

"Feminine" on the other hand has no beginning and is as old as the "woman" or the "female" species. All women have feminine qualities, but they may differ in measure. It could also be that some are expressive whereas others are not. There are cases too where a woman can be reduced to such oppression that she no longer bears the impression of being a feminine. At Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*, Grace Poole is hired by Rochester to be the jailor of Bertha, *The Mad Woman in the Attics*. So ghastly, so ghostly, "it groveled," "it snatched and growled", (Jane Eyre 295) the look that no eye would turn twice. Elaine Showalter has her comment: "the feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny" (Showalter 428). The society of the time was so framed that women were used to ensnare the defects and faults of each other.

"Endurance" can be understood as "the ability or strength to continue or last, esp. despite fatigue, stress, or other adverse conditions" ("Endurance" www.beactivenc.org). It can also be described as "the fact or power of enduring something painful and long-lasting" (Soanes 291). The Bible (all biblical text will be quoted from *The New Jerusalem Bible*)

speaks of “Endurance” as patient waiting: “Now be patient, brothers, until the Lord’s coming” (James 5:7). Endurance is also perceived as the “Ability of the body to keep up an exercise or activity continually over a period of time without getting tired”. (“Endurance” moveit4.org). Thus we find that endurance has a lot to do with patience, perseverance, determination and fortitude. The power that enables one to endure could be the end result that awaits one, or it could be that the very nature of endurance has its own prize.

“Feminine endurance” can be categorized into different types. It is at times forced upon someone due to certain circumstances of life; at times one is thrown into a situation where there is no escape but to accept the lot. We also find cases wherein people willfully make others carry the “cross” (Matthew 10:38) out of jealousy or revenge. It is also noticed that living in certain company, one is automatically compelled to endure if one has to survive. In some cases it has much to do with what one’s religion teaches. But the “feminine endurance” in question is one that is intrinsic, it is related more on how a woman by her very nature has to endure immensely in order to survive, more so as to let others survive meaningfully and purposefully.

Probably what makes the women characters of Charlotte Bronte endure could be the lessons the author learned from her own life. It is clear that as there are strong autobiographical leanings in most of her writings, as also the aspect of endurance. At a time when her family was topsy-turvy: her brother Branwell with his drunken habits and in deplorable health, her sisters in anxiety for livelihood and also afflicted by poor health conditions, her father in need of an immediate eye operation and as contained in Charlotte’s letter to Ellen Nussey states: “A series of tooth-aches prolonged and severe, bothering me both day and night” (Charlotte’s letter 104), Charlotte, the eldest now has to see and endure everything. To add fuel to the fire, comes a bolt from the blue, the rejection of the manuscript of *The Professor*, not just once but “six firms in succession” was no easy pain (Gerin 327). “With the stoicism common to her family” (328), Charlotte moved ahead. Instead of being crushed, “It drove her to take up her pen and begin a new book” (327).

Right from the very first chapter of the novel, *Jane Eyre*, we are presented with little Jane enduring the blows from John Reed, her cousin, who just thrashes her without rhyme or rhythm. Jane’s only concern at this moment of time is how best “to endure the blow” (Jane Eyre 10). Still Jane had no other choice but to bear all these taunts, if she was to live on in this world. The Reeds children could move and act even in such disgraceful manner, and yet things seem fine for them. Whereas whenever Jane “dared commit no fault”, she was “termed naughty and tiresome” (15). Locked up in the red-room at Gateshead-hall, a room where Mr. Reed “breathed his last”, “a room very seldom slept in”, with “a sense of dreary consecration”, Jane felt “some coming vision from

another world". She felt "oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down" (17). Here "she loses consciousness, therefore her self" (Datta 203). And yet "It is at this moment that the gem of the person we are finally to know as Jane Eyre is born: a person determined to live, and to choose her life with dignity, integrity, and pride" (Rich 471). Jane endures and so is able to live with dignity; Mrs Reed's inability to "endure" Jane's behaviour results in sending Jane to the boarding house at Lowood.

Her stay at Lowood was an "irksome struggle with difficulties in habituating" (Jane Eyre 60) herself with the whole new world. There were "rules and unwonted tasks" (60) she had to undertake. It was a mental, physical, emotional struggle. Coupled with the pains of adjustment, the insufficient clothing to move around in the winter season, the "scanty supply of food" for "keen appetites of children" (60) aggravated the situation. Furthermore Jane had to endure the false accusation of Mrs. Reed in her report to Mr. Brocklehurst. When he came to Lowood and saw her for the first time, Brocklehurst wanted the staff at Lowood to keep a "strict eye on her"; also they were to keep a "guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit" (33). An "air of oddity" (47) could be felt among the young girls at Lowood; some of them "full-grown girls" (47) dressed in special costume, yet there was no choice. They had to endure what was thrust upon them.

Helen Burns gets a chance to enlighten Jane on certain Christian principles. She speaks of Christians who follow the teachings of the Lord who says to forgive one's enemies. She quotes the *New Testament*: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you," (Luke 6:27-28). Jane expresses her incapacity to "comprehend this doctrine of endurance" (Jane Eyre 56) seeing her companion Helen Burns being scolded and treated so cruelly by Miss Scatcherd for silly reasons but accepting all so meekly. The notion of forgiveness, forbearance was totally a new ideology altogether. She explains to Jane:

It is better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you - and besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil (56).

Helen's religious assurances bring calm, but with a blend of poignancy. For she has spoken as "one facing towards death; and she dies, her message of endurance and trust... only half accepted" (O'Neill 31); at her deathbed Jane asks "Where is God? What is God?" (Jane Eyre 82), thus evoking pity and pain. Gail Marshall rightly comments on the Victorian society:

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of religion for the Victorians ... Religious services provided a structure to the week... Sunday schools were often the principal source of primary education, and scriptural texts and hymns provided a common source of reading-matter and reference for the whole nation (Marshall 11).

No wonder, Charlotte Bronte's works are at times termed deeply religious. However, she did not allow her agony to overcome her. Even though the character of Jane seemed frail, she fought that her image be preserved and maintained. The person of Bertha, the mad woman is an example of how a person is compelled to suffer her lot, ostracized from society, being unable to express or do anything to improve her lot. She had to accept whatever was set before her whether she liked it or not. She was no more than what the French writer Simone de Beauvoir said:

She is called "the sex", by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other (Beauvoir 16).

In *Shirley*, we have two contrasting heroines, the "quiet and girlish Caroline Helstone and the expressive and dramatic Shirley Keeldar" (Burkhart 79). Caroline shies away and deteriorates drastically when Robert Moore does not reciprocate her love. She quietly tolerates until he returns and proposes to her. "*Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* are fine studies of feminine life. In these novels we get a peep in the inner life of a woman's spirit" (Kumar 19-20). Lucy Snowe in *Villette* is an "outsider" without parents and home, without beauty, wealth or confidence. Her history documents the continuity between social and psychological experience with more complexity than Caroline Helstone's (Newton 110). The crowning of all "endurances" ever endured by any of the characters in all the novels of Charlotte Bronte comes in the last but one chapter of *Jane Eyre* when Jane returns to Rochester who is now with "seared vision", and "crippled strength" (*Jane Eyre* 449), and declares to him, "I had endured, he was certain, more than I had confessed to him" (445). And this is the feminine endurance Charlotte Bronte highlights in portraying her women. Daringly passing through the test of time and tide, she achieves the crown of glory.

Highlighting the feminine endurance of the person of the woman, Charlotte employs passion to reach the goal. Passion is seen as the ardent desire to achieve her goal with patience and perseverance. It is passion that gives fire to consume one with zeal. These are very evident in her women characters. Charlotte has not been explicitly active in the field of feminism but she portrays on several occasions the endurance and in the innate capacity of the woman for achieving her goals and standing firm on what she knows is right. She highlights the struggle that the women of her time and may be what her own self had to go through with the general acceptance of the western concept that woman is the cause of evil. The journey to establish credibility and power became all the rougher because men in her time had the power, position and acceptance. We see the efforts that Charlotte makes through her stories time and again for promoting more benign laws so that their endurance becomes fruitful. We might say there is hope for the future and a light at the end of the tunnel as final victory is assured by the endurance of the woman.

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