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Queer Reading of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

Queer theory is a field of critical theory which emerged from the alliance between gay and lesbian theories. It aims to disrupt the presumed relations between and among sexuality, gender and desire. A deconstruction of the hetero/ homo hierarchy is one of the major components of queer theory. Michael Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* is one of the important and influential critical works which informs the Queer theoretical movement. Queer theory includes both queer reading of text and the theorisation of queerness itself. Queer reading of texts explores characters who in some manner defy predisposed notions of explicit heteronormativity and binary gender norms. *Jane Eyre* is one of the seminal works of Charlotte Bronte in which there are strong undertones of queerness. The aim of this paper is to explore a queer reading of the novel. This paper intends to explore the homoerotic character of female friendships concealed behind the much-touted heterosexual romance of the novel. It illustrates the currents of lesbian desire in the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and Helen Burns through key episodes. Emphasis is also given upon portrayal of superiority of homosexual relationship over heterosexual relationship in terms of intimacy and emotional fulfilment. The paper also explores Jane as a queer character whose journey attempts to defy predisposed notions of explicit heteronormativity and binary gender norms.

Keywords: Queer theory, normative vs non-normative categories, heteronormativity, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Michael Foucault, Homoerotic Female Friendships, Lesbianism

“Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed.” (40) This remark by Judith Butler completely sums up the gist of Queer theory. Queer theory has existed for roughly two decades and has contributed diversely to many fields such as medical sciences, anthropology and literary theory. The term “queer” was originally used in a derogatory to stigmatize male and female, same sex love as ‘deviant’ and ‘unnatural’. Since the early 1990’s, however it has been adopted by gays and lesbians themselves as a noninvidious term to identify a way of life and an area of social inquiry. Gradually it has become an umbrella term for a coalition of sexual identities that are marginalized in all terms. It is now prominently associated not only with gay and lesbians, but also ‘cross-dressing’, ‘hermaphroditism’, ‘gender ambiguity’, and ‘gender- corrective surgery’.

‘Queer’ refers to a kind of doing, a way of living, that does not take for granted the presumptions that are often made about the naturalness of identity, of sex, of gender, or of desire. It questions the whole set of normative categories and the working ideology behind them. It challenges the cognitive paradigms generated by such normative i.e. what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ and so on. As Teresa de Lauretis puts it: “Queer unsettles and questions the genderness of sexuality.” (100) In other words, ‘queer’ becomes an act by which established compartments of sexual identity are transgressed, reversed, mimicked, or otherwise critiqued. It gives voice to all those non-normative sexualities as well as identities that are denounced as alien, strange, unnatural, transgressive and odd. They are marginalized in all aspects be it social or cultural and so on. Michael Foucault’s work on sexuality has had a considerable influence on queer theory. *The History of Sexuality* is a seminal work of Foucault which exposes the politics of ideology behind the fixed sexual categories as well as identities. He explores how in his time heterosexuality was legitimized at the expense of homosexuality.

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At the heart of queer theory lies the debunking of the concept of 'heteronormativity'. Heteronormativity is a notion that promotes heterosexuality as the only natural desire or orientation and is reinforced in society through the institutions of marriage, employment and others. Heterosexuality is seen as something 'fundamental' and 'natural' and in turn discriminates those outside it particularly homosexuals. Homosexuals are not only mentally tortured but also emotionally throughout their life. They struggle throughout in order to gain acceptance in society. This critique of one-dimensional sexual orientation as well as desire is an integral element of queer theory. Eve Sedgwick, another prominent theorist of 'Queer theory', in her seminal work *Epistemology to Closet*, explores how the dominance of notion of heterosexuality conceals the existence of homosocial relations.

Queer Reading of the novel *Jane eyre* explores the latent layer hidden behind the surface layer: love story of Jane and Mr. Rochester. It explores the homoerotic character of Jane's friendship with female characters particularly Helen Burns. Bronte subtly employs queer language in key scenes between female characters to create an intangible erotic connection, free of physical sex acts. Jane experiences a myriad of sensual relationships with other women, despite the heterosexual romance seemingly at the centre of the work. There is a consistent portrayal of all heterosexual relationships as being inferior to the homoromantic ones. It is pretty evident that homoromantic relationships are the ones which provide Jane with the kind of intimacy she needs physically as well as emotionally. Jane's relationships with men turn out to be toxic whereas her bonds with women bloom with intimacy like anything. Jane does not have any sort of romantic fantasises with Mr. Rochester or St. John and instead: "Jane Eyre's most insistent passion is lesbian. From her need to express her love for Helen Burns in physical touch and embraces through her erotic paintings of beautiful women to her intimacy with the river's sisters, Jane's emotional and inner erotic life is focused much more often upon girls and women than upon men." (Morse 6).

Bronte portrays female-to-female relationships which possess the necessary amount of love and support that are nowhere to be seen in Jane's heterosexual relationships. Jane throughout the novel pines for someone who will not only listen to her thoughts but only understand them. Within the realm of the journey, where men are often villainized and Jane's closest relationships being with women, the listener Jane desires is female. Jane, who continually addresses the reader throughout the novel, is telling her story to another woman and emphasizes the power of homoromantic friendship (Brooks 46). The way Jane feels and talks about her fellow females clearly go beyond just a passive admiration of their beauty or talent. She obsesses over them in her artwork just as Rochester and St. John obsess over her, and she bonds with many female figures like Helen, Miss Temple, Adele, and her cousins Diana and Mary. In other words, Jane often views other women through the male gaze. There is a current of romanticism in her description of her fellow women. The feeling of romantic attraction is present in all her interactions with other female especially Helen Burns. She obsesses over their beauty, which is heavily contrasted to her focus of ugliness of men. When she paints women, it is through the lens of the man, as evident when she paints Blanche Ingram, "sketched alone with Rochester's gaze" (Morse 4). Jane is

enamoured with the beauty of women in the way typical hero is with the beauty of a heroine. As Morse puts it in her journal article "Brontë Violations: Liminality, Transgression, and Lesbian Erotics in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane eyre*": "heroine's painstaking delineation of other women in sketches or paintings as well as in her narrative displays a transgressive expression of lesbian desire under the cover of conventional feminine auspice. (12)"

Nowhere are the feelings of lesbianism more evident than in the relationship Jane has with her school hood friend, Helen Burns. This relationship is the most prominent one and therefore the foundation of the queer reading of novel. There are various instances which implies a kind of romantic relationship between Jane and Helen. It all begins with their conversation over a book in which the initiative is taken not merely once but multiple times by Jane Inspite of being an introvert. As Jane says: "the step was contrary to my nature and habits." Helen supports and encourages the recalcitrant facets of Jane's identity Jane's independence and reluctance to submit to authority. Jane suffers at Lowood for not upholding Brocklehurst's excessive ideals of femininity that the girls must learn to be "hardy, patient, self-denying" as well as surrender to the household duties of cooking and cleaning. She refuses to submit to the conservative thinking of Brocklehurst and gets support and motivation from Helen. When Jane is publicly humiliated for accidentally dropping a dinner plate, she is ignored by all but Helen who, "lift[s] her eyes and smile[s] at me" (63). The tiny smile in this scene cheers Jane in an intimate way. She is in awe of Helen's smile, and immediately forgets her punishment. There is a feeling of epiphany on the part of Jane.

Bronte presents Helen like an ideal person for Jane through many episodes. Helen accepts Jane as she is. Like an ideal partner she loves Jane and does not ask for any changes to be made. It is Helen's love which keeps Jane going well in the oppressive conditions of school. She is always there whenever Jane feels low. Jane feels lonely and pessimistic without her as reflected in the classroom episode: "Helen Burns was not here; nothing sustained me" (64). Jane and Helen are also more physically intimate with each other than Jane is with both Rochester and St. John. They are not sceptical of physical intimacy and often embrace, such as when she tries to calm Jane after her punishment: "[Helen] chafe[s] my fingers gently to warm them resting my head on Helen's shoulders, I put my arms around her waist; she drew me to her". This scene is hailed by Morse as "the iconography of female tenderness and love" (7). Their physicality is intimate, but not overtly sexual, and that distinction draws the parallel as this relationship being utterly pure. Theirs is a connection of minds and souls. Their love is not only bodily but beyond that. Perhaps the penultimate scene that vividly employs physical embrace between two female characters to create the homoerotic experience comes just before Helen's death. There is a transition from smiles and sweet glances to a passionate embrace in their relationship. As Armstrong puts it: "The intimacy between Jane and Helen reaches another level of intimacy and achieves closure in the moment of Helen's death." (118).

Bronte explores how Jane experiences a violent reaction to the news that Helen is near death. "I dreaded being discovered and sent back; for I must see Helen I must embrace her before she died [and to] give her one last kiss." (123) She almost turns mad as well as desperate in order to

meet Helen. Her words express the intense attachment and strong emotions Jane reserves for Helen. Her reaction resembles that of a lover desperate to be with her beloved. The episode ends in a perfectly romantic way with two lovers completely into each other in the moments before a looming tragedy. Jane makes a point to say that Helen “[kisses her], and [she Helen],” versus stating they kissed each other (127). Jane’s final words to Helen nearly echoes the marriage vows: “I’ll stay with you, dear Helen: no one shall take me away.” (76) There are strong undertones of romantic as well as emotional attachment. Both remain in the bed by morning though Helen passes away in the midnight. Jane doesn’t forget Helen even after death. Her love and affection for Helen even after latter’s death come again to forefront in the last part of novel in her visit to Helen’s grave over a decade later with a son to etch a note claiming Helen will “rise again” (77).

Conclusion

In the light of above discussion, we can confidently conclude that queerness is a major theme in the novel *Jane eyre*. Female homoeroticism abounds in the relationship’s Jane has with her fellow females. Bronte marvellously accomplishes this through the systematic use of queer language in key scenes between Jane and Helen. At the heart of the novel lies the contrast between homosexual relationships and heterosexual relationships along with the triumph of the former over latter in terms of perfect intimacy and fulfilment. Jane can be effectively considered as a queer not just because of homoerotic tendencies but because of her attempt to live outside an accepted social norm.

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