

Listening to the Perpetual Mind's Inward Tale: A Study of the Psyche of Jane in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Arkanil Das

Abstract— This dissertation project intends to explore Charlotte Brontë's seminal novel, *Jane Eyre*, through the lens of psychoanalysis. By employing Freudian psycho-analytical theories, it tries to bring out the subconscious motivations, desires, and conflicts embedded within the protagonist, Jane Eyre. The main focus of this analysis is the exploration of Jane's psyche, from her traumatic childhood experiences to her complex relationships and inner turmoil. Freud's concepts of the conscious, subconscious and preconscious minds provide a foundation for understanding Jane's 'subconscious drives'. Additionally, this dissertation gives some more insights on Jane's journey towards her personality and self-realisation. The paper examines key moments in Jane's life, such as her traumatic experiences at her aunt's house in Gateshead and Lowood Institution, her conflicted romance with Mr. Rochester, and her quest for freedom and identity. Through the psychoanalytic lens, it uncovers the underlying psychological dynamics at play, including repression, trauma and the resolution of Electra complexes. Furthermore, the study investigates the influence of external factors, such as societal norms and gender expectations, on Jane's psyche and development. Ultimately, this dissertation offers a brief understanding of *Jane Eyre* as a character, focusing on her psychological complexities and the ways in which her journey reflects universal human experiences. By applying psychoanalytic theory to Brontë's masterpiece, it contributes to a deeper appreciation of the novel's psychological depth.

Index Terms— Psychoanalysis, Subconscious, Individuation, Repression, Societal norms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is considered one of the best female writings in English literature. In the novel, Brontë depicts a young woman's journey to self-realization. The narrative, published in 1847, has captivated readers with its rich characterizations and emotional depth. The complex character of Jane Eyre is central to the novel, whose struggles and triumphs closely resemble universal human experiences. This dissertation focuses on the psychological complexities of Jane Eyre through the lens of psychoanalysis, specifically utilizing Freudian theories to unpack the subconscious motivations, desires, and conflicts that define her character. The novel opens with Jane's traumatic childhood, packed with emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her cousins and her aunt, Mrs. Reed. This period of her life, particularly the horrible experience in the red room affects her psyche. The repression of these early traumas influences Jane's later

behaviour. At Lowood Institution, Jane faces further hardship and loss, yet it is here that she also finds moral guidance and companionship in figures like Helen Burns and Miss Temple. These experiences are pivotal in shaping her ethical values and resilience, setting the stage for her later challenges and growth. Jane's complex relationship with Mr. Rochester throws her into a struggle between her subconscious desires and her conscious values. Through a Freudian lens, this relationship can be interpreted as a battleground for Jane's id and superego. Eventually, her inner turmoil leads her to a balanced and equal partnership with Rochester, metaphorically signifying her triumph over patriarchy. My research would like to find the following objectives which are: What role does the traumatic experiences of Jane Eyre in childhood play in haunting her back and is the marriage of Jane the outcome of her narcissistic personality? The present research focuses on taking into account the strategies of textual analysis. The dissertation also intends to incorporate critical tools and insights into the psychoanalytical theory of adaptation, especially trauma as a research methodology.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychological complexities of Charlotte Brontë's protagonist Jane Eyre have been extensively explored through psychoanalytic theory. Researchers like Dr. Stevie Davies have analyzed how Jane's traumatic childhood experiences shaped her later development and inner conflicts, such as the significance of the "red-room" incident reflecting her repressed fears. Jane's complex relationship with Mr. Rochester has been viewed through a Freudian framework, as a battleground between her id (desires) and superego (moral values). Scholars have also highlighted the influence of societal norms and gender expectations on Jane's psyche and quest for identity and freedom. Overall, the psychological depth of *Jane Eyre* has provided a fertile field of study and literary analysis, with psychoanalytic theory offering valuable insights into the protagonist's inner world and its relation to broader themes in the novel.

III. EARLY LIFE OF JANE AND HER EXPERIENCES AT GATESHEAD

Orphaned as an infant, Jane Eyre lives at Gateshead with her aunt, Sarah Reed, as the novel opens. Jane experiences neglect and emotional and even physical abuse in her childhood, more specifically from her cousin John Reed. Herman describes trauma as a threat to the person's corporal existence, experience of security, and social identity (Herman 33). According to this framework, it is irrefutable that Jane has suffered from trauma because of her experience with the

Reeds family. John Reed, son of Mrs. Reed, throws a book at Jane as a way of punishing her for reading a book that belongs to the Reed family and tells her that she is "a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us" (Brontë 25). Jane resists the violence and tells him that he is a "Wicked and cruel boy!... You are like a murderer-you are like a slave driver-you are like the Roman emperors!" (Brontë 25). Here Brontë puts John Reed's bullying into a bigger context; that of human oppressors, "Roman emperors", to show the reader John's character and Jane's oppression. As a result of Jane's resistance, she gets locked in the red room, the same room in which her uncle Mr. Reed had "breathed his last" (Brontë 28). Herman argues that a consequence of trauma is that one can lose a sense of self, that is not recognizing yourself anymore (Herman 86). This is clear with Jane when she is locked in the red room and sees herself in the "looking-glass" and describes reflection as "the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving" (Brontë 29). Brontë depicted the notion of loss of identity by describing Jane's self-reflection as 'strange'. The trauma can make the victim feel responsible and that any action from the victim as a result of abuse will justify further abuse thus leading the victim to feel entrapped and that there is no escape. Mrs. Reed, who should be Jane's protector because she is her sole guardian after her parent and uncle's death, is "blind and deaf" on the subject that John is abusing Jane (Brontë 24). Though Jane tries to be pleasant all the time and never dares to commit any fault, she is still "...bullied and punished...not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually:..." (Brontë 24). In short, no matter what Jane does, she still feels responsible for the abuse she receives even though she feels it is unfair: "Unjust!-unjust!" (Brontë 30). This damages Jane's self-perception as she says, "Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please?" (Brontë 29). This portrays that Jane feels like she is accountable because she is accusing herself of never being able to please and therefore justifying that she is getting abused.

IV. THE HORROR OF THE RED ROOM

The red-room episode is dominant in the novel, especially in how Jane's psyche is portrayed here. The red room has the closest relationship with tyranny in the tale. She describes the interior design of the room by focusing only on objects that have a red colour shade. This kind of description, shown in the passage below, imitates Jane's feelings when she is in the room and causes readers some tension that makes them terrified too. According to Jane:

"The red room was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in; I might say never, indeed, unless when a chance influx of visitors at Gateshead Hall rendered it necessary to turn to account all the accommodation it contained: yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion. A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany hung with curtains of deep red damask stood out like a tabernacle in the center; the two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery;

the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn color, with a blush of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly-polished old mahogany. Out of these deep surrounding shades rose high, and glared white, the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane. Scarcely less prominent was an ample, cushioned easy chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a footstool before it; and looking, as I thought, like a pale throne." (Brontë 28).

Red is a symbol of prohibition and death. It metaphorically shows the deadly, claustrophobic condition of Jane without any way to escape. The significant suspense here is the 'ghost' of Mr. Reed. 'It' appears when Jane thinks about how Mr. Reeds would treat her if he were alive when she moves to Gateshead. However, it is vague to determine if Jane sees 'it' or not, showing how she has a conspicuous reaction to her body in this quote: "I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed; and I thought Mr. Reed's spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister's child, might quit its abode—whether in the church vault, or in the unknown world of the departed— and rise before me in this chamber. I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs, fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity. This idea, consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realized: with all my might I endeavored to stifle it—I endeavoured to be firm. Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the darkroom. At this moment a light gleamed on the wall." (Brontë 31-32)

Herman argues that repeated trauma can lead to post-traumatic stress (Herman 2). Post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, is a mental condition as a result of multiple traumas, the symptoms are triggered by various events. The symptoms include anxiety, dreams, and flashbacks. It should be noted that Jane gets strange dreams before any evil happens which foreshadows the events that are almost destined to happen next. Sigmund Freud opined that the human mind consists of the 'conscious', 'unconscious', and 'preconscious'. The conscious mind acts when the individual is awake and fully aware of its surroundings and feelings, thoughts, and urges. The unconscious refers to notions, thoughts, memories, and urges that are outside of our conscious awareness (Nayar 65). According to Freud, these thoughts, feelings, and memories are unconscious as they are unpleasant to human beings because they cause pain, anxiety, and conflict. As Jane was an orphan, it is quite possible that she was going through a parental identity crisis. She was in search of a parental figure. Instead of getting filial love from the Reeds', Jane was only harassed and abused by them. So it is possible to conclude that Jane suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as she endured multiple traumas, leading her to hallucinate the red room horror.

V. THE MAD WOMAN IN THE ATTIC

Bertha Mason, the lawful Creole wife of Mr. Rochester, is often read as Jane's alter-ego. Her story begins with how her physical appearance or even her name does not appear before

Jane's time for most of the time before a marriage ceremony. A clergyman, for example, says that he "never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at Thornfield Hall." (Bronte 331). For most of the time, shown in the underlined quote, Bertha is described by Jane in a very vague way, making her existence more unclear to Jane's audience:

"The lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest." (Bronte 333)

Bertha can be interpreted as hallucinations born from Jane's traumatic past, where Bertha's violent and horrifying behaviour mirrors the subconscious drives Jane must hide. This projection allows Jane to confront her trauma indirectly, as she sees in Bertha the reflection of madness and loss of control she fears within herself. Through this lens, Bertha's presence and actions in Thornfield serve as a psychological mirror for Jane, reflecting her struggles with her past experiences at Gateshead and Lowood and the quest for freedom. The hallucination perspective also highlights the blurred lines between reality and fantasy in the novel. Jane's encounters with Bertha raise questions about what is real and what is merely a product of her mind. This ambiguity adds to the sense of uncertainty and tension, underscoring the instability of Jane's mental state. After Jane escapes from Thornfield and revisits Ferndean, there is no evidence of Bertha again. Her death becomes obscure to readers and appears in how the servant who follows Mr. Rochester to Ferndean tells the story to Jane. The interesting thing in this storytelling is how Bertha is demonized even on her death, and how Mr. Rochester is represented as a hero, which can be perceived in the following quote: "It was all his own courage, and a body may say, his kindness, in a way, ma'am: he wouldn't leave the house till everyone else was out before him." (Bronte 485)

VI. A LOVER OR A NARCISSIST

Jane's return to Ferndean is as interesting as the question of her narcissism. It is not only because of how she manipulated the time when Mr. Rochester's calling happens but also because how "Jane, Jane, Jane!" (Bronte 502) appears in the novel is paramount to how she represents her identity and morality. When living with the Rivers, Jane tends to forget her heroic figure development, as she works in a religious environment. This Religious context shows a contrast between moral and immoral in society. The fact that the calling has emerged instantaneously is related to how Jane recalls the self that she wishes to be. Considering that this happens after St. John's proposal, which offers her a job opportunity as a missionary in India, and combined with how Jane manipulates a time description after the proposal this means that Jane waits for the possibility to express this side of her personality, which is limited due to a religious setting. Jane is deeply unwilling to show her narcissistic side when she lives in Whitecross Moor, which results in how Jane immediately flees from the Moor the morning after. When she arrives at the manor house of Ferndean, this is an opportunity for Jane to regain her saviour representation, as she returns to blinded Mr. Rochester and claims her spot as a nurse and a partner. The interesting part of the coming back

event is, that instead of a traditional return that the readers might expect, Jane uses her voice to make him recognized. Despite the uncertainty, Jane shows that, because of how helpless he is, Mr. Rochester recognizes her and wholeheartedly confirms her identity. Jane tries to show how heroic she is in this case by making Mr. Rochester plead for her aid. Picturing him as a blinded man helps Jane represent this image without being taboo in her society, which is related to her narcissism. The suspense motif in Jane's story, despite her religious upbringing, is linked to her desire for freedom and her heroic nature, highlighting her resilience and determination. As the motifs that happen after St. John's proposal appear suddenly, it shows that Jane still thinks that the religious environment may not suit her like being an independent woman, causing a less appearance of her narcissism when she works with St. John. The calling works as a suitable and ethical answer for Jane, as in her social standard, she cannot directly reject St. John. By marrying St. John Jane may be viewed as a 'damsel in distress' in the society and would always be inferior to him because of his well-respected image in the community. But by marrying Mr. Rochester Jane not only establishes her heroic image but also gets the pleasure of domination over the patriarchy by aiding a blind and crippled person.

VII. CONCLUSION

At the verge it can be pointed that this discussion delves deep into the psychological impacts of trauma through the life of Jane in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Jane's early experiences of abuse and neglect at Gateshead shape her later life and the conflicted psyche, manifesting in her struggles for freedom and identity. The Red-Room incident can be viewed as her repressed fears of isolation and entrapment expanding from her childhood to maturity in this *künstlerroman* narrative. Bertha Mason can be projected, as Jane's repressed trauma, highlights the extreme consequences of an individual's subconscious. Bertha's 'madness' and confinement serve as a stark contrast to Jane's controlled rebellion, emphasizing the broader themes of identity, repression, and resistance. Bronte's novel, through psychoanalytic theory, reflects the deep psychological scars caused by societal norms and personal childhood trauma carried through the rest of her life. This analysis will help us understand Bronte's masterpiece and offer enduring insights into the universal human experiences of trauma, repression, and the quest for identity and freedom.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Rupa Publishers, 2001.
- [2] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- [3] Nayar, Pramod Kumar, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Pearson Publishers, 2010.

Arkanil Das is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Malda Women's College, Malda, West Bengal, India. His primary focus is in the discipline of Cultural & Theoretical Studies and to examine psychological and socio-political behaviours and thought processes preserved the broader social structure through comparative literature across time. (<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7693-7636>).