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## **FEMINIST CRITICISM OF JANE EYRE AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

### **Abstract**

Feminism is a belief in the cultural, social, economic, and political equality of women. It is a term used to describe the cultural phenomena linked with the position of women in the patriarchal society. Feminism arose in three waves. The first wave was concerned with women's suffrage. The second wave was a reaction to the working conditions necessary in America during the Second World War. The *Third Wave* was mostly focused on intervening in problems that were still present in society including the lack of women in positions of power and sexual harassment in the workplace. These three waves have been followed by what is called feminist criticism which deals with the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, social, political, or psychological oppression of women.

Taking this into consideration, *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale* will be analyzed from a feminist perspective, focusing on the relationship between men and women portrayed in the novels and designating the power relationships between men and women. These two novels are first and foremost a portrayal of how women's and men's roles are defined in society. From this perspective, the novels shed light on the characters taking on traits of the opposite gender and the possibility of sisterhood as a method of resisting patriarchy.

***Keywords:*** *feminist criticism, feminist waves, women, men, Third Wave, equality*

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Feminism is a belief in the cultural, social, economic, and political equality of women. It is a term used to describe the cultural phenomena linked with the position of women in the patriarchal society. The term feminism was first coined by Charles Fournier, a utopian philosopher, and radical socialist, as a reaction to different organizations of activism for supporting women's suffrage (Malinowska, 2020). As a Western movement, Feminism arose in three waves. The first wave of Feminism was in the late 1700s and early 1900s. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights*, highlighting the inequalities between women and men. Also, Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull contributed to the women's suffrage movement, a movement where women could have the right to vote and dominated much of feminism for certain decades. Many people thought voting rights for women were unacceptable. However, this attitude toward women's rights to vote was soon swayed by Frederick Douglass, a leader of the abolitionist movement and an early champion of women's rights, when he stated that he couldn't accept his right to vote if it was not recognized as a right for women too (History.com). This movement slowly began to achieve success. New Zealand became the first place that gave women the right to vote in 1893. It was followed later by Australia in 1902 and Finland in 1906 (History.com). In the United States, women participated in World War I which proved that women deserved to have equal rights. In 1920 women finally earned the right to vote which secured women the possibility to enter the workplace in higher numbers. During World War II, a great number of women participated in the military or found work in industry (History.com). This marked the second wave of Feminism that was in the early 1960s and late 1970s.

The second wave was a reaction to the working conditions necessary in America during the Second World War. The majority of men were overseas and women had to be brought into the economy to replace men's positions. The second wave focused on matters of equality and discrimination. The incentive of this second wave was Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* which criticized the postwar assumption that a woman's role was to be a housewife, to marry and bear children (Bloomington Women's Liberation Newsletter, 1970). In 1971 Gloria Steinem a social activist, editor, and writer created a National Organization for Women called "National Women's Political Caucus" and also initiated many political involvements. Things started working successfully. Awareness was raised regarding domestic violence and gender and also women's

studies departments were found at colleges and Universities (Bloomington Women's Liberation Newsletter, 1970).

The third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s which was mostly focused on intervening in problems that were still present in society including the lack of women in positions of power and also sexual harassment in the workplace. The women of the third wave embraced the energy of rebellion and encouraged one another to express freely their sexuality and individuality. “Riot **grrl**” which was a feminist punk movement and also many groups like “Bikini Kill”, “Batmobile”, “Heavens to Betsy”, and so on, brought their feminist bands into pop music. Their songs addressed issues such as rape, abuse, sexism, and racism (Pruitt, 2022).

These three waves have been followed by what is called feminist criticism. Feminist criticism deals with the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, social, political, or psychological oppression of women (Prude writing lab). Feminist criticism tends to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women. It concerns the fact that the women writers' exclusion in the literary canon is less obvious. It also has the tendency to underrepresent the contributions of women writers. It examines works of literature and analyzes them from a feminist lens. There is no question that there have been some great women writers who simply because they have been women, works have been ignored in academia. It has to be accepted that there exist different feminist approaches but these approaches seem to have some commonalities. They all believe that women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, socially, psychologically, and politically. Patriarchal ideology enforces the oppression that is made on women. In every place where patriarchy rules, a woman is considered as the other, she is marginalized. Females are also defined only by their difference from male norms and values. Just like in the case of history that is written by the winners, also if society is ruled by men, they are going to write what is normal according to them. All Western civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology. As a perfect example, it could be mentioned the part where the garden of Eden was lost because of a woman, Eve. Feminist critics have a goal to change the world by promoting gender equality. Feminism issues occupy a very important place in every aspect of human production and experience including here that of literature. Literature was the main source that indicated what was an acceptable representation of femininity (Abou N., 2021). Many literary works have portrayed the suffering of women through discrimination and violence in all areas of life. Others have created the idea of

women's rights and how women should be treated in society. Taking into consideration feminist criticism and the elements explored by it, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood will be analyzed through feminist lenses. These two novels contain many elements that are related to women's position, function, and rights in society, and each of these novels can be analyzed through a feminist approach. However, the feminist approach in each of these novels is explored in different ways.

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë is a novel that faces the reader with boundless elements of feminist criticism. Charlotte Brontë was one of the founders of feminism in the Victorian Age. She was considered the revolutionary representative of that age and also broke numerous rules that prevailed during that period of time. She wrote eponymous novels, that is the name of the protagonist is the title of the novel and *Jane Eyre* is one of those novels. The feminist spirit that Brontë had is depicted clearly in this novel. The novel narrates the story of a young orphan girl named Jane who is ill-treated since her childhood. Throughout the book, the reader realizes that Jane is not the usual heroine of the Victorian era. An era best known for its social structure and an era where every thought, desire, or dream is strictly dependent on its social class. Women of the Victorian era were repressed, with no social status, no rights, and no options for self-support or self-realization. At that time besides men's superiority over women, it was believed that people are born unequal. However, through the character of Jane, Brontë contradicts and refuses all those beliefs and unfair situations in society. Brontë presents the reader with a picture of how the relationship between men and women was in that period of time. From the first pages, it is seen the male superiority over women:

“You have no business to take our books; you are 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, and eat the same meals we do, and 12 *Jane Eyre* wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they ARE mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows.” (BRONTE, 11-12)

The first oppression made of Jane by a male character was by her cousin John Reed. He treated her very badly psychologically and also physically. Through his actions, the reader is able to plainly understand that John Reed is the ideal model of a patriarchal character who shows no respect for women, oppresses, humiliates, and bullies them. The Reed family represents the Victorian society that suppresses Jane's desires and feelings by punishing and discriminating against her. Jane is called many times wicked or mad just because she chooses to stand up against her bully cousin John Reed. The reader starts noticing the first stands of Jane against oppression, bullying, and discrimination. Another male figure that oppresses Jane is Mr. Brocklehurst who strictly believes in the theory of women's inferiority. He demands the girls to dress in ugly clothes, eat less, and lead a hard life "Madam, allow me an instant. You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying" (Brontë, 94). Mr. Brocklehurst is the headmaster at Lowood institute where Jane is sent after leaving the Reed family. The main tenet of the school, according to him, is to make girls be humble, docile, and self-sacrificing, being completely obedient and under their husband's submission. The headmaster of the school is put into a dominating position (Rawat, 4) that shows exactly the role of men and women in society. In Lowood school, it is seen a great progression of Jane's personality, especially with the help of Helen Burns who appears to have a very strong character, able to endure all the society's discrimination. The support given to Jane by Helen points out one of the elements taken into consideration by feminist criticism, sisterhood against patriarchy. Jane acquires six years of rigorous education and two years of teaching at Lowood Institute but the only job she can get is a governess at Thornfield Hall under Mr. Rochester's possession. This is the only opportunity society offers women which for Jane's aspirations is clearly not enough:

"It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it ... Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex." (BRONTE, 167)

Jane expresses her thoughts based on inequality and she emphasizes the prevalent inequality and the equality that must be (Rawat, 5).

Jane's love interest Edward Rochester, at the same time as her headmaster at Thornfield, is another male figure who oppresses Jane by trying to control her. Rochester's oppression could be considered kind of positive because he does it for love. He has this dolled-up romantic approach against Jane which does not suit her by any means:

“I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair; and I will cover the head I love best with a priceless veil.” (BRONTE, 395)

Jane refuses any material gift offered by Mr. Rochester and dislikes any special treatment that involves financial favor:

“Oh, sir! - never rain jewels! I don't like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them.” (BRONTE, 394).

She rather prefers being equal with Rochester than having all those things. It is noticed that Brontë to achieve equality between genders, equips Jane with qualities that no woman should possess in that society. The reader sees that Jane can inherit a great amount of money something that is impossible for women to possess at that time. Brontë gives Jane the traits of a male by making her strong, intelligent, wealthy, and in search of independence.

Another novel that can be analyzed through feminist lenses is *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood who is best known for her prose fiction and for her feminist perspective (Encyclopedia Britannica). *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the story of a feminist dystopian society that rearranges completely the hierarchy of citizens as a response to a fertility crisis. Before Gilead was formed, society was filled with pollution, abortion, and many diseases. Furthermore, rape and pornography were being spread enormously. All the riots that were happening led to a reduction in the birth rate. As a response to all this upheaval things Gilead was created, however, things seemed to become worst and worst creating a dystopian society. In a feminist dystopian society, the goals of females go in the opposite direction, and in many female dystopian societies identity of women is thematized. On most occasions, women get ripped off their identities and get objectified (Schäder, 2018). This story describes a new society that is completely ruled by men and women are

oppressed, tortured, discriminated against, and even raped. However, in the novel, women are not oppressed directly by men but by women who are placed higher in the hierarchy:

“The first thing that happens in this new society is women getting fired from their jobs, and getting their bank accounts blocked leaving women with no money or position at all. They lost their independence completely:

“We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his.” (ATWOOD, 128).

Women of Gilead take the position of domestic wives while men take care of the intellectual businesses. This, Atwood says is not something that has not been seen or heard before. It has always happened somewhere in the world and is happening even now (Ochsenfahrt, 2008). Without even noticing the rapid progress of this new regime, women started being divided into different categories especially based on their fertility. Another element showing the differentiation between women and men is that men were able to gain or lose power while women couldn't change their status. They were designated to bear children for the Elite. The only way for them to change their status was to become Unwoman and be sent to the Colonies. The reader notices that men's fertility is not even questioned throughout the story while women's fertility was one of the most important factors for a women's duty toward society. In this regime, the State gets rid of handmaids' names erasing completely their identity, and labels them according to their Commander's name; another way to show men's possession over women.

According to Offred the main character of the novel, women are not allowed to have access to the books. They cannot read, write, or use pens or paper and they cannot even scrabble. It is also seen that women can identify shops by pictures and not by names given that words are forbidden “You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone” (Atwood, 21). The girls are only allowed to recite parts from Bible that are obviously distorted to reinforce women's obedience:

“From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited those three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said.” (ATWOOD, 81).

Offred's comment forces the reader to doubt the authority of that statement and also highlights the use of the pronouns "her" and "his" which reinforces the oppression of women in that society and presents the male as the dominant figure. However, even though Offred's identity is taken away from her, she still maintains pieces of her womanhood and identity and manages to rebel even in small actions.

It is seen that Atwood puts a big emphasis on women's suffering leaving men little space for what they think or feel. Men are important for the plot and context of the world in which women live, however, they are not explored to the same extent as women are (Florczak, 5). The relationship between women takes the biggest importance in the novel. This relationship is both destructive and empowering. Atwood emphasizes a lot of women's solidarity which in this novel is founded in two ways: authentic solidarity and forced solidarity. Bonds develop naturally against the regime and bonds are forced by the regime to put women against each other (Florczak, 7). Either way, it is seen throughout the novel that women contribute to each-others success or failure. In the case of forced solidarity, it is spotted that women are surveyed by their companion women. There is the handmaid who surveys you while shopping, the wife of the household, the aunts, and the Marthas, however at the same time you survey them too:

"Judd — according to the Limpkin material — was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves." (ATWOOD, 212).

Sisterhood was strictly prohibited in Gilead because the controllers of that society were well aware that if women stood together, they would become powerful and that is something not beneficial for the leaders of Gilead.

Feminism is used to describe the cultural phenomena linked with the position of women in the patriarchal society. As a movement feminism arose in three waves. The first wave was concerned with women's suffrage<sup>1</sup>. During World War I, women participated in the war which proved that women were able to withstand those situations and that they have the right to be considered equal. The second wave was a reaction to the working conditions necessary in America during the Second World. The Third Wave was mostly focused on intervening in problems that were still present in society including the lack of women in positions of power and also sexual harassment in the workplace. These three waves have been followed by what is called feminist criticism. Feminist



criticism deals with the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, social, political, or psychological oppression of women. Many literary works have portrayed the suffering of women through discrimination and violence in all areas of life. Others have created the idea of women's rights and how women should be treated in society. Approached from a feminist perspective, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, portray a picture of women's role, function, and rights in society. In Victorian times besides men's superiority over women, it was believed that people are born unequal. However, through the character of Jane, Brontë contradicts and refuses all those beliefs and unfair situations in society. Brontë presents the reader with a picture of how the relationship between men and women was in that period of time. Throughout the novel, it is noticed that Brontë gives Jane the traits of a male by making her strong, intelligent, wealthy, and in search of independence. Whereas *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the story of a feminist dystopian society that rearranges completely the hierarchy of citizens as a response to a fertility crisis. In the novel, women are stripped of their identity and objectified. The story describes a new society that is completely ruled by men and women are oppressed, tortured, discriminated against, and even raped. An important role in this novel has women's solidarity which is presented in two ways destructive and empowering. However, the Controllers strictly prohibit sisterhood in Gilead which implies that the power of united women could bring them down.

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