

# *The Blurring and Demonisation of the Image of Women in Reality*

## *–Exploring the Modern Development of Feminism with Jane Eyre as an Example*

Kaiyue Zeng<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, Tong Zhou<sup>2,b</sup>, and Zhaoyu Wang<sup>3,c</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chinese Language and Literature, Hubei University, Friendship Street, Wuhan, Hubei, China

<sup>2</sup> Chinese Language and Literature, Guangdong Ocean University, Haida Street, Guangdong, China

<sup>3</sup> Beijing Bayi School, Haidian Street, Beijing, China

a. kaiyue@student.wust.edu.pl, b. 1309676410@qq.com, c. 2569989263@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** In today's world, feminist thinking is flourishing, and scholars are increasingly concerned about women's groups, queer groups and other disadvantaged groups, with ideas that are becoming more open and diverse. Along with this change in the world landscape, feminism has gained more momentum, and Jane Eyre, an exemplary feminist masterpiece, has been widely studied by scholars. So this essay focuses on the writings of Jane Eyre, looking at the 'madwoman' Mason in the book, exploring the blurring and demonisation of the role of women, and considering the modern development of feminism. By closely reading the text and combining it with Spivak's theoretical framework of feminism, this paper aims to discover how the discourse on women's groups has been colonised in society and how feminism has been underdeveloped. The result is that reality, like fiction, has a habit of obscuring and demonising the female community and men are induced to obscure and demonise women through discourse, thereby consolidating male-centred hegemony. There is still a long way to go regarding women's liberation, equality and freedom. Women need to make aware of their disadvantages and inequality from the inside out, to understand clearly the methods men use to demonise women, to learn how to counteract these methods and to give women a voice. Women need to be self-respecting and confident and unite the strength of spirit of women and the disadvantaged to fight uncompromisingly against all hegemony and for the human rights to which they are entitled.

**Keywords:** feminism, Jane Eyre, discourse power, demonisation

## 1. Introduction

*Jane Eyre* is a long, autobiographical novel by the English author Charlotte Brontë. As a world-renowned work of feminist thought, it has profoundly impacted the lives of many female readers. It is a model work that encourages women's liberation, proclaims equality and freedom, opposes

colonial hegemony, and is of great research value. Current research on this work has focused on a multifaceted analysis of the grand feminist ideas in the book, exploring the feminist character traits embodied in the heroine Jane Eyre and deconstructing the specific intentions of the text. However, there is a lack of information on the implied treatment of women as madness, the blurring of women in reality, and the modern development of feminism that resonates in the book. This paper, therefore, seeks to deconstruct and analyse the resonances and differences between Jane Eyre and Mason by using a close reading of the text as a means of critically examining the progress and shortcomings of feminist thought in *Jane Eyre*, with a particular focus on the implied flaws of feminist thought in the book. Based on Spivak's theory of *Jane Eyre*, this paper also expands on the analysis of Mason's encounter and the image to reveal the situation of women who are blurred and demonised in real life and unable to make their voices heard, thus complementing the realities not reflected in Spivak's theory. This paper uses Bertha Mason, the 'madwoman' in the attic, as an entry point to explore the causes of the blurring and demonisation of women in real life.

## 2. Definition of Demonisation

Insanity is demonising treatment. It is a treatment in which one party frames the mental state of another party and, through other means, such as public opinion, causes bystanders to believe that the other party, who is in good shape, is mentally problematic. It allows bystanders to attribute the demonised individual's actions and behaviour to mental madness. The discursive colonisation of the person being mad is achieved by creating a preconceived impression of the maddening party as a person with mental problems and attributing all their actions to mental madness.

Such an act usually occurs when the two parties are not on an equal footing, and the weaker party is about to make a statement that can reverse or influence the situation between them. The common perception is that the party with the dominant position in a conflict is usually the one who meets the moral or legal requirements, so people are predisposed to recognise their point of view. The dominant party uses this to lead people to believe that the weaker party is mentally problematic, thus linking all attacks and rebuttals by the weaker party against him or her to his or her own mental condition and minimising the negative impact on him or her.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is born into a family with mental problems, and it is not just Rochester who demonises her; the author uses madness as a means of making her words unrecognisable to others, and through this, creates a "glorious" image of Rochester.

## 3. An Analysis of the Background of Jane Eyre and the Feminism of the Main Character's Experience

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was written in early Victorian England during the social upheaval and alternating values when Whig liberals were in power and preaching social equality. Influenced by the ideas of emancipation, *Jane Eyre* undoubtedly embodies a strong sense of female independence. However, as a female writer growing up in a particular era, Charlotte Brontë was constantly being constructed as a woman, and even the most emancipated ideas were bound by ideology.

Gender is inherently defining and imposes hierarchical labels on people [1]. From a feminist perspective, the long-standing patriarchal society, where gender is not only a biological distinction but also a hierarchy of 'second sex', has left women as the 'other' inherently on the margins and without a voice [2]. There is much unconscious pandering in Jane Eyre's discourse, whether in the moral concerns of the ending or the hegemonic ideas of male society in words. For example, Jane Eyre's life is one of compromise and defiance. As a child, Jane Eyre's cousin John Reed's bad behaviour towards her and Jane Eyre's aunt's aiding and abetting obedience to John Reed exemplify the hegemonic idea of the son inheriting the family fortune as the head of the family under the patriarchy;

when she goes to school, Jane Eyre does not submit to the violent and abusive attitude of Brocklehurst towards his schoolgirls; and the love she develops for Rochester is rife with the tropes of 'wife' and 'master'. This paradigmatic servant relationship with the 'master' and the strong patriarchal and male patriarchal identity of the 'wife', which usually corresponds to the 'husband', expresses a contractual relationship of equality and freedom. This unequal relationship suggests that Jane Eyre's love for Rochester is marked by patriarchal oppression and does not lead to true spiritual independence. After leaving Rochester, St. John's forced marriage in the name of devotion to the Lord binds Jane Eyre with obligations. It reflects the essential oppression of women in the face of religious fervour.

The recurring sites in the book, the 'attic', the 'red house', the 'Thornfield' and the 'drawers', 'cupboards' and 'boxes' in the rooms, can be seen as metaphorical images, representing some kind of confinement. "The enclosed spaces are the evil of inequality, the bastions of money and colonisation, like prisons. The locked-up women, representing the male domination of the centre, are an endless hell that is finally put to the torch by the 'madwoman'[3].

#### 4. The Colonisation of the Words of the Madwoman "Mason"

In *Jane Eyre*, the reader always focuses on Jane Eyre but ignores Bertha Mason, the 'madwoman', not only because of the small proportion of space devoted to the madwoman but also because of the author's and Rochester's colonisation of her discourse [4]. Jane Eyre's first appearance as the madwoman is a fateful coincidence that saves Rochester, and the author's portrayal of the Madwoman is baroque, very ambiguous and Insanity. For example, Jane Eyre first hears "a devilish laugh" and "something cackled and groaned" [5]. The second time in the night, she hears "a wild, piercing scream" and "a brief barking sound" [5]. These details, which are generally not used for humans at all, blur her as a human being and have a strong horror and ambiguous atmosphere, making it impossible for the reader to relate to the 'person' and giving the impression of being more like a description of an animal, monster or raptor. These sets give the stage for Rochester's demonisation of her later on, tempting the reader to pity Rochester and ignore and even be angry at Bertha Mason's existence.

After all is revealed, and Jane Eyre learns that the madwoman is his wife, Rochester distorts and obscures the sophistry. With colonial phrases like "Bertha Mason is mad" and "I'm so stupid!" putting himself in the position of victim, without any mention of the huge dowry the madwoman brings, and with her "madness" and "inhumanity" label, to win the reader's and Jane Eyre's forgiveness and sympathy [5]. It is easy to make Jane Eyre believe him simply by using the same elite dominance measures that their male counterparts have always used to discredit or demonise their opposing groups so that their "raving" is not cared for or believed.

#### 5. Exploring Reality from the Limitations of Jane Eyre

If Rochester called Jane Eyre an angel, then Bertha Mason was the devil in the eyes of the times. What Jane Eyre represents in the book is an idealised female compromise and independence, which still played a certain progressive significance, causing a certain impact on the social phenomenon of women being suppressed at that time, reflecting the progress of feminist development. At the same time, however, the book's happy ending pulls full of reader care and moral concern, not true spiritual equality and freedom of liberation. The contrast between Rochester's loss of property and physical disability and Jane Eyre's heavenly possessions in the ending suggests a discriminatory nature: women do not have a certain basis for independence only when their material and physical appearance are equal to those of men. The equality of men and women that has been advocated by public opinion today is the equality of men and women without distinction. However, men and women are born with different physiological structures, making it difficult to achieve complete equality without distinction,

and this advocacy is itself a manifestation of inequality. True equality and respect should be unconditional, and true equality should be reflected according to the different qualities of men and women. As advocated by the United Nations Environment Programme in *How To Implement Gender Equality And The Environment*: "An integrated gender approach takes into account the different needs, concerns and experiences of men and women, ensuring that policies and projects will benefit both and will not lead to gender inequality. A gender-specific approach includes gender-specific activities and incentives, particularly for women and/or men who are particularly disadvantaged"[6].

On the contrary, the death of the madwoman Mason may be the true freedom of the times. Her hatred burns up the sinful place of Thornfield, which represents that she wants to burn not only the prison warden who tears apart the cage and patriarchal culture that alienates her but also the abuse and violence of the entire patriarchal society against women. Her more wants to overturn the colonial rule that destroys everything in the endless struggle against society in the pursuit of true democracy [7]. She is not a madwoman; she is as radical as Jane Eyre, if not more so, never compromising and bent on subverting and destroying male colonisation. In Spivak's classic study, she classifies Jane Eyre as a First World woman and Bertha Mason as a Third World woman, arguing that the disappearance of the Madwoman is necessary to make Jane Eyre's perfect ending possible [8]. Third World women are doubly oppressed by both the male colonisation of the second sex and the colonial oppression of the Third World by the Western world. The book also contains the discursive colonisation of the madwoman of the Third World by the female author from the First World and Jane Eyre, and the death of the madwoman has hegemonic overtones. In contrast to the Western paradigm and the cultural values shared by the West, which reflect a strong sense of national superiority and often dominate culture, non-Western Third World or Eastern cultural traditions are often marginalised and deprived of a dominant voice because of their differences [9]. The Madwoman may also represent Jane Eyre's dual personality, the innermost part of her repressed and compromised independent personality, resilient and resistant subversive personality, a stand-in for her persona, and the demise of the destructive personality would represent the eventual arrival of resigned respect and happiness.

## 6. An Analysis of the Madness of Women in the Context of Reality

The development of modern society is also fraught with the madness of women. As T.S. Eliot said, "Civilisation itself is the work of men" [10]. They have absolute power of speech, marginalise women indefinitely, distort their minds, trap them in a male social ideology and keep them silent. When they cannot refute what they have done or their mistakes, they try to use mental illness to label women as insane. Because insane people are not sane, what they say does not recognise. They usually try to push the other person's actions to extremes to cover up their own evil deeds [11].

For example, on 17 December 2021, in the face of his ex-wife's word-for-word accusations, Lihong Wang's retort exemplifies the process of driving women mad. He demeaned and stigmatised his ex-wife, attempting to brand her as a madwoman to discredit his words to the public. On May 30, 2022, Xiaofei Wang's Weibo account of Xiyuan Xu's "long-term use of banned drugs through prescriptions from others" was a hit. In the midst of a war of opinion between the two families, the man suddenly exposed the information without evidence to suggest that the woman was mentally ill, using tactics that would demonise the woman while putting himself in the position of a victim.

After centuries, men still colonise women's discourse in such a way that they do not want to hear the woman's most authentic voice and then go on a immutable of madness to demonise her, making bystanders think she is insane and thus lose credibility and stop listening to her [12]. However, the male partner also has faults. Under the theory of gaslighting manipulation, both partners should be actively involved in the relationship they are forging together and maintaining; it is not the responsibility of one partner, let alone an excuse for one to take control of the other's feelings [13].

## 7. Conclusion

Because in today's world, men have an absolute voice, male discourse is seen as the norm, and female discourse is seen as a violation of the standard, implying that the default, in reality, is that women are themselves a defect and a deviation from the rules. Thus, when voices emerge that do not fit or conform to today's patriarchal rule, countless invectives follow and countless notoriety and labels are imposed on those who speak out.

Religion, culture and others are the products of male ideologies that have been brainwashing and indoctrinating women since birth, constructing and teaching them what it means to be 'female'. They have always restricted the way women can act and made them into objects to be subservient to them. As a group of women, girls can often hear the patriarchal words "you have to be like a girl", but why be "like", be what you are as a woman and not be what they prescribe as "female".

In contemporary society, the development of feminism is inevitably branded as polarised and subject to patriarchal onslaught if one is not careful, not unlike what Rochester did at the time when he branded Mason a mad woman. Thus, the road to feminist development is still long, but women's groups cannot stop speaking out just because they encounter difficulties. Only when a steady stream of voices come forward to continue speaking out for women and equality through unyielding and bloody struggle will feminism truly develop.

## References

- [1] Li, J.W. (2001). A Review of Western Studies on Language and Gender. *Journal of the PLA Foreign Language Institute*, 24(1), 11-15.
- [2] Beauvoir, S.D. (2011). *The Second Sex*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Press.
- [3] Gilbert, S.M. Gubar, S. (2015). *The Madwoman in the Attic: Women Writers and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [4] Ni, X.H. (2007). A brief analysis of the colonial discourse in *Jane Eyre*. *Journal of Guangxi Education College*, 3, 120-122.
- [5] Bronte, C. (1980). Trans. by Zhu Qingying. *Jane Eyre*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Press.
- [6] UNEP. (2017). How to implement gender equality and the environment. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org> [2023-2-17]
- [7] Du, Y. (1999). An Experiment on the Image of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. *Journal of Dandong Teachers College*, 3, 50.
- [8] Spivak, G. edited by Chen, Y.G. Lai, L.L. Guo, Y.J. (2007). *From Deconstruction to Globalization Critique: The Spivak Reader*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- [9] Wang, N. (1995). Postcolonial Context and Contemporary Chinese Cinema. *Contemporary Cinema*, 5, 32-39.
- [10] Millett, K. (1999). *The Politics of Sexuality*. Beijing: Social Science Literature Press.
- [11] Liu, C.X. (2006). On the Narrative of Modernity and the Construction of Gender Consciousness in Chinese Literature. *Yunnan Social Science*, 5, 119-123.
- [12] Li, G.Y. (1999). The theme of "women's liberation" in *Jane Eyre*. *Journal of Anhui Radio and Television University*, 1, 76-79.
- [13] Stern, R. translated by Liu, Y. (2020). *The Gaslight Effect: How to recognise and escape the hidden control of others over your life*. Beijing: CITIC Press.