

The Elements of Feminism in the novel “Agnes Grey”

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Abstract

Anne Bronte was the youngest among Bronte sisters. Although her works are not as much celebrated as of Emily or Charlotte but her contribution towards the demand of rights for women can not be simply ignored. She wrote two novels namely *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. These works of fiction depict the saga of women’s struggle during Victorian era and contain the elements of feminism. She raised many issues about the grim condition of women which either remained unnoticed earlier or her predecessors could not dare talk about them. Her dedication to women’s rights and betterment and her distrust of men as superior gender led her to declare that women must look to defend their self-respect. She openly challenged the double standards that insisted for different rooms and yardsticks to judge and justify what was and was not proper and permissible in male and female writings and demanded equality.

KEYWORDS: Bronte Sisters, Anne Bronte, Feminism, Victorian age writers.

Objective of the study: Objective of this study is to identify and emphasize the contribution of Anne Bronte to the feministic literature.

Methodology: Creations of Anne Bronte; especially “Agnes Grey” were studied thoroughly. Also the views of critics were considered while writing this paper.

Introduction:

The contribution of Anne Bronte to the feminist writing is customarily dismissed. The critics simply emphasise the more celebrated work of her sisters Charlotte and Emily. Probably Anne lacked their genius but it is not right to leave her without a few words of praise. She created two novels namely *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. These are considered great books in the history of feminist literature written in nineteenth century. The Bronte family has inspired many studies, in which Charlotte, the oldest child, is characterized as the most ambitious writer, and Emily the greatest genius. Anne has been described mild and the less-talented youngest sister although, but her literary creations were sharp and arresting. Her highly independent, revolutionary and blunt heroines contributed much to create an environment which helped to understand the woman’s need and right for freedom. It provided a platform to voice their emotions, passions, and desires. These writing qualities from a woman’s pen were something that was completely unexpected and radical for their age. Through both of the novels there are scattered passages and phrases which have enough potential to attract the feminist writers.

Anne Bronte's novel, *Agnes Grey* (AG), is a story of female development. The critics consider it as equally talented to Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*. Agnes Grey, the heroine of this novel, is a young woman and the daughter of a minister who lives in northern England. Her family comes to financial ruin after her father loses most of his wealth in an ill-advised investment. As a result, he becomes ill and Agnes, her sister, and her mother all try to keep the expenses low and to bring in extra money to save their dignity and social status. But Agnes is frustrated because her family treats her like a child. To prove herself and to provide financial help to the family, she determines to get a position as a governess. Although her mother does not want Agnes to leave the house to get a job yet Agnes remains successful to convince her and finally gets her permission for the same. She reaches Wellwood house to work for the Bloomfield family. The Bloomfield family is rich but crueller than Agnes has expected. Bloomfields constantly find fault with Agnes's work. The children are unruly and Agnes is given no authority over them so she can not control them. Tom, the eldest child, is abusive, but Agnes can do nothing to stop the boy from torturing small animals. In less than a year, Agnes is relieved of her position, since Mrs. Bloomfield thinks that her children are not learning fast enough. Agnes becomes depressed and returns home. Despite her first bitter experience as a governess, Agnes is determined to try again. This time, she gets a position with the Murray family where she teaches Matilda and Rosalie Murray. Matilda is a tomboy, prone to lying while Rosalie is a flirt. Both girls are selfish and unpleasant, and although Agnes's position is slightly better than it was at Wellwood house, she is still often ignored or used in the girls' games. Thus, Agnes does not feel the job of governess as a respectable one. Agnes is also shocked that the beautiful Rosalie flirts with other men, including the curate, Edward Weston, even though she is engaged to be married. Agnes has feeling of love towards Weston but it looks as though Rosalie will snatch him from Agnes. Ultimately, Agnes leaves Wellwood and weds with Edward. After her father's death, Agnes opens a small school with her mother and finds happiness with Edward who loves her for herself.

This novel seems to be based on Anne's recollections of her experience with the children of the Ingham family and the Robinson family. In the story Agnes Grey is employed by the Murray family. Agnes's step to leave her family at the tender age of eighteen in order to become a governess, to attain the social and economic independence may be considered as a bold step as it was quite uncommon for the Victorian era woman. She resists being kept the "child and the pet of the family... too helpless and dependent – too unfit for buffeting with the cares and turmoil of life" (AG 2). She wants "To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance." (AG 8) Agnes's capabilities were always underestimated by her family. She craved for autonomy and independence to take responsibility of her life, she wants to come out of the shadow of elderly members of her family who were always there to take decisions for her and thus, made feel her dependent and incapable. She narrates: "Though a woman in my own estimation, I was still a child in theirs." (AG 5) Doubting Agnes's potential to sustain an independent life, her mother says: "But, my love, you have not learned to take care of yourself yet: and young children require more judgment and experience to manage than elder ones." (AG 7)

As a governess for the Bloomfield children, Agnes works under difficult conditions, which mainly consist of a lack of respect between employer and employee.

She understands there, what being a governess is really all about. Agnes was forced to cope with isolation, thus, she begins by reaching out to God as her divine source of inspiration. Agnes's employers constantly criticize her ability to function as a good governess, yet Agnes remains "confident that she will be able to alter the children's personalities and reform their characters" (Frawley 94). Despite her failures, Agnes maintains self-control in times of difficulty. She says: "I thought, if I could struggle on with unremitting firmness and integrity, the children would in time become more humanized." (AG 28)

Agnes's progression from the Bloomfields' to the Murrays', from young children between the ages of four and seven, to children between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, marks her own self-progress. When she arrives at the Bloomfields', Agnes is but a child herself, as she admits, having been spoiled and indulged by her family. Agnes is naive only in experience but in principles and understanding she is mature. The degradation and rejection Agnes feels in the Bloomfield household, results in her increasing opportunities for self analysis and begins a journey for understanding who she is. When Agnes hears from her home that her father is seriously ill, she asks permission to go on vacation from Mrs. Murray. One can hear in words Agnes's own bitterness:

Mrs. Murray stared, and wondered at the unwanted energy and boldness with which I urged the request, and thought there was no occasion to hurry; but finally gave me leave: starting, however, that there was "no need to be in such agitation about the matter - it might prove a false alarm after all; and if not - why, it was only in the common course of nature: we must all die some time; and I was not to suppose myself the only afflicted person in the world. (AG 140)

At the end of her story, after series of humiliations, Agnes becomes the wife of Edward Weston, a curate, and states soberly and optimistically in her diary: "We have had trials, and we know that we must have them again; but we shall bear them well together..." (AG 178)

She always has the choice of returning to her home; thus, she assesses her situation on the basis of the autonomy she has achieved rather than on the difficulties she encounters. It is as if she wants to prove something to her family and the female community in particular, in showing how her independence is reflective of her self-awareness. Agnes understands that "family's patterns of thought - patterns that initially denied her an independence result in her seeing herself as somehow less fully developed and able to act on her own" (Frawley 91). Through a deeper introspection and regulation of her behaviour, Agnes establishes the self-esteem sufficient to challenge the turbulent forces of the public world. This drive to define her independent self:

I longed to show my friends that, even now, I was competent to understand the charge, and able to acquit myself honourably to the end; and if ever I felt it degrading to submit so quietly, or intolerable to toil so constantly, I would turn towards my home, and say within myself-they may crush, but they shall not subdue me! This of thee that I think, not of them. (AG 28)

Anne's heroines were less emotional, calculative and precise. Anne seems to avoid any romantic involvement of her heroines with men, particularly of men with power and money. She finds large scope for ill-treatment in them. Anne Bronte's writing lacks the qualities which have made *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* landmark texts, but this should not prevent critics from recognising the important contribution of a novel like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: "Without the searing intensity of Charlotte or the dramatic inventiveness of Emily, Anne demonstrates through her writing that she has a conscious, perceptive control of her fictional materials. This control gives Anne Bronte a claim to artistic merit in her own right." (Jackson 198) Anne Bronte's achievement in *Agnes Grey* must be measured by her success presenting the radical themes of women's independence into the reasonably satisfactory subject matter. Victorian women seemed to face the risk that in defining their voices as female they would be excluded altogether from public debate. The obsession in early works of the Bronte's work with the sex of the authors or with the appropriateness of the subject matter for female readers underscores the Victorian obsession with judging all behaviour through a rigid lens of gender. (Allotte 249)

Conclusion:

Through her unconventional heroines, Anne Bronte depicts the emotional trails and pain of women of Victorian era. Anne's self-confidence in her own passion and judgment, as well as her strength of character and gentleness of manner, combined together, makes her heroine a woman of substance. The heroines created by Anne Bronte were individuals in their own right, free and independent, but none of them were shown to deliberately defy society, in order to assert their freedom and individuality.

The feminist critics, who have been so generally successful in revising our literary appreciation and critical estimate of woman writers, especially those in the Victorian period, have had surprisingly little to say about Anne Bronte. While Charlotte has benefited immensely by the feminist perspective, Anne is little better known and scarcely more frequently discussed than she was previously. (Langland 157)

The general opinion about Anne Bronte as an author remains that she was not indeed a radical woman writer of her age. She spoke of women's issues in a truthful and realistic manner but her approach was mild in comparison with her contemporary women authors. "But an attention to the literary context of Anne's work and to the historic context of her publications allows us to begin to revise the image of Anne as a pale shadow of her sisters." (Langland 149)

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