



Chapter I

Introduction

Throughout Britain's social history, it is generally acknowledged that, the nineteenth century was a period in which norms and socially conspired conventions repressed women most significantly. The rise of the middle class and their social codes concerning family life were crucial to the reinforcement of patriarchal power and the subjugation of women in this period. Conventional ideas regarding femininity which rigidly restricted and constrained women, for instance, were upheld by the powerful middle class who set the tone to different values of the age in England. In providing an overview of the status of women in the nineteenth century, it is, therefore, important to refer to the background related to the rise to power of the middle class and their ideology and values which permeated the rest of society.

By the nineteenth century, the newly emerged middle class which had ascended to power and taken their place in society in the eighteenth century were firmly established. The agricultural and industrial revolutions that ensued favored the growth in number and status of the people in this class. With the rising of their power and increasing wealth and sense of well being, they gradually saw the need to cultivate a genteel lifestyle, much of which was inherited from that of the aristocrats'. But while these revolutions were benefiting certain sectors and the country economically, they were simultaneously creating social problems due to wealth disparities, class distinctions and deteriorating conditions for the poor. By the end of the eighteenth century, with the impact of

the French Revolution in 1789, social unrest in England became rampant. This situation continued and became increasingly more critical in the early decades of the following century.

The nineteenth century, hence, began with scenes of widespread social unrest as industrialization was well underway. The English people witnessed these rapid changes with mixed feelings of excitement and awe. While on the one hand they enjoyed new inventions and discoveries, they felt, on the other hand, that these unprecedented changes engendered doubts and anxieties. Additionally, fear of revolution by the poor in industrial towns and religious conflicts between the established sector and nonconformists contributed to a sense of social and political crisis (Stone 422). There was an urge for discipline and order and this favored the trend for conservatism which was marked by a strong emphasis on propriety, morality and religious concerns.

The social codes of the nineteenth century were dominated by the newly emerging middle class which reached its height and became the most powerful sector in society, socially and politically, from the nineteenth century onwards. It was this class which benefited the most from the changes in economics, society and politics and was hence considered central to Victorian ideology. Power shifted from the hands of the upper class to the middle class, of which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, about one-fifth of the whole population claimed to belong (Levy 22). However, in the midst of this success, the middle class were yet to gain confidence and were rather insecure about their position and conduct.

This was to be a significant force which drove them to develop a moral order and the adoption of new standards of social conduct, which evolved from the eighteenth century, to reassure the security of their position and stability.

One remarkable feature of middle class life-style was its significant emphasis on family and home. The family, more distinctively than any age, was considered a central and sacred unit of Victorian society. Therein, patriarchy was reinforced, sexuality restrained and a woman restricted and constrained by both her traditional and spiritual roles as subservient wife or mother who was also a guardian of peace and happiness in the sanctity of the home. In families, the female position relative to men, who were the head of the family as well as the society, was metaphorically demonstrated in the nineteenth century middle class world view. Leonore Davidoff, in her essay "Class and Gender in Victorian England" underscores this middle class world view which uses the body metaphor to stress its organic nature:

According to the organic view, society was able to operate as a system because of its hierarchically ordered but interdependent parts. The adult middle-class (or aristocratic) man, representing the governing or ruling group, was seen as the Head of the social system as well as the Head of his household which was in turn a society in miniature. The Hands were the unthinking, unfeeling "doers," without characteristics of sex, age, or other identity. (The implication of the word "Hands" for workers is mercilessly castigated by Dickens in his novel *Hard Times*.) Because work was central to Victorian society, the implication was that middle-class men did brain work while the hands did menial work. Middle-class women represented the emotions, the Heart, or sometimes the Soul, seat of morality and

tenderness. Women performed these functions as keepers of the Hearth in the Home, and here we find a body/house connection which figured widely in the Victorian world view (Davidoff 19).

The world view relates that women belonged to the spiritual region while men dominated the material world. As Victorian society believed that a woman's morality could be in danger if she were to get involved with material matters such as money and politics, a woman was hence restricted to her duties within the boundary of home which was her proper place and sphere (Mitchell xii). This stark demarcation of gender roles succeeded in excluding women from the domain of education, work and business and thus kept women as dependents who had little control over their own lives. To be extolled with the role of the keeper of the hearth and often being endowed with an image of an angel or Virgin Mary, a woman was not expected merely to care for her husband but also to be a pure and virtuous soul mate who could offer comfort and solace to him. An ideal nineteenth century woman was to be submissive, well-mannered and chaste. She was to live her life relatively to men, to be educated enough to suit his needs and to support him in all aspects—someone who was there to “please them (men), to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them”.¹

The character of Agnes in Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield*, an excellent housekeeper and a virtuous and self-abnegated heroine, superbly exemplifies the ideal woman of the age: “the Angel in the House”.² To gain her acclamation as an ideal wife, a heroine such as Agnes needs to depend on her

excessive capacity to devote herself in the service of others. It was self-sacrifice regarded as one of the female's greatest virtues, that Miss Sara Ellis, a popular writer of conduct manuals for women, saw as inspiration to genuine womanly conduct (Dyhouse 174). Not only was self-abnegation seen to reflect womanliness, it was also a virtue reinforced by Christian beliefs, which considered it to be a religious duty as well. The ideal Victorian woman had to subdue her own desires to others and to endure patiently and silently whatever conflicts such suppression engendered. Self-abnegation, as well as other womanly virtues were deeply rooted and even those who questioned gender inequality believed, to a certain degree, the necessity to retain some of such values including self-sacrifice. Charlotte Brontë who is known to have been raised as a dutiful daughter and sister is an excellent example of a Victorian woman who chose to suppress her own wishes and desires for the sake of her family.

To extol women with an ideal image of virtuousness and chasteness as Agnes, in fact, was a manipulative tactic to keep women under control. In this process women were confined and bestowed with values which if to live up to meant total self-abnegation. But these images of women as ideal woman, angel or the Virgin Mary were only one side of a duality which society had conceived of. Influenced by classical and Christian beliefs, society viewed a woman as comprising dual sides, pure and wicked. The image of the Virgin Mary—representing virtue and purity which was powerfully emphasized was counterposed by images of women as beings who were potentially sexual and prone to moral corruption. By relating to the sin of Eve and her creation from Adam, Christianity held that women were inferior and imperfect. Religious

doctrine supported women's suppression in order to keep them from becoming tempted by lust and, in effect, always retaining them in their designated sphere. To control women's sexual appetite, Victorian society claimed, women must be protected from the knowledge about their body and sexuality and extreme precautions for all proper actions as suggested by numerous conduct books were deemed essential.

As the social controls and restrictions described were determined by men who also established laws, discrimination against women in legal terms was serious. Under the law first established in the sixteenth century, women lost their legal right over their property after marriage (Stone 136). When a woman married her legal identity was merged with that of her husband: she no longer possessed a legal right to sign contracts or wills. Even her earnings belonged to her husband as exemplified in the case of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), a well-known writer and Brontë's contemporary, who needed to request from the pocket of her husband the money she earned (Basch 29). The law which allowed married women the right for complete control over their own income only came into force in 1882 (Williams 6). Moreover, mothers were refused the right to custody of their children: the husbands could legally take custody of the children and not allow the mother to see them (Williams 6). During 1832-1884, while a number of reform bills gradually enfranchised middle and working class men, women were still denied the right to vote. After a series of struggles and movements by different women's suffrage societies, women over thirty who possessed a certain amount of property were finally accorded that right only in

1918. Since most married women no longer own their property after their marriage, only 6 million out of the total of 13 million adult women were given the right to vote in that year (Levy 25).

Against all these clearly pronounced legal disadvantages, young females in their restricted world continued to dream of romantic love and marriage, the latter being the primary goal to achieve in life. These young women, in fact, knew very little about life beyond their home. They saw marriage as liberation from the confinement of home and their parents' authority. In many cases, as reflected in a number of Jane Austen's novels, the convention of primogeniture necessitated women who were not endowed with property to seek marriage for economic reasons. Economic pressure was particularly severe on unmarried women who had no family support nor property as society had never prepared them to seek employment outside their homes. In the Brontë family, Patrick Brontë realized this fact and, thus, equipped his daughters with the education available to girls of their class in those days, to endow them with resources for earning an income.

However, no matter how young women hoped to fulfill their dream of marriage, a large number of them would not have their dream realized. Statistics indicate that by the middle of the nineteenth century there were half a million more women than men and one million women remained single (Perkin 153). Worse was the fact that single women were also prone to be victims of social ridicule if they failed to marry at all. As reflected in novels, spinsters were typically portrayed as malicious, ill-tempered and ugly women.

As statistics reveal, the majority of English girls were critically deprived of formal education in the nineteenth century. The type of education considered suitable for young women involved the training of domestic work and household management. In wealthier families girls were also taught other skills such as music and drawing which seemed to be worthwhile only for fulfilling ones' leisure and displaying ones' well-being. As boys were more preferable in English families and were believed to have greater intellect than girls, they were provided with higher forms of education. For a son, education was regarded as "an investment in a boy's future" (Perkin 37) while a daughter's education was merely a preparation for a role as housewife. Girls who determined to keep on studying had to find time to read their books in secret, as in the case of Mary Somervill (1780-1872), an outstanding scientist and mathematician who, for many years, sought the early hours at daybreak and the late of the night to read Euclid, algebra or the classics (Perkin 28).

From the 1850s onwards, new schools and colleges for girls which placed more emphasis on academic achievement began to open. However, the numbers of females in such schools remained small: it was reported that in 1894, there were about 200 quality schools for girls with a few hundred pupils studying in each (Perkin 38). From the 1880s colleges and universities began to admit women to study for degrees. Cambridge did not allow women a full degree until 1948 while Oxford did so only in 1920 (Royle 381). However, the number of women in higher education remained small: in 1939 there were 876 female compared with 4,147 male students at Oxford, while 509 female and 5,422 male students were at Cambridge (Perkin 43).

Women's inadequate formal education and occupational training made them unqualified for most work available, a situation which seriously affected single women as earlier mentioned. Most jobs available to women were narrowed to domestic service and factory or needle work (Williams 10). The lives of the Brontë sisters and the heroines in their novels, in most of Charlotte Brontë's works and in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, echo the problems of educated middle class women who needed to support themselves with limited resources and occupational options. The only respectable work available to them was that of a governess of which supply was higher than demand and which ones had to tolerate extremely low pay and hard working conditions. Around the 1850s, after Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) had undertaken the responsibility to standardize nursing which was then an unskilled and lowly profession, nursing became increasingly more acceptable and respectable. Although remuneration was very low the profession became another working alternative for middle-class women. Among the working class, with the enclosure of land and rapid urbanization, women as well as other family members were forced into the labor market. Many had to toil over ten hours a day as needlewomen, agricultural laborers and mineworkers in exchange for very little pay.

The ideology and traditional aspects of women which this chapter earlier outlined is depicted in numerous nineteenth century novels. Novelists of this age often presented stories involving women, marriage and the domestic relationships which emphasize the significance of female duties and virtues and women's needs for male protection. Few voices from these novels were to question the validity of these traditional values or examine their consequences. One of these early voices was found in the works of Charlotte Brontë. During the

last years of the 1840s Charlotte Brontë's first published novel introduced to English audiences a new type of heroine and the unconventional circumstances she encounters in her struggle and quest for love and recognition. The lives and struggles of the heroines in this first and other ensuing novels, convey the reality regarding condition of women in society which derived from the author's direct experiences as she was one of these Victorian women who struggled through life's hardships in order to fulfill her needs and dreams.

Ostensibly, by considering relevant aspects in Charlotte Brontë's biography one is able to see some related background and forces which influence her literary creations. Some of the circumstances which Brontë's protagonists encounter are parallel to those experienced by the author and some of her characterizations show strong resemblance to a number of people she had met and interacted with and those who had an influence upon her. Charlotte Brontë was born in 1816, the third of six children. She was brought up in the village of Haworth on the moors of West Yorkshire. Her mother died when she was five and four years later she lost both her elder sisters to tuberculosis. The pattern of deaths was to recur during 1848-49. It began with the death from tuberculosis of her brother Branwell in 1848. Subsequently, Emily rapidly developed the same disease and died three months later. After Emily's death Anne began to display symptoms of tuberculosis and died in spring of 1849, six months after the death of Emily. According to Robert Keefe in *Charlotte Brontë's World of Death*, these tragedies are believed to have affected her views on life, particularly the death of her mother, which Keefe holds to influence Brontë to perceive herself as an onlooker of life (Keefe 4). With the deaths of her elder

sisters, Charlotte Brontë inherited the responsibilities of the eldest daughter in taking care of household matters and family members, especially her father. She took these conventional roles seriously and would never neglect them all her life.

Being brought up deprived of motherly love in an isolated and untamed environment all the young Brontës sought solace and security in their close friendship, love for the natural moorlands and a fascination in creative composition. The four children who had a strong inclination for the arts, and perhaps inspired by their father's published books, had learned to write creatively and imaginatively since they were very young. All the young Brontës were well-educated, mostly self-taught, except for Branwell who received constant tutoring from his father for the kind of education boys in those days were expected to have. Charlotte was the daughter who received the longest schooling: for almost one year when she was eight at the Clergy Daughters' School where her sisters developed the fatal illness and again when she was fifteen at Miss Wooler School where she attended for one and a half years. She was known to take her studies with her greatest effort and diligence and was one of the school's outstanding pupils. Brontë saw it as her responsibility to prepare herself to become a governess in order that she could support her family and provide an education for her younger siblings.

The sisters shared a unique drive for economic independence which was untypical for women in their generation. This could have been influenced by their father, a self-reliant man himself who paved his way to the respectable profession from his poor peasant background. Realizing that their father's income as a parson of about 200 pounds per year was insufficient to run the

family, the Brontë sisters prepared themselves to earn their living. As mentioned earlier, the only respectable work option for educated middle class females at that time was being a governess who often had to tolerate over-working with extremely low pay and the lack of respect in the family to which she rendered her services. Lacking skills in teaching and the handling of children and being accustomed to living in the wild and natural surroundings and the security of home, all the Brontë sisters had difficulty adjusting themselves to a governess' life. They could not retain the posts for long. It was rare that a young woman of the time would be attracted by the idea of establishing her own school but that was the idea Charlotte Brontë adopted, wishing to work with her sisters in their own way. To improve their qualifications she and Emily went to Brussels to perfect their language skills in French and German. In Brussels Charlotte met and fell in love with her French teacher, Constantin Heger, then a married man, and this poignant experience of forbidden love, desires and rejection became one of the significant resources for her writing in later years.

After Brussels she and her sisters embarked on the school project by modifying part of the parsonage as a boarding school for girls. The scheme was, however, unsuccessful because no pupils enrolled. The area around the parsonage was too isolated and the sisters did not want to leave their father behind to settle their school elsewhere. This was one of the hardest times in Charlotte Brontë's life as there seemed to be no remaining prospects when the school scheme failed and her love lost. She was extremely frustrated by the constraints she felt imposed on her: years of the suppression of her wishes to become a writer in a society that did not approve writing as a proper career for women, and her struggle to earn a living in a work market which offered middle

class women only one unpleasant choice. Brontë realized her own potential to contribute more than society had allowed her and other women to. Her frustration and sense of despair over her conditions are reflected in a letter she wrote to one of her close friends:

I can hardly tell you how time gets on at Haworth. There is no event whatever to mark its progress. One day resembles another; and all have heavy, lifeless physiognomies. Sunday, baking-day, and Saturday, are the only ones that have any distinctive mark. Meantime, life wears away. I shall soon be thirty; and I have done nothing yet. Sometimes I get melancholy at the prospect before and behind me. Yet it is wrong and foolish to repine. Undoubtedly, my duty directs me to stay at home for the present. There was a time when Haworth was a very pleasant place to me; it is not so now. I feel as if we were all buried here. I long to travel; to work; to live a life of action.....(quoted by Gaskell 190).

Evidently, Brontë felt entrapped in a life of stagnancy with little hope for anything better to come, a circumstance which too many women in society also shared. This made her understand too well the frustrations and agonies of women in a patriarchal society who saw their lives waste away to nothing. These poignant experiences are captured in all of her novels.

Her first step in the literary world was taken after the Brontë sisters' school project turned out to be an unsuccessful venture. When she one day accidentally encountered Emily's fine poems, the idea of publishing a book of poetry authored by herself and her sisters was conceived. Although only two copies of the book were sold, the event inspired her to continue to write. Her first work, *The*

Professor, was refused by publishers but her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, became a popular publishing success. With such welcomed recognition, Charlotte Brontë was then ready to fully embark on a literary career.

In a span of less than ten years, Charlotte Brontë completed four novels: *The Professor* completed in 1846 but published after her death in 1857; *Jane Eyre* published in 1847; *Shirley* in 1849 and *Villette* in 1853. All except *Shirley* were written in the form of an autobiography: the narrators provide details of significant events in their struggles for life fulfillment. Many of the accounts in her novels are believed to be derived from and inspired by the author's actual life experiences. The Lowood section in *Jane Eyre*, some of the prominent scenes and characters and the account of relationships of the protagonists in *The Professor* and *Villette*, in particular, are believed to be inspired by the actual places, people or events in the author's real life. Of the four, *Shirley* is the odd one out since it involves lives in a broader sense, focusing on interactions between men and women and people of different interests and classes in the community during a period of rampant unrest in history.

Charlotte Brontë's novels portray themes of struggle and quest which intertwine with the love themes of the protagonists occurring under different circumstances from typical domestic fiction of the time. The novels portray the male protagonists as powerful figures in contrast to the female protagonists who appear powerless but are, in fact, potentially strong and subtly superior to the male counterparts in some aspects. These female protagonists are usually poor orphans who struggle with life hardships to fulfill their needs and to gain a recognition. In seeking to fulfill their aspirations for love, most of them experience

a forbidden or an unrequited love which render them a level of self-growth. In almost all of Brontë's works, the protagonists encounter critical events which force them to escape or journey away to leave behind the past life for a new and more hopeful beginning.

Most of Brontë's protagonists differ from the conventional male and female protagonists in that they are poor, not physically attractive and are orphans. It was Brontë's intention to create such unconventional protagonists who are still able to interest and move readers in their unfortunate destinies. As the writer of an article "The Death of Currer Bell" recalls, Brontë

...once told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, "I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours" (quoted by Gaskell 215).

As readers have seen, Brontë was able to portray her female protagonists as she wished most successfully. Such portrayals reveal the author's higher priority towards personal strength, intellect and effort; ones that are the key to fulfillment in life. As presented in her novels, the female protagonists are industrious young women who struggle with limited resources and access to life's fulfillment. They are small, thin and plain-looking females who strive to make it through their "native wit, moral integrity and strength of will" (Ewbank 157). This reflects one of the greatest virtues of the age, "self-help", as the author was herself a daughter of a self-reliant man who ascended to the middle class through

his determination and effort to gain a good education despite his working class background. Brontë herself became a self-dependent woman who had to support herself for a living and in order to fulfill her dreams.

Interestingly, all these female protagonists display a sense of rebelliousness, something Walter Allen in *The English Novel* claims distinguished Brontë from the female novelists who preceded her (Allen 192). Whether or not these protagonists are able to transcend the restraints which seek to debilitate them, a drive to rebel can be seen in all of them. This asserts into the literary scene a rare voice of protest from women against irrational and unjust social conventions. *Jane Eyre*, for example, begins with the violent scene of a girl's revolt against cruelty and injustice. Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* requests her uncle's permission to get work as a governess since she feels an urgent need to fill the intolerable void in her life. Frances Henri, the female protagonist in *The Professor*, tells her husband that if she married a man who proved to be a tyrannical husband, escape would most probably be her way out of her misery.

Some conventional critics of her time strongly disapproved of this sense of rebelliousness displayed in Charlotte Brontë's novels. But what they found most unacceptable was her handling of love and passion and deviations from the conventionally obedient and submissive image of women in her female protagonists. A reviewer of the *Athenaeum* found Brontë's "treatment of love excessively passionate" (Ewbank 44). Another attacked the lack of womanliness of the heroines exclaiming that Brontë's "impersonations are without the feminine element, infringers of modest restraints. Despisers of bashful fears, self-reliant,

contemptuous of prescriptive decorum; their own unaided reason, their individual opinion of right and wrong, discreet or imprudent, sole guides of conduct and rules of manners..." (quoted by Ewbank 45).

Yet, in fact, Brontë's female protagonists such as Jane in *Jane Eyre* or Caroline in *Shirley* choose to suppress their own desires so as not to transcend the morality line and the prevailing rules of etiquette. They also reveal their capacity to dedicate themselves solely to their male counterparts just as traditional women would do. By presenting her female protagonists as passionate and longing for love, Brontë was only adhering to the reality that women have passions, feelings and a need for love just as men do. The originality and remarkable qualities in Brontë's novels, in fact, won her more acclamation than attack from critics of her time. Their appreciation was often noted with such key words as "power", "originality", "freshness", "vigour" and "truth" (Allott 22). Subsequently, in the last few decades of the nineteenth century they finally began to admire the "unconventional" elements which had been severely attacked by earlier reviewers.

One important reason that makes the works of Charlotte Brontë so outstanding and earns so much attention from readers and critics generation after generation is the intensity with which she conveys and expresses her message. Female frustrations from women's deprived conditions, for instance, are echoed with intensity through the voices of characters such as Jane and Caroline. In *Villette*, Lucy's isolation and craving for love and friendship piercingly moves readers to realize the extreme loneliness of a friendless and resourceless young woman who strives to live on.

All these elements conspire in giving Brontë's novels power and intensity in presenting women's conditions and problems in society. Through the experiences and reflections of her female protagonists, Brontë mainly depicts women's frustration and suffering as they seek to fulfill their needs in a society which deprives women of resources and opportunities to live independently. Along with these, the author asserts the need for a woman to engage herself more substantially and to be recognized first and foremost as an individual, as someone who can think and decide for herself. She also emphasizes the value of independence: women must be able to retain an extent of independence even after their marriage.

Charlotte Brontë's novels are, thus, proper resources, among others, for a study of women's status in the nineteenth century, the focus of this thesis. The thesis aims to argue that while women in the nineteenth century are conditioned to be dependents and subservient to men, in fact, they have the potential to be empowered so as to live more independently and to have greater control over their lives. The study is divided into four chapters: the first chapter provides the social background of the position of women in the nineteenth century and background to Brontë's literary creations; the second chapter supports the thesis' assumption by exploring women's plight and deprivation in their restricted lives and sphere and examining the imbalanced paradigm of power in male-female relationships through the author's four novels; the third chapter focuses on women's needs and aspirations as it explores the struggles for self-fulfillment of the female protagonists through *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, as one of their prominent

themes is the female protagonist's quest; the final chapter provides conclusions on the status of women in the nineteenth century as seen in the works of Brontë and points to Brontë's assertions as significant to female selfhood.

Notes

1. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar quoted this from *Émile* written by Jean Jacques Rousseau to show that the traditional idea that women should live their lives for and relative to men gained support even from such a male figure as Rousseau whose philosophy on liberty influenced a number of movements for political reform. Though written in 1762, this quotation could still be regarded as “the nineteenth century’s ideology of femininity” according to Gilbert and Gubar in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York: W.W. Norton &Company, 1985), p. 168.
2. Referring to Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854-6) which is a verse-novel written in exaltation of the courtship and marriage of the heroine whose “unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility reveal that she is not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth” as described by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.22.