



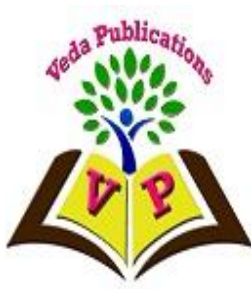
WOMEN QUESTION IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S SHIRLEY

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ABSTRACT



Charlotte's Literary achievements during her brief span of life are relatively few but what she lacked in quantity, she more than made up in variety. Certain basic themes and ideas do recur in all her novels, but there are several major and minor differences. Shirley is a significant work of regional fiction with its faithful representation of the contemporary society. Charlotte shows the problems of the individual in a corrupt society. Shirley deals with "something unromantic as Monday morning." as Charlotte Bronte herself states in the novel. What she seeks to study is not only the individual but also in relation to society. Both men and women are afflicted by a sense of uncertainty of their existence, but Charlotte concentrates upon women who, besides being powerless victims of political and economic forces are subjugated by a male oriented society and reduced to the position of ineffectual creatures. The novel explores this problem by means of the two heroines, Shirley and caroline.

Keywords: *Subjugated, Predicament, Submissive, Conventional, Conquer.*



Before the commencement of Shirley, Charlotte wrote to Mr. Williams, of Smith, Elder & Co. expressing her desire of writing something about the women question. As W.A. Craik remarks, "Through Caroline and Shirley, she examines the position and difficulties of a single young woman and how common life, the attitudes of men and the accepted tenets of society frustrate her" (Craik 136)

She was also interested in a public subject which was the Luddite uprising in the west riding of Yorkshire, that began in 1811-12. These were the clashes between employers and their employees, as a result of Napoleonic wars and the Industrial revolution with its far reaching effects. Her choice was probably influenced by the contemporary Chartist movement and the fashion prevalent at the time of writing socially significant novels. Thus, Shirley deals with the historical, the intellectual and the external. With its faithful representation of the contemporary society, Shirley is a significant work of regional fiction. Robert B. Heilman describe the book as Charlotte's one deliberate venture from private intimacies into public extensities, orders in council, the luddites technological unemployment in 1811 and 1812, a social portraiture which develops Charlotte's largest cast of characters. Yet Charlotte cannot keep it a social novel. She wanted to present outer life but was drawn to express inner emotions of the heroines.

This was something new in her fiction since what she seeks to study is not merely the individual but in relation to society. The hero of the novel is Robert Moore, he is the chief male character in the novel and the novel concentrates on his efforts and success. Winifred Gerin Summarizes the novel as "a book about the predicament of women-women in

love, women suffering from un-required love, women, who have never, and never will be loved."

Robert Moore, the hero of the novel is determined to repay the debts left behind by his father upon his death. He is determined to mechanise everything, acquire new machinery and is aware that his unrelenting attitude has made him unpopular. He is indifferent to the plight of the labourers and works single mindedly. He keeps aloof from politics and has no prejudices against anyone in the neighbourhood. He views Mr. Helstone and Mr. Yorke, inhabitants of Briarsfield impartially.

Caroline Helstone, like Charlotte's previous protagonists, is an orphan if not in the literal in the figurative sense, since her father is dead and her mother deserted her when she was a child. She is related to the Moores and is deeply in love with her cousin, Robert Moore. Caroline nourishes hopes of marrying him. Robert, too, is attracted to her but there is a conflict within his psyche. He feels that the frenzy is quite temporary. He had it earlier also and it will vanish soon. Caroline, who is living in a fool's paradise, takes it for granted that he loves her as she loves him and is convinced that marriage will be the natural outcome of their association. She finds it very difficult to conceal her feelings from him and reveals them when she talks to him. She doesn't want to be misunderstood as being fast.

Robert tries to avoid meeting her whenever possible and even when he meets her, he treats her in a very casual manner. She can't blame Robert for what she is suffering because he has not wronged her in any manner. She retires into herself and pretends that nothing has happened. She loses interest in everything and feels that every activity is monotonous. Caroline sees Robert only as church



and she avoids looking at him because it involves "too much pain and too much pleasure". She feels hurt by Robert's continued disinterestedness and struggles spiritedly in order to conquer her weakness. Caroline's sense of insecurity fills her with a desperate longing to know her mother, but accompanying this desire is a doubt whether her mother would be likeable or not as, she has never heard anyone uttering a word in praise of her mother. Caroline's memories of her father are not pleasant ones. He had not been a kind man and his beauty had been skin deep. Mr. Helstone tells her that her mother has never cared to enquire about her. Caroline is totally dissatisfied with her life. So, she asks her uncle, if he is agreeable to her becoming a governess. He is incredulous and can't understand why she wants to work when she lacks nothing. It is a male dominated society – the best opportunities are available only to men and she is over – ruled firmly by her uncle. Caroline feels rebellious because of the bondage to which all women are subjected. As W.A. Craik remarks, "spiritual freedom rather than social or financial independence or emotional satisfaction is what is in question."(Craik 136)

Caroline expects to become calm with the passage of time though she never expects to be happy. Mr. Helstone takes her to Fieldhead to introduce her to Shirley Keedlar, the heiress of the Fieldhead estate as he is interested in promoting friendship between them. Shirley has a charming face and manner and is simple. Mrs. Pryor, her companion approves of the friendship between the two girls and encourages Caroline's visits to Fieldhead.

Terry Eagleton writes; "Caroline is the typical Charlotte heroine, of whom Shirley is a heavily idealised version. It is enough to say here that

Caroline suffers from an acute crisis of identity from which Shirley is protected by virtue of her social privileges."(Eagleton 50)

Shirley represents the obligations of a landowner in a society which is both industrial as well as agricultural. She is a spirited girl who declares that she should be addressed as Shirley Keedlar Esq. Shirley invites Caroline frequently to Fieldhead. Caroline herself is too reticent to go there on her own. She lacks confidence in her ability to be amusing and youthful in her company. Shirley asserts her equality with men and can be appropriately termed as a "Woman liber", but in spite of that she is subjected to the same superior attitude of men as Caroline and unfit to know about the happenings of her own property. Shirley and Caroline share similar tastes in reading, they have similar likes and dislikes and thoroughly enjoy each other's company.

Despite her friendship with Shirley, Caroline is not able to overcome her yearning for Robert Moore completely and he continues to haunt her thoughts. One night, while returning home she sees Robert and Shirley together but it does not surprise her because from their first encounter with each other she had the conviction that friendship between them was inevitable. As she opines,

"They will both be happy, and I do not grudge them their bliss; but I groan under my own misery; some of my suffering is very acute." (p238)

She gradually grows more and more mournful and depressed and the beauty of the environment also cannot rouse her spirits from their state of apathy. Mrs. Yorke feels that Caroline is very impractical, sentimental and idealistic and never experienced life as it really is. She thinks that Caroline attaches too much importance to feelings and her



face wears a lackadaisical expression. Caroline feels indignant and refuses to listen to Mrs. Yorke's criticism. She declares the supremacy of her feelings and her love: "Whom my feelings teach me to love, I must and shall love, and I hope, if ever I have a husband and children, my feelings will include me to love them. I hope in that case, all my impulses will be strong in compelling me to love." (p. 387)

Caroline is reluctant to go home since she has been hoping that she will meet Robert before she departs. Even though he will express only displeasure when he sees her. Caroline is down with fever which persists for many days. Mrs. Pryor decides to stay at the Rectory till Caroline's condition improves. Caroline welcomes the comfort of her presence and declares that she would like to remain ill so that she could keep Mrs. Pryor by her side. The latter is deeply touched by this and dedicates all her energies in looking after Caroline. Loneliness and gloom were now away from her and she felt protection and solace there. She and her nurse shared a wonderful association together.

The rapport that exists between Mrs Pryor and Caroline right from the beginning grows stronger. Mrs. Pryor always enjoyed her company. For Mrs Pryor, it is a rare occurrence that her love is being reciprocated. Caroline has "feelings of affection and admiring esteem" for her. Mrs. Pryor is worried about Caroline's growing pallor and she tells her not to worry about the future. But Caroline's problems are not connected with the future but are concerned with the immediate present which she finds "oppressive". She had been neglected in her childhood, although servants had been very kind to her. Mrs Pryor is dead set against the idea of Caroline's becoming a governess. As her own

experience as one has left her extremely bitter. She was never allowed to forget the hiatus in the social position. Mrs Pryor is not trying to prejudice Caroline but she genuinely feels that Caroline does not have the constitution to battle with this sort of life and will not survive long in such an atmosphere. Caroline is sure that she is going to die but she wants to see Robert once before her death. Hortense comes to visit Caroline who is very happy to see her. She learns from her that Robert has gone away on business for about a fortnight. Caroline is sad and starts crying after Hortense's departure. Like Jane. Caroline can't conceive a life without love. Mrs Pryor is very anxious and she has deduced that Caroline's deterioration is due to mental rather than physical strain. As she opines,

"But your mind, Caroline: your mind is crushed; your heart is almost broken: you have been so neglected, so repulsed, left so desolate."

This is what makes Mrs Pryor confess that they are mother and daughter. Caroline cannot believe what she has heard. She has her uncle summoned because she wants confirmation from him that Mrs. Pryor is her mother. Mrs. Pryor's bitterness about marriage is explained when she describes her experience of it to Caroline. James Helstone had fascinated her with his good looks, but it did not take her long to realize how his appearance had misled her. But now she feels she can forgive him because of the beautiful gift he had given her, their daughter.

Mr. Yorke tells Louis Moore to write to his brother warning him that the prize will be snatched by someone else if he is late. Louis is taken by surprise because he has no idea that Robert wants to marry Shirley. The Sympton family due to their



superior financial position have a supercilious attitude towards Louis, who is merely a tutor in their house. Their behaviour with him is very proper but cold. As is evident from the following comment,

“ yes, Louis Moore was a satellite of the house of Sympson, connected, yet apart, ever attendant ever distant.” (p.429)

Shirley is not proud but she just doesn't acknowledge his presence and Louis seems quite resigned to this treatment. He is conscious of his comparatively inferior social position, but is otherwise confident of his superior intelligence and talents. Caroline asks Shirley why she has such an unsympathetic attitude towards him. She extolls his virtues for Shirley's benefit because she wants the other girl to like him, little knowing that Shirley actually loves him.

Mr. Sympson accepts that she will be the tutor's relative. Shirley's patience with her uncle has ended and she tells him that his and her ambitions, beliefs, ideals are all too different for harmony to exist between them and the best course for them is to remain at a distance. She tells him in unambiguous terms as to what she wants her husband to be: "My husband is not to be my baby. I am not to set his daily lesson and see that he learns it, and give him sugar plum if he is good and a patient pensive, pathetic lecture if he is bad. Improving a husband, no, I shall insist upon my husband improving me, or elsewhere part. (p.575)

M.H.Blom analyses Louis 's situation .She writes, “ And here is the core of his problem,if he is to triumph , he must discard the protective mask of false humanity donned to enable him to view rejection in sociological rather than personal terms;

he must hazard himself in his proposal to her.”(Bronte 124).

Shirley is scared of losing her independence. In the introduction to the Penguin edition of Shirley, edited by Andrew and Judith Hook, Shirley's character, temperament and motives have been analysed.

"It is only within the world of love and feeling that Shirley is willing to play anything approaching the conventional woman's role. And even with Louis Moore she is merely submissive. Her marriage to Moore is none-the-less the crucial index of the character; it signals her strict adherence to the truths of feeling, her complete rejection of the values of conventional society."(Bronte 124)

Robert Moore has been away for a long time and people have started speculating about the reasons. People feel that he is perhaps afraid of jeopardising his life by returning to Briarsfield. The day, he returns, is the market day. Mr. Yorke feels that it is his duty as a friend to inform Robert that Shirley is on the verge of matrimony and advises him to propose to her. At this, he tells Mr. Yorke how he had led to believe that Shirley loved him because of her reaction when she saw him and the financial help she gave him. Her attitude towards him had always been very sympathetic. His Yorkshire ancestry puts him at par with Shirley. Feeling that it was a wonderful opportunity to use her wealth for his own purpose, he had proposed to her in a hard, firm fashion as he himself describes it, because he has never been attracted to her physically. This proposal had shocked and infuriated her. She had told him that he had spoken like a brigand who demanded her purse rather than like a lover who asks for heart. He



feels "her words were a mirror in which I saw myself."

When Rebert sought her forgiveness, with her strong sense of fairness she had replied, "I could, if there was not myself to forgive, too" was her reply, "but to mislead a sagacious man so far, I must have done wrong". Shirley did not love Robert, therefore refused his offer of marriage and at the same time proved to him that she is morally superior to him as he is utterly mercenary. He had resolved never to propose to a girl unless he loved her. He would not allow financial consideration to gain hold in the matters of marriage. His pride had been severely hurt. But he had always known that they were not made for each other as they were not really compatible.

Besides surrendering his mercenary intentions, his attitude towards the labourers has changed. He visited localities in which poor labourers' families lived and saw the deprivation and necessity there. So, he is now determined to protect the interests of the poor although he will still resist and crush revolts. On way back home, Robert is shot at and is in a serious condition. Mr. Yorke takes Robert to his own house as it is near. Mrs. Yorke feels exultant because Robert is solely in her care.

Caroline becomes very upset because of Robert's condition and is dying to see him. She meets Martin Yorke in the woods and pretends that she has lost her way. He wants to confirm the rumours about Caroline and Robert but feels quite repentant on seeing her pale face. Martin arranges a meeting with Robert for her. Caroline is not sure whether Robert will be happy to see her but she is surprised that even he has been wanting to see her. Caroline is over-joyed to be in his company.

"Here I am at your side, where I thought never more to be: here I speak to you-I see you listen to me willingly look at me kindly." (p.542)

When Robert hears these words, only then he realizes how much he has wronged this faithful girl. Now, he will live to atone for his sins. He is guilty because he has neglected her and hopes to compensate some way. After Shirley's rejection of him, he had realized his folly and during his illness realized now much Caroline meant to him.

When they are alone, Robert asks her how she is looking so well and cheerful. Caroline tells him that it is partly due to the love and affection of her mother and because they are friends again. Robert wants to clear his conscience and confesses to Caroline about his proposal to Shirley. He wants to force out a direct confession of love from Caroline and wants also to admit his own love for her. He seeks her forgiveness, he has repented therefore redeemed. Their's is a perfect union, both physically and spiritually.

The novel is full of the pessimistic reflections of Caroline on the condition of man in the form of impassioned out-bursts which appear to be the outcome of both the heroine's and the author's sufferings. Characters are independent of each other and they are presented impartially. Charlotte Bronte created suspense as it surrounds the characters such as Shirley, Mrs. Pryor, Robert Moore with an aura of mystery. The novel describes the lonely individual's search for social identity which can be fully realized only by acquiring a soul mate. There is a sorting out of the two pairs, Louis and Shirley and Robert and Caroline where by men and women of contrary temperaments are united in matrimony. Thus, the insistence that men as well as women need



fulfilment in life is one of the new elements of reality
in Charlotte Bronte's novels.

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