

Female Writers' Anxiety of Authorship Observed in *Jane Eyre*

KE Hui, ZOU Jian-ling

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Female writers have always been in an inferior status to male writers in the early age. This situation does great harm to many female writers both physically and psychologically, which can also be fully displayed in their works. *Jane Eyre* is a feminist canon written by Charlotte Bronte. As an autobiographical novel, *Jane Eyre* contains the dilemma and the anxiety of the authorship of female writers in 19th century. Those could be mainly embodied by the masculine pseudonym and dual writing strategy, the portrayal of heroine Jane, and another important female character Bertha.

Keywords: anxiety of authorship, feminism, *Jane Eyre*

Introduction

Jane Eyre is a realistic novel with strong sense of romanticism. It prevails for many years not just because of its element of romance, but also the great contribution to feminism. The story of Jane can be read as a model of resistance, not only to “the Victorian conception of woman’s place” (Christ, 1990, p. 67) but to “women’s fate within the symbolic order” (Homans, 1986, p. 86). It’s a story of woman’s fear and resistance towards patriarchal society as well as the compromise to the environment. On the consideration of autobiographical factors, the struggling and compromise of the heroine is the reflection of the plight of Charlotte Bronte—a representative of female writers in early 19th century. Specifically, it implies Bronte’s concern about her own identity as a female writer, which is named as anxiety of authorship. There is a truth that female writers were faced with the literary history written by men in the early 19th century and they found that they should not learn from the precedent, but to create a new writing style and break new ground for themselves. For a long time, artistic creativity has been regarded as the basic feature of men. Writing has been viewed as men’s activity and women’s image in literature has become the product of male fantasy. Women writers have been deprived of the right to create female images and have to obey the standard of traditional patriarchy (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 132). When female writers carry out literary activities, they always bear “the anxiety of writer’s identity”. This kind of anxiety makes them not directly use “female unique strength”, but take circuitous way to express their feelings. These women writers are doing a difficult and contradictory job: They are seeking to become the real authority of women’s literature, and meanwhile they have to obey and destroy the literary standard of patriarchy. *Jane Eyre* is such a work that shows the anxiety of female writers.

Anxiety Behind the Masculine Pseudonym and Dual Writing Strategy

Many literary critics give evaluation that Bronte’s writing is a typical autobiographical work with the text

KE Hui, master’s degree, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.
ZOU Jian-ling, associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

form of female writers' self-fulfillment, integrated with her experience of being a tutor. Except from the self-fulfillment, there is also compromise and anxiety. That can be seen in the way of publication of *Jane Eyre*. Influenced by the environment at that time, women's low social status determined their subordination and dependence in social life. They were excluded from social public labor and lost their economic resources; therefore, they fell into poverty, let alone their dominant position in society. They could only use self-concealment strategy and masculine to make their works published smoothly and get fair and objective evaluation. Currer Bell was the male pseudonym that Charlotte Bronte used to publish the work. At that time, it was not uncommon that female writers took masculine pseudonyms to write. For example, Bronte's sisters Anne Bronte and Emily Bronte took Ellis Bell and Acton Bell as their pseudonyms. This phenomenon reflected the fact that the literary world was entirely dominated by male writers. If a woman wanted to write, it was abnormal and would not be accepted. If they wanted to publish their writings and became famous, it was impossible unless they disguised themselves as males. Writing in a masculine pseudonym shows the struggling of Bronte's mind, which is paying efforts to break the stereotype of women while holding the low self-confidence in female identity. Taking a masculine pseudonym is a kind of form of anxiety in female writers' self-identification.

This kind of anxiety of authorship can also be seen from the dual text writing strategy of the work: On the one hand, *Jane Eyre* fosters the tradition of autobiographical bildungsroman originated in 1847. On the other hand, Bronte deconstructs the social status quo that women were oppressed and had to compromise in the patriarchal society through the appearance of crazy women, thus further revealing the inner conflicts of female writers (Tao, 2009, p. 26). In some sense, Bronte inherits the writing tradition as male writers and adopts to appeal readers at that time. Meanwhile, she still creates and retains the distinctive characteristics of a female writer, that is, the confrontational attitude towards the rules and confinement imposed by patriarchal society. The main carriers are heroine Jane and the mad woman Bertha.

Anxiety in the Portrayal of Jane

The Madwoman in the Attic, written by Gilbert and Gubar, is a feminist critic in the United States. It tries to understand the "unique literary tradition of women" in the 19th century from a new perspective and establishes a new theory of women's literary creativity. The criticism of *Jane Eyre* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is often quoted as: The heroine actually has two parts. The first is Jane, which stands for ration, restraint and social discipline. The other is Bertha, who represents the wild, untamed and primitive anger at the patriarchal system (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 303). In fact, the story of *Jane Eyre* shows the anxiety of female writers by the tension between the living room and the attic, as well as the mental split between the female characters who submits to the male authority and the madmen who rebels against the authority.

Jane, who is the heroine of the story, by comparison to Bertha, is a well-behaved, self-controlled, and tamed woman. She is both rational and passionate, self-confident but shy and reserved before strangers. Charlotte Bronte gives Rochester a line "ere long I found you full of strange contrasts" and she is really a complex character. Combined with the authoress' experiences, Jane is often regarded as the same person with Bronte. Another aspect of her is that she has a secret self that only those she feels comfortable with get to know. For the others she is just a humble governess. Actually, the modesty and prudence is the part to conform to the patriarchal culture. However, the secret part is the woman's self consciousness. The concealment of this part also testifies the female writer's anxiety.

The creation of *Jane Eyre* implies anxiety of authorship of female writers. Firstly, it's a romance and which is double-edged. It requires, as various feminist critics have noted, that women's anxieties about gender inequality be both aroused and allayed (Kaplan, 1996, p. 7). Romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members. That is to say, an ideal partner in a romance might be a man who respects the woman or at least not a strictly follower of patriarchal culture. From this perspective, *Jane Eyre* is a feminist novel against patriarchal culture. However, the heroine Jane is designed as a well-behaved woman who conforms to the patriarchal society. The seemingly contradictory designation implies Brontë's resistance to female writers' unequal treatment in patriarchal culture and the helpless and reliance to the males. In short, the contradiction is one of the performances of anxiety of the identity of female writers.

She is resilient and brave. In the surface, she is self-reliant, educated, and mentally strong. Her strong heart and independent character just like that of female writers. They are females, undoubtedly, but they have the peculiarity of a strong man. Even though, their status will not be acknowledged by male writers and even the whole society. The anxiety of the female writers can be seen accordingly. Moreover, *Jane Eyre* tells not simply the story of her transformation from victim to agent, orphan girl to family heiress, governess to wife; it is also the story of her own longing to talk, to find someone to credit her version of her life, to sympathize with her trials and listen as a friend. It is, ultimately, a story of a woman advancing to the central society from a marginalized character by protesting against her place in the social order. For example, when Jane was a kid and was treated badly, she warns Mrs. Reed:

People think you a good woman, but you are bad, hard-hearted. You are deceitful!... If anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty. (Brontë, 1974, pp. 68-69)

Those words testify Jane's brave resistance to the unequal treatment. Even though she was just a weak child, she showed a clear spirit of resistance. As she grew up, this valuable spirit became more obvious. At the banquet of the aristocrats, *Jane Eyre* and Adele sat behind the sofa, hidden in the curtains. Under the shadow, she saw the radiant Rochester flirting with the charming Miss Ingram. Jane's heart is very anxious and lost. Jane is on the edge of the position and she is watching their love game coldly. Her pride and conceit pushed the man that she wanted to seduce farther and farther away (Brontë, 1974, p. 243). Although she is a humble tutor, from the evaluation of Miss Ingram, a potential voice tells readers that she is so confident and gets too much dignity.

The ending of *Jane* is controversial. It shows Brontë's identity anxiety as a female writer. In the male dominated society of the 19th century, the value of women's marriage should be measured by property. Despite there is true love between Jane and Rochester, they still have some barriers to overcome. The equality of social status or property is the necessity for a received marriage in patriarchal society. Therefore, the plot that Jane accepts the heritage set by her uncle Mr. Brontë implies the compromise and reliance to the patriarchal culture. This further reflects women writer's identity anxiety, that is, she has to cater to the preferences of male readers.

Anxiety in the Portrayal of Bertha

Bertha is another important female character in reflecting Brontë's anxiety. If the female consciousness is still implicit in *Jane*, it is certainly straightforward and obvious in *Bertha*. Many female critics explore *Bertha's* role in the novel and Brontë's real intention to create this character. Although she is not the protagonist of the

novel, her few descriptions reflect Brontë's real intention of writing. There are few descriptions for her, but they are very impressive. Madness is the most distinctive characteristic of her. Beyond the madness, Bertha also suffers a lot from the oppression of the patriarchal society. The deficiency of the discourse power is another characteristic of Bertha. The anxiety of female writers' authorship is embodied by madness and deficiency of the discourse power in Bertha.

She is crazy, mad, and morbid. On the one hand, with Bertha's image of a mad woman, the author shows the real plight of women's existence and accuses the male dominated society of suppressing women. Bertha was the hostess of the Thorn field but she was locked in the attic for decades. Her husband married her for 30,000 pounds and she not only lost her freedom of life, but also gradually collapsed during decades of confinement, becoming a madwoman. However, she has no right to speak and has never had a chance to argue for herself. In Chapter 27, when Rochester makes another sharp attack on the mad woman, Jane Eyre interrupts him: "You are so cruel to that unfortunate lady. You speak of her with hatred and hatred, which is cruel. Her madness is beyond her control" (Brontë, 1974, p. 360). That's true. Most information we know about Bertha comes from the mouth of Rochester and there is always negative. This reflects the lack of discourse power of the woman at that time. In the same way, the female writers also do not have a say on their works and social status. The lacking of discourse power is also a kind of manifestation of their exclusion and confinement in the male dominated society. On the other hand, she delivers confrontational attitude towards the rules imposed by patriarchal society. Of course, she also resisted. She made three retaliatory resistances. For the first time, she tried to burn Rochester in bed. The second time she stabbed her brother with a dagger. For the third time, she set fire to the manor, and herself also was buried in the sea of fire. The first two actions failed and she died in the last resistance. From Bertha's death, we can observe that the author follows the male chauvinist discourse and sets a bad ending for the mad woman. The mad woman Bertha is a female writer's subconscious self-repressed by male discourse. She is the copy of the author in a certain sense, with her own image of anxiety and madness. The image of Bertha's madness represents the essential state of existence of the social female writers at that time and is the expression of her own worry and anger. Bertha's failure of resistance and death also shows that the resistance of the 19th century female writers to male chauvinism is futile.

From the image of Bertha, we can strongly feel Brontë's anxiety of authorship as a female writer. The madness and aphasia are the rewriting of the situation of the female writers in 19th century. In addition to madness and aphasia, there is no lack of anxiety in the works of the 19th century female writers. Like innocent little girl who has been treated unfairly in Emily Dickinson's poems, the immortal Orlando in Virginia Woolf, the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and so on, those vivid and distinct characters reflect the female author's inner anxiety in some way. The image of mad women in the works of women writers are "the image of the author himself", which expresses the author's worry and anger. From the point of view of Gilbert and Gubar, this "crazy image" is a reflection of the creativity of female writers, and it is their self-definition that identifies and corrects the patriarchal culture imposed on them.

Conclusion

In the creation of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë not only obeys, but also subverts and rewrites the traditional position of women in the history of literature. On the one hand, she wants to rewrite the role orientation of women distorted and belittled by patriarchal culture; on the other hand, she unconsciously identify with the imprint of patriarchal culture which has been engraved in their minds for a long time. The author not only identifies with

but also subverts the traditional patriarchal culture's role orientation of women, which reflects the author's psychological pressure in writing, that is, anxiety of authorship of female writers.

References

- Bronte, C. (1974). *Jane Eyre*. Shirley. A. Hook and J. Hook, (Eds.). London: Penguin.
- Christ, C. T. (1990). Imaginative constraint, feminine duty, and the form of Charlotte Bronte's fiction. In B. T. Gate (Ed.), *Women's studies in critical essays on Charlotte Bronte* Ed. Barbara Timm Gates. Boston: Hall.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1984). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Homans, M. (1986). *Bearing the word: Language and female experience in nineteenth-century women's writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Kaplan, C. (1996). Girl talk: Jane Eyre and the romance of women's narration. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 30(96), 5-7.
- Tao, L. L. (2009). Anxiety of authorship embodied by the madwoman in Jane Eyre. *Journal of Langfang Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, (3), 26-28.