



Empowering Women through Education: A reading of Anne Brontë's fiction

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Abstract

Nineteenth century Britain witnessed radical economic challenges brought about by rapid industrialisation and a burgeoning market that spread across the globe. In its wake it brought about significant changes in human rights, political rights, and labour rights as well as in the field of education. However, when it came to the question of women's emancipation, the Victorian age proved to be regressive. The period saw a calcification of repressive moral stances and a devaluation of women's labour. Cognizant of the restrictive role accorded to women Anne Brontë envisages a woman who can stand shoulder to shoulder with her male counterpart. She recognizes that the key to women's emancipation lies in reimagining education – both male and female. Anne Brontë did not subscribe to the Victorian belief that the “true end of the education of women is making good wives and mothers.” Nor did she accept that boys should be educated in “masculinity.” Instead, she forwarded a concept of holistic education that will create well-rounded human beings. Eclipsed by the writings of her more talented sisters, Anne Brontë's works tend to be marginalized, much like her protagonists. This paper attempts a comparative study of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë; to explore the socio-economical condition of Victorian women and their access to educational opportunities and the labour market. It traces Anne Brontë's radical educational philosophy and attempts to uncover the thinkers who influenced her.

Keywords: Women's education, economic independence, autonomy, marriage laws, Enlightenment philosophy.

Introduction

The imaginary space that the idea of what constitutes the feminine, underwent a gradual but systematic revision in the eighteenth century. Simultaneously, the concept of home was also being reimagined. This dual reconceptualization was in part driven by the changes in perception brought about by the Enlightenment Philosophy of the preceding century as well as the economic changes wrought by Industrial revolution. Enlightenment was a pan European phenomenon that was influential in the eighteenth century, but majorly impacted nineteenth century. Enlightenment philosophers cutting across geographical boundaries identify belief in humanity's intellectual powers, and its inherent possibility to improve as its distinctive feature. William Bristow, in his

entry on 'Enlightenment' in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* observes: "The faith of the Enlightenment ... is that the process of enlightenment, of becoming progressively self-directed in thought and action through the awakening of one's intellectual powers, leads ultimately to a better, more fulfilled human existence" (Bristow 1). Unfortunately, when Enlightenment philosophers spoke about man depending on his own thought for guidance, they were not thinking of women.

In England, economic prosperity and political stability experienced during the Victorian age had an impact in reshaping society and the notion of womanhood. Women found that the freedom they had enjoyed earlier were being systematically encroached upon. This was partly because the Victorian conceptualization of women was reductionist. While talking about women, they were referring primarily to the middle-class and upper middle-class women, while excluding the large number of women belonging to the working class. The term "woman", as the Victorians used it, occupied an imaginative space that had little to do with reality. Women were considered physically and mentally fragile. She was no longer the farmer's wife who toiled on the land and looked after her numerous offspring. Instead, she was consigned to the interiors of the house. She was reimagined as the "Angel in the House,"¹ and was expected to function as the moral loadstone for her husband and children and by extension – the society. Even her education was designed to further this objective. A girl was taught to read and write and a little mathematics in order to keep the household accounts. Her entire childhood was geared towards making her into a successful wife and mother.

"The goal of women's education in Victorian England was to provide little more than a finishing polish to a girl's manners by encouraging the acquisition of 'showy accomplishments ... French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and a little drawing'," (24) observes Elizabeth Langland in her excellent study on the life of Anne Brontë. After marriage, she was expected to confine herself to domesticity and to spend her time inside the house. She stepped out of the house only to go to Church, for walks, to visit friends and neighbours, and Church activities. If she read, she was expected to read religious literature, or magazines or the then ubiquitous penny novels. This shift in perspective is reflected historically, in the exclusion of "shopkeepers' wives, farmers' wives, innkeepers' wives, shoemakers' wives, butchers' wives etc." from the 1861 census, under gainful employment. Instead, the "enumerators were instructed to tabulate women under the domestic heading 'no matter what trade or occupation she might occasionally follow'" (Gordon & Nair 794).

It is in this context that we have to locate the works of Anne Brontë. When she died in 1848 at the age of twenty-nine, her oeuvre consisted of a few poems and two novels – *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Eclipsed by the brilliance of her more famous sisters Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Anne found herself marginalized by both literary historians as well as critics. Her relative obscurity was in part due to the aversion her only surviving sister, Charlotte felt towards her writing, especially *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* which prompted her to block its republication, in spite of its popularity. Though deliberately suppressed, the work proved influential. This is affirmed in May Sinclair's 1913 pronouncement, that "the slamming of [Helen's] bedroom door against her husband reverberated throughout Victorian England" (quoted in Carter 269). Anne Brontë received critical attention in the latter half of the twentieth century when there was a concerted effort by female literary critics to reclaim women's writing and re-examine them from a feminist perspective. This kindled a renewed interest and a radical re-evaluation of Anne Brontë's work (Gordon, Langland, Gérin, Berry, Frawley, Chitham, Shires, Carnell *et al*). Not surprisingly, these readings locate Anne Brontë's writing firmly within the rubric of feminist writings. These critics highlight the sustained focus the author brings to the question of women's employment, her need for economic freedom, her relentless refusal to romanticise man-woman relationship, and her debunking of the domestic ideal for women.

Women and Economic Independence

Anne Brontë's choice of themes is based on her life and her experience. Her first novel *Agnes Grey* draws on her work as governess at Blake Hall, in Yorkshire and later with the Robinson's at Thorp Green, near York. From childhood, Anne had recognized the need for an education that would enable her to get a job. She even braved severe illness in pursuit of an education at Roe Head, a school where her sister Charlotte was working as a teacher. Later, when she found a job, albeit low paying, as a governess, her determination to succeed is evident in her refusal to give it up even though it proved to be a miserable experience. Instead, she transformed this unpleasant episode into art and painted one of the most memorable portraits of a governess in *Agnes Grey*. Anne did not romanticise her heroine, nor did she provide an easy escape for her through a convenient marriage. Agnes does get married, but only after she becomes economically independent. She along with her mother, successfully sets up a school for young women.

Unlike other women writers including her sisters, Anne Brontë was radical in claiming an independent professional identity for women. Helen Graham Huntingdon, the protagonist of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, supports herself while in hiding by selling her painting. Helen, is distinct

from other Victorian heroines – she is not a young debutante looking for romance, finding it and getting married. She is a married woman with a child who is living in hiding after abandoning her husband. This choice of a protagonist challenges a number of beliefs and notions implicitly accepted by Victorian society. Firstly, it contravenes the Victorian belief that a wife should stand by her husband, whatever his behaviour might be. Secondly, it makes her conduct criminal because even if she were to “abandon” her husband, according to law, she cannot take his son with her. It would have been considered “kidnapping” and she could have been arrested for it.

Helen Graham Huntingdon is a woman who is distinct when compared to the heroines of Romantic and Victorian literature. She thinks deeply about her moral stances and her actions are based on these reflections. In fact, Helen often acts in a manner expected of a man during the Enlightenment. She is guided by her own reasoning ability, and her moral beliefs. She does not wait to be rescued by a man but depends on her ability and her own initiative. She even plans to repay her brother the expenses he has borne to set her up in their own childhood home (Brontë 377). Langland pertinently observes: “The autonomy of Anne Brontë's heroines is truly compelling. She gives us portraits of women prepared to support themselves in the world, women who are independent of male approval and who are content without male attention” (54-55).

Devaluing Women's Labour

Anne Brontë lived in a society that failed to even acknowledge the economic significance of women's labour. Conceptually, the Victorian society was sharply divided into the interior and the exterior and the women's presence was firmly located in the interior. Even at home, man was the lord and master and woman his helpmeet. This “division of labour” had the backing of the law. This perception also affected the way women's work were viewed and quantified. Gordon and Nair in their detailed analysis of the economic role of middle-class women in Victorian Glasgow, tabulates the implications of such a demarcation. They enumerate the effect as:

[1] Thus, a vital cornerstone of the ‘separate spheres’ ideology was the ideal of the family wage: a man should be able financially to support his wife and children. Women should not have to earn a living: a married woman should be economically dependent on her husband; and a single woman should be provided for by a male relative.[2] Furthermore, women should not have to deal with financial matters: so husbands took over the property of their wives at marriage, and wives were increasingly excluded from the running of family businesses. (Gordon & Nair 791)

The economic implications of this retrogressive step were hard on women. Women who worked shoulder to shoulder with their husbands in shops, workshops, agriculture, and other small-scale industries found that their labour was no longer recognized. Unfortunately, for them, this was also accompanied by a loss of income from other homebound activities like weaving, knitting, baking,

and the like. Once industrialization picked up momentum, these activities proved no longer economically viable and handmade goods were replaced with mass produced goods.

The economic position of single women, spinsters, widows, and married women abandoned by their husbands were pathetic. Women belonging to the economically deprived class found themselves employed as maids, domestic servants, seamstress or shop assistants. Others, less fortunate than them, struggled to survive on meagre wages in the teeming cloth mills and coalmines, living in utter poverty in unhealthy slums. The situation of women who belonged to the middle class who were destitute was even more difficult. They were convinced that the employment opportunities available to the lower class were too demeaning. Their only recourse was to take up employment as a lady's companion, a governess, or to try their hand at literary pursuits like writing novels. Most of them accepted their position unquestioningly. Surprisingly, unlike their middle-class counterparts some women belonging to the labour class, were active in questioning their situation and working to change it through political actionⁱⁱ.

Agnes Grey also exposes the exploitation of governesses. Being a governess, was a popular option for intelligent, educated, women who were looking to support themselves. However, their wellbeing was entirely dependent on the family they served. Often a governess worked under impossible conditions. She was expected to educate and instil in her wards a sense of discipline but without the accompanying power to enforce it. She was also a social misfit – neither part of the family or one with the servants, and often hated and shunned by both. Anne knew about this dilemma from her own experience. She also knew about the impossible expectations placed on governesses as she had suffered considerably while living with a rather uncouth family at Blake Hall. Her portrayal of the Bloomfield family in *Agnes Grey* is based on this experience. Agnes is confronted with children who are spoilt, arrogant and often downright wicked. Mrs Bloomfield indulges her children but take no responsibility for their discipline or moral upliftment. Anne is shocked by their wickedness and even takes it upon herself to kill a nest of fledglings to save them from being tortured by Tom, the eldest Bloomfield. Anne lays the responsibility of such perversion firmly at the door of bad parenting and ineffective education. Margaret Smith, in her “Introduction” to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* published by Oxford University Press observes:

Anne Brontë, affectionate, humane, and like all her family very fond of animals and birds, abhorred cruelty; yet she had the courage not to gloss over it in her novel, but to use it as an example of the terrifying consequences of parents' dereliction of their moral responsibility for the upbringing of their children—one of the main themes of *Agnes Grey*, as it was to be of *The Tenant*. (Brontë xii)

The suppression of women and the refusal to acknowledge their labour arises from deep-seated notions regarding the nature of women. It is predicated on the belief that man is rational

and strong while women are emotional and fragile. These notions have been deployed to deny women even the ability for logical reasoning. Elizabeth Langland is convinced that the “Victorian debate on the Woman Question: what was woman's nature and what was her proper sphere?” is at the centre of Anne Brontë’s works (Langland 23).

Women’s Education

The question regarding the nature of women was brought into critical attention during the Victorian period and the scope of her education was being critically scrutinized. This issue was raised as part of a larger debate regarding education of children in general. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the role of the government and its intervention in the economic and social sphere was still being actively deliberated. Guided by the *Laissez-faire* theory the government adopted a hands-off policy regarding worker rights. In the field of education as well, the government was reluctant to legislate. There were strong arguments against centralizing educational policy that were accepted by influential policy makers including Disraeli. The argument was that education should be left in the hands of the parents. Governmental interference in the scope of education will impact the character of the Englishmen and will impede their achievements. Given the self-congratulatory outlook prevalent during the Victorian times, the argument for non-interference won the day.

This does not mean that education was entirely home based. As mentioned earlier there was a marked disparity between the education of the middle class and upper middle-class children and the poor; as well as between boys and girls. The lower classes were depended on charity and semi-charity schools, such as Sunday Schools, Factory Schools, National Schools, Schools of the British and Foreign Society, Day Schools, Dame Schools, Ragged Schools, and later, Reform Schools. Many of these schools taught only reading, writing, and a little arithmetic. The general practice was to apprentice poorer students to learn a trade. It was only in 1880 that the provision of elementary schooling for both sexes was made compulsory. While the need for elementary literacy was universally recognised, there were contradictory views regarding the role of education. Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism exerted considerable influence and educational policy was determined to a large extent by its utility value. Denying girls, the right to proper education was a natural corollary because people believed that women did not require a comprehensive education.

Mary Wollstonecraft used Enlightenment philosophy to argue a rational education for girls at par with the education provided for boys. In her “Preface” to *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Women, Wollstonecraft had observed perceptively: “Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all...” (66). Explicating Wollstonecraft’s views on education, Sandrine Bergès in her excellent study notes, “Wollstonecraft is not merely giving an instrumental argument for educating women – she is not saying that unless we teach her a little morals and politics, a woman will not educate her sons properly and will not be an amusing wife. She is saying that the progress of humanity as a whole will be halted...” (24).

Wollstonecraft’s radical departure regarding the education of women exerted influence in later thinkers and their writings on this subject. However, neither Harriet Taylor who wrote “The Enfranchisement of Women”, or J S Mill, the author of *The Subjection of Women* acknowledge Wollstonecraft’s contribution. It is quite probable that in the erudite atmosphere prevailing at the Haworth parsonage, Anne may have come across Wollstonecraft’s ideas, either through her own writing or through the writings of others. What is already substantiated is that Anne was familiar with the principles of education forwarded by Hannah More in her popular work *Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners*. More was intensely interested in the question of female morality and felt education for women was necessary to “foster moral principles and conduct in female Christians” (qtd. in Langland 40). While Wollstonecraft and More argued for women’s education through their essays, Anne made a moving appeal for the same by vividly portraying the plight of women and the need to educate her. She presents characters who struggle to overcome their handicap and take their place in society as rational and economically independent beings.

Anne Brontë and the question of Education

In the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë clarified her intention behind her writing. She remarks, “My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public; I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it” (Brontë 3). This statement attests to Anne’s purpose – she wishes to present “truth” and believes in its enlightening potential. So in both novels she presents women who when faced with financial difficulty, does not look to men to rescue them and provide succour but rely on their own devices to provide for themselves and their loved ones. This revolutionary departure can only be appreciated if we compare Anne Brontë’s characters with other female protagonists peopling Victorian fiction.

Education of young men and women was a theme that Anne consistently focussed on in her fictional works. While she exposed the pernicious effect of a lack of moral grounding and the ensuing wickedness through her portrayal of the Bloomfield children, she turned her attention to the absence of clear reasoning, grounded in religious morality in portraying the Murrays. The introduction of Rosalie Murray and her subsequent marriage to Sir Thomas Ashby in *Agnes Grey* provides Anne with a chance to expose the canker in a marriage of expediency where there is no true love or respect. It also provides a commentary on the fate of a marriage that is contracted based solely on economic considerations. It is evident that Anne was mounting a scathing criticism of marriages upheld by Victorian society as desirable and endorsed in countless fictional works.

This theme of a woman's fate after marriage to an undeserving rake forms the central theme of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. To date, it is also the most incisive riposte to the Byronic hero celebrated in Romantic and Victorian literature including her sisters' writings (Rochester and Heathcliff). Anne's searing portrayal of a man brought low through alcoholism and the abuse of drugs, his lack of moral principles, the corruption of home and hearth, shattered the romantic patina bestowed by poets and prose writers alike. Commentators have observed that Anne's portrayal of Arthur Huntingdon in *Wildfell Hall*, is partly drawn on Anne's brother Branwell. Watching Branwell destroy himself and cause untold pain and suffering to his family may have played a part in facilitating Anne's understanding. But it was her clarity of vision that impelled her to debunk the romantic myth of a rake saved by the love of a pure woman.

Anne was bold enough to envisage a character who went against the laws and social customs of Victorian England. During those times, marriage vows were sacrosanct, especially for women. Her dependence on her husband had the stamp of law. According to the law, a woman's property passed to her husband upon marriage and he could claim any earnings that she obtained through her own endeavour. If, Helen had painted, according to English law, it belonged to her husbandⁱⁱⁱ: Langland explicates:

Women had no legal status; they were non-persons under the law. A woman stood in relationship to her husband as did her children, entirely dependent on his will, responsibility, and generosity.... Her husband could squander his own fortune as well as hers, seize any earnings that might accrue from her efforts, yet she had no recourse. Under the law, her earnings were his earnings. (Langland 24)

A married woman was not even a legal entity. Nor did she have any claim on her children. Even if she was a victim of abuse, she could not sue for divorce from her husband or claim the custody of her children. In rare instances where she was granted divorce she lost all contact with her children. This dire situation was partially remedied with the passing of the Married Women's Property Act of 1871. Anne appears to have a comprehensive understanding of the legal status of

married women. Her portrayal of Helen while at Wildfell Hall and later as a rich widow, attests to this fact. The choice Helen has to take is starkly presented, for once she agrees to a remarriage, her financial and bodily autonomy will be compromised, and she is in danger of finding herself under another lord and master. That Helen agrees to a remarriage with Gilbert Markham shows her belief in him and confidence in her own wisdom.

Anne Brontë was convinced that a girl should receive a robust education, one that will equip her to stand shoulder to shoulder with men. Like Wollstonecraft, she was also acutely aware of the lack of reasoning powers among the women she saw around her. Anne, like many other thinkers including Wollstonecraft identified women's obsession with the ephemeral and the trivial as caused by their lack of exposure to edifying thought, refusing to blame it on their nature. The controversy regarding nature versus nurture was foregrounded by the educational philosophy outlined by Rousseau in *Emile*. In *Emile* Rousseau "advances the idea of "negative education", which is a form of "child-centered" education. His essential idea is that education should be carried out, so far as possible, in harmony with the development of the child's natural capacities by a process of apparently autonomous discovery" (Alberg 2007). However, his concept of "negative pedagogy" unravels in *Les Solitaires*, the sequel to *Emile*, in which he considers the question of female education and feminine nature.

In her Preface to *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argues, "that boys and girls should be educated together so as to enable them to learn to live together, to know and respect each other, and not regard the other sex as strange, dangerous, inferior or superior" (Bergès 26). "Wollstonecraft does not believe that men and women should have different virtues," observes Bergès. She debunks the notion that different sexes are distinct by nature and while men are "masculine" by nature, women are "feminine". Instead, she anticipates Simone de Beauvoir when she claims that the qualities that define men and women are acquired through their nurture and education are not inherent. Wollstonecraft is "not afraid to tell men outright that they need to develop virtues that have traditionally been seen as feminine," such as chastity and modesty. Anne Brontë appears to agree. She questions the need to encourage and cement the "so-called" masculine qualities in boys. Her outrage against the discriminatory treatment is evidenced in Helen's diatribe against the prevalent educational practices. When Markham urges her to send her son to a boarding school so that he learns to be tough and hardy, Helen retorts, "but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?" She proceeds to deconstruct their logic in advocating a differentiated educational process for girls and boys:

I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will to watch and guard herself –and as for my son – if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world – one that has "*seen life*," and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it, as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society – I would rather that he died to-morrow! – rather a thousand times!' (Brontë 31)

Helen's words about female education must have been as shocking to her contemporaries as her criticism of boy's education. Anne's views on education are radical, considering the age in which she lived. They appeared to have been shaped not only by the philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers, but also Mary Wollstonecraft.

Anne Brontë had realized from her own experience that economic autonomy was essential for women's independence and bodily autonomy. Her impassioned plea for proper education for women was aimed at empowering woman to be rational, moral creatures in charge of their own fate, rather than mere possessions handed over by one man to another. Through her fictional creations, Anne has mounted a comprehensive set of arguments to support the cause of female education. She has also initiated a robust debate on the question of masculine and feminine stereotypes and the truth, hidden beneath their acceptability and popularity. The attractive girl and the attractive man after marriage prove to be spineless decadent creatures wallowing in their own moral degeneracy.

Priti Joshi observes that Anne refuses both "the Wollstonecraftian indictment of the feminine," as well as its "elevation" forwarded by Hannah More and "forges a path between the extremes of Wollstonecraft-More spectrum". The need to define masculine and feminine as distinct is very strong and any "dilution" of this difference is often perceived as a threat. "In *The Tenant*, a reformed masculinity emerges not, as More would have it, under the tutelage of a woman, but by emulating feminine ways," (Joshi 908) and a bold new woman emerges who does not shy away from imbibing "masculine" ways of thinking and acting on her own. This balancing of the masculine-feminine in pursuit of a better, more rounded human, is without doubt ahead of the times. Though other Victorian writers including Dickens explored the theme of Education in their fictional works, Anne Bronte is unique in her emphasis on the need for educating women and empowering them through employment.

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ⁱ "The Angel in the House" is a poem written in 1854-56 by Coventry Patmore. It captured the concept of Victorian ideal of womanhood and immediately became very popular.

ⁱⁱ See Eleanor Gordon (1991) *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); A. John (Ed.) (1986) *Unequal Opportunities: women's employment in England 1800–1918* (Oxford: Blackwell); J. Liddington & J. Norris (1978) *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago); E. Roberts (1988) *Women's Work 1840–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon points out that under the law, "what was her personal property before marriage, such as money in hand, money at the bank, jewels, household goods, clothes, &c., becomes absolutely her husband's, and he may assign or dispose of them at his pleasure" (119). These marital laws later enable Arthur to destroy Helen's paintings. This act ironic echo of Helen's earlier destruction of his portrait before their engagement.