

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF ‘WOMAN’ IN PAMELA BY SAMUEL RICHARDSON AND JANE EYRE BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË

İsmet TOKSÖZ

Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu

Abstract

*The effects of feminist ideas and movements were seen in English literature differently in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. ‘Feminist sensibility’ and the perception of ‘woman’ in the society were different in these two centuries. Feminism as an idea was born in the eighteenth century and developed substantially in the nineteenth century. Cultural feminism as a theory is one of the waves of this feminist idea. Donovan suggests in his book *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions* that cultural feminism begins in the nineteenth century developing from its roots in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, this study proposes that there is a cultural change in the characterization of ‘woman’ in the selected novels from two different periods: *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë due to the emergence and the rise of cultural feminism in the periods when they were written.*

Keywords: feminism, cultural feminism, feminist theory, Pamela, Jane Eyre

1. Introduction

In society there have always been individuals who identify women in a “second-class status” and gender restrictions have become essential issues in women’s cultural, social, intellectual and political development. “The word ‘feminism’ is based on the French word ‘feminisme’ and was first used in English in the 1890s” (Choudaraju 739). Smith defines feminism as follows: “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women”. (qtd. in Dicker 7)

Feminism as a viable and prevalent movement did not emerge until democratic ideals dominated the West during the eighteenth century. Since that time feminist activity was consistent; that is to say, it was more vigorous in some time but got weaker later and the circle went on. Inspired by the events of the democratic revolutions, Mary Wallstonecraft published the first major feminist tract in English “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” in 1797. Then, feminist activity got stronger during the nineteenth century as women entered social life as factory workers during the Industrial Revolution. “The Subjection of Women” was an influential British feminist tract in 1869. Yet, feminism gained the most strength in the West when women were granted the vote in 1918 in Britain. Still, women’s social status and opportunities were not in the sufficient rank compared to those of men in the twentieth century. This fact prepared the ground for new waves of feminism towards 1960s such as “Radical Feminism”, “Marxist Feminism”, “Dual System Feminism” and so on.

2. Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism studies woman’s social place in society. It focuses on the gender differences between men and women. Cultural feminists believe that it is through the individual change that liberation of women could come true. Cultural feminists aim to create a “women-centred” culture and they seek to redefine femininity and masculinity. Cultural feminism regards essentialist understandings of the differences between men and women as the roots for women’s subordination in society.

Cultural feminism is one of the most prevalent and influential theories of feminism. “Cultural feminists believe that women are inherently nurturing, kind, gentle, egalitarian, and non-violent” (Wolff 1). It is also worth noting that cultural feminism adopts some assertions of radical feminism but it is different from radical feminism in terms of its central focus. Cultural feminists focus on women’s uniqueness and regard women’s feminine qualities as advantageous features; it does not aim to wipe the differences between men and women. This idea is the focus of radical feminism. Willis shortly reveals the difference between radical feminism and cultural feminism as follows:

Cultural feminism is essentially a moral, countercultural movement aimed at redeeming its participants, while radical feminism began as a political movement to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life, and rejected the whole

idea of opposing male and female natures and values as a sexist idea, a basic part of what we were fighting (91).

Cultural feminism places ‘woman’ in the centre while regarding the differences between genders. Cultural feminists focus on individual change and the emergence of women’s own culture. The new definition of femininity in the theory addresses the redefinition of female identity. According to cultural feminism when the society rejects the perception of ‘woman’ which is formed by patriarchy women’s liberation can be realized: “During a time period when some other branches of feminism were rejecting traditional values of womanhood, challenging and/or erasing what was understood as inherently female, cultural feminists sought to revalidate the essence of what it means to be ‘female’ by embracing and reappropriating female attributes” (Wolff 1). Accordingly, women’s femaleness must be honoured by opposing the conventional perception of ‘woman’ which is a gender role formed by patriarchy. For cultural feminists, female traits of women such as the ability to nurture, their emotional intelligence and their non-violent nature must be honoured as well.

Cultural feminism asserts that the oppression of woman is a sexual one. Patriarchy makes the woman body as an object of man desire and women are treated to be merely beautiful and sexual. In fact, women are individuals like men. Women must also have their own rights and freedom as men have. Moreover, Echols puts forward that “cultural feminism holds out the possibility that women could build a culture, a space, uncontaminated by patriarchy” (245). Accordingly, cultural feminism aims to abolish the sex-class system, an individual change for both men and women, and form a culture of woman’s own in the society.

Comparing Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* with Richardson’s *Pamela* it could be argued that Pamela Andrews and Bertha has similar captivities. Brontë seems to have transformed Pamela’s lumber-room into an attic in *Jane Eyre*. Han claims that “Richardson’s use of the lumber-room in *Pamela* as a generic node anticipates Brontë’s re-purposing of the attic in *Jane Eyre*” (529). Accordingly, this lumber-room and attic room are the jails for feminist characters presented in both novels. This unfair entrapment symbolizes an urgent need to change the patriarchal system in the society and teach men to respect women’s ideas and feelings. Thus, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both need to develop their own culture in order to make themselves approved by the societies which they are living in. This assertion of cultural feminism is clearly reflected in both novels although they were published in different centuries.

3. Discussion

3.1. Pamela by Samuel Richardson

Pamela by Samuel Richardson is one of the first novels in English literature. It was written in 1740 before feminism as a movement began. Yet, Richardson's characterization of the protagonist Pamela addresses that the society of the eighteenth century needed a movement that supports the women and tackles with their problems with the patriarchy. It seems that the situation of women in the era created a feminist sensibility and inspired Mary Wallstonecraft to publish the first major feminist tract in English "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1797. *Pamela* was written in a time when feminism was in the starting point to spread all over Europe.

The protagonist of the novel *Pamela* is a poor, young and virtuous maid who is a victim of her libidinous master. She is always escaping from her master Mr. B—'s seduction and rape attempts. She feels so hopeless due to her predicament that she even tries to commit suicide. Thus, marriage to her master is the only way out for Pamela; in fact, marriage is a reward for her as the title of the novel suggests: "virtue rewarded". Thus, the title also puts forward that a young girl must be virtuous to deserve marriage in the eighteenth century. More interestingly, it seems to be normal for upper class men to seduce and rape their maids. These ideas of the patriarchal society seemed to be unreasonable for the individuals who had formed 'feminist sensibility'.

The virtue and chastity of women are outstanding themes in the novel. However; virtue is presented as retaining one's sexual purity against an aggressor. Even though Pamela is innocent Mr. B— despises her in some parts in the novel. However, it is worth stating that Pamela embraces one of the first feminist utterances in the eighteenth century: "Besure don't let People's telling you you are pretty, puff you up: for you did not make yourself, and so can have no Praise due to you for it. It is Virtue and Goodness only, that make the Beauty. Remember that, Pamela" (Richardson 20). Thus, Pamela could be claimed to be one of the first feminist characters in English novel since she is atypical in that she does not let Mr. B— possess her easily. This is unusual for a poor maid like Pamela in the eighteenth century. "And pray, said I, walking on, how came I to be his Property? What Right has he in me, but such as a Thief may plead to stolen Goods?" (Richardson 126). Accordingly, Pamela is presented as a woman character who stresses how a woman must be in the society which she is living in. Castle puts forward that "*Pamela* delineates symbolically the 'making of a lady' (471).

The reform of Mr. B—, that is to say, his transformation of being a dissolute man to a kind husband for Pamela foresees the individual change in society that cultural feminism proposes. It could be evaluated as a success of Pamela's feminist sensibility just as Pamela changes Mr. B—'s character the society can change the perception of man in the eighteenth century. Thus, this reform of the character that Richardson creates could prepare the society for a new movement named 'feminism' and could make people ready to talk and discuss about women's social, economic and cultural problems.

3.2. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë is a Victorian novel published in 1847. Victorian Era was a time when feminist sensibility was developing. Accordingly, cultural feminism had become a more accepted theory. Brontë's characterization in the novel addresses this feminist sensitiveness because her protagonist Jane Eyre seems to be the first true feminist characters in English novel. However, Brontë also creates a foil character to Jane Eyre: Bertha Rochester.

While reading the novel the reader is stimulated for a comparison between these two characters in terms of feminist sensibility. It is revealed throughout the novel that Jane Eyre is a representation of cultural feminism because she feels herself free to do anything, she can choose her way of living; and, accordingly, she has her own culture as a woman in a patriarchal society. She seems to have abolished the sex-class system in her life. She is also presented to have already completed the individual change that cultural feminism puts forward for individuals. On the other hand, Bertha Rochester is presented as a victimized woman. She is enslaved in her room by her husband Mr. Rochester due to her mental illness. She is a 'mad woman in the attic'.

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (Brontë 143).

Jane Eyre is not a typical Victorian woman. She is a calm and intelligent character who grows spiritually and emotionally with everything unpleasant in her life. Unwanted and mistreated by her aunt Mrs. Reed she experiences traumatic events throughout her childhood. She is also abused by her cousins. When she is sent to a boarding school her mischance continues. However, she does not give in and she sustains her inward desire to mingle with higher society. Then, she finds her way and becomes a successful governess. Most importantly, she marries the man that she loves. Although she is a poor orphan, she does not regard marriage as a way of getting out of her destitute life; and, she refuses to have a patriarchal society that makes any choice for her.

Brontë creates a woman character (Jane Eyre) who has feminist consciousness and is aware of gendered power differences. Jane knows that she is not and will never be a property of men; she opposes patriarchal system in the society. She believes that if the world will be a better place woman must be liberated and there must be room and opportunity for women to change themselves and build their own culture. She is a powerful character who grows up in unpleasant circumstances but turns her tragedy into her advantage. Thus, it could be suggested that Jane Eyre is a character who has been created under the influence of the growing idea of cultural feminism in the Victorian Era.

Bertha Rochester, on the other hand, is a foil character to Jane Eyre. She is Mr. Rochester's wife and presented in the novel as the "mad woman in the attic" (Gilbert and Gubar). The attic is a part of the house where unused items are stored. Han states that "the attic exists in a liminal state, stores disparate and obsolescent items, but re-purposes those unused items to renovate the space and narrative and gesture to the history of the domestic novel" (537). The patriarchal Victorian society regards Bertha as an unnecessary, trivial woman whose statements and actions have no sense. Since she is a misfit, she is considered to be a useless object that could be left in the attic by Mr. Rochester. This mistreatment implies that if women have no voice, rights and no culture of their own they can be doomed to live in an attic forever.

Bertha's entrapment and actions reflect the society's treatment of women in the Victorian Era. Bertha cannot find her place in the patriarchal society while Jane has found hers (she achieves this by ignoring the sex-class system in the society). Bertha's actions question Mr. Rochester's decisions. She destroys Jane's wedding veil because she believes she does not deserve to be treated as a second wife. When she sets fire to Mr. Rochester's bed she takes a revenge for her maltreatment. While she is presented as an evil character her actions are all

she can do to communicate with the people around her and react to her entrapment in the attic.

Unlike Jane, Bertha has no opportunity in life. She cannot learn, grow and leave Thornfield. She is a victim of patriarchal system in the society and has no other chance apart from violence in her actions. Towards the end of the novel she sets fire to Thornfield and kills herself by jumping off the roof. Bertha only feels free in the frame of the flames that she creates. Her salvation lies in her death.

Brontë's characterization of Jane and Bertha addresses the difference between the existence and the lack of feminist sensibility in the society. She wishes to prove to the reader that if cultural feminism can realize its assertions there would be woman characters like Jane Eyre in the society; however, if there is no feminist sensibility in the society there would be thousands of victimized woman characters such as Bertha who is suffering from male dominance. Thus, it could be put forward that the rise of cultural feminism in the period when the novel was written dragged Charlotte Brontë to the need of creating a culturally liberal woman character, Jane Eyre and a foil character to her, Bertha Rochester in order to portray the patriarchal situation and women's sufferings in the Victorian Era.

4. Conclusion

Pamela by Samuel Richardson and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë are both substantial literary works in terms of depicting the severe sufferings of women in the ages in which the characters live. The problems that women have experienced in the sex-class system of patriarchal society throughout the history called forth a feminist sensibility, later a feminist movement. Starting of feminism as a movement later gave birth to cultural feminism that had the most reasonable assertions about the women's place in all societies. The literary works discussed above are essential ones in terms of depicting what suffering a woman could experience in a world of man domination. They seem to have succeeded their aim to present the readers sensible reasons about why cultural feminism was born as a need to form an ideal future for women.

The characterization and the perception of 'woman' in English novel shift from the submissive Pamela Andrews to liberal Jane Eyre. These two woman characters present the emergence and the rise of cultural feminism as an adoptable theory in the society. This development has obviously affected Richardson and Brontë in the creation of their protagonists. Literary works are crucial documents in terms of presenting the history and

portraying the society in the time periods when they are written. Henry James states in “The Art of Fiction” that “the subject matter of fiction is stored up [...] in documents and records [...], it must speak with assurance, with the tone of historian (35).

Pamela Andrews and Jane Eyre are both feminist characters who have succeeded to be a powerful, liberal woman by somehow eliminating the sex class system of patriarchy in the society to the extent that they could. However, the essential point is that the reflections of cultural feminism in these literary works imply that man and woman could be equal, free and content with their lives only when both men and women have an individual change, when women have a culture of their own, and when the sex-class system of patriarchy is abolished in the society.

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