

Jane Eyre's Enduring Resilience: A Bridge between the 19th Century and Modern Women

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* explores the issue of female resilience as a powerful perspective to analyse the changing societal role of women, influenced by the concepts of intersectionality. This study examines the character of Jane Eyre and applies Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory. This theory acknowledges the intricate interaction of many elements of identity, such as gender, class, and race, in creating women's experiences. Through a careful examination of Jane's experiences in relation to this notion, we acquire insightful insights into the difficulties encountered by women during both the 19th century and the present time. The narrative of *Jane Eyre* depicts her resolute drive in a world that frequently attempts to restrict and repress her, as she navigates from a repressive upbringing to her quest for autonomy and self-esteem. Utilising Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, we analyse the impact of the intersections of gender, class, and socio-economic determinants on Jane's resilience. Furthermore, we establish a connection between her personal experiences and the wider obstacles that women encounter in contemporary society, such as the disparity in wages, reproductive rights, and the struggle for equal representation. In the end, *Jane Eyre* becomes an exceptional symbol of the power and bravery of women. Her experience serves as a catalyst for empowering women in the present to persevere in realising their full potential and advocating for fairness. Jane's resolute resolve throughout the 19th century anticipates the tenacity of modern women who continue to champion the struggle for equality. This research contends that examining and reevaluating Jane's experiences can function as a potent catalyst for women facing contemporary obstacles. *Jane Eyre* continues to serve as a significant connection between the Victorian era and the present day.

Keywords: Resilience, Gender, Intersectionality, Patriarchal, Empowers Women, Independence, Self-Actualization.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, has strongly resonated with numerous generations of women who draw inspiration from the unwavering self-reliance and strength of its memorable protagonist. Amidst the inflexible male-dominated social structure of Victorian England, *Jane Eyre* emerged as a trailblazing literary icon due to her unwavering resolve to establish her own identity and exert authority over her own fate. Her tale continues to hold great significance for modern women who strive for empowerment and equality in the continuous battle against gender obstacles and injustice, even after almost two hundred years. This paper will analyse Jane's role as a lasting connection between women from the 19th century and the present, highlighting the everlasting essence of women's pursuit of self-realization and satisfaction. Utilising Kimberle Crenshaw's essential theory of intersectionality offers a profound comprehension of the varied oppression that Jane encounters in her journey.

Intersectionality acknowledges the way in which gender interacts with other elements of identification, such as socio-economic class, race, and social standing, to influence one's own experiences. Jane's formative years as a parentless child and her upbringing in an oppressive environment cultivate within her an unwavering sense of independence and resolve as she manoeuvres through a society controlled by men. Despite the efforts of institutions and society to restrict her to conventional gender roles, Jane achieves autonomy and mastery over the trajectory of her life under her own conditions. The resonance of her attempt to establish her own identity aligns well with contemporary feminist movements, encompassing issues such as reproductive autonomy, legislation against discrimination, and equitable representation.

By analysing Jane's experiences through a modern feminist lens, we can find inspiration in her story as a timeless illustration of the strength, bravery, and determination that women have always required to conquer oppression. Despite the advancements in social progress, Jane's spirit continues

to hold great significance for women who are still striving to reach their full potential and exercise their rights in a society where gender-based restrictions continue to exist. Jane Eyre is a remarkable individual who acts as a connection between women in the 19th century and women now, serving as a reminder that the struggle for equal rights is still ongoing.

Kimberle Crenshaw developed the theory of intersectionality to explore how various social categories, including race, gender, and class, intersect and interact to shape individuals' experiences and social positions [1].

Kimberle Crenshaw's pioneering efforts in formulating and clarifying the concept of intersectionality have had a tremendous impact on feminist academia and our understanding of identity since she initially coined the term in 1989 [1]. Intersectionality recognizes the interconnectedness of various dimensions of identity, including race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability, which cannot be separated from each other in individuals' real-life encounters. Instead, various aspects of identity cross and interact to form a whole experience that is distinct from the combined effect of each individual component [2].

Crenshaw contended that contemporary feminism typically prioritises the perspectives of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, disregarding or downplaying the experiences of women of colour, working-class women, queer women, and women with disabilities. Her theory of intersectionality sought to elucidate the obscured intersections of identity, thereby exposing the intricate ways in which several overlapping systems and structures of power and oppression influence individuals' experiences. In her theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw argued that examining each factor independently is insufficient to understand the cumulative consequences produced by the intersection of identity elements such as race, class, and gender [2].

Intersectionality offers a crucial paradigm for examining societal problems, prejudice, exclusion, and nuanced power dynamics in a more precise manner. Examining intersections allows for a deeper comprehension of the unique and complex ways in which women of diverse racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, abilities, and classes experience various forms of marginalisation and obstacles as a result of the combined influences of racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism [2]. Crenshaw primarily dedicated her research to examining the intersectionality of race and gender, specifically in relation to the distinct effects on the experiences of discrimination and violence faced by black women. However, it is crucial to consider that intersectionality encompasses an infinite number of potential combinations of intersecting identities. This viewpoint enhances feminist discussions and efforts by highlighting voices, challenges, and types of oppression that often remain unnoticed when individual aspects of identity are considered in isolation [3].

Crenshaw's groundbreaking theory revolutionised feminist ideology and activism, prompting a broader acknowledgment that womanhood is not a uniform and singular experience.

Her theories on intersectionality have significantly advanced feminist movements and research for more than three decades. Intersectionality is a vital framework for understanding and examining the complexities of identity, power dynamics, and promoting inclusivity and representation for women of all backgrounds. This theory established the foundation for a more comprehensive dialogue and advocacy that encompasses the complex and interconnected realities influenced by overlapping structures of authority and subjugation. According to Collins and Bilge, intersectionality originated in black feminism, critical race scholarship, and legal studies, although its significance extends beyond these initial contexts [4].

Intersectionality's fundamental principle lies in its potential to apply to social justice initiatives and examinations. Collins and Bilge define intersectionality as a comprehensive paradigm that elucidates how various variables of identity, social division, and power convergence intricately impact individuals' lived experiences and societies. An intersectional perspective reveals the interconnected nature of various factors, including race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, age, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and environmental inequity. Collins and Bilge emphasise the importance of considering the interconnectedness of many factors of marginalisation or privilege when trying to comprehend or tackle social issues. They argue that isolating one component without acknowledging its relationships with other intersecting forces is insufficient [4]. Crenshaw's intersectionality theory has the potential to generate diverse and intricate viewpoints in several fields. It serves as a source of knowledge that enhances feminist and anti-oppression studies and efforts towards achieving justice.

1.1. Jane Eyre: A 19th Century Heroine Whose Strength Resonates in the Modern Day

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* powerfully depicts the title heroine's struggles against multifaceted oppression as an orphaned, impoverished woman in 19th century England. Kimberle Crenshaw's inspiring intersectionality theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing how Jane's gender intersects with her marginalized class status and lack of family to shape her vulnerabilities and resilience. While Jane exhibits fierce independence and defiance of patriarchal forces, Brontë also conveys her unfulfilled longing for love, kinship, and community underneath her stoic exterior [1].

An intersectional reading of *Jane Eyre* enriches understanding of how she navigates external oppression and inner yearning as an orphaned woman without social capital or security. Both her outward displays of courage and inward emotional landscape are impacted by the overlapping disadvantages wrought by gender, class, and family status in Brontë's stratified society. Examining the intersections shaping Jane's choices and possibilities provides deeper insight into the privileges and systemic barriers she faces as she forges her quest for autonomy, purpose, and freedom as a woman alone in the world. An intersectional analysis reveals the deeper complexities of Jane's story beyond portraying her as simply strong or resilient.

Jane's early life as an orphaned child colours her worldview and development greatly due to the traumatic abuse she endured. As Crenshaw discussed, childhood shapes identity in foundational ways that intersect with gendered experiences of discrimination later in life. She suffers cruelty from her affluent yet cold-hearted aunt, who resentfully took her in out of duty [1]. Jane suffers trauma and deprivation at the cruel hands of her aunt and later at the oppressive boarding school Lowood. She experiences further privation and humiliation at the rigid Lowood School. Showalter cited by Suman Rana posits that, as an institute Lowood acts as an 'asylum' for disciplining and controlling female energy. Lowood 'disciplines' its inmates by attempting to 'destroy their individuality [...] and starve their sexuality' the purpose behind it being to make its inmates 'Angel in the house'. (544)

This maltreatment stems from Jane's position as a poor, dependent female lacking status or parents to protect her interests. A pivotal example of Jane's mistreatment occurs after she fights back against her abusive cousin John Reed. When the maids Bessie and Abbot admonish Jane for this incident, their words expose the multiple layers of Jane's oppression as an orphan:

"What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your Benefactress son? Your young master."

- "Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?"
- No, you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep (7).

"You ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because Missis kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them"(8).

This exchange highlights Jane's utter lack of power and status as someone without parents or resources who relies completely on the unpredictable charity of her aunt. The maids emphasize how Jane must placate her cruel relatives despite their abuse, as she has no recourse or means of escape as an impoverished orphan. The scene encapsulates the disempowerment, social exclusion, and voicelessness Jane endures under the Reed family's roof due to the intersecting facets of her disadvantaged identity.

Her vulnerability as an orphaned girl leaves her at the mercy of oppressive forces like her aunt Reed and the harsh school administrators. Jane's painful childhood trauma fuels her resilience and determination to seek liberty, respect, and refuge. Jane Eyre's experiences illustrate the degree of oppression women faced in the 19th century Victorian era. As Crenshaw's intersectionality theory elucidates, Jane is marginalized due to the interlocking forces of gender, class, and other aspects of identity [1]. Bronte depicts the vulnerable position of orphaned children and particularly females in Victorian society, showing how easily they could fall prey to abuse. Jane's determination to rise above her circumstances demonstrates remarkable resilience even as a child. According to Bahreldein Guma Abaker, Jane is presented thus, she

is a strong, and a passionate woman, she has already left a strong impression on readers when they first seen her at the beginning of the story when she was a child. In the beginning of the story she had a fight with her cousin (53) [5].

The deprivation and maltreatment she endures shape her fiercely independent spirit and sense of self-reliance in navigating an oppressive, male-dominated world.

Jane's friend Helen Burns serves as a foil, accepting suffering obediently as part of a pious Christian worldview that emphasizes grace and redemption in the next life. In contrast, Jane questions doctrine urging passive submission and begins to trust in her own judgment and principles. This divergence in perspectives foreshadows Jane's insistence on defining herself rather than allowing external forces to dictate her path. Even at a young age, Jane's strong-willed nature plants the seeds for the resilient, autonomous adult she becomes.

When Jane secures the position of governess at Thornfield, the patriarchal power dynamics of Victorian society become evident. Though educated and skilled, Jane must accept the inferior status of governess due to her gender and class. Mary Poovey states that, she navigates the "contradictory demands and expectations" (128) imposed on Victorian women to be compliant yet responsible, powerless yet dutiful [6]. Rochester begins to disrupt such gender roles through his unconventional interactions with Jane as an intellectual equal. However, upon discovering Rochester's intent to commit bigamy, Jane refuses to be his mistress and relinquishes socioeconomic security to preserve her principles. This defiance of gender expectations illustrates Jane's prioritization of moral integrity over social position or material comfort. Suman Rana affirms that, "She strikes out courageously and shaped her own destiny (544)."

Rochester attempts to dominate Jane by trying to conjure jealousy through Blanche Ingram's presence and later pleading with Jane to live with him unmarried. Yet Jane upholds her sense of justice despite immense pressure and emotional anguish. Her departure from Thornfield epitomizes the courage to make sacrifices in defending dignity and womanhood against Rochester's patriarchal arrogance. Jane's principles give her the strength to resist Rochester's control and manipulation.

In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte crafts a protagonist who epitomizes fierce independence and self-determination against the backdrop of Victorian female oppression. Jane continuously resists external attempts to define or limit her, forging her own identity and values despite childhood trauma. Rather than marrying for social or economic security, she prioritizes emotional integrity, financial self-sufficiency, and adherence to her moral principles. For example, Jane leaves Thornfield and Rochester when his attempted bigamy would compromise her values, choosing dignified poverty over financial comfort paired with degradation. She supports herself teaching village schoolgirls, finding spiritual purpose through meaningful work aligned with her compassionate

nature.

Even as a marginalized governess, Jane maintains emotional self-possession in restraining passionate impulses that would lead her to forfeit self-respect. Ultimately, her ethos demonstrates that identity stems not from external social standing or the abuse one suffers, but from exercising reason, justice, and determination to lead a life defined by one's own character. Bronte crafted a heroine whose hard-won autonomy and conviction reveal women's potential to transcend systematic gender oppression through courage of integrity.

As a governess, Jane's identity as an unmarried woman of low socioeconomic status circumscribes her choices and status despite her education and intellect. As Crenshaw explained, gender-based violence often uniquely intersects with class vulnerabilities. Mr. Rochester wields immense power over Jane's situation as an employee without family, connections, or financial resources [2]. Their evolved intimate rapport threatens rigid Victorian class divisions. When Jane discovers Rochester's existing marriage, she refuses to be his mistress despite intense passions, sacrificing her security to avoid compromising her self-respect. She said, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will (306)." Jane Eyre defiantly pushes back against Victorian gender stereotypes and attempts by men like Rochester to treat her as property or a pawn.

At a time when women, especially governesses, were expected to be compliant and subservient, Jane asserts her right to be treated as an equal. She rebuffs Rochester's early efforts to make her jealous and refuses to cave to his pleas to live with him as his mistress after learning of his existing marriage. Jane upholds her dignity, principles, and womanly worth in the face of Rochester's attempted bigamy despite the painful sacrifice of leaving Thornfield and him behind. Her courageous defiance and willingness to endure poverty on her own terms rather than submit to social scripts or Rochester's control reflects profound resistance to male domination. Bronte crafts a heroine whose actions subvert attempts by those like Rochester to manipulate or subjugate her according to class and gender-based hierarchies. Jane's resistance crystallizes into empowered self-determination. Moglen writes that, "In freeing Jane from the conventional trappings of femininity and granting her liberty to feel and express her feelings, Bronte created her first 'anti-heroine'" (485). This courageous choice highlights her integrity.

However, as Crenshaw noted, women marginalized by interlocking forces like gender and class face limited options in protecting their interests [1]. Jane's principles manifest strongly, but lack of familial ties and social capital compel her to start anew destitute and alone. Her multilayered identity as an impoverished woman governs the constraints and tradeoffs she must navigate. Jane's experiences teaching at a small village school poignantly demonstrate the alienation of being a social outcast on the margins. Jane's identity as a woman seeking meaningful self-sufficiency creates dissonance with societal expectations. Her insistence on supporting herself breaches conventions dictating passive female

dependence. This alienation resonates with Crenshaw's discussions of exclusion from dominant cultural norms due to intersecting forms of oppression. Though exercising freedom, Jane remains marginalized for defying gender and class-based propriety [1].

Jane Eyre's story powerfully demonstrates the injustice and damage wrought by binary conceptions of identity. As Crenshaw explained, intersectionality aims to unveil experiences erased by narrow identity constructs. Bronte depicts Jane's struggle to preserve her integrity and autonomy against powerful external forces seeking to dictate her existence based on gender and class identity [2]. But Jane courageously insists on self-definition beyond externally-imposed labels. She achieves ultimate happiness by reconciling her ideals with security on her own terms, fueled by her resilient spirit. Jane's complexity as a character stems from the intersection of her keen moral sense and imagination with her gender, class, and childhood privation.

Jane's resolve is further tested when she nearly starves on the streets after leaving Thornfield. Nevertheless, she succeeds in finding meaning and purpose through work at the village school. Her self-reliance and determination manifest starkly here in the face of hardship, accentuating the depth of her resilience. Jane reunites with Rochester only after she has proven her self-sufficiency and earned independence on her own terms. Their marriage represents a reconciliation of the patriarchal values embodied by Rochester with the feminist principles embodied by Jane. Though attaining domestic bliss, Jane's journey shows that inner fortitude and conviction can empower women to overcome systematic gender oppression.

Even in destitution, Jane maintains her dignity through diligent work and an irrepressible spirit. Despite having few options as a woman alone without financial means, she leverages her skills as a teacher to sustain herself. Jane's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity highlights the strength and determination she marshals in sculpting her own destiny. Her self-reliance in the face of gender and class constraints embodies female empowerment.

1.2. Relevance to Modern Feminist Struggles

Jane Eyre's experiences mirror modern feminist struggles for equal rights and bodily autonomy. Workplace discrimination, pay inequity, and imbalanced representation persist, with the World Economic Forum (2021) estimating over 135 years to close global gender gaps. Jane's fight parallels issues like workplace harassment, discriminatory barriers, and pay gaps women still face [7]. Additionally, Rochester's efforts to dictate Jane's choices against her convictions echo contemporary threats to women's reproductive freedom through legislation limiting contraception and abortion access.

Jane's refusal to surrender her principles and wellbeing at Rochester's behest symbolizes bodily sovereignty. Her courageous defiance of external control retains strong relevance given continuing fights to uphold reproductive justice against moralistic regulations infringing individual liber-

ty. Bronte's enduring heroine offers inspiration to modern women navigating systemic gender inequality. By appreciating Jane's resilience despite multifaceted efforts to subjugate her existence to masculine whims and social scripts, today's advocates can find motivation to demand equity. Jane Eyre's timeless spirit stands as a bridge between Victorian women and current activists pursuing self-determination. Through her integrity and resistance, Jane lights the way for unfinished 21st century fights against patriarchal limitations on women's advancement.

2. Conclusion

Bronte's heroine, Jane Eyre emerged as a radical figure for her assertion of selfhood and independence, values which cement her status as a feminist literary icon today. She withstands oppression and adversity through sheer willpower, charting her own course while resisting external pressures and conventions. Her timeless journey empowers women across generations to demand liberation from gender barriers, fight injustice, and fulfill their potential without sacrificing principles or autonomy.

By applying an intersectional analysis, we deepen the appreciation of how factors like gender, class, and socioeconomic status intertwine to shape Jane's hardships. The complex interplay of these forces in Victorian England adds dimensionality to our understanding of the obstacles Jane transcends through her resilient spirit. Her early traumas as an orphan subject to abuse instill fierce self-reliance. Navigating the patriarchal constraints of Thornfield as Rochester's intellectual yet socially inferior subordinate highlights the oppressive gender hierarchy of the era. Jane's refusal to be Rochester's mistress and her ability to sustain herself in poverty further exhibit her courageous defiance of conventions. Examining these challenges through an intersectional lens enriches our interpretation of Jane's experiences and her transcendence of multilayered oppression [8-11].

Tracing parallels between Jane's experiences and ongoing feminist struggles highlights the relevance of her story today. Issues like, discrimination, violence against women, and reproductive rights connect Jane's world to the present day. Jane's plight resonates in the modern era as women continue advocating for gender equality. Appreciating these connections reminds us how far we have come yet how far we have to go to achieve women's full empowerment in society. Jane Eyre's courageous self-reliance modeled female empowerment in the 19th century and continues to motivate women confronting modern challenges. Her refusal to surrender her principles demonstrates conviction can be an unstoppable force against injustice. By illuminating the timeless nature of women's struggle for self-determination, Jane's journey resonates across generations as both an inspiring call to action and a testament to woman's capacity to enact change. Jane's determination gives hope that resilience and inner fortitude can overcome systematic barriers.

Nearly two centuries after its publication, Jane Eyre remains a transcendent figure who serves as an enduring bridge between women of the past and their modern counterparts. Her unconquerable spirit persists as a beacon of hope, reminding us that the work of feminism is unfinished but not insurmountable. Jane gives us the faith to press forward, using her resilient example as the flint that lights our way. By revisiting and reinterpreting Jane's experiences through a contemporary lens, we reconnect with the fire of her fighting heart that burns bright across history, guiding us onward. Jane Eyre stands among great literary heroines as a woman who defied conventions and defined herself on her own terms. Her courage manifests the belief that one committed individual can challenge oppressive norms and inspire change. Jane's quest for autonomy and justice speaks profoundly to the universal human yearning for self-actualization. By reflecting on her struggles through a modern intersectional perspective, we unearth enduring lessons about defying injustice with an unyielding spirit. Jane remains a timeless symbol of hope, her immortal words a clarion call: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will (306)".

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