

## Theme of Love in Charlotte Bronte's Novel 'Villette'

Sanjeev Kumar\*

---

### Abstract:

Charlotte Bronte had written her first novel The Professor, in which she portrayed the school-life at Brussels. It excited no publisher's interest, and thus remained unpublished during her lifetime. Afterwards, when she became successful in depicting the emotional lives of her heroes and heroines, she rewrote the tale under the name of Villette, one of the most curious works ever printed. The resurrection of The Professor as Villette was published in January 1853. Mrs. Gaskell reports that Villette was received with "one burst of acclamation" on its publication. The public which had yet not had the opportunity of reading The Professor, found the Belgian school setting strikingly original and its depiction forcefully intense.

In Villette, Love theme is prevailed in each and every relation. Here the love is in triangular form as in 'Jane Eyre'. Lucy falls in love with Oh John, who primary was infatuated to Gnerera but luckily his attraction was shifted to Paulina, who was introduced as Polly in the early chapters. On the other hand M. Paul has a soft corner for Lucy in his heart. The triangle continues till Lucy was able to discover John loves Paulina and M. Paul has offered her heart to Lucy. In this way this love theme develops in this work of art but the death of M. Paul lift Lucy again lonely as she was in her childhood. Their love transcends the religious barrier.

Love as major theme like in Jane Eyre and Shirley also dominates her later novel 'Villette' but the treatment of love in this novel is somewhat different to Shirley and Jane Eyre. Though Lucy the Protagonist, can be regarded as a young feeble sister of fame in her plain appearance, but she is demand of the Charm lane was endowed with.

Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Villette, was as proper a Victorian lady as Charlotte Bronte was in real life. Bronte's own feelings,

experiences and passions have been recreated in Lucy. Lucy can be regarded as a "younger, feebler sister" of Jane. Both are plain, striving for independence, on the surface level are conventional, but quite volcanic underneath. Like Jane, Lucy too is an orphan, living as a child in someone else's household, but unlike Jane, she is not regarded as an intruder and is "a good deal taken notice of" She is therefore not as rebellious as Jane. Both have to make their own way in life.

But Lucy is devoid of the charm ascribed to Jane. She lacks the mental and physical strength which Jane has, and in the large part of the novel she exists in a state of nervous fever, is neurotic at times, and has a most frightening nervous breakdown described in the haunting chapter entitled 'The Long Vacation'. Therefore, her need to love is stronger than Jane's.

Lucy is thus, more mature and reflective than Jane. She means to look at the world as it is. There will be no miraculous calls, no Rochester, not even a St John Rivers, or a sudden elevation of fortune in her world. Charlotte wants to paint a true picture of life and not a fairy-tale.

When Lucy first sets foot in Villette, she falls in love with the first man she meets. This man is Dr. John who helps her with her luggage upon her arrival, and thus appears to Lucy as some kind of a lord of prince. Her affection for John is all on her side. It is not Lucy's fault that she fancies herself in love with John, for she would have fallen in love with any chivalrous man whom she would come across, in her situation.

Dr. John is a successful, intelligent, but a vain man. He lacks emotions, which excite sympathetic warmth towards others. Therefore, as the novel develops, without directly making it explicit, Lucy's view of John grows more critical. This can be seen in the play staged at school under M. Paul's direction. Lucy is cast as a male "foppish wooer" of coquettish Ginevra Fanshawe. The fact that John is in love with Ginevra and is part of the audience witnessing the play, spurs Lucy to divorce Ginevra from him. Herself being in love with John, she wants to separate him from Ginevra. In her wooing of Ginevra, she releases her hostility to the girl, reveals her jealousy, a desire to injure Ginevra, and a resentment of those more successful than herself.

It is interesting to note that uptill now she has kept her suppressed love for John hidden from us, from herself, as well as from John. She has also deliberately concealed from us a very important discovery she

---

\*(M.Phil. English, UGC NET, English and Education)

has made, that Dr. John and Graham Bretton of her early youth are one. In Mrs. Bretton's house she sees a picture of Dr. John, as a sixteen-year-old Graham, such a picture "any romantic little school-girl might almost have loved it in its frame" (242-43). This revelation of a schoolgirl love leads us to re-evaluate the chapters of her early youth. Lucy at that time was only two years Graham's junior, and thus more susceptible to his male charms than the nervous and excited Polly. She hides her schoolgirl interest in Graham's perfectly proportioned male features by projecting them into the child Polly's emotions. As a young withdrawn adolescent, Lucy began to fear love. Her opening womanhood found her so vulnerable, that she could only "hide away the experience and the emotions it engendered"<sup>6</sup>. She pulls back sharply and completely from her first sexual awakening in adolescence- the first attraction to a boy.

John's friendly letter acts as an assuagement for her 'love parched' existence. Eventually, she has to watch Dr. John encountering his settled love of life in Paulina on the very night he takes her to the theatre. The termination of his letters indicates that from now on the recipient of his letters will be Paulina. Lucy's feelings at this time are, "That goodly river on whose banks I had sojourned, of whose waves a few reviving drops had trickled to my lips was bending to another course: it was leaving my little hut and field forlorn and sand-dry, pouring its wealth of waters far away." (378)

John's kindness to her has been professional and not heartfelt. He shows no realization that she responded to him emotionally. Unaware, he asks Lucy to reveal his affections for Paulina to her. According to Terry Eagleton, Lucy's bitterness at "John's breezy treatment of her is clearly a class-issue": "Had Lucy been intrinsically the same, but possessing the additional advantages of wealth and station, would your manner to her, your value for her have been quite what they actually were?" (401)

Lucy's love for John can be called romantic infatuation but is one-sided affection all from her side. That John does not love her is not his fault and he has not promised her anything. Any woman in Lucy's position would fall in love with a man who has been kind and helpful to her. That Lucy starts romanticizing about him is not her fault either. Her romantic feelings for him may be an extension of the infatuation she has for him as an adolescent girl. That the infatuations are not permanent is proved by her opinion about him undergoing modification: "I give the

feeling as at the time I felt it; I describe the view of character as at the time I felt it; I describe the view of character as it appeared when discovered" (266). Lucy's narration of the tale as an old woman confirms that maybe as a young woman she was romantically inclined to him, but with the passage of the time, she takes a cooler view of him as she is not overcome by anger or spite at his lack of interest and no longer overvalues him through love.

A sudden shift of Lucy's affections from Dr. John to M. Paul creates a lot of confusion during the first reading of the novel. But if there would have been no M. Paul, and Lucy's love for John consummated, the book would not be read as a literary masterpiece, but just another fairy-tale romance or a twentieth-century Mills and Boon romance to relax us in our free time. Critics like Mrs. Gerin opine it was Charlotte's actual circumstances and of mind, which affected the structure of the novel, and this effect, is certainly for the better.

The character of M. Paul is modeled on M. Heger, the director of the pensionnat at Brussels, with whom Charlotte was in love. Thus the master-pupil relationship takes another course. M. Paul is Lucy's colleague, but in the master of her destiny. Time and again, Charlotte has worked and reworked the principal characteristics of M. Heger in her male characters. According to Patricia Beer: "If M. Heger had not existed she would have had to invent him".<sup>8</sup>

The wonderful portrayal of Paul proves, Charlotte was indeed in love with some Paul when she wrote the book.

The schoolmaster M. Paul is very unlike a heroic hero, yet this hero with a difference is quite fresh, original and striking. He is not created to attract a lady's fancy for he is quite vain, passionate and imperious. Nevertheless, he manages to catch the fancy of the directress, the English teacher and students lodged up as they are in a sort of nunnery, starved of any male company. He is not allowed to carry his appeal to the great world outside, for he is imprisoned in the women's world, that of his cousin directress Mme Back's pensionnat; and that of Madame Walravens.

Equally passionate like Lucy, M. Paul is quick to discern the fiery Lucy imprisoned behind her icy façade. He appreciates the true Lucy and repeatedly provokes the storm beneath her calm exterior by challenging her to give expression to her suppressed feelings. He tells

her: "You want so much checking, regulating, and keeping down" and "you need watching; and watching over" (452). Indeed, he does this 'watching over' not only of Lucy, but of the whole school, acting as a kind of master spy. He shocked the Victorian Lucy and the nineteenth century reader pointing to a window overlooking the pensionnat, which is his "post of observation" for observing shamelessly "female human nature" (453), talking like some "Dante emerging from the Inferno".

M. Paul's strong passions lead him to involve himself in Lucy's life, even when she does not wish it entirely. It is surprising to see him being jealous when Lucy receives John's letter. It is he who hands the letter to her, and his anger at its content can be seen in his "blue, yet lurid, flash out of his angry eye" (379). His jealousy of Lucy's feelings for John reveals not only his own interest in her, but also the quality of that interest and perhaps even something about how he looks at her. After his honorary lecture at the Tribune, he finds Lucy with John, who unaware of her feelings for him uses her to communicate his affections for Paulina to her. While John ignores Lucy's emotions entirely, M. Paul is quick to discern the force behind Lucy's expressed hurt at John's action. He immediately offers her his friendship proving that he too has a heart, not a stone: "That same heart did speak sometimes; though an irritable, it was not an ossified organ: in its core was a place, tender beyond a man's tenderness..." (425).

M. Paul's clear indication of his feelings are revealed to Lucy when he picks up a quarrel with her on his special fete day at school. He believes she has neglected him, whereas she deliberately withholds her special gift to him, for she wishes to stir him to even greater revelations of his feelings. He brings up the idea of 'passion'. His statement on the reality of passion leads to a discovery of the burial of his heart in the past.

Lucy finds that M. Paul's heart can open to her; their hearts are in fact mutually responsive to each other. He calls her his sister, yet pursues an intimacy very unlike sibling relations. He wants a "true friendship" with her which should be "intimate and real – kindred in all but blood" (500). Lucy senses the dawning of mutual affection and trust. She feels she is becoming more than "bonne petite amie" he considers her: "Could it be that he was becoming more than friend or brother? Did his look speak a kindness beyond fraternity or amity?" (538).

Lucy and M. Paul share a love that is romantically unique, for it transcends any other ordinary love-tale in the book, like that of Paulina and John. In her time, Thackeray criticized Charlotte, for he was amused by her portrayal of the heroine being in love with two men

Lucy is not another Caroline Helstone who will sit pinning for her unrequited love for John. She is sensible enough to realize that John's heart lies elsewhere and she has no part in it. Her choice to remain single after M. Paul's death is only a pining for love partly, for she has a career unlike Caroline to keep herself occupied, career whose doors have been opened to her by her lover. Thus, the spirit of love is more important than 'living happily ever after'.

Destiny does not hold the same fate for all the lovers can be seen in the beautiful love-story of Paulina and John, which is consummated in marriage. The love is too romantically idyllic, the kind we find in fairy-tales. This is the kind of love, the course of which runs smooth, with no obstacles in its way, barring a brief opposition from Paulina's father. We meet Paulina as Polly in the opening chapters of the book, which are a remarkable presentation of childhood. We are extremely delighted by her delicate, quaint, neat, capacity to love deeply and sensitive nature, and on the first reading we hope that, the authoress is going to present her Life and love. Instead, towards the middle of the first volume, the narrator assumes the role of the protagonist from being the frigid observer. Polly loves Graham as a child of six, to the extent of hero-worshipping him. He likes her as a child, but when he meets the woman, he loves her. Their meeting reads like a straight lift from a fairy - tale romance. The delicate Polly faints in the crowded theatre and is rescued by her childhood hero Graham, who incidentally happens to be a doctor and gives her medical attendance. It sounds too good to be real, but we like it because we all love beauty, grace and excellence. Like a typical conservative nineteenth century woman, Polly's world revolves round the two men who matter most to her, her father and Graham. She is "intensely familiar, a doll-sized version of the genteel married woman" and assumes the kind of role demanded of her "stirring cream and sugar into papa's tea and meeting Graham at the end of a hard day with a warning to wipe his shoes properly upon the mat". She will love and sacrifice to men who provide her material and emotional security. Polly is "rewarded in the end with marriage to the socially

desirable and eminently suitable Dr. John". The end of such a love is always to 'live happily ever after'.

In direct anti-thesis to this beautiful relationship, is the love of a woman who seems to be frustrated with her widowhood. This autonomous woman is the directress of the passionate, Mme Beck. She has imprisoned the young girls in her school fortress, giving them no opportunity to mix with the world outside. Herself, she pussyfoots and spies, and reads other people's letters. Lucy's impression of her is that, "she had no heart to be touched: it reminded her where she was impotent and dead" (137).

There is another comic pair of Ginevra Fanshawe and de Hamal. Ginevra Fanshawe is quite daring by the nineteenth century standards. She is a sort of 'Cleopatra' in her own way, epitomizing the values of the fashionable world. She is not merely a silly coquette, but has deep insight of other people's character.

Charlotte Bronte in *Villette* presents various facets of love: infatuation frustrated love, and romantic love itself in its various forms - as a fairy-tale romance and as courtly love. Infatuation, which is quite normal in a person in growing-up stage, does not gain much sympathy in one case from the author, as she does not allow it to end happily. But in another case, she gives it a fairy-tale ending, by providing the couple with all the happiness they deserve. She outrightly rejects frustrated love of a widow, for the widow is easily routed. Only the pure romantic feeling is approved by her as in the case of Lucy and M. Paul, Polly and John, and to some extent Ginevra and de Hamal. However, one is forced to conclude that Charlotte Bronte is most comfortable with presenting the love, the course of which never runs smooth. Most critics have ascribed Charlotte's own sadness over her isolated state and her not so sunny imagination to have influenced the novel. In the misery of Lucy, we too become miserable, as Mrs. Craik says: "Pure joy, still less ecstasy, is never offered to the reader". Therefore, we delight in the short pauses which Charlotte Bronte offers to us by delineating the love of Paulina and John, and Ginevra and Alfred de Hamal. But it would not be wrong to say that we revel in the main tragic love-story, even if it may or may not end happily for the main characters.

### References:

1. Charlotte Bronte, *Villette* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953) 61. Hereafter the references are cited from the same text.
2. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985) 493.
3. Harriet Martineau, *Daily News*, 3 February (1853) rpt. in Miriam Allott, ed., *Charlotte Bronte: Jane Eyre and Villette, A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1973) 77.
4. R.B. Martin, "Villette and The Acceptance of Suffering", *The Accents of Persuasion* (1966), rpt. in *A Casebook* 226.
5. Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979) 9.
6. Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction - 1778-1860* (London: Methuen, 1985) 86.
7. Pauline Nestor, *Women Writers* (London: Macmillan, 1987) 86.
8. W.A. Craik, *The Bronte Novels* (London: Methuen, 1968) 162.