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A Foucauldian and Feminist Reading of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Şatodaki Kadın Adlı Romanın Foucaultcu ve Feminist Okuması

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ÖZ

Anne Brontë'nin Türkçe'ye *Şatodaki Kadın* veya *Wildfell Konağı Kiracısı* olarak çevrilen *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* adlı romanı, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda ataerkil toplumun gücünü ve kadınlardan daha üstün görülen erkeklerin yaptıklarını meşrulaştıran uygulamaları eleştirir. Romanın kadın kahramanı Helen, zalim ve ihmalkar kocasından dolayı çocuğuyla evden kaçmakla hem kendi ayakları üzerinde kalarak yaşayabileceğini hem de Arthur gibi bir baba olmadan çocuğunu iyi bir şekilde yetiştirebileceğini göstermekte ve dönemin ataerkil düzenine ve söylemine karşı çıkmaktadır. Romanda temsil edilen kadınlara yönelik erkek baskısını ortaya koymak amacıyla, bu çalışmada feminist eleştirinin yanı sıra Michel Foucault'nun eleştirel teorileri de kullanılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, Helen gibi kadınların toplumsal hayatta ve kanun önünde erkeklerle eşit olması gerektiğini ima ederken romanın ataerkil düzeni yıktığını iddia etmektedir. Kahramanın Viktorya dönemi anlayışının aksine rasyonel, yaratıcı, çalışkan ve kendine güvenen bir kadın olarak tasviri ışığında, bu çalışma erkeklerin kadınlara üstünlüğünün burjuva toplumunda oluşturulan ataerkil söylemden kaynaklandığını ortaya koymaktadır.

ABSTRACT

Anne Brontë, in her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, criticizes the power of the patriarchal society in the nineteenth century and the practices that legitimize the actions of men considered superior to women. Helen, the female protagonist of the novel, shows that by running away from home with her child due to her cruel and neglectful husband, she can both stand on her own feet and raise her child well without a father like Arthur, and thus opposes the patriarchal order and discourse of the period. In order to illustrate male oppression on women represented in the novel, this study employs critical theories of Michel Foucault as well as feminist criticism. In this respect, the study claims that the novel subverts patriarchal order while implying that women like Helen should be equal with men in social life and before the law. In the light of the protagonist's portrayal as a rational, creative, hardworking and self-confident woman contrary to Victorian conceptions, this study reveals that the superiority of men over women stems from the patriarchal discourse created in the bourgeois society.

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Introduction

Anne Brontë, one of the Brontë sisters whose novels are still among the British classics today, became a leading novelist in England in the nineteenth century with her novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which defied the established patriarchal order of her time and made her more outstanding on gender roles compared to her sisters. For the Brontë Society she is now viewed as the most radical of the sisters due to her focus on tough subjects such as women's need to maintain independence, and how alcoholism can tear a family apart (BBC News, 2020). The study uses the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's theories on power and the criticism of the leading feminist theorists to discuss how Anne Brontë criticizes the power of the patriarchal society in the nineteenth century and the practices that legitimize the actions of men considered superior to women.

Along with Michel Foucault's theories on power and discourse, criticism by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have been taken as basis in analysis of the novel. For feminists, women in literature have been presented not from a female perspective but from a male perspective. Foucault's redefinition of power, however, has helped the feminists challenge the narratives constructed in the male dominated world. His concept of power regarding how it functions and exists differs from the previous traditional concepts of power. His books and essays such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality, Power/Knowledge, and Subject and Power* have been analysed to do the Foucauldian reading. Foucault's theories on how power works will shed a light on the fundamentals of female subordination. He made valuable contributions to the social sciences with his concept of power, how it works, and its mechanisms. According to Foucault, each period in history has its unique discourse and power relations. He does not see power coming only from the top to the bottom. It comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). For Foucault, since power has synergy, it does not operate only through repressive apparatuses and thus it cannot be regarded as completely repressive.

Anne Brontë and the Analysis of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Anne Brontë (1820-1849), like her elder sisters Charlotte and Emily, adopted a male pseudonym for her literary works since they hoped to evade the prejudice against female writers in the nineteenth century. Anne Brontë is a less known writer compared to her other two literary sisters Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë. "But Anne was, of the sisters, perhaps the most rigorously logical, the most quietly observant, the most realistic, and, in certain spheres, the most tenacious, the most determined, and the most courageous" (Langland, 1989, p. 4).

Like Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë worked as a governess for some time and reflected her experience in her first novel *Agnes Grey* (1847). Her second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) is remarkable in literary circles for its feminist content. "Anne's second novel confronts Victorian motherhood's inherent contradictions, societal shortcomings and, more radically, demonstrates its extraordinary potential by examining it through the lens of rational feminism" (Le Veness, 2011, p. 345). Her empowering the major female character in her fictional work, can be regarded as a challenge to prescribed gender roles.

Her novel, published just a year before her death, is significant regarding the women of the early Victorian Period. "While Anne's first novel dealt with the mission of teaching and rectification of abuse toward the governesses as employee, *The Tenant*, also didactic but far from ponderous in nature, focuses on evils such as alcoholism, profligacy, and self-indulgence" (Knapp, 1991, p. 91). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be regarded as an important source

reflecting the women issue based on themes such as objectification of women, questioning gender roles, alienation of women, female identity, and women's silence when analysed thoroughly. Male pseudonyms adopted by the Brontë sisters is the evidence of a male dominant society, in which women were not equal and did not have the rights men had.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, which conveys the story through the narration of Gilbert and the protagonist Helen's ("Mrs Huntingdon" or "Mrs Graham") diary and letters, starts with epistolary form with a letter written by Gilbert to his brother-in-law Jack Halford, which is about the incidents and events that led to his marriage. He goes back to the autumn of 1827, about twenty years before his writing the letter. The plot of the novel focuses on a woman named Mrs Graham, who arrives at Wildfell Hall with her son little Arthur and her nurse Rachel, and the challenges she faces in the neighbourhood. In an environment that observes secretly a woman living without a man, the female protagonist is exposed to bad rumours produced by the patriarchal society. Although Helen cannot become successful in her attempts to reform her husband Mr Huntingdon, she epitomizes a woman who can manage her own life.

Anne Brontë assumes a realistic attitude in her novel. She tries to reflect the society of her time as it is. In the preface to the second edition of the novel she says: "...when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear" (*TWH*

¹, p. 4). Mary Wollstonecraft, who is considered Britain's first feminist, was an ardent supporter of women's rights and accordingly wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which is considered a seminal work voicing the demands of women. Her views were radical enough to draw great attention in a period when women were deprived of social and political rights. The professions they were involved in were limited with being maids or governesses. "[S]he shows that women, because they are denied their rights as human beings, have been forced to seek their ends by means of coquetry and cunning, the weapons of the weak...". Wollstonecraft claims that women have unjustly been attributed some characteristics that degrade them and calls this "artificial weakness". Wisdom and intellect are what women should be named with rather than chaste and modest (Greenblatt, 2006, pp. 169, 174).

In the Victorian period, women were seen inferior to men. They were not equal, they were limited with their private sphere, doing household chores and taking care of children. "This does not mean that women were persecuted. On the contrary, more often than not they were placed on a pedestal and worshiped. Coventry Patmore's long poem in praise of his wife, *The Angel in the House* (1854–62), was widely admired and became a best-seller" (Nassaar, 2004, p. 95). Women were already provided with their role by the dominant patriarchal discourse of the time and this was done subtly resembling them to an angel as the persons of virtue and exemplary conduct. Men, on the other hand, belonged to the public space, running their business or involving in secret affairs with other women, thus elevating themselves to the level above reproach. D'Cruze (2004) states that business and professional men adopted masculine roles of protector, father and provider, and family roles were highly gendered as well as class specific. Furthermore, divorce and inheritance were also areas relevant to middle- and upper-class families (pp. 264, 269). Even with the Reform Bill of 1832 that expanded the voting right from landowners and men of the upper classes to the majority of middle-class men, women

¹ Brontë, A. (2008). *The tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Oxford University Press. Hereafter, the book is referred to as *TWH*.

had not voted for hundreds of years (Mitchell, 2009, p. 3). The struggles of women for defending their rights started to the end of the eighteenth century and this took the shape of a feminist movement in the form of waves for the following centuries.

Anne Brontë was already aware of how laws worked for both men and women in Britain when her novel was published in 1848. Before the Infant Custody Bill of 1839, law worked differently for fathers and mothers. “When parents separated or, much more rarely, divorced, the father’s right to custody of his progeny was largely unquestioned and legally absolute” (Berry, 1996, p. 33). The fathers were given more right compared to mothers, who were considered financially insufficient. The child usually belonged to the father and this was absolute. With the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, separate wives were given the right to petition the court for the temporary custody of children below seven years of age and this required mothers to be of good character. Women, even before the law, were legally assigned their role of mothering. “The bill, in acting out opposing cultural representations, transforms the category of ‘woman’ into ‘mother’ ” (Berry, 1996, pp. 34-35).

All such developments gave rise to feminism and laid the foundation of feminist movements that would appear decades later. “Feminism reflect[s] concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in favor of men” (Guerin, Willingham, Reesman, Morgan, & Labor, 2011, p. 253). Critics detect three phases of feminism historically. While the first-wave feminism, which appeared in the nineteenth century, aimed at gaining rights to vote and making laws that did not treat women like property, the second-wave feminism, which began after World War II and lasted until the 1970s, addressed additional inequalities related with social, political, legal, and economic rights. The third-wave feminism, on the other hand, started in 1990s and has challenged the essentialist definitions of femininity as a universal female identity and attempted to expand the interests of feminists (Guerin, Willingham, Reesman, Morgan, & Labor, 2011, pp. 254-256). In addition to the three phases of feminism, a fourth one, called the fourth-wave feminism, has appeared in the twenty first century as a result of internet and social media that have been used in almost all countries in the world. The purpose of this wave is to allow women “to engage in consciousness-raising” (Whipps, 2017, p. 28) through technology, which has become a part of our life.

It can be said that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published in 1848, became a voice for the silenced and marginalized women in Victorian literature at a time when more women took up writing. In *A Literature of Their Own*, the American feminist and literary critic Elaine Showalter, who explains that men and women have different organizations and experiences, divides the women’s literary tradition of novel writing into three phases: “the Feminine phase as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase as 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote; and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960” (Showalter, 1977, p. 13). Similarly, Anne Brontë used the male pseudonym Acton Bell for her novel. Brontë, like her sisters, imitated the hegemonic literary culture of men since conditions of the period were not ready for her gender to publicise their real names. It was after the 1880s that women struggled to earn their right of voting and better economic and social conditions. From 1920 on, they entered a new phase which ignited the construction of self-identity.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the writers of the feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, call *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* “a story of woman’s liberation” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 80) in their analysis. Considering the prevalent conditions in the Victorian period, this is true since women were not allowed to have the same conditions and opportunities that men had. Helen Graham, as the mouthpiece of Anne Brontë, creates her own space when she leaves the house. “...[S]he produces a public art which she herself rejects as inadequate but which she

secretly uses to discover a new aesthetic space for herself” (p. 81).

It is possible to see a resemblance between Anne Brontë’s life and the characters in her novels in assuming a feminist attitude. Anne Brontë was a woman who wanted to pursue “her goal of independence and competency” (Langland, 1989, p.13). In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she chooses her suitor. Mrs Maxwell, a morally upright person, always warns Helen to be careful in choosing a husband, which is a sign of protection. “Anne’s mother died before she was 2 years old. An unmarried maternal aunt, Aunt Branwell cared for the children after the mother’s death, and as the youngest child, Anne had a closer relationship to her than the others” (McDonagh in *TWH*, 2008, p. xii). Mrs Maxwell becomes a guide for Helen like Brontë’s aunt who took care of her when she was little. Helen’s aunt suggests that she love a person but in a reasonable way: “First study; then approve; then love. Let your eyes be blind to all external attractions, your ears deaf to all the fascinations of flattery and light discourse” (*TWH*, p. 112). Helen, an inexperienced girl, finds excuses for rejecting one of her suitors, Mr Boarham, whom both her aunt and uncle regard as a good suitor. Drawing attention to the age difference between her and Mr Boarham, Helen, who is just eighteen, claims that he is narrow minded, his tastes and feelings are wholly dissimilar to hers, his looks, voice and manner are displeasing to her, and that she has an aversion to his person that she can never surmount (*TWH*, p. 118). It is important to note that Anne Brontë uses her protagonist Helen as a woman of free will in choosing her husband in spite of making a wrong decision, which can be read a sign to elevate women to the level of men. Her aunt, on hearing that Helen has fallen in love with Mr Huntingdon, becomes worried and tries to discourage Helen from marrying him. Helen, depending on her limited life experience, gets angry with her aunt: “And you have no right to call him a profligate, aunt; he is nothing of the kind” (*TWH*, p. 127). Helen cannot foresee the outcome of her marriage because of her inexperience in life and the constructed gender roles in the society. Marriage, as an inseparable unit that makes up the society, is seen as a mechanism that controls women.

The novel reflects the incarceration of Helen not only in public space but also in her domestic space, that’s in her home. Her aunt suggests that she marry Mr. Boarham (*TWH*, 114), one of the older suitors of Helen, who was just eighteen and a beautiful girl. Parents or aunts in this case tried to get their young girls to marry wealthy men ignoring the young girls’ wishes. Although Helen did not marry Mr Boarham but Arthur, she suffered pain in her domestic sphere because of her unfaithful, gambler, and drunk husband at home. Arthur uses the legal power endowed to him by laws while Helen tries to take her son into her custody in a power struggle. Berry (1996), evaluating *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *TWH*, explains that “[t]hese Brontës make it clear that the family is the inevitable, and indeed the most threatening, site for relations of power both direct and indirect...” (p. 41). It is as if Helen tries to protect her domestic sphere from the patriarchal discourse by developing a counter discourse against it.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, written in the nineteenth century, reveals the power of religion, capitalism, and social life, all of which were directed by men, on women in order to confine women to more passive roles. The individuals behave according to discipline in a social environment. Discipline in social life is conducted through surveillance as well. Behaviours are shaped according to specific norms that arise out of schools, prisons, hospitals, or churches. “Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules” (Foucault, 1972, p. 224). Foucault makes use of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s prison model Panopticon developed in 1785 to explain the control mechanisms.

It is through this mechanism that prisoners will always feel that they are observed by the authority behind the windows of the tower and will be forced to behave accordingly.

Similarly, the social life in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is as such since Helen feels obliged to attend the church ceremony in order not to be condemned by the community. Foucault (1995) mentions “carceral network” (p. 298) referring to the control mechanisms in society. It is through this that the individual is manipulated. “Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies” (p. 138).

When Helen begins to live in Wildfell hall with her son and Rachel, Mr Millward, the vicar of Lindenhope, decides to visit her to give some pastoral advice since she has entered the neighbourhood and did not make her appearance at church on Sunday (*TWH*, p. 13). Since the neighbourhood is not a crowded place like London, the new people who have settled in the area are easily noticed and are expected to join the religious rituals. When the novel was published, religion was still a very strong element in the life of many British people, especially in the rural areas. When Helen joins the church ceremony, she is the focus point of attention and watched by the people there (*TWH*, p. 16). Althusser (1984) states that state institutions such as the church teaches “know-how” but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* (p. 7).

In the Victorian period, women were expected to live, work, and behave according to the norms. Control mechanisms function in modern times as well, though differently. According to Foucault (1995), it is power that constructs the subjects in a society. Concept of normal and abnormal thus determine whether actions or behaviours of the individuals are apt or not for the society. “In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194). Helen’s patriarchal society has standardized the duties and role of women. Church-going, obeying the husband in spite of whatever he does, doing few specific jobs apt for women are what they are confined to do. Her family life, on the other hand, is not very different since she has a neglectful husband like Arthur. The only salvation seems to keep herself and son away from him.

Her husband Arthur becomes an obstacle in front of Helen, who wants to raise her son away from his dominance. Thus, she defies not only her husband but also the patriarchal society she lives in. Her slamming the door in her husband’s face is a symbol of women’s resistance against this culturally constructed order since in the Victorian period the subordinated women who defied the dominant ideology were usually condemned by the constructed social conventions. Foucault (1978) argues that “the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior” (p. 96). Helen’s secret plan of leaving her house along with her son turns into a resistance that aims at changing the constructed status of women in the power relations. She keeps a diary in which she saves her emotions in her private sphere and does not hesitate to give it to Gilbert so that he can learn all truth about her oppressed life and her will to abandon her husband, who mistreats and ignores her. She is aware of injustices committed against her just because of her gender and her resistance spreads over time since she is a strong minded individual. Furthermore, her talent as an artist helps her to position herself in public sphere. Painting helps her to earn her living and have an independent life thanks to economic freedom, which is a fundamental right for all human beings.

In her new life, which starts with her escape from Grassdale Manor, she does not yield to the patriarchal hegemony imposed especially by her husband Arthur, his friends and the men and the women who can be called *angel in the house* during her stay at Wildfell Hall. Julia Kristeva, a postmodern feminist, rejects separation of sex from gender claiming that they cannot be separated from each other since they represent biology and culture. Kristeva maintains that it is not maternity or reproduction that is responsible for women's oppression, but the representations of them and she believes that the representations of woman and motherhood

can be changed through the power of texts. Her analysis of philosophical, religious, and literary texts suggests that these texts have been historically situated social forces engaged in the production of representations, representations through which we live (Oliver, 1993, pp. 105-106). Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in this regard is indeed important for feminist studies since it was written in a time when the concept of feminism had not developed enough. Considering feminism as the advocacy of the equality between women and men, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can be called a feminist text since it tries to subvert the established roles determined by the patriarchal discourse. By expressing her discontent, Anne Brontë, who uses her protagonist Helen as her mouthpiece, succeeds in becoming a voice for the silenced women.

The construction of gender roles starts from the childhood. In the discussion between Gilbert and Helen, regarding the ways of raising boys and girls, one can see the world view of Anne Brontë as an early feminist writer. Helen, the heroine of the novel, is criticized by the Markhams for being overprotective of her son. In return to Gilbert's claim about how a boy should be raised for life, Helen touches upon the issue of how girls are raised: "...you would have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant—taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil. But will you be so good as to inform me why you make this distinction? Is it that you think she has no virtue?" (*TWH*, p. 30). Helen knows that it is the society that regards girls as having less capacity than boys in protecting themselves against the evils and claims that such judgments must be made disregarding gender differences.

Focusing on power relations and forms of resistance, Foucault (1982) gives the example of a series of oppositions such as "opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live" and names these as struggles that "underline everything which makes individuals truly individual" (pp. 780-781). It is Helen who struggles against and resists the power imposed by the patriarchy that empowers her husband Arthur. Foucault claims that power cannot function alone. Resistance is related with power. According to Foucault (1978), power owes its existence to resistance. "Where there is power, there is resistance..." (p. 95). It is power that produces marginalisation and it is power again that is subverted to be used to its own ends. Helen says, "I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own" (*TWH*, p. 333). She considers herself the owner of what she produces, which contradicts the constructed image of women in the society she lives in. Her resistance aims at subverting the power that marginalises women. Helen's stance is the model of a woman who resists the traditionally established gender roles in the Victorian period. The Wildfell Hall, with its "dark grey stone", "its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation" but "only shielded from the war of wind and weather by a group of Scotch firs, themselves half blighted with storms, and looking as stern and gloomy as the Hall itself" (*TWH*, p. 20), seems to be summarizing Helen's difficult life and her struggles against unfair practices in a male-dominant society, her loneliness but strong persistence and will to protect her son.

Anne Brontë was already familiar with clerical life due to her father's profession and reflected religious themes in her literary works. Mr Huntingdon, who is the antagonist in the novel, is a "selfish", "dishonest", "self-indulgen[t]", and an "alcoholic" man (*TWH*, pp. 171, 199, 220, 234). He gets involved in an affair with Lady Lowborough and does not keep his marriage vows. Moreover, he does not take responsibility for raising his son in an ideal way and drinks a lot with his friends. When Helen tells him that her aunt wants her to marry "a really good man", he mockingly says that he will change for her aunt (*TWH*, p. 147). When going to

church, Arthur wants to create the image of an ideal suitor by pretending to be a good believer. In fact, he disrespects the sermon as he does not truly believe in God or holy places (*TWH*, p. 151). Helen, who thought that she could reform Arthur, never expects him to be so base. It is interesting that it is as if Arthur is trying to change her with his vile methods. He says: “To my thinking, a woman’s religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord” (*TWH*, p.173). While Foucault (1978) counts the men as having power in the order of sexuality, he mentions women as “forced to remain ignorant” (p. 99) just because they are deprived of power. Foucault defines power as the multiplicity of force relations that are liable to gain and lose strength through “ceaseless struggles and confrontations” (p. 92). Thus, the dominant patriarchal ideology loses ground when confronted with resistance as in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

There are social and cultural forces that make men seem superior to women. “In religious writing, novelists accepted the subordination of women because it was read as God’s will” (Šalinović, 2020, p.223). Worse still, the laws themselves made men superior and women inferior. “Laws controlling marriage and divorce still had their roots in ecclesiastical law, treating the genders unequally” (Bellamy, 2005, p. 256). Helen defies the socially established gender roles. She endures all difficulties set on her way by Arthur. What she wants is a man who will not be a stereotypical Victorian man, who tends to despise the ability of women but on the contrary, a man who will love her in return for her love and respect equal conditions necessary for both genders. In spite of all cruelty by him, she still has a sense of doing her duty as a wife. She finally loses her patience because of his secret affair with Annabella (Lady Lowborough) and tries to save her son from Arthur and his corrupt friends Mr Hargrave, Mr Hattersly, and Grimsey as they get little Arthur to drink alcohol and use bad language. It is knowledge molded by discourse that forms the social rules in a society.

The relation between power and knowledge is very strong since it is power that constructs the norms of knowledge and as a result, the subjects who are exposed to power are equipped with certain modes of behaviours. It is “power [that] produces knowledge” (Foucault, 1995, p. 27). Therefore, truth is created by knowledge in a specific discourse and so are the thought worlds, beliefs, and normal/abnormal concepts of people in a given community. Foucault (1995) explains that penal practises differed from period to period and so did the perception of truth. “...[T]he truth-power relation remains at the heart of all mechanisms of punishment ...” (p. 55). Furthermore, he stressed that it was the ideology of the dominant class, which determined what it was 'right' or 'not right' to do or to be (Foucault, 1980, p. 3).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) states that authorities use binary division and branding such as “mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal” to control individuals (p. 199). It is through this and control mechanisms that the individual is characterized in a society. He further claims that power is what dictates its law to sex and “sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” rule (Foucault, 1978, p. 83). It is power that defines whether individuals belong to the public sphere or domestic sphere. The women of the Victorian period were expected to conform to the social rules by not breaching conventions set up by males.

The status of women and men were not equal before the law when this novel was penned since men were considered superior to women. Brontë is thus becoming the voice of all women who stand against male oppression. The French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1956), a representative of the second-wave feminism and known for her famous work *The Second Sex*, expresses that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 273), which refers to the socially constructed status of women in society. De Beauvoir argues that femininity is constructed by the environment we live in and by the civilization. Helen’s attempt to construct a female identity and create equal conditions for women is praiseworthy. Anne Brontë was a

very conscious novelist and sensitive to gender issues while penning her novel. It is not the natural phenomena like birth that determines the role and identity of women but the society and the dominant discourse. Thus women, who are capable of doing many things as men, are attributed with qualities that degrade them to passive or weak persons.

Throughout the novel, it becomes obvious that Arthur, who is not a good model as a husband and father, has a love affair with Annabella and another woman, Miss Myers. On his deathbed, he cannot recognize Helen and asks her why she left him. “[H]e was in delirium at Helen’s arrival. He did not know her, and addressed her as ‘Alice’ (no doubt the name of ‘that unhappy person Miss Myers’)” (Liddell, 1990, p. 105). Comparing the matrimonial duties of Arthur with hers, Helen emphasizes the differences as follows: “Judging from appearances, his idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly, and to stay at home --- to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way...” (TWH, p. 206).

The Subjection of Women (1869), an essay by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, criticizes the condition of women and demands gender equality. Mill states that men have put everything in practice to enslave their mind and the social subordination of women stands out an isolated fact in modern social institutions (Greenblatt, 2006, pp. 1063-1064). Mill thinks that the condition of women should be improved by giving them equal rights as men and implies that the treatment against them in the society is shameful for modern times. He refers to men as the masters of women who are degraded to inferiority and sees marriage as an institution that serves this purpose. “Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house” (Mill, 1984, p. 323). Helen feels that she does not have the power to correct and better her husband. On the contrary, she feels herself to be “a slave, a prisoner” (TWH, p. 312) when her keys were taken by her husband to prevent her escape with her son and her possessions. She is confined to Grassdale Manor and cannot behave with her free-will. Kate Millett (2000), on the other hand, like other critics of the second-wave feminism, considers “patriarchal ascriptions of temperament and role” as “arbitrary”. Moreover, she thinks that family is the chief institution of patriarchy and “[i]t is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society...” (pp. 32-33).

Anne Brontë, by taking up writing as a woman, challenged the conventions of her time and proved that women could write as well as men. In her essay titled *The Laugh of the Medusa*, the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous (1976), another representative of the second-wave feminism and the writer of *Écriture féminine*, strongly advocates that women should write and create their own world rather than let men-created world write for women. She insists that women create their own writing and history. “Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible” (p. 876).

In many other novels written by female writers such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot during the Victorian period, the difference between genders and attempts to remove the wide gap in equality are vivid. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë assumes a role of social responsibility by emphasizing that the rooted beliefs and prejudices in the society regarding females should be abolished. “While Helen does receive her own romantic conclusion, Anne places Helen’s story within the context of a community that, with Helen’s help, is beginning to be transformed for the better” (Colón, 2008, p. 20).

In her extended essay titled *A Room of One’s Own*, the famous novelist and feminist Virginia Woolf (2007) is very sensitive on woman question and states that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (p. 2). She stresses that women must be allowed to write their literary works on equal conditions as men. Woolf touches upon injustices conducted against women in the society just because of their gender and conveys her

experiences in this essay. Criticising the patriarchal society, she states that women could not visit even the college libraries by themselves unless they were “accompanied by a Fellow of the College” or provided with “a letter of introduction” (p. 6). Anne Brontë’s aim was to depict the truth in the society and thus trigger the consciousness on women issue. In fact, with her *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she succeeded in paving the way for equality of the sexes and became a model for the female writers that appeared after her.

Conclusion

Feminism, which began with the struggle of women’s rights in the late eighteenth century, aims at bringing equality and freedom to women on social, political, and economic grounds. Anne Brontë, through her protagonist Helen Huntingdon, shows that women can reveal their capacity of creativity in both private and public spheres effectively. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the condition of a Victorian woman, who resists the male dominance and establishes her privacy both by running away from home and gaining her life by herself, is revealed. Rather than being *the Angel in the house* by obeying wishes of her husband, Helen rejects and challenges the male dominated society that degrades her just because of her gender, and makes her subservient to her husband’s power by depriving her of working in public space, and thus, of power.

The study shows that Helen subverts the patriarchal society by resisting the male-dominated society and presenting herself as a rational and creative woman. Her attempts to reform her husband, although not successfully, reveal that a woman like her can better men like Arthur and contribute to the ideal formation of family and society. Using Foucault’s theories on power along with feminist criticism, subjugation of women has been shown through power relations in the novel. Therefore, Helen’s behaviours and her maternal role throughout the novel shows that while she resists bourgeois ideology of her time, she does not neglect her duty as a mother.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, written by Anne Brontë may not be as commonly known as *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights* by other Brontë sisters. However, its main theme is indeed significant since this novel focuses on construction of female identity. Helen’s escape from her merciless husband is an attempt to exceed her boundary constructed by the patriarchal discourse. It is through her struggle that she builds up her female identity against a male-dominated world. The novel is a magnificent piece of work in portraying a woman, Helen, as an ideal example who is self-sacrificing, responsible for taking care of her son, protecting him, working and earning her life. Although it was published in 1848, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* maintains its pertinence focusing on the rights and roles of women, since they are unfortunately great problems in the contemporary world.

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