

# THE WOMAN STRUGGLE OF BEING A GOVERNESS IN ANNE BRONTE'S AGNES GREY

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**Abstract:** *In the Victorian era, the existence of governess held unique position and became a social phenomenon in England. The governess became a popular figure in fiction. Many authors of governess novels drew on their own experience as a governess. Among these authors is Anne Bronte. In her first novel Agnes Grey, she depicted the life of governess throughout its female main character named Agnes Grey. This thesis focuses on analyzing that female main character and her struggle of being a governess. The aims of the thesis are to examine the motive that leads Agnes Grey to be a governess and to reveal her struggle to face the oppression from her employers within her being of governess depicted in the novel. Since studying on woman, this thesis basically uses Feminism theory which mainly focuses on womanhood. Marxist feminism is additionally used to examine governess as working woman is as woman source of oppression. Besides, inside the analysis the thesis also tries to correlate some points with Islamic views.*

**Keywords:** Victorian; governess; feminism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literary texts are assumed to be ideological in the sense that they cannot give us a knowledge of the social formation; but they do give us something of equal importance in analyzing culture, an imaginary representation of real relations (Eagleton & Milne 329). Therefore, literary works represent real life of it. There are many authors who cover their conditional surroundings into their works. Thus there must be found a very close relation between one literary work and the era when it is made.

Every literary work covers its own historical and sociological background based on its period. One period that cannot be neglected is Victorian period as one period of literature development. The Victorian period marks the beginning of change of feminist activists (Lee, 1997).

Many women started to be aware of their right much bravely. It can be proven by the existence of women writers who tried to bring all the issues around women and their sufferings such as gender inequality and oppression through literature. In this period, there were Bronte sisters who were very popular of their literary works: Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte. Unlike her two sisters who were well-known earlier of their novels, Anne Bronte finally proved that she herself was also able to make an agreeable novel like her two sisters. Her first novel was successfully finished and published in 1847, entitled *Agnes Grey*.

This novel showed that Anne Bronte was one of woman authors who were aware of a notable issue around women in that era. It tells about a woman who trains and teaches children in their own home, called a governess. Governess was a woman's profession in Victorian era which was distinguishable from other jobs. Because of Victorian custom which forbade women to have activities outside the house, having job—for example, so then governess, for some reasons, was considered as one and only possible job which would not endanger woman's social status of middle class when she had to go into employment. It tells a story of a clergyman's daughter who decided to earn her own living as a governess in order to help the financial state of her family which gets into the ruin because of the unlucky fate of her father in his business. The story seems so natural since it is partly based on the author's experience. Therefore, the way Anne Bronte described the difficulties that Agnes has during her being governess is a detail representation that has been delivered so well to the readers so that we, as the readers, can really feel how hard is her struggle as a governess.

This study has two objectives. The first is to explain the motive that leads Agnes Grey to be a governess and the second is to reveal the struggle of Agnes Grey to face the oppression from her employers within her being of governess as depicted in the novel.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A. Character and Characterization**

Character is a personage in a narrative or dramatic work and it is also a kind of prose sketch briefly describing some recognizable type of person (Baldick, 37). It can be simply said as people who build up a story. Characters often become interesting object chosen for analysis. Interpreting character's moral qualities can be performed through analyzing the characters' speaking, doing, and thinking. By exploring the characters, readers can get some moral lessons implemented in real life since a character possesses a strategic position to deliver messages, values, and all things that the author wants to give to the readers (Nurgiyantoro, page 167).

Talking about characters, it is supposed to talk about Characterization, too. Characterization means ways which an author or writer presents and

reveals the characters' personalities within creating the story. Commonly, in characterizing the characters, there are two ways that an author usually uses. Those are direct and indirect characterization. Using direct manner means that the author describes directly about the character. The author attributes the qualities of characters in direct description. Otherwise, in indirect manner of characterization the author does not merely tell the characters but showing them to the readers through how the character looks, what the character does, what the character says, what the character thinks, and how the character affects other characters (Baldick, 2001, page 37). So characters and characterization cannot be separated each other. Also, characters become an important point to analyze in this study. The writer tries to reveal Agnes Grey's struggle in helping to maintain her family's financial condition by being a governess who lives uncomfortably and gets oppressed by her upper-class employers through the speaking, the doing and the thought of characters involved.

## **B. Feminism**

This study also tries to reveal the woman character and her struggle so that Feminism theory is involved. Feminism can be roughly defined as a movement that seeks to enhance the quality of women's lives by defying the norms of society based on male dominance and subsequent female which implies the emancipation of women from the shackles, restrictions, norms and customs of society. It demands that women should be treated as autonomous subjects, and not as passive objects. It seeks to achieve equality between men and women in moral, social, economic and political fields. The objective of that movement is the creation of a new identity for women and making them aware of their rights (Shihada, 2005, page 121).

Marxist-Feminism is a sub-type of feminist theory which focuses on the social institutions of private property and capitalism to explain and criticize gender inequality and oppression (Bertens, 2001, page 80). Rosemarie Putnam Tong, in her book 'Feminist Thought' reinforced that either class or sex as the primary source of women's oppression strove to present capitalism and patriarchy as two equal partners colluding in a variety of ways to oppress women (Tong, 2009, page 115). So, Marxist feminist claims that the system of patriarchy and capitalism is the source of women's oppression.

This study intends to apply is theory in examining the struggle of Agnes Grey. The writer uses this theory to analyze how class division between Agnes Grey and her employers constructs a capitalist system and how her family's thinking especially her father about her inequalities become a system of oppression for her, and how she struggles along with it.

### 3. FINDINGS

To explain the motive that leads Agnes Grey to be a governess, firstly it has to understand her character and situation. Agnes Grey is a character of eighteen years old girl and a daughter of a clergyman as it is evident from the following mention of her parents, she comes from a decent family:

*My father was a clergyman of the north of England, who was deservedly respected by all who knew him; and, in his younger days, lived pretty comfortably on the joint income of a small incumbency and a snug little property of his own (Bronte, 1877, page 3).*

This means that Agnes is not rich. She just comes from adequate family that her father only has a small amount of money. Actually, although Agnes family has no large sum amount of money but it is at first never troubling their life, especially, Agnes. Although they are not rich, the father “liked to see his house comfortable, and his wife and daughters well clothed, and well attended; and besides, he was charitably disposed, and liked to give to the poor, according to his means, or some might think, beyond them” (Bronte, 1877, page 6). As it is obvious from the excerpt above, Agnes has a very comfortable background, and lives in a happy family.

Unfortunately, that entire comfort situation does not last long. It starts when one day; Agnes’s father is suggested by a kind friend, a merchant, to double his private property by entrusting him with the money he spared, promising him a fair share of the profits. But unfortunately, “the vessel, which contained [the] fortune, had been wrecked, and gone to the bottom with all its stores, together with several of the crew, and the unfortunate merchant himself” (Bronte, 1877, page 7). Thus, the family is suddenly impoverished and this is the point when Agnes’ life begins to change.

In order to help her family to solve that financial problem, Agnes said “I wish I could do something” (Bronte, 1877, page 12) to her mamma. From this statement, the writer argues that Agnes character shows a value of Marxist feminism which rejects the construction women as a class of passive consumers (Madsen, 2000, page 65). Agnes’s awareness that she hopes to do something to earn money means that she, as woman, thinks that she is not only consuming but also able to produce something. Agnes has prepared in mind what she wants to do and she tells it to her mom:

*‘But I have another scheme in my head, mamma, and have had long, only I did not like to mention it.’*

*‘Indeed! pray tell us what it is.’*

*‘I should like to be a governess.’ (Bronte, 1877, page 12)*

From the quotation above, the writer sees that Agnes character performs the spirit of feminism in which women become autonomous decision makers that they have the right and freedom to decide their own careers and life patterns (Tong, 2009, page 15). Unluckily, her father, mother and sister cannot accept her idea. They think that Agnes has no capability in doing that. However, Agnes struggles a lot to convince them all. Being rejected by all her family members does not interfere herself with the plan she decides. She still argues that becoming a governess is the best way.

*How delightful it would be to be a governess! [...] to earn my own maintenance, and something to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mamma and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. (Bronte, 1877, page 14)*

It seems that she chooses to be a governess for two reasons. The main purpose is that she hopes to earn money in order to help her family's financial condition which is getting worse at that time. She does not wish to trouble them of her life needs. The additional reason is that she wants to prove to her father, mother, and sister about her capability. Agnes who is always treated like a child tries to show them that she has been mature.

Finally she gets the permission and sent away to be a governess. Nevertheless, the conflicts arise again. By the system of capitalism, then she often gets oppressed by her employers. In capitalism, oppression appears in some ways: violence, powerlessness, exploitation and marginalization. Therefore this study tries to reveal the struggle of Agnes Grey in facing the oppression from her employers within her being of governess.

The first family who hires is Bloomfield family. Master Tom, the eldest child, has troubled Agnes the most. It is very hard to make him obey the order. He does not want to be ruled. On the other hand, he loves ruling others, his sisters and also Agnes, his governess. The worst of all is he likes to use violence in making others obedient towards his command.

“Master Tom, not content with refusing to be ruled, must needs set up as a ruler, and manifested a determination to keep, not only his sisters, but his governess in order, by violent manual and pedal applications” (Bronte, 1877, page 34), this performs that Agnes is oppressed through Tom's violence. However, Agnes does not simply let Tom to do all the things he wants, especially to violate her.

*[...] I determined to refrain from striking him, even in self-defence; and, in his most violent moods, my only resource was to*

*throw him on his back and hold his hands and feet till the frenzy was somewhat abated. (Bronte, 1877, page 34)*

From the excerpt, the writer sees that Agnes does not merely accept Tom's attitude. She makes an effort to protect herself from his violence but still using way which does not injure him.

The naughtiness of children is not only one thing that Agnes should handle. She has to cope with the parents, too. Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield frequently leave the fault of their children on Agnes side. One example is when Tom, Mary and Fanny escape from the schoolroom and run out of the house into the garden, where they plunge about in snow, shout and scream in exultant glee. Agnes has attempted to catch them and get them in but she fails.

Suddenly Agnes hears a voice behind her, in harshly piercing tones, exclaiming. This is Mr. Bloomfield's shouting. He is showing his anger towards Agnes. He is angry of his children's wickedness of playing around outside in the snow. Agnes explains that she has made an effort to get them in but they do not listen to her.

*'But I INSIST upon their being got in!' cried he, approaching nearer, and looking perfectly ferocious.*

*'Then, sir, you must call them yourself, if you please, for they won't listen to me,' I replied, stepping back.*

*'Come in with you, you filthy brats; or I'll horsewhip you every one!' roared he; and the children instantly obeyed. 'There, you see!—they come at the first word!'*

*'Yes, when YOU speak.' (Bronte, 1877, page 47)*

In this quotation, the writer supposes that Agnes is also oppressed by the parents. Mr. Bloomfield is angry to Agnes whom he considers irresponsible of his children. Agnes does not let her employer to wrong her that way because she has tried to control them. Mr. Bloomfield still forces her to get his children in. Agnes refused to do it. She thinks what she has done is enough. She is even asking bravely to Mr. Bloomfield to do it himself. It is her struggle to show her power. Powerless is the other mode of oppression in capitalism (Young, 1990, page 40). By refusing to be always wronged and boldly command her employer is her struggle to show that she is not powerless. She has power either to deny or to order even though she is just a governess in Bloomfield family.

The other mode of oppression in capitalism is exploitation. Capitalism thrives on exploiting its laborers. Labor power is the one commodity which in the process of being consumed produces new value (Young, 1990, page 49). The oppressive treatment in exploiting Agnes service can be seen through Agnes utterance, "About Christmas I was allowed to visit home; but

my holiday was only of a fortnight's duration" (Bronte, 1877, page 43). In this utterance, the writer sees a disappointment in Agnes character of her only short holiday. She adds "How intensely I had longed for my holidays, how greatly I was disappointed at their curtailment" (Bronte, 1877, page 43). It means that her employer does not give her enough time to have a break. In other words, Agnes is exploited.

Working for less than a year, she is fired by the Bloomfield family but it does not make her give up. She tries again to be a governess in Murray family. Here, although the situation is a bit better but she still often gets oppressive treatment. The worst of all is that in this family she is marginalized. The marginalization towards Agnes can be seen through the part when Agnes admits that she is lonely because she is restricted inside the household of her employer without a chance to communicate liberally with the people around.

*"[...] the lonely drudgery, of my present life: for I was lonely. Never, from month to month, from year to year, except during my brief intervals of rest at home, did I see one creature to whom I could open my heart, or freely speak my thoughts with any hope of sympathy, or even comprehension: never one..." (Bronte, 1877, page 125)*

From the statement above it can be seen clearly that Agnes has a lonely life within her being governess. She has no other friends to share with, a friend to talk to about things freely because it is impossible to do such things with her employers. She is marginalized from the society.

However, Agnes attempts to make the situation better. She does not let herself to be vulnerably marginalized all the time. "and thus I made a few acquaintances among the cottagers; and occasionally, I went to see them on my own account" (Bronte, 1877, page 111). This excerpt shows that Agnes tries to interact with the surrounding society. Until she succeeds to make a friend with "poor Nancy Brown, with whom I could enjoy a single moment of real social intercourse, or whose conversation was calculated to render me better, wiser, or happier than before" (Bronte, 1877, page 125).

The struggle of Agnes Grey results in the highest point in which she finally succeeds herself to be free from the system of capitalism. She, with her mother, build a school of their own so that she does not need to be employed by other people. This makes them have the authority on herself to do anything they want.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Agnes Grey is woman of the main character in this story that appears from the beginning to the end to narrate all the experiences she has. Her

family is decent. However, one day it becomes more unfortunate by the fact that her father loses a lot of amount of money in the case of failure of his business that creates the worse condition of finance. Agnes decides to give help by deciding to be a governess as the way which is considered that such job cannot degrade her middle class status because the patriarchal custom in that era limited women from the workplace but governess is viewed as an extraordinary profession.

Her decision to be a governess at the first time denied by her family. They see Agnes, as the youngest child, must be incapable of that great responsibility to teach and take care of children. However, she tries to convince them over and over again until they finally let her do so. Through the deeper analysis, the writer reveals that the motive which leads Agnes Grey to be a governess is two reasons. The main aim is to help her family to get better condition of finance after the bad luck of her father's loss of money in business. The second motive is to give evidence to her father, mother, and sister who always regard her as a child in her teen age that she has been capable enough with her own life.

Furthermore, she often gets oppressive treatments from her employers, and even their children. In Bloomfield family where she has her first experience of becoming a governess, she has to deal with children who are so naughty and uncontrolled. Violence from the children and exploitation of her work by the parents are the kinds of oppression she ever got but she never just accepts those things helplessly. She always struggles a lot for her right to survive. Although she is at last fired from the Bloomfield, but she does not give up directly. Next, she is employed by the Murray family. In Murray family, the condition is not so far different. Here, she also often gets oppressed. Besides exploitation, she is also marginalized. However, Agnes makes more attempts to do some efforts in order to defend her right. Her highest achievement of struggle is when she finally builds a school of her own with her mother which releases her from the necessity to be a governess so she does not need to accept any oppression from her employers anymore.

Based on the explanation stated earlier, it seems that Agnes performs as a feminist in which she struggles a lot for her decision. She is specifically a Marxist feminist who can earn money and also succeeds to set herself to be free from the patriarchal and capitalism system that oppress her.

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