

THE BRONTË POETRY : A FOUNTAIN OF FAITH

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I, Apeni Lotha, hereby declare that the subject matter of the thesis entitled *The Brontë Poetry: A Fountain of Faith*, is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis of the award of a previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university or institute.

This is being submitted to the North Eastern Hill University for the award of the *Degree of Doctor of Philosophy* in English.



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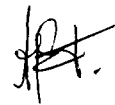
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The Brontë sisters, painted by their brother Branwell, c. 1835. From left to right are Anne, Emily and Charlotte, with a painted-out space in the background which probably once held a self-portrait of Branwell himself. From Brian Wilks, *The Brontës* (London: Hamlyn, 1976), p. 100.

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PROLOGUE

We wove a web in childhood,

A web of sunny air;

We dug a spring in infancy

Of water pure and fair;

We sowed in youth a mustard seed,

We cut an almond rod;

We are now grown up to riper age –

Are they withered in the sod?

The mustard-seed in distant land

Bends down a mighty tree,

The dry unbudding almond – wand

Has touched eternity.

- Charlotte Brontë, 'Retrospection'

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The three Brontë sisters- Charlotte, Emily and Anne- along with the only brother Branwell, and father Patrick and mother Maria constitute a family of writers. As the members of a close-knit family the children grew and developed under the direct guidance and affection of the parents, especially of the father whose strongly-held principles were to exercise such marks of discipline and determination on the growing children as to give them the distinction of the Brontë children, and later, of the Brontë sisters. The sense of determination and faith they inherited from him was so strong and far-reaching as to drive them against all odds and resistance towards their evolution as women and writers. Even Robert Southey's most deadening and masculine admonition to Charlotte that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not be"¹ failed to deter them from their resolve and they held on to the quest of their literary vocation. In the face of dearth, disease and death, and the drudgery of governessing the precocious clergy-man's daughters sharpened their inborn talent with extensive reading and rigorous training whereupon the inspiration they received from their Cambridge graduate father and the stimulus they felt from his books along with those of others lying on the selves contributed significantly towards shaping them into would-be accomplished writers: "The highest stimulus as well as the liveliest pleasure

we had, lay in attempts at literary composition,"² so was Charlotte Brontë to recollect and record the genesis of their literary career.

The three Brontë sisters popularly known as the celebrated Victorian novelists were primarily poets. Though they published novels³ towards the close of their life, they had been writing poems since their early childhood, with the occasional outbursts of their juvenilia in prose.⁴ The publication of *Poems by Currer, Ellis, Actjōn Bell* by Aylott and Jones, London, in May 1846 is proof enough that the sisters began their career in the belief that they were first and foremost poets. That their first love was poetry is further confirmed by the evidence that quite a lot of the poems of varied length, running into 140 pages, included in the *Publication* together with those excluded, such as Charlotte's 'Retrospection', Emily's 'High Waving Heather' and Anne's 'North Wind', to name only a few, are discovered to have been written as early as in the third decade of the nineteenth-century, i.e., much before the idea of writing novels was to strike their mind, and while they were still teenagers. Charlotte recollects in the following stanza of unique serenity and simplicity the product of their close partnership:

We wove a web in childhood,
A web of sunny air;
We dug a spring in infancy
Of water pure and clear.⁵

The images of weaving and web and consequently of spinning suggest that while the other children of Haworth village were engaged in the process of spinning yarns and weaving them into cloth, the Brontë children as their counterparts engaged themselves in spinning words and phrases to weave them into verses, mostly of faith. While the textile industries in the North of England polluted the air and defiled the water, the Brontë sisters cast in the same mould preserved for the spiritual regeneration of mankind the purity of both the elements, for if the 'sunny air' symbolizes the spiritual essence of God, the 'Spring' embodies in it the attributes of the 'Water of regeneration' or 'living water' or the 'living well'⁶ implying God's redemptive grace through Christ.

The stanza quoted above that begins with 'We' may fairly be viewed as a prologue to the Brontë poetry of faith, and for its 'living-well-like' quality it may rightly be called a fountain of faith, which is perennial and pure; flowing unimpeded, it transcends time and space. Except for some occasional oscillations, Emily also, like her two sisters, was quite assured of the immortality of the soul:

But I'll not fear - I will not weep
 For those whose bodies lie in asleep:
 I know there is a blessed shore
 Opening the ports for me and mine;
 And, gazing time's water o'er,
 I weary for that land divine,⁷

That Emily was weary of the phenomenal world and so she did 'weary for that land divine' is a recurrent theme in her poetry which is well-confirmed by the frequency in it of 'weary' and 'dreary' nearly sixty times. That she was convinced and confident of the 'blessed shore' – 'I know' – characteristically speaks of Emily as a woman of faith, of her belief in a blessed afterlife. It is a strong theistic assertion of personal experience, but whether at all a deity would help her secure the 'blessed shore' or the 'land divine' is not clear. Or would the one, if any, be a Christian one is not evident either. Anne's deity on the other hand is certainly and always Christian and so is her conviction:

Though friends and kindred turn away
 And laugh thy grief to scorn:
 I hear the great Redeemer say,
 'Blessed are ye that mourn'.⁸

This stanza from Anne invites a close comparison with the verse that reads, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Similarly, Charlotte's vision is explicitly and characteristically Christian:

More I recall not, yet the vision spread
 Into a world remote, an age to come -
 And still the illumined name of Jesus shed
 A light, a clearness, through the unfolding gloom -
 And still I saw that sign, which now I see,
 That cross on the yonder brow of calvary.⁹

The vision she had was of Jesus Christ who interceded for man on earth and who is ceaselessly interceding for him with God from heaven above since then. Though the images of the Cross and Calvary ordinarily speak of the crucifixion of Jesus as a historical incident, but the spreading of the vision into a remote world, and the appearance of 'A light' dispelling the gloom speak of something beyond the mere historicity of Jesus Christ. The vision then could have been a historical, mystical vision, because the intense and timeless impact it had on Charlotte- 'now I see' – projects in her heart "a Jesus as spiritually arisen within men,"¹⁰ who is significant and relevant not only for our time but for all time to come. Unless he is experienced as spiritually born in us, we may remain forlorn. She reinforces the same theme in the form of a longing for the fleeting vision in the following couplet:

Oh! to behold to the truth – that sun divine,
How doth my bosom pant, my spirit pine.¹¹

Protestant daughters of the protestant parents, the sisters conceived and formed their religious faith "upon a personal apprehension of God" admitting no human mediator to distance the relation between God (in Jesus) and man. The awakening call to understand and realize God's word, they felt, rests upon the individual with "no appeal to any authoritative body for dogmatic pronouncements."¹² They were then revolutionary; Charlotte makes the claim of her 'searching soul' explicit:

The world advances; Greek or Roman rite
 Suffices not the inquiring mind to stay;
 The searching soul demands a purer light
 To guide it on its upward, onward way.¹³

She further expresses her detest of 'old faith', and its rituals. It was, as she called it, a rotten faith, inadequate to quench a hungry soul, chiefly because of its dependence on the earthly priest rather than on Jesus Christ:

Our faith is rotten, all our rites defiled
 Our temples sullied, and methinks, this Man,
 With his new ordinance, so wise and mild
 Is come.¹⁴

The sisters were convinced in their heart that the soul could be saved by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ rather than by mere observance of the sacraments. The believer should enthrone him as ever-abiding in the heart.

With all its merits the slim *Publication* on its authors' expense could ensure but a very poor reception; despite favourable reviews only a couple of copies could sell. The sisters, however, had the satisfaction of having come to limelight. But their dream of making a fortune by writing proved futile. In all probability it was the complete failure of the slim *Publication* to make any impression on the reading public and the literary world that drove them to try their fortune with the novels. But as the sisters were Christian enough, along

with writing the novels they continued writing poems as well. Once undertaken the quest and identified their vocation, they kept themselves committed to it till death. Regardless of success and incidental failure, to persevere in the quest with God overhead is the “only [Christian] heroism.”¹⁵

Also, with their father’s interest in poetry, the sisters had accepted poetry-writing as a natural and necessary part of life. They could not live without it. It was as inevitable as breathing. It was their support and solacer. Anne in *Agnes Grey*, through the voice of the heroine, says: “When we are harassed by sorrows or anxieties, or long oppressed by any powerful feelings which we must keep to ourselves, for which we can obtain or seek no sympathy from any living creature...we often naturally seek relief in poetry.”¹⁶ With Anne, the end of writing poetry could thus be purgative and therapeutic. Charlotte also means the same when she writes in *The Professor*: “I must cultivate fortitude and cling to poetry. One is to be my support and the other my solace through life.”¹⁷ Poetry was an appropriate channel to relieve themselves of their sufferings and agonies. Emily realizes that poetry “is ever there to bring”

The hovering visions back and breathe
 New glories o’er the blighted spring
 And call a lovelier life from death
 And whisper with a voice divine
 Of real worlds as bright as thine.¹⁸

The following lines from Blake, though of a different context, may be compared with Emily's above, for their fullest import, in the sense that what great poetry does is comparable with what God does:

O, He gives us His joy
 That our grief He may destroy
 Till our grief is fled and gone
 He doth sit by us and moan.¹⁹

As for Blake, so also for Emily, "God and the Imagination are one,"²⁰ that is, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, and it is this power which creates great poetry which in its turn gives us a divine world opposed to the temporal. So in the world of the imagination Emily experiences the 'benignant power' of God with all His healing and solacing attributes, giving 'glories over the blighted spring', and 'life for death', and 'His joy' for 'our grief'. Emily would then naturally pledge to

...Welcome thee, benignant power,
 Sure solacer of human cares,
 And sweeter hope, when hope despairs!²¹

The complete bulk of poems that we now have from the sisters (excluding those from Branwell) testifies to the fact that the sisters did not care for the nonchalance shown to their meritorious poems included in the

Publication. As a result of rigorous researches of such Brontë lovers as T. J. Wise, Alex Symington, and of Clement Shorter made in the 1920s and '30s, of Tom Winifrith in the 1980s, and of C. W. Hatfield in the 1940s, we have 142 poems running into 388 pages from Charlotte Brontë, 54 poems running into 150 pages from Anne Brontë and 192 poems running into 227 pages from Emily Brontë.

While most of the poems of Emily and Anne give expression to their agonies and religious faith, a few of them celebrate the theme of unfulfilled love which ultimately sublimates itself to love celestial. With Charlotte the case is somewhat different. While a larger number of her poems are on nature and on the frustration in love, a select few explore her religious crisis and faith. And it is the theme of faith fraught with crisis and agonies that give an identity to the Brontë poetry. It is in this sphere of their poetic activity – where they complement and supplement each other – that they are seen at their best, expressing the quintessence of their religious life and experience. “No wonder that their religion should be part of the fibre of their being.”²² It is then only natural that Anne should write such hymns that express the grimness followed by brightness on the ascent a Christian makes:

Believe not those, who say
 The upward path is smooth,
 Lest thou shouldst stumble in the way,
 And faint before the truth.

It is the only road
 Unto the realms of joy;
 But he who seeks that blest abode
 Must all his powers employ.

Bright hopes and pure delights
 Upon his course may beam,
 And there, amid the sternest heights,
 The sweetest flowerets gleam.²³

While in the stanzas above Anne suggests persistent efforts, Charlotte in the following stanza prescribes prayer and meditation, but the goal to be attained is the same, with the employment of courage, conviction and confidence in common, equating ‘the realms of joy’ and ‘the blessed abode’ with ‘a life and world to come’:

Feel no untold and strange distress –
 Only a deeper impulse given
 By lonely hour and darkened room,
 To solemn thoughts that soar to heaven,
 Seeking a life and world to come.²⁴

Anne and Charlotte talk of ‘pure delights’ and ‘solemn thoughts’ without any reference to the punishment for iniquity. Though Emily does not refer to the punishment, in no way does she exclude its possibility, and yet she

is sure of salvation because the stern judge who could condemn is also the merciful God who forgives and absolves:

What fortune may await thee there
I will not and I dare not tell,
But heaven is moved by fervent prayer
And God is mercy – fare thee well!²⁵

Emily comes closer to such Protestant writers who believe with Tyndale that the law and gospel are inseparable. This belief became the most dominant factor in their writing to such an extent that Anne propagated what was to be called the doctrine of universal salvation.

With faith in God and in the immortality of the soul, together with an undeterred trust in His mercy, the Bronte poetry was written in an age of unfaith and doubt created by the advancement of such sciences as Botany and Zoology, in particular. The impact of the scientific advancement brought a sea-change in men's attitude to Christian faith, questioning the existence of God and the divinity in man, as a result of which there emerged a controversy, called the Victorian Controversy, which "finds well-known expression in Tennyson and Browning."²⁶ Browning begins the final section of his *Pauline* with shuddering questions on the dehumanising effect of science that gives rise to doubt opposed to faith:

O God, where do they tend - these struggling aims?
 What would I have? What is this 'sleep' which seems
 To bound all? Can there be a 'waking' point
 Of Crowning life?²⁷

The 'struggling aims' for mad pursuit, the poet experiences, drug us into sleep of spiritual darkness, and the 'Crowning life' is denied. If faith fell asleep, the fallen humanity might tumble in the Godless abyss beyond recovery and redemption, and therefore the poet shrieks in agony for help from above – 'O God'.

For many men and women of Tennyson's and Browning's generation as also for the Brontës' generation, it seemed an awful time when human life due to the conflict between science and faith could be viewed meaningless as though the grave appeared to be the end of all, and the sky above the universe a dead expanse from which God himself had disappeared.²⁸ Though Tennyson expresses the Victorian spirit of adventure, exploration and expansion in one of his classic utterances: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield"²⁹, he does not support this terrestrial spirit in its exclusiveness from the spiritual. The absence of belief in God and afterlife makes meaningful life absolutely impossible. So while he desires the advancement of knowledge, he also suggests in *In Memoriam*³⁰ a harmonious concurrence between the mind (the intellectual) and the soul (the spiritual):

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
 But more of reverence in us dwell;
 That mind and soul, according well,
 May make one music as before.³¹

Tennyson's preference for 'reverence' for the spiritual is characteristic of his love for God, but his use of 'us' in the stanza also imposes on the poet Laureate a social responsibility that he should inculcate in people the same preferential love for God. The Brontë sisters, unlike Tennyson, did not experience any conflicting controversy between religion and science, faith and unfaith, nor did they feel any need for working out a compromise either for themselves or for people around them.

Not that the sisters lived in intellectual isolation, nor were they unaware of what was going on in the world beyond their Haworth parsonage. They read sciences, specially the life sciences, and were regular subscribers of magazines and newspapers available then. Over and above, Mr. Patrick Brontë had provided them with a library of their own, and helped them "improve their scientific knowledge cheaply and conveniently." If the study of "sciences" and "secular books" exercised "an impact on their intellectual development", "the *Bible*, prayer books, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* remained the lasting influence on them."³² Though as writers of religious sensibilities, they realized that the satisfaction of spiritual hunger was the deepest human need, they could also discern that "there is an underlying

conflict between scientific and religious mentalities, the one dealing in testable, the other deserting testability for faith, the one relishing change as scientific understanding advances, the other finding solace in eternal verities.”³³ As is evident from their poetry, the sisters welcomed ‘eternal verities’, and avoided the prevalent, underlying conflict, for their sole concern and quest was for a poetry of faith. And therefore, theirs is a poetry with a difference.

The young Brontes thought it an artistic necessity to create for them their own imaginary worlds as substitutes for England; Charlotte and Branwell founded the Kingdom of Angria, and Emily and Anne of Gondal as the scenes for their poems. These Kingdoms, unlike England, could be free from what Tennyson was to call “ever-broadening Commerce” and “ever-brightening Science.”³⁴ Congenial to the heart and soul, the twain Kingdoms are generative of peace, tranquillity and serenity. I quote a Gondal poem from Emily:

Cold clear and blue the morning heaven
 Expands its arch on high
 Cold clear and blue Lake Wernas water
 Reflects that winters sky
 The moon has set but Venus shines
 A silent silvery star.³⁵

While on one hand, Emily, by an avoidance of punctuation, ensures uninterrupted internal rhythm in the lines, on the other, she makes them reveal

a mind that was calm and content and could produce such tranquil moments of uninterrupted solitude. The following lines from Anne depict a typical Gondal scenario of brightness and beauty:

Brightly the sun of summer shone
 Green fields and waving woods upon,
 And soft winds wandered by;
 Above, a sky of purest blue,
 Around, bright flowers of loveliest hue.
 Allured the gazer's eye.

The scene depicted in Anne fails to sustain a comparison with the one in Emily. Perhaps finding it deficient in its impact on the spirit, as it “allured the gazer’s eye” only, Anne rejected it and withdrew within from without:

... And called my willing soul away,
 From earth, and air, and sky,³⁶

The withdrawal was not so much from Gondal as from a world of the senses, of change and decay. Similarly, the inclination to withdrawal is a dominant theme in Emily’s poetry, because “The world within”, she says, “I doubly prize”, for it is a world

... Where guile and hate and doubt
 And cold suspicion never rise;
 Where thou and I and liberty

Have undisputed sovereignty.³⁷

“The world within” opposed to “the world without” is God’s space in us wherein dwell undisputed “thou and I and liberty.” This is a space she explores, and which she believes can ensure her release from the confinement of the hostile phenomenal world. Whether in Gondal or in a non-Gondal world, Emily believed with Patrick Brontë in the sovereign existence of such a space in man, for “The mind is its own place.”³⁸

Anne also in a Gondal poem called ‘The North Wind’ seeks liberty for her exodus into the world beyond the world here and now, and thus desires to break open her dungeon-like captivity, in order to overcome her spiritual agony

Confined and hopeless as I am,
 Oh, speak of liberty!
 Oh, tell me of my mountain home,
 And I will become thee!³⁹

Both the sisters strive for liberty from the visible world; while Emily experiences it in ‘the world within’, Anne cries for it to reach her from above.

Like Emily and Anne, Charlotte also looks into her kingdom of Angria (which she believes is fair and intact from the murky England) for spiritual joy.

In the 'Lines written Beside a Fountain', Charlotte's conception of Christian faith in the joys of sweet tranquillity with God in Heaven, defying death, could still be a flickering experience only, for though she seems to have forsaken the earthly attraction, she in fact was not yet immune from it.

It is appropriate to cite here a romantically exciting incident from her fifth novelette, *Caroline Vernon*.⁴² It was Zamorna's creed that all things bright and beautiful live[d] for him, and Miss Caroline was such a thing for him. He said what remained to be said to her, "If I were a bearded Turk, I would take you to my Harem." Her guardian was gone, something terrible yet acceptable sat in his place. The silent lonely library, far away from the inhabited part of the house, was getting a deeper shade in all its Gothic recesses. She grew faint with dread, she dared not stir. "You are Zamorna", cried Caroline, "But let me go." He entreated "I have a little home, somewhere near the heart of my own kingdom, Angria... it is a plain house outside, but has some rooms within as splendid as any saloon in Victoria Square."

He smiled as Caroline looked at him with wonder and fear mixed. His face changed to an expression of tenderness more dangerous than the fiery excitement which had startled her before. He then caressed her fondly, and lifted with his fingers the heavy curls which were lying on her neck. She no longer wished to leave him, she clung to his side, infatuation was stealing over

her. The thought of separation or return to Eden was dreadful. The man before her was her guardian again, but he was also the Duke of Zamorna. She loved, she feared; Passion tempted her, Conscience warned her. But in a mind like Miss Caroline's, conscience was feeble opposed to passion. The fatal man began to reign supreme in her heart.

Passion and Conscience were the two opposing forces in Charlotte's life. During her youthful days, especially due to suppression, passion was naturally stronger in her literary utterance, which was the expression of her real life. Conscience was a warning guardian, but finally gave way to passion. Caroline is the replica of Charlotte herself. By the way of catharsis Charlotte was trying to dislodge passion from her so that she could wake up to the call of conscience and devote herself to the cause of faith in her personal life. But the exodus was to be full of agonized anguish:

My love is almost anguish now,
 It beats so strong and true;
 'Twere rapture, could I deem that thou
 Such anguish ever knew.⁴³

But before she could ease herself of the Romantic agony, she fell into another; this time she developed Romantic passion for her teacher, M. Heger who taught her German and French in Brussels in Belgium. Her infernal passion for the young magnetic married man was so irresistible as to drive her

into a sexual relationship with him. To her, he was now another Zamorna, of course, Brusselized, not Angrian. Madame Heger impeded and the passion remained unrequited, which Charlotte Brontë was to romantically transform and celebrate as the dominant theme in her two autobiographical novels – *Jane Eyre* and *Vilette*. The same theme pervades some of her poems, as for example, ‘Frances’:

‘Unloved – I love; unwept – I weep;
Grief I restrain – hope I repress:
Vain is this anguish - fixed and deep;
Vainer, desires and dreams of bliss.’⁴⁴

Though Charlotte had to court defeat and sustain the agony of emotional frustration, the eventful incident changed the course of her life. She confessed that she had lost “sight of the Creator in idolatry of the creature,”⁴⁵ and therefore she longed for “the pure fountain of Mercy” and further hoped that “I might one day become better, far better than my evil wandering thoughts, my corrupt heart, cold to the spirit and warm to the flesh, will permit me to be.”⁴⁶ This is an honest expression of a Christian heart in agony, which discloses her religious crisis and her consequent resolve:

Come Reason – Science – Learning – Thought
To you my heart I dedicate;
I have a faithful subject brought:
Faithful because most desolate.⁴⁷

‘Reason’ awakes conscience, ‘Science’ relates to theology, and ‘Learning’ to God and good thought; they all constitute what the disillusioned Charlotte calls the ‘faithful subject’ – the study of the relationship between God and man – she would dedicate herself to with all her heart and soul. Sexual aberration is reprehensible, but if the lover sublimates his passion of love to God he realizes Him in him, for He is not an object of dread as an ireful judge, but the embodiment of undying love, allowing forgiveness and comfort and grace:

Now, Heaven, heal the wound which I still deeply
 feel;
 Thy glorious hosts look not in scorn on our
 poor race,
 Thy king eternal doth not iron judgement deal
 On suffering worms who seek forgiveness,
 comfort, grace.

He gave our hearts to love: He will not love
 despise,
 E’en if the gift be lost, as mine was long ago;
 He will forgive the fault, will bid the offender rise,
 Wash out with dues of bliss the fiery brand of
 woe.⁴⁸

Charlotte’s poetry as well as Anne’s confirms the fact that the source of regeneration and redemption lies ultimately in God’s love and grace, freely

vouchsafed on men who are moved to pray and repent and be obedient, with conscience as their guide, even towards the close of their life at least.

Gentle and pious Anne did not experience any conflict between passion and conscience, for the passion she had for William Weightman was as immaculate as herself, the non-fulfilment of which, because of his sudden demise, rent her heart. Then she re-seizes her love as wish-fulfilment in *Agnes Grey*; the emotional agony of lost love remained an indelible mark on her impressionable consciousness. The sense of loss of what had been and would never be finds its pathetic expression in her sweet memorial verses:

Yes, thou art gone! and never more
 Thy sunny smile shall gladden me;
 But I may pass the old church door,
 And pace the floor that covers thee.⁴⁹

The need for emotional relief is expressing itself as a need for spiritual direction. She is therefore led to feel in the heart of her hearts that the loving God saves even those who could believe in Jesus as their Redeemer, even in the death-bed, experiencing the purgatorial fires of hell: "Lord Jesus, save me, lest I die: / Christ hear my humble prayer."⁵⁰ With her faith in the doctrine of universal salvation opposed to eternal damnation, she is confident that if despaired and defeated Cowper could be saved by his service to God that he

rendered in his poetry, then the Rev. William Weightman, a devout lover of God, must have been saved. And therefore,

It must be so, if God is love,
 Answers fervent prayer;
 Then surely thou shall dwell on high,
 And I may meet thee there.⁵¹

Her faith in the love of God was an epiphany, as Grace was so strong on her as to inspire her soul-winning poem, 'The power of Love' which brings her home the realization that

'Tis not, my own strength has saved me,
 Health, and hope, and fortitude,
 But for love,⁵²

As an Evangelistic believer who believes in the religion of the heart, Anne's love and devotion to God convinced her to reject the adamant convention of her day that hell is an abyss, not of temporary, but of eternal punishment. The heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, who lives by the sure existence of the Christian God of love, asserts that the threatened fires of hell are purgative rather than everlasting, and therefore even her dying sensualist husband must ultimately be saved, for

how could I endure to think that the poor

trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment? It would drive me mad! But thank God, I have hope – not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass, whatever fate awaits it, still it is not lost, and [the loving] God who hateth nothing, that he made will bless it in the end.⁵³

This is Anne's firmest "espousal of the doctrine of universal salvation" opposed to "eternal damnation"⁵⁴, - a good example of how she combines an instinctive and personal philosophy of love with the dictates of her Christian conscience. With this doctrine she was perhaps a revolutionary, in advance of her times, who wounded the sentiments of the Anglican clergy, for it was not until 1877, i.e., thirty years after Anne's novel that Dean Farrar in his book *Eternal Hope* startled the ranks of the orthodoxy by suggesting that salvation was an appointed goal of all.⁵⁵ But then Anne had to answer the enraged clergy and the laity:

What matters who should whisper blame,
Or who should scorn or slight? –

What matters – if thy God approve,
And if, within thy breast,
Thou feel the comfort of His love,

The earnest of His rest?⁵⁶

Whether or not the enraged were assuaged could well be a matter of concern for the historians of theology, but Anne as a devotee stands firmly assured in her relationship of love and trust to her God. And her biographer Edward Chitham stands by her when he observes, “Her heart... opened to the sweet views of salvation, pardon ... and peace ... and welcome to the weary and heavy-laden sinner.”⁵⁷

Emily Brontë does not seem to have experienced the passion of love for a lover outside herself. She is the inscrutable member of the Brontë family. “It is undoubtedly disappointing that no lover can be found for Emily Brontë, orthodox or unorthodox.”⁵⁸ But the one who wrote *Wuthering Heights* is also the one who wrote the poems, some of which are due to come under our discussion. As such, though it may be speculative yet not far from being authoritative that her ideal object of love is Heathcliff. Catherine tries to express her feelings to Nelly (Catherine is about to marry Linton):

My great miseries in this world have
been Heathcliff's miseries; and I watched and
felt each from the beginning: my great thought
in living is himself. If all else perished and he
remained, I should still continue to be; and if all
else remained, and he were annihilated, the
universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I

should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like a foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself.⁵⁹

As the matter-moulded forms of speech cannot accurately describe spiritual experiences, she is taking resort to symbols. Opposed to the perishable foliage-like temporal love of Linton, Heathcliff's is eternal like the rock, the imperishable essence, of which she is an intrinsic part. Away from him she is in a state of alienation. It is the state of de-alienation she is craving for, which she believes may make in him her immersion possible. Till such time as she remains estranged from him who is her essence, she suffers in agony as if in prison, for she is ultimately 'Heathcliff'. Relieved of 'the dreary dungeon', she declares, "I am happiest when most away." Identifying herself with a free bird caged, she implores, "In dungeon dark I cannot sing". The dreary dungeon implies the corporeal body and the phenomenal world. She wishes for wings, "If I should break the chain, my bird would go." She would therefore turn to the Gondal milieu which in fact is the vast, open moorland aspiring in solitude after an ascent into the sky. It is here that she would enjoy the liberty to think and sink to wake in a sort of mystical vision:

But first a hush of peace, a soundless calm descends;
 The struggle of distress and fierce struggle ends;
 Mute music soothes my breast – unuttered harmony
 That I could never dream till the earth was lost to me.

With the senses suspended, the visible world with all its unrest and sensuous manifestations ceases to exist to the mystic. S(he) experiences perfect peace which gives rise to the inward silence and soundless music of harmony to her spirit which establishes contact with the Eternal who is the Indwelling God in man. And so she continues in the same vein:

Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen its truth reveals;
 My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels –
 Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;
 Measuring the gulf it stoops and dares the final bound!⁶⁰

Freed from the senses, the individual soul remains only the essence pure. The imagery of ‘wings’ is again a reminder that the soul is a bird imprisoned in the cage-like body, but that when liberated it finds its harbour.

Wordsworth also talks of “that serene and blessed mood”. When absolved of the burden of the “prison house”, we experience:

... even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In a body and become a living soul.⁶¹

Unshackled from the body, the soul lives awakened which otherwise remains dormant. This spiritual experience could be more a state of aesthetic contemplation, and less a mystic vision. But the spiritual realization by the liberated soul of ‘the Invisible’ or ‘the Unseen’ is the result of mystical vision. But though the verb ‘reveals’ may lead us to believe that Emily’s mysticism is Christian, yet it could also be called a “religious ecstasy” in a larger sense where the spiritual hunger of the soul is satisfied, or at times it could be called “the spiritual marriage or mystical union where the soul is the “bride” and God the “bridegroom”. And here it is the bride that negates her ‘self’, for “Mystical love unites by negation of the self.”⁶²

If the mystical union or the spiritual marriage is a participation in the divine life, alienation from it gives the soul intense agony:

Oh, dreadful is the check – intense the agony
 When the ear begins to hear and the eye begins to see;
 When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,
 The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain!⁶³

But faith or union in love would cease to be what it is, if it is not followed by separation. Perpetual possession would mean certainty, not faith. Participation and separation in turn vitalize and revitalize faith.

Such utterance is representative of a soul neutrally culturally awakened, or if it could be viewed as having come from a culture precisely Christian, Emily's culture is then on its peak of progress. Such an awakening so powerfully expressed is nowhere in Charlotte or Anne. Also, not that Emily is overtly not Christian in her poetry as the two sisters; she definitely is as we have seen and may like to see:

If thou hast sinned in this world of care,
 'Twas but the dust of thy drear abode –
 Thy soul was pure when it entered here,
 And pure it will go again to God.⁶⁴

But when she would be at the height of her conviction, she would not mind ignoring conformity and going for deviance. And if her deviance, personally so passionate to her, was not relished she would be bold enough to come out with her defence:

Let me be false in others' eyes
 If faithful in my own.⁶⁵

Perhaps, she could never forget the metaphysical relationship that she experienced existing between Heathcliff and Catherine, which is the expression of the one existing between herself and God. And so she sums up her undying faith in her God in the following most powerful stanza that she ever wrote:

O God within my breast
 Almighty ever-present Deity
 Life, that in me hast rest
 As I Undying Life, have power in Thee.

And then she sums up:

Though earth and moon were gone
 And suns and universes ceased to be
 And thou wert left alone
 Every existence would exist in thee,⁶⁶

He existing, everything exists. The sun shines not, nor does the moon, nor do the stars, but it is He who alone shines and exists and all that which is seen as living and lighted is lighted by Him alone. This can be viewed as a strong monistic belief in the existence of God who is though thought of as transcendent is in fact immanent in us. Emily's conviction that God is supremely present in human nature is nowhere as strongly expressed as here. That such a monistic belief was shared by Wordsworth might be taken as confirmed if we consider the import that informs the following lines:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought
 And rolls through all things.⁶⁷

And if we go back to Coleridge he provides us with another philosophical parallel when he writes:

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul.⁶⁸

In spite of the thematic similarity that we find in the three poets, one thing supremely goes into the credit of Emily Brontë, that while the two poets talk philosophy more and poetry less, Miss Emily Brontë talks poetry more and for the same reason she talks philosophy all the more convincingly. The spiritual vision she projects is more powerful and moving. There is a sweep in her poetry that carries us all into the bosom of her vision. It is religious and yet it transcends religion. It is universal, it is infinite. And so it is culturally neutral, not belonging to any particular religion or culture whatsoever. Though neither Charlotte nor Anne alone could ensure such universality, neutrality and intensity, yet it is this excellence of spiritual strength experienced and expressed by Emily Brontë that gives the Brontë poetry an identity of its own.

If such is the spiritual content of the Bronte poetry written in an age shaken by “unfaith” when “The sea of faith,”⁶⁹ as Arnold was to experience, was receding, the Brontë sisters writing in the isolated Brontë parsonage had to keep their fountain of faith intact. Charlotte declares its own immortalizing and savouring effect on the reader:

The fountains sweet of poesy,
 That nectar of the sky,
 Where wreaths of immortality
 In hallowed beauty lie.⁷⁰

This is what can be called a theocentric view of poetry sustaining a theocentric view of life. Its origin as well as its function, Charlotte Brontë believes, is Godly. It is that nectar which has been flowing incessantly from the perennial fountain(s) since time immemorial. And those who write it and also those who read it experience in them its immortalizing effect, with the addition that especially those who write it are deified with the wreaths of immortality shining so beautifully on their head. Shakespeare also seems to be saying something of the same substance in the following couple of lines from one of his sonnets:

When all the breathers of this world are dead;
 You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen.⁷¹

This study is finally broken up into the following chapters:

Chapter I – Introduction

This chapter deals with the birth and parentage of the Brontë children, their hopes and aspirations that led them to their quest for identifying their vocation of writing, with special reference to their poetry. The novels they

wrote are also referred to in the appropriate context, to trace their evolution as writers.

Chapter II – Quest

This chapter dwells on the efforts the sisters made against all odds to see themselves as accomplished writers, especially of poetry. Because the efforts they made to overcome the odds find their adequate expressions in the lives of the characters in the novels, I have supported my discussion on the quest with suitable illustrations from the novels as well.

Chapter III – Agony

This chapter takes special care in detail of the emotional and religious agonies and crisis the sisters experienced as women as well as writers of poetry of faith. An enormous amount of agonies the sisters suffered are reflected in the lives of the heroines in the novels. I have, therefore, tried to augment my discourse on agony by drawing references from the novels.

Chapter IV – Fountain of Faith

Here I dwell on their concept and conviction of faith which like a fountain flooded on in an age of unfaith and doubt, unimpeded, with special reference to their belief in universal salvation. Since the Brontë sisters were basically writers of faith, their concept and conviction of faith are also well-

embodied in their novels. As such, I have drawn on the novels as well in this chapter.

Chapter V – Vision of Life

This chapter discusses some of their poems which significantly contribute to their optimistic vision of life. The optimistic vision of life the sisters project in the poems is the vision we find also in their novels. I have, therefore, gone into the novels also where necessary.

Chapter VI – Conclusion

Here at the end I attempt a summing-up of the discussions made in the preceding chapters, and offer a conclusion.

Though this humble endeavour of mine aims at an integrated study of the Brontë poetry, yet it excludes the poetry of the sisters' father, Patrick Brontë, and that of their brother, Branwell. Their father's poetry, though considerable in terms of its voluminosity, mainly consists of his preachings to humble the sinners, to exalt the Saviour, and to promote holiness. His prose writings also mainly do the same. His writings, therefore, do not constitute poetry the way the sisters' do. Branwell's is poetry. But it talks much of unfaith and a sort of sad predeterminism, and thus does not agree with the spirit of the sisters' poetry. No doubt, part of his poetry celebrates his love of nature almost in the Wordsworthian spirit. But this again is something different

from what the sisters collectively do. So for one reason or the other the father's and the brother's poems do not find room in this study. And so for the same reason they deserve independent, adequate studies.

Also, it is not merely the title 'Brontë' that binds the members of a family together as writers, but the thematic togetherness, a sameness in thought and experience and expression that binds them together as poets of faith. Moreover, only things Brontëana could seat the sisters together.

Since the main title of the thesis is set against the background of unfaith experienced and expressed by Tennyson, and also against the background of the recession of 'The Sea of Faith' felt and expressed by Arnold, it has been my sincere effort to invite comparative references from the two great Victorians. Though most of Arnold's poems of 'faithlessness' were composed in the 1850s, the scene of the erosion of faith was already obtaining ground when the sisters were writing poems and novels. Unaffected by the sense of loss, Browning also finds his place in this study.

Sometimes an aching heart creates a great work of art. And so *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Tenant*, and a considerable number of poems from the three aching hearts constitute great art need not be doubted, though their greatness may be debated by the critical reader and the scholar, for taste and standard differ. The question of greatness therefore may be set

beside the point. But what remains important for us to take into account is the fact that their aching is the genesis from which their writings, be it poetry or fiction, spring. We can praise the subjectivity of the Brontë sisters, that is, the quality of their perpetual presence in their poetry. And so it has been naturally irresistible for me to refer to their ‘suffering’ and ‘frustration’, ‘dearth’, ‘disease’, and ‘death’. Such expressions and the like force their way in all the succeeding chapters. But this is not to say that the poems to come under our discussion do not in themselves form independent structures. They do. And quite a few of them do breathe their own life. Yet a large number of them depend for their life on the subjective concern of the poets. This may be a limitation of the Brontë poetry. But this could also be its strength as well.

The related critical and theoretical works have helped me understand the poems, and have stimulated me to go to the poems time and again, yet the conclusions that I arrive at are chiefly based on the poems, for final authority I believe is the creative text. As it needs to be done so, the study has been broken up into individual chapters. Every chapter opens with a brief, befitting introduction to itself, and conclusively closes with a link integral to the chapter to commence. Yet, I would like to admit that at times they tend to coalesce into each other. With all its commissions and omissions the thesis is humbly open to scrutiny ^{of} my esteemed Examiners. And finally, I supplicate myself to my Lord for my success.

INTRODUCTION: NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- (i) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 1st published in 1847.
 - (ii) Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 1st published in 1847.
 - (iii) Anne Brontë *Agnes Grey*, 1st published in 1847.
 - (iv) Anne Brontë *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 1st published in 1848.
 - (v) Charlotte Brontë *Shirley*, 1st published in 1849.
 - (vi) Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 1st published in 1853.
 - (vii) Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, 1st published in 1857.

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⁵ Clement Shorter, *The Complete Poems of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 193.

⁶ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, I:II:43.

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- ¹⁶ *Agnes Grey* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1985), Chapter 17, p. 121.
- ¹⁷ *The Professor* (Ware: Wordsworth Edition, 1994), Chapter 23, p. 172
- ¹⁸ Emily Brontë, 'To Imagination', *Publication*, p. 83.
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- ²⁸ Roy E. Gridley, *Browning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 24.
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⁴⁵ T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendship and Correspondence*, 4 Volumes (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1932), Vol. I, p. 153.

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⁵⁵ As late as 1853 F.D. Maurice had been deprived of his professorship at King's College, London, for proclaiming his disbelief in everlasting damnation.

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CHAPTER II

QUEST

QUEST

Only those who are chaste and firm in thought, word and deed, with a fixity of purpose in life, and have a strong will, make a quest to ultimately discover and realize the best in them that God gave them. The road they travel along is long and hard, but at the end they reach the grail of peace. It was in this spirit that the Brontë sisters did never ever cease to make efforts, one after another, till the quest they had committed themselves to, finally identified their real vocation of writing which alone could – and really did – give them peace and joy, fame and fortune.

The sisters lived in a milieu when women in general did not enjoy the same privilege as men. Women had limited chance and avenue to develop themselves. The Victorian society was a patriarchal and male-dominated society but in such a society the sisters struggled to be independent and self-reliant women. The indomitable spirit in them gave them strength and courage to search for a meaningful life, and as such, they had to commit themselves to their quest through thick and thin.

In the early Victorian era, there were no proper educational institutions for girls. The few ones which existed could not give them more than the basic education. The popular notion prevalent was that a woman's place was her

home and she was expected to be “the angel in the house.”¹ Women as a result were poor victims of the society, for they could not see anything beyond their homes and family life. It was only in 1880 “that the women were for the first time allowed to take degrees at the university of London, women colleges were established at Cambridge and Oxford in 1869 and 1879 respectively, but women could not take degrees at either university until 1920-21.”²

But until such a time came the English society was being governed by what could be called an oppressive patriarchy which denied women inroads into the complacently male-dominated literary culture. The cruel patriarchy would also suggest that marriage should be the only profession for women, and the unmarried ones should depend on their relatives. All that they could be allowed to do in this world was contained within the duties of a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. They were viewed as creatures devoid of independent dignity, intellectual self-respect, and moral autonomy. But as the social and moral climate changed, within the domestic restraints and responsibilities imposed on women, literary interests were not to be forbidden any longer, but inevitably had to take only a second place in their life. But if they aspired after identity and self-hood, there would arise other problems and inhibitions. But with the Brontë sisters the story was to be different, for consciously or unconsciously the sisters seem to have been influenced by what Mary Wollstonecraft had said in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She challenged the traditional notion that women as an inferior species (to men)

exist only to please men, and therefore she demanded that “women should receive the same treatment as men in education, work opportunities and politics, and that the same moral standard be applied to both sexes.”³ But it took some time for such opportunities to come in the life of women in general.

So while most women were deprived of education, the sisters were fortunate enough to have a father who was highly qualified and was enthusiastic to give proper education to his children. In 1823, Patrick sent two of his eldest children Maria and Elizabeth to Crofton School but “the fees proved to be beyond Mr. Brontë’s means; and they were withdrawn after a few months.”⁴ They were shifted to a semi-charitable Boarding School for Clergymen’s daughters at Cowan Bridge. Here he admitted four of his daughters but the change of the school proved to be fatal as it led to the death of Maria and Elizabeth. Charlotte was a very small girl at the time but she could never forget the bitter experience. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, she recreates this experience. Cowan Bridge is projected as Lowood and her sister Maria as Helen Burns, and Charlotte Brontë speaks about the miserable condition of her sisters.

The remaining children were brought home and Patrick decided to give them home education, where he and aunt Elizabeth Branwell became the teachers. Though it was an informal education, it was a complete and all-round education. Patrick taught them “History, Geography, Grammar and Scripture”⁵

and to his only son Branwell he also taught “Greek and Latin.” Miss Branwell took extra care for the girls and “taught them to be good housewives and needle women.”⁶ The children were happy in each other’s company at home and enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere of home. The unique experience they enjoyed was the love of their father who “treated his children as equals, allowing them unrestricted access to his library and discussing with them his literary and political interest.”⁷ This was an immense blessing to the children. They grew up to be extra-ordinary children and were very observant and receptive of what they read, heard and saw.

The need for formal education for his children was awakened in Patrick during his serious sickness in 1830, and he became anxious for the future of his children, “aged from fourteen downwards, if he died.”⁸ He hardly knew what destiny had in store for them. It was only an irony of fate that the old father outlived the children who died young. But as the circumstances then demanded he once again decided to send them to schools for formal education.

Charlotte went to Roe Head at Mirfield Moor for schooling in 1831. Unlike Cowan Bridge it was a comfortable place. Here, she enjoyed the friendship of her friends and the Headmistress. During this time an arrangement was also made for Branwell to go to London to join the Royal Academy School of Arts. Branwell went to London and explored the institution as well as the city but the grandeur of the institution and place

instead of giving him inspiration, disheartened him and he returned to Haworth vanquished. Charlotte remained in Miss Woller's school. She was an industrious girl and she excelled in her studies and at the end of her first half term she "bore of three main prizes."⁹

Later, Charlotte joined the same school as a teacher. She took Emily with her for education, but Emily was too homesick to stay, so she was sent home, and in her place Anne joined the school, where she stayed for "over two years."¹⁰

Having received the basic education the sisters now wanted to try their luck in search of jobs. While higher class women kept themselves away from employment, women belonging to the middle-class and lower ranks had to work hard in order to support themselves, and so the sisters also could not be immune from the harsh reality of life. Marriage was regarded as an option for a comfortable and secure life, for it meant "release from the threat of poverty or, at worst, a sharing of burdens."¹¹ But marriage for the Brontë sisters could not be accepted as profession.

Moreover, the sisters were destined to lead a single and a lonely life. For Emily Brontë "there is no indication of her falling in love with anyone. Moreover there is no sign that, merely lacking the opportunity of meeting a man, she did not fall in love."¹² As for Anne Brontë the sudden death of

William Weightman shattered her dreams of marriage and family life. Charlotte Brontë, on the other hand, got three proposals before she finally married Nicholas Arthur Bell, but she had rejected all the three because ‘marriage’ to her was not merely an escape and “she had already closed the door on marriage not founded on a tested affinity of mind and heart.”¹³ She behaved like Jane Eyre who rejected St. John, seeing in him the dangers of highly spiritual but conventional religious and moral attitudes, who sought for social approval rather than God’s approval. During the prime of her life the prospect of marriage seemed to be dim. She expresses sadly:

Life and marriage I have known:
 Things that seemed so bright,
 But now utterly has flown
 Every ray of light.

When my childhood’s hopes were fled,
 Brighter hopes arose;
 Now the last is vanished
 It set in clouds of woes.¹⁴

Like any other normal human being Charlotte and Anne wished for love, marriage and a family life. Charlotte had often contemplated marriage but her dreams and wish seemed to have disappeared and left her sad and dejected. We should not forget that “both Anne and Charlotte were at various times interested in men as potential-husbands. Both fell in love, both pined for the

return of love from the men concerned...love as known to Anne and Charlotte included the elements of marriage, sex, companionship, children, womanly status and many others, combined as one emotion – love, and as one desire – to be loved in like manner.”¹⁵

Anne Brontë genuinely loved William Weightman. She unmask her love for him in her poem ‘Self – Congratulation’. Weightman came to Haworth in August 1839 and remained there till his death on September 6, 1842. Through the voice of Olivia Vernon, Anne introspects and explores herself;

I’ve noticed many a youthful form,
 Upon whose changeful face
 The inmost workings of the soul
 The gazer well might trace;
 The speaking eye, the changing lip,
 The ready blushing cheek,
 The smiling, or beclouded brow,
 Their different feelings speak.

Anne Brontë speaks like a psychologist. She could read human nature by observing the expressions indicated on the face of a person. This way she could bring out the thoughts and mind of an individual:

But, thank God! You might gaze on mine

For hours, and never know
The secret changes of my soul
From joy to keenest woe.
Last night, as we sat round the fire,
Conversing merrily.
We heard, without, approaching steps
Of one well known to me!

And yet she would maintain her emotional equilibrium:

There was no trembling in my voice,
No blush upon my cheek,
No lustrous sparkle in my eyes,
Of hope, or joy, to speak;
But, oh! my spirit burned within,
My heart beat full and fast!
He came not nigh – he went away –
And then my joy was past.

And as a woman she knew how to keep her feelings to herself:

And yet my comrades marked it not:
My voice was still the same;
They saw me smile, and o'er my face
No signs of sadness came.
They little know my hidden thoughts;
And they will never know
The aching anguish of my heart,

The bitter, burning woe!¹⁶

These lines, no doubt, speak about her secret love for someone. Anne Brontë could conceal her feelings and emotions without allowing any suspicion from anyone. She appears calm and cool on the surface but deep inside her, her heart is filled with 'aching anguish' and 'bitter burning woe'. She bears all these feelings silently and quietly. Her love for Weightman is explicit. Like Charlotte Brontë who created Frances and Jane in her fiction, Anne Brontë also expresses her wish for marriage and family life in 'Dreams'.

While on my lonely couch I lie,
 I seldom fell myself alone,
 For fancy fills my dreaming eye
 With scenes and pleasure of its own.

Anne treasures imagination and allows it to transport her to a different world, different from the real world, where she is a sufferer. She enjoys the bliss of this experience:

Then I may cherish at my breast
 An infant form beloved and fair,
 May smile and soothe it into rest,
 With all on mother's fondest care.

How sweet to feel its helpless form
 Depending this on me alone.

And still I hold it safe and warm
 What bliss to think it is my own!

Anne Brontë imagines that she is married and is a mother. She speaks about the joy of motherhood, but unfortunately she could not fulfil this wish in her actual life. In the last two concluding stanza she expresses her despair:

But then to wake and find it flown,
 The dreams of happiness destroyed;
 To find myself unloved, alone,
 What tongue can speak the dreary void!

A heart whence warm affections flow,
 Creator, Thou hast given to me;
 And am I only thus to know
 How sweet the joys of love would be?¹⁷

Anne Brontë's 'dreams of happiness' were too early destroyed in life. She had to remain a spinster. Life became a 'dreary void' with no human love to fill up this void. In the last two lines she raises a question to her creator, whether she was created only to dream the sweet joys of what love could be like. But the non-fulfilment was a blessing in disguise, for the poet as she was, it drove her deep to explore every nuance of love and marriage. What she could not get fulfilled in her actual life is relived as fulfilled in *Agnes Grey*. It is a wish-fulfilment novel, for she concludes the novel with Agnes' words: "I became the wife of Edward Weston, and never have found cause to repent it..."

Our children Edward, Agnes and Little Mary, promise well; their education, for the time being, is chiefly committed to me; and they shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give."¹⁸ It is indeed pathetic that her dream was destroyed.

The prospect of marriage being remote, the sisters had to find a way for supporting themselves. But the scope was limited because "until the last decade of the [19th] century almost the only occupation open to women of good family but reduced circumstances was limited to teaching as a school mistress or more likely, as a governess in a private family."¹⁹ The Brontë sisters had no other choice but to take up the similar job, for they had to "make their own way without the aid of either inherited wealth or husbands,"²⁰ and had to depend entirely on their hard work.

When Anne Brontë first went out of her home to take up job as a governess, she was full of enthusiasm. Through Agnes she says, "How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world, to enter upon a new life, to act to myself; to exercise 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."²¹ Anne Brontë thought that it would be a delightful experience. The main purpose thus was to relieve the family and to contribute to the family's income and lighten the burden of her father who was the sole breadwinner. But the enthusiasm slowly

died because “the work was hard and the Teacher’s social status was as low as her pay, in most homes governesses ranked with the superior servants.”²²

Anne Brontë continued in this profession for almost seven years. Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë also went through the similar experience and found out that the life of a governess was “isolated, powerless and exploited.”²³ But despite this, Anne Brontë in particular, as a Christian, tried to put her effort in practicing Christian piety into her profession. The teaching of the Bible, especially the fruits of the Holy Spirit which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,”²⁴ guided her. Her own words are heard through Agnes, when she utters, “... I know (at least I believed) unremitting patience and perseverance could overcome them, and night and morning I implored Divine assistance to this end.”²⁵ It was her faith in God that gave her strength to endure and become a successful governess, for “A successful governess must possess large quantities of patience, adaptability, cheerfulness and calm.”²⁶ Anne Brontë possessed these qualities with God’s help.

As for Emily Brontë, her contact with the outside world was always brief. When Charlotte Brontë got a job in Miss Wooler’s school, she took Emily Brontë along with her for schooling, but Emily could not stay with her beyond three months. Charlotte Brontë later in life recorded “every morning when she woke, the vision of home and the moors rushed on her, and

darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. Nobody knew what ailed her but me...”²⁷

Emily Brontë stayed at home for the next two years, and in October she joined as an assistant teacher in Miss Patchett’s school at Law Hill near Halifax. However, Emily Brontë could not stay more than six months. She was overburdened with work but it was also the most fruitful period in her poetic growth, for “during her first three months’ stay there, she wrote fourteen poems, some of them her longest pieces.”²⁸ Poems like ‘Lines’, ‘Glenneden’s Dream’, ‘O wander not so far away’, ‘Loud without the wind was roaring’, ‘Stanzas’, and ‘The Bluebell’ are some which are worth mentioning. The final adventure was to Brussels with Charlotte again, but fate and destiny called them back. Aunt Branwell who had been a mother to them since their childhood died suddenly, and in November 1842, they had to return home after a period of nine months.

Even the nine months’ sojourn to Emily Brontë was terribly insufferable, for “she felt imprisoned, bound and helpless and a deep sense of frustration was the result.”²⁹ She expresses her inability due to captivity:

Could I have lingered but an hour
 It well had paid a week of toil,
 But truth has banished fancy’s power;
 I hear my dungeon bars recoil –

Even as I stood with raptured eye
 Absorbed in bliss so deep and dear
 My hour of rest had fled by
 And given me back to weary care.³⁰

Emily Brontë disliked the routine life. Law Hill is compared to a 'dungeon'. She did not enjoy her duty as a teacher. She was wearied and tired. The only consolation she had was her writing.

Charlotte Brontë and her sisters put all their effort to be self-reliant and self-dependent women. What they dreaded in themselves was to become parasites. This is explicitly indicated in John Reed's words to Jane, "You are dependent, mamma says; you have no money, your father left you none; you ought to beg and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense."³¹ So to avoid such humiliation the sisters tried to earn their livelihood. But the magnitude of the workload seemed to be beyond their capacity. Teaching and governing was a stressful job and their strength failed them. They felt exhausted and depressed and in pain cried:

Wandering and toiling without gain,
 The slave of others' will,
 With constant care and frequent pain,
 Despised, forgotten still.³²

Anne Brontë exposes the true position of governesses, who are expected to work endlessly. All the energy in them is drained out but in return they are 'despised' and 'forgotten'. Governessing was a sort of slavery. Unable to bear the joylessness and monotony of the job she again cries out:

Oh, I am very weary,
 Though tears no longer flow;
 My eyes are tired of weeping,
 My heart is sick of woe;

And again she was to deplore her lot:

My life is very lonely,
 My days pass heavily,
 I'm weary of repining
 Wilt thou not come to me?³³

Anne Brontë felt dejected and lonely. She felt exploited because though her service was accepted, her 'self' was rejected without any sympathy. There was none to cheer her or appreciate her value. Charlotte Brontë, who also went through the same experience, expresses her vexation:

To toil, to think, to long, to grieve, –
 Is such my future fate?
 The morn was dreary, must the eve

Be also desolate?

And the vexation deepens into depression:

Well, such a life at least makes Death
A welcome, wished-for friend;

She would therefore resign and say:

Then, aid me, Reason, Patience, Faith,
To suffer to the end!³⁴

The fervour and zeal in them was, however, extinguished by the workload. Their frail body could not endure the heavily taxed life. The physical exertion was further deepened by the curtailment of liberty. Teaching and governessing seemed to be unsuitable to them. Moreover, staying away from home had uncongenial effect on them. But at the same time, the sisters had to think for the means of survival. The idea of establishing a school seemed to be a good plan which could offer them a decent future. They were inspired because “the East Riding of Yorkshire was perhaps less provided with schools than the industrial West, they believed the neighbourhood of Bridlington might provide a suitable site.”³⁵ With this plan, they sought Aunt Branwell’s help to convince their father. Charlotte wrote, “Papa will, perhaps, think it a wild and ambitious scheme; but who ever rose in the world without ambition? When he left Ireland to go to Cambridge University, he was as

ambitious as I am now.”³⁶ Fortunately their aunt and their father supported their plans and vision.

Now, to qualify themselves, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to get training in teaching. After a rigorous training in Brussels they returned to begin their preparation for the project, but they did not receive any response to their advertisement. This was another failure in their venture. From then on the school project became a closed chapter in their lives. But they did not cease continuing their quest for the real vocation becoming of their nature and need.

The repeated failures in their previous occupations paved a way for them to search for their true vocation. Writing was one area they had not yet given a serious thought to. From childhood they had cultivated this habit and had acquired adequate writing skills.

Charlotte Brontë had begun writing as early as when she was eight years old. Her earliest manuscript was written for her youngest sister Anne. They were highly imaginative children and were voracious and extensive readers. With their inborn talent and wide knowledge about things around them they could write beautiful poems. Moreover, when Charlotte Brontë was hardly eighteen years old, she once wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey, “You ask me to recommend some books for your perusal, I will do so in a few words as I can. If you like poetry, let it be first-rate, Milton, Shakespeare, Thomson,

Goldsmith, Pope, Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth and Southey ... for natural history read Bewick and Aunderson and Goldsmith and White's History of Selborne, for divinity your brother will advise you there."³⁷ The catalogue speaks of the huge bulk of her reading material shared by the younger sisters as well.

This letter is proof enough for her wide range of reading and is indicative of the fact that the Brontë sisters were well in advance of the children of their age. Reading and writing was the greatest thing they enjoyed most. From childhood their leisure time was wisely and well spent. Even while governessing and teaching they could still spare some time to write. To Charlotte Brontë especially, "Day means drudgery, noise, and the irritation of struggling ... Night meant escape ... She gave herself up to visions."³⁸ It was during the spare time when she realized the existence of the self within herself, which is the divine in the human. The "visions" she gave herself to were those of the divine. And she would, therefore, try to strive in the quest for expressing those visions in her writing, especially in her poems of faith.

It was entirely a matter of chance that the discovery by Charlotte Brontë of Emily's volume of manuscript poems convinced her that writing could be their right vocation. Perhaps they had been successful in their quest. She said, "of course I was not surprised, knowing that she could and did write verse. I looked it over, and something more than surprise seized me – a deep

conviction that these were not common effusions.” The manuscript poems, as they have come down to us, are powerful enough to move and teach. Charlotte found them to be “condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine.” “To my ear,” she continues, “they had also a peculiar music – wild, melancholy and elevating.”³⁹ These positive qualities in the poems prompted Charlotte Brontë to hasten for verse-publication. Charlotte and Anne too definitely had written and had been writing verses of exquisite merit, which, on the mutual consent, were published collectively.

Through poetry they relieved themselves from their passions and feelings. Charlotte Brontë writes;

The human heart has hidden treasures
 In secret kept, in silence sealed
 The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,
 Whose charms were broken if revealed.⁴⁰

It is the heart which gives birth to every thought, hope, dream and pleasure. This according to Charlotte Brontë is a hidden treasure, which is to be kept in secret. But contrary to these lines, it was impossible for the sisters to repress their thoughts or retain them in their hearts. The hidden treasures needed to be brought out to the world without, recurrently. By way of pouring out their intense passions they felt purged, and experienced a kind of spiritual serenity.

Poetry indeed was their refuge and solace. It was also a means of communication to the mortal as well as to the divine. And the divine dominates the thematic strands of their poetry:

I had no one to love me there;
 I knew no comrade and no friend;
 And so I went to sorrow where
 Heaven, only heaven, saw me bend.

These lines speak of Emily's nature. She was an isolated character without a companion. At times she felt friendless and lonesome. It was God who alone gave her refuge and strength and with Him she could say:

Those who follow earthly pleasure,
 Heavenly knowledge will not lead;
 Wisdom hides from them her treasure
 Virtue bids them evil – speed!

Trusting in God's guiding hand, she wanted to abide by it. Emily Brontë's quest for the 'divine' and the 'heavenly knowledge' is finally discovered. Thus, she renounces the earthly pleasure which is vain and meaningless, and clings to the wisdom of God which gives her insight to true knowledge:

Then do not in this night of grief,

This time of overwhelming fear,
 O do not think that God can leave,
 Forget, forsake, refuse to hear!⁴¹

Such an utterance of faith and trust springs from the core of a protestant who believes in the religion of the heart, precisely called the Anglican Evangelicalism. Emily's God is a merciful God who 'forgives' and 'forgets' the sins of sinners. He is a God who never 'forsakes' his children or 'refuses' to give grace and mercy to them, for they are His own creation. Emily Brontë may then be seen as having realized the nature of her quest. Likewise, Anne's firm belief in God made her seek the divine for deeper faith, for faith is the essence of belief and existence itself. Anne Brontë needed this faith and she asks for this;

Then hear me now, while kneeling here,
 I lift to thee my heart and eye,
 And all my soul ascends in Prayer,
Oh, give me – give me faith! I cry.

Anne Brontë realized that faith is the moving force and controller of life. It is faith that guides and leads a person. Though her life was filled with weariness, discouragement, failures and a sense of futility, yet it was the determination to keep on trying uplifted her. As well aware she was, Anne Brontë expresses her faith amidst dismay:

Dangers surround them – pain and woe
 Their portion here must be,
 But only they that trust thee know
 What comfort dwells with thee;
 Strength to sustain their drooping powers,
 And vigour to defend, –
 Thou pole-star of my darkest hours,
 Affliction's firmest friend!

Day does not always mark our way,
 Night shadows oft appal,
 But lead me, and I cannot stray, –
 Hold me, I shall not fall;
 Sustain me, I shall never faint,
 How rough so e'er may be
 My upward road – nor moan, nor plaint
 Shall mar my trust in thee."

Faith alone could enable her to overcome danger, pain and sorrow. It alone had the power to sustain and strengthen. It is compared to a pole star, the symbol of constancy and steadfastness, and a firmest friend in times of affliction.

Faith alone could restrain her and hold her from falling into sin. In 'The Three Guides', the spirit of earth, Pride and faith woo her but Anne Brontë does not yield to the spirit of earth and pride. She could not rely on them and

Sometimes sufferings made them expressionless, and they experienced numbness in their mind. But such feelings are temporary which pass away and are rejuvenated by the 'God of vision', dispelling their doubts and fears away. Charlotte Brontë is often reminded that:

A thousand early thoughts and dreams
 Of heaven and hope were mine,
 And musings sweet by placid streams
 In childhood's vision shine.
 In summer evenings mild and dim,
 Oh, it was sweet to me
 To sit and say some simple hymn
 Beneath a lonely tree.

In the innocence of childhood, the vision that she had was of heaven and of hope. This vision gave her immense joy, and in solitude and in stillness she could sing or compose 'simple hymn'. Charlotte's simplicity and sweetness expressed here above are comparable with Anne's.

In retrospection, Charlotte Brontë expresses the sense of loss for those by-gone innocent days of childhood:

I never since have known such bliss
 As then came on my mind,
 And a trace of such pure happiness
 I never again shall find.

My heart was better then than now,
Its hopes seemed far more free,
I felt a blind but ardent glow
Of love for piety.⁴⁴

Charlotte Brontë could not forget her innocent childhood days, which had the purity of joy, of thoughts and feelings. Such joys of innocence may not be re-experienced but Poetry or the imagination brings back such memories and fills her heart with joy, as does like the touch of a magic wand. And this is the gift of poetry.

Now, the Brontë sisters were fully convinced that writing was the right vocation for them, and that there was no need for them to explore other areas of profession. Had the warning and admonition from Robert Southey and Monsieur Heger been heeded to their childhood dreams and ambition to become writers would have been suppressed. But now that they had reached the shore of their quest, their future lay in literary excellence. Charlotte's enormous strength and courage enabled her to withstand all criticisms and failures. And as she was the source of inspiration to her younger sisters, she took the pain of convincing them to bring out a publication. Convincing Emily was the hardest task that she experienced. She said, "It took hours to reconcile her to the discovery that I had made, and days to persuade her that such poems merited publication."

The Brontë sisters, like Aurore Dudevant before them and Mary Ann Evans after them, decided to mask their feminine identity behind male pseudonyms. Charlotte confessed later: “We veiled our names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’ – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice ...”

Though the *Publication* was not widely acclaimed, it was appreciated and it received some favourable reviews which encouraged them not to give up. The Publishers could manage to sell only two copies but the sisters were not discouraged. Charlotte Brontë later on said, “Ill-success failed to crush us: the mere effort to succeed had given a wonderful zest to existence; it must be pursued.”⁴⁵ They pursued it, and the indomitable spirit and courage in them helped them to fight till the end in the truest Christian spirit.

As I have said in the introduction of this thesis, when their poetry did not bring them success in their literary aspiration, they took up novel writing, for writing with them was not only a passion for fame and faith, but also something to earn their fortune by. The taste of the Victorian reading public was for the novel, and the sisters wanted to write something which would

attract them. Naturally, persistent hard work and patience was finally rewarded. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey* brought them immediate success right in 1847, soon after the poor reception of the *Publication* in 1846.

Today, the Bronte sisters are widely known for their novels. Charlotte Bronte wrote four – *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette* and *The Professor*; Emily Brontë wrote the single superb *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne Brontë *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

But the fact always remains that the Bronte sisters were first and foremost poets, and that they began their literary career as poets. They could not just then materialize the dream of becoming renowned poets. However, they emerged as famous novelists and through fiction they achieved success, fame and fortune and expressed their faith. Simultaneously, they kept on writing poems as well. It was the love for writing that gave them strength and courage to compete with male writers of their age. The sisters proved themselves equivalent with the male counterparts of the Victorian age. It is, therefore, remarked of them that time could not efface their greatness and worth, because

Ages pass away, and those writers and writings which have only appealed to transient phases of thought or particular changes of society are swept away as by a resistless current,

whilst those who defy the potency of the waves are the gifted few who have shown the genuine power of interpreting nature, or of dealing with the passions of the human heart.⁴⁶

The sisters are the ones who did 'defy the potency of the waves' of thought responsible for creating a rift between religion and science, the soul and the mind; a conflict between faith and unfaith. Holding on to human nature, they wrote of and celebrated that which is perennial in man since the creation. And the perenniality of faith for his integrated existence, though then only a fountain of faith, and not the 'Sea of faith', flows ceaselessly in the Brontë poetry. But before the sisters could realize the fullness of this fountain in them, they had to undergo a series of agonies which I am to describe in the succeeding chapter on "Agony".

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CHAPTER III

AGONY

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Agony in its varied manifestations was the integral part of the Brontë Parsonage. Right since the Brontës settled there, it proved to be a death-haunted abode, exposed to poverty and subjected to frustrations in all that the sisters attempted to accomplish. The negatives agonized them to the core. But as women of faith, even though shrouded, they would not be subdued and defeated. Though it was agony again for their adherence to faith and their tenacity to literary pursuit that sustained them firm and unmoved, yet their spirit would sometimes be on the wane to such an extent as to drive even the unbending Emily to give in and say:

All our hearts were the mansions of distress,
 And no one laughed, and none seemed free from care,
 Our children felt their fathers' wretchedness;
 Our homes, one, all were shadowed with despair.¹

Emily calls the heart 'the mansion of distress' because the heart of man as she thinks is often filled with pain and sorrow. It is a universal truth that no one can escape the misery of this sorrowful, fallen world. Ever since the fall of man, mankind has been subjected to death, disease, pain, and sorrow. Though man has been able to solve many mysteries, he cannot solve the miseries that surround us. "All down the ages man has had the same experiences – emotional, moral and physical; the same ecstasies and agonies, triumphs and

frustrations, glories and shames. He has faced the same questions. He has found himself entangled in the same emotional and moral conflicts in his relations with others and with himself.”² The sisters’ lot was in no way different. Time cannot change but may ameliorate the fate of man. And more often than not, amelioration in the Brontë family was only a flicker. So not only their ‘hearts’ but their family also could be ‘the mansion of distress’ wherein dwelt all the agonies and suffering. Weighed down with anxiety and agony, they were destined to live an unhappy worldly life. Though generation after generation mankind experiences, with occasional happiness, the ‘wretchedness of life’, the sisters experienced that their hearts and homes had always been ‘shadowed with despair’.

The Brontë sisters lived a brief life beset with trials and tribulations. They were subjected to poverty, sickness and death. Their world indeed was the “valley of the shadow of death.”³ Naturally, most of their poems are autobiographical, wherein the sisters express their loneliness and ^{longing} nostalgia, their frustrations in love, their sorrows of death, bringing out their emotional and spiritual agonies.

The strands of agonies we discover in their poems embody themselves in different forms and feelings in the sisters’ novels, which are mostly autobiographical. It would, therefore, be a rewarding endeavour if we look into them, and also refer to some of Charlotte Brontë’s letters on women’s

suffering, for they all project before us the sisters' aching hearts in all their passionate intensity.

The sensitive Brontë sisters could not keep themselves aloof from women of their economic status, who had to suffer enormous agonies – ^{social} ~~socio~~-economic and emotional – in the then male-dominated Victorian society. We are sometimes moved to construe them as identifying themselves with those women suffering in pain and agonies. Charlotte Brontë especially ensures in her fiction a rare touch of intimacy with which she sadly and satirically projects the baneful lot of women under age-old bondage:

A lover masculine can speak and urge explanation;
 a lover feminine can speak nothing; if she did, the
 result would be shame and anguish, ...Nature
 would brand such demonstrations as a rebellion
 against her instincts. Take the matter as you find it;
 ask no questions; utter no remonstrances; it is your
 best wisdom, you expected bread, and you have got
 a stone; break your teeth on it, and do not shriek
 because the nerves are martyred.⁴

This was the doleful, unpleasant lot of women in a society of snobs. Without any assertion they should endure what came to them from men. They need not at all complain. And if they did, that should be an ignoble slur on their tribe. But the bitter truth, we know, lies the other side. Men had taken

undue advantage of women's obedience, submission and dependence. Therefore, it is important to hear here the pervasive undertone of the feminist (opposed to the feminine) voice which Charlotte had already rung in *Jane Eyre*, and with which the sky is now always rent. Though it is for the sociologist to record how far the situation has since then changed for the better in favour of women, yet it cannot absolutely be denied that women's heart is not aching.

As a Protestant writer, Charlotte Brontë supported the right of the individual conscience against the authority of the church. And so did the two younger sisters. In the same way they also fought for the conditions of support for the right of the individual women against the men in authority over there. The sisters also believed that God created a partnership of Adam and Eve in Eden. As such, they further believed that He must have allowed the freedom of conscience and opportunity to both the halves. But here *Shirley* presents a milieu where woman is denied all freedom. The milieu so projected is the actual one, and which squarely reverses all that they believed in and fought for. Though Charlotte Brontë creates in the novel such situations which allow the fulfilment of her ideals in the end, the actual makes the heart bleed, for we see women in agonies suffering for want of economic support, emotional fulfilment and social security. They are tortured by their husbands to leave home and are never allowed to retouch its threshold. They disguise their identity in obscurity as a shield against social insecurity and infamy, and take

to the servitude of governessing for a living. Mrs. Pryor in *Shirley* represents them:

It [Mrs. Pryor] was a name in my mother's family I dopted it that I might live unmolested. My married name recalled too vividly my married life: I could not bear it. Besides, threats were uttered of forcing me to return to the bondage: it could not be; rather a bier for a bed – the grave for a home. My new name sheltered me: I resumed under its screen my old occupation of teaching.⁵

Her married name was Agnes Helstone, and the disclosure of her pathetic past she makes above is to her own daughter Caroline who too is seen suffering in alienation from her lover. The maltreatment and destitution of love meted out to women could only be removed by letting them realize the presence of conscience in them, and by allowing them work opportunities. Charlotte Brontë and the younger sisters perhaps seem to be agreeing with what Margot Peters writes, “A woman who works is by that alone better than one who does not and a woman who does not happen to be rich and who still earns no money and does not wish to do so is guilty of a great fault – almost a crime.”⁶

With the solitary exception of Caroline in *Shirley*, who wants to work but happens to be her only non-working heroine, - Frances in *The Professor*

and Jane in *Jane Eyre* are teachers. And if Shirley is rich, Lucy in *Villette* is her only working poor heroine. Anne Brontë's heroines are also working women. While Helen is a painter in *The Tenant*, Agnes is a housewife nicely engaged in church and other productive activities in *Agnes Grey*. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is of course a different story. So while agreeing with Peters, we may also disagree, for when a woman ventures out to work, she should not be harassed and exploited, she should suitably be placed and her services be appropriated. But within the framework of the Brontë fiction the heroines for the most part are seen to be suffering and aching. But this does not happen in the world of Jane Austen. Her heroines live in elegant houses cramped with all sorts of luxuries and comforts. As George Sampson puts it, "Her [Jane Austen's] world is comfortably off, and no one seems to work for a living."⁷ With Charlotte's and so also with Anne's the situation is basically different. Lucy in *Villette* bewails and engages our sympathy, "I believe while I tremble, I trust while I weep."⁸ She loves but herself remains unloved.

It is always essential that the two souls Paul and Lucy – in love should inevitably enjoy the bliss of marriage on earth. Love exists between them, and its spiritual and imaginative realization that it does exist is enough. Paul no doubt plans to make her his wife, but in the mean time he is sent out to the West Indies for three years. During all these years Lucy lives happily. She is practically in the emotional state of a loving, caring, expecting house-wife, who stands on the threshold with all preparations to receive her husband back

home from far off land, “My school flourishes, my house is ready: I have made him a little library, filled ... with the books he left in my care: I have cultivated out of love for him ... the plants [and flowers] he preferred and some of them are yet in bloom.”⁹ Lucy stands here as a virtuous wife whose likes and happiness are her husband’s likes and happiness. It is not too far to look for a similar theme which assumes a different form and feeling in one of Charlotte Brontë’s undated poems:

I will pluck the wild flower
 On bank and on brae
 At the still moonlight hour;
 And will twine for him a wreath
 Low in the fairy’s dell,¹⁰

The three years elapse. She exultantly awaits the arrival of the ship. The ship is mystified in the peril. Charlotte Brontë does not say that Paul is drowned. But the result we know is obvious. Cruel fate does not allow her wifely expectations to materialize. So she expresses the agony of her suffering soul rather sarcastically, “Let them [hostile people] picture union and a happy succeeding life.”¹¹ But in the poem she gives the agony a tranquillised expression in the solemn word: “Farewell”, and yet does not forget to assert, “Sweet hope from my bosom shall never be banished.”¹² The mortal hope will put on immortality – it is not for earth, it is for heaven. With this hope she

would suffer agony of the terrestrial world without complaint, and would tend her soul to God for help:

God help me in my grievous need,
 God help me in my inward pain;
 Which cannot ask for pity's meed,
 Which has no licence to complain;¹³

The sisters were the most uncomplaining creatures to remain content with what fortune offered them, and were always willing to rectify and pay for the mistakes made. So are their heroines. In *The Tenant*, Helen, the angel monitress, stands in the role of 'mother' to Huntingdon to reform him. She makes all possible efforts to make herself acceptable to him. She suffers the insufferable. Her soul is anguished and agonized. She often confides into her diary that her inner self is being dried up, withered and petrified. We are moved to feel that a hardness such as this is caused in her heart by rough experience and despair. This theme, of what experience does to a sweet, believing heart, occurs in Anne Brontë's Poetry, notably in her 'Self-Communion', a poem on which she had worked simultaneously with *The Tenant*. She does not slight the world outside her. She simply and painfully unlocks her heart to the world:

I see that time, and toil, and truth
 An inward hardness can impart, -
 Can freeze the generous blood of youth

And steel full fast the tender heart.¹⁴

It is her personal experience universalised, feeling made thought. But then the steeled heart would not be without hope, the hope which always ensures it victory over despair in the Brontë poetry and fiction. It enlivens the steeled heart to the need of loving and being loved. The love so regenerated gives birth to faith. Now the trio of hope and love and faith the sisters believe can make life meaningful here and hereafter. But again, as the sisters lived and experienced, agony was the integral part of their life. More often than occasionally, it was agony which made in them the passion of love more intense and lovelier, a relationship of love that exist between two loving souls, and when sublimated, it exists between man and God.

Love was the greatest concern of the Brontë sisters. Without it they could not be what they wanted to be. "Love was the breath of life to Charlotte Brontë; the be-all and end-all of human life."¹⁵ We can extend this remark as applicable to Anne, and also to Emily but with a difference, for in the world of her *Wuthering Heights* there could be marriage without love, and love without marriage. It is ultimately Heathcliff's world where he is the ultimate object of ultimate love. And Emily Brontë through the medium of Catherine aspires after that love. Her aspiring in the novel is full of spiritual agonies as her aspiring in her poetry. Though the passion of love described in the novels and the poems of the eldest and the youngest sister passes through a series of

emotional and spiritual agonies, they do not attain the height of Emily Brontë. Their emphasis is on the fact that love must station itself in the institution of marriage sanctioned by society and sanctified by God. Charlotte Brontë in the main champions this principle of love and marriage in the larger interest of women.

An unmarried woman was to the Victorian mind an incomplete and unnatural being who could often be viewed as a blight on creation. What the Victorians thought then sounds true today and would sound so possibly tomorrow, not only scripturally but biologically as well, for without love and marriage, with all the claims of feminism, she remains incomplete. Marriage for a woman, though not a profession, was and is a passport to financial security, respectability and worthy womanhood. So “the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live,” for “the matrimonial market is overstocked.”¹⁶ Charlotte sobs to see this pathetic situation.

Now for the marriageable women to be marketable in the matrimonial market two qualifications were required – they should be both beautiful and wealthy. If one was only beautiful and not rich or vice versa, she would be doomed. Now those of the second category assumed airs and made the most of their looks to compete with those of the first category for winning husbands in marriage. The elements of love and intellectual compatibility would all along

remain absent. It would then be a market for sale and purchase of interests, without any sense of soul-mating which might enable the couple to thrive in their married life.

Besides the women of the second category, there were women of a third category, who are never loved and married, and are rather despised by gentlemen because they find them neither pretty nor young, neither merry nor youthful. These single women who constitute a considerable number are called old maids: they are a class in themselves. Both Charlotte and Anne feel for their miserable lot. These women's agony is something of the private predicament to them, but the spectacle that emerges marks a social stigma. As machines have replaced the poor proletariat, they have no place in employment market and so they suffer. Similarly, lack of physical beauty and attractiveness compounded with material poverty on their part does not allow the old maids any place in the matrimonial market. Because of the same deficiency again the happy and rich parents do not like to employ them as governesses. Charlotte Brontë bewails their lot:

Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and occupation in the world: the demand disturbs the happy and the rich: it disturbs parents.¹⁷

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- ⁵⁹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 22.
- ⁶⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 24, 27.
- ⁶¹ Laurie Lanzen Harris, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, vol. 3 (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower), p. 76.
- ⁶² Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, chapter 36, p. 410.
- ⁶³ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 59, 60.
- ⁶⁴ Emily Jane Brontë, *Poems*, p. 243.
- ⁶⁵ F. B. Pinion, *A Brontë Companion* (cited above), p. 92.
- ⁶⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 210.
- ⁶⁷ Emily Jane Brontë, *Poems*, p. 107.
- ⁶⁸ Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, Dec. 23, 1848. In Muriel Spark, *The Brontë Letters* (cited above), p. 157.
- ⁶⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 200.
- ⁷⁰ J.D. Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), p. 137.
- ⁷¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 201.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- ⁷³ "I Thessalonians" 5:18.
- ⁷⁴ Charlotte Brontë to W. S. Williams, dated June 4, 1849.
- ⁷⁵ Anne Brontë, *Poems*, pp. 149, 150.
- ⁷⁶ Gordon Campbell (Ed.), 'When I consider how my light is spent', *The Complete Poems of John Milton* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1980), p. 83.
- ⁷⁷ Anne Brontë to Ellen Nussey, dated April 5, 1849. In Muriel Spark, *The Brontë Letters* (cited above), pp. 160-161.
- ⁷⁸ Emily Jane Brontë, *Poems*, p. 180.

direct solution to the malady; she leaves it with men who are for the most part masters of society. If men worked as per her appeal, the inferior status of women would considerably improve, and father^s would be proud of their daughters who would be their ‘tenderest nurses in sickness; [and] most faithful prop in age.’ The sisters had made their father proud of them by establishing their reputation as celebrated writers through perseverance, and by championing the women’s cause, though writing mostly in agony. So long as they lived they were their father’s tenderest nurses in his old age. Her letter to William Smith Williams is quotable here:

Lonely as I am – how should I be if providence had not
 Given me courage to adopt a career – perseverance to
 plead ... ? how should I be with youth past, ... a resident
 in a moorland parish where there is not a single educated
 family? In that case I should have no world at all; the
 raven, weary of surveying the deluge, and an arch to return
 to, would be my type. I wish all your daughters – I wish
 every woman in England had also a hope and a motive.
 Alas! There are many old maids who have neither.¹⁹

The letter though autobiographical is universal and objective in its total import. Charlotte Brontë’s tone in the letter is emotionally sad as in the novel on the theme. In the novel as she creates a fictional reality, in the letter she describes a social reality. But the degree of agony felt and described in both is equally stirring. Yet, in face of all agony, she does not forget to stress the need

of 'a hope and a motive' in women for their survival and success in society. But the question remains to be answered as to how many women could be novelists (like Brontë sisters), and how many of them could be lawyers and doctors when the employment opportunities would mostly be availed of by the sons of the soil. And, with hope and motive denied, old maids were the worst sufferers. Even the young and the beautiful ones needed preferential and ungrudging treatment from the masters of society. But the sisters themselves would not openly voice it, because they were women in a man-dominated society. The sisters then and Charlotte in the main would send to heaven a piercing cry for relief, as expressed in the letter to William Smith Williams:

One can see where the evil lies, but who can point out the remedy? When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident; her destiny isolates her, I suppose she must do what she can, complain as little, bear as much, work as well as possible. This is not a high theory, but I believe it is a sound practice, good to put into execution while philosophers and legislators ponder over the better ordering of social system. At the same time I conceive that when patience has done its utmost industry its best, whether in the case of women or operatives, when both are baffled, and pain and want triumph, the sufferer is free to, entitled at last, to send up to heaven any piercing cry for relief, if by that cry s(he) can hope to obtain succour.²⁰

It is agony again which is the genesis of the pathetic intensity expressed in the epistle above. While voicing the inability of women, she is also advocating and crying for women's cause through epistles to her publishers and in the exclamations of her heroines. The two younger sisters did not feel the need to write separately to the publishers because they shared her views in unison, and moreover she was their guardian figure. Nor do we have hungry operatives in them, except in Charlotte Brontë. As operatives' existence is dependent on masters, so also women's existence is dependent on men. And this is their inability, a sort of predicament from which, Charlotte says, they cannot get themselves absolved until a better ordering of social system is affected. Till then – especially women – should afford to work ungrudgingly. And if patience fails, they should cry their heart out to heaven for help, if that cry could help. Anne Brontë too, as does Charlotte Brontë, believes it helps. We see how Helen reposes in agony her trust in heaven, “Surely God in his mercy will preserve me from so severe a trial,”²¹ a trial for her acquittal from the bondage of her inhuman husband. And therefore, it would not be unfair for us to surmise that the sisters were consciously or unconsciously influenced by the following stirring words written in agony by Wollstonecraft:

Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast thou
 Created such a being as woman ... who can believe
 that she was only made to submit to man, her equal,
 a being, who like her, was sent into the world to acquire
 virtue? – can she consent to be occupied merely to

please him; merely to adorn the earth when her soul is capable of rising thee? – and can she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with him the arduous steeps of knowledge? ²²

The rhetorical question so posed deftly affirms that woman, like man, her equal, was sent into the world, not just to submit to him, but to acquire virtue, because she is equally capable of acquiring it. Because she is virtuous, her soul can tend itself upwards to God and therefore she is not only a show-piece to beautify the world and gratify the pleasures of her man. She is not just a dependant on him, but an equal partner with him to scale the heights of knowledge, and especially of reason, which is the gift of heaven. But the important thing to mark here is that the affirmation is a cry in agony; it is not without tears, because as Wollstonecraft seems to be feeling, woman is not born so as she is made by man. God creates woman, and civilization makes her inferior to man whose mother she is. It was intolerable as with Wollstonecraft so with the Brontë sisters. And so Charlotte had to write again in pain:

Your daughters – no more than your sons – should be burden on your heads. Your daughters – as much as your sons – should aim at making their way honourably through life. Do not wish to keep them at home. ²³

Women – as men do – should stir out of the confinement of home, and make the best use of their energy and talent, to ease their emotional, spiritual

and socio-economic agonies. When so eased, then only will they realise in them the presence of the virtuosity granted to them by God, and will consequently cease to be 'burden' on men. Charlotte Brontë would again say:

I will travel away, far away,
 Where the dream in the darkness lie shrouded
 and grey.
 Time shall not chain me,
 Place not restrain me,
 Mind is no matter, soul is not clay.²⁴

And so in unison would also do Emily:

Come, walk with me;
 There's only thee
 To bless my spirit now;²⁵

For the Brontë sisters, the meaning and justification of life lay in actively living it. It was their nature and necessity that always propelled them to be on the move. If on one hand they viewed themselves as such reality as 'mind and soul' existing irrespective of time and space, on the other they also had to remain sensitive to the phenomenal world to meet their material needs. The well-being of the incorporeal, they knew and we know, is dependent upon the well-being of the corporeal. And hence the struggle of the 'Unquiet Souls'.

Thinking deep into their physical and spiritual agonies, Matthew Arnold rightly writes of them:

Unquiet souls!
 - In the dark fermentation of earth.
 In the never idle workshop of nature,
 In the eternal movement,
 Ye shall find yourselves again!²⁶

The lines quoted above are the concluding lines from ‘Haworth Churchyard’, a poem which Arnold was moved to compose in April 1855, after Charlotte Brontë’s death on the 31st March of the same year.

But so long as they lived, life for them was a continual struggle for survival and independence. To fulfil this demand the sisters had to venture out, but the quest for a befitting occupation, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, was a difficult task. In the process they had to bear the pangs of parting and separation from each other. Though it would be only a temporal and temporary parting, the sisters could not endure such pangs of breaking up. Home-sickness disrupted their zeal and enthusiasm to pursue their career and interest. The sight of a simple flower as the ‘bluebell’ excited the nostalgic feelings in Anne Brontë and in sadness she would express:

Oh, that lone flower recalled to me
 My happy childhood’s hours,

When bluebells seemed like fairly gifts,
A prize among the flowers.

The 'bluebell' is an ordinary flower, which becomes a symbol of their childhood happiness. So it was much prized. Perhaps this flower grew in plenty in Haworth. The sight of this familiar flower evoked the memories of home and she further expresses:

Those sunny days of merriment
When heart and soul were free,
And when I dwelt with kindred hearts
That loved and cared for me.²⁷

The time spent at home were her gayest days. It was the 'sunny days of merriment', because her heart and soul were free from worries and cares of life. As the youngest child in the family she was showered with love and affection. The recollection of her by-gone days made her sad and lonely.

Emily Brontë also expresses her nostalgic feelings excited by the bluebell. She dedicated two of her poems, 'The Bluebell' composed in December 18, 1838 and 'To a Bluebell', composed on 9th May, 1839. This particular flower seemed to be her favourite one as she calls it 'the sweetest flower':

The bluebell is the sweetest flower

That waves in summer air;
 Its blossoms have the mightiest power
 To soothe my spirit's care.

It is not only beautiful to the eye of the beholder but it also has the 'mightiest power' to soothe the spirit. It naturally acted as a balm to her ailing spirit and eased her form her nostalgia. In the concluding lines she mournfully expresses:

How do I yearn, how do I pine
 For the time of flowers to come,
 And turn me from that fading shine
 To mourn the fields of home.²⁸

Emily Brontë yearns for its blooming season to come though it causes her to mourn the fields of home. John Hewish remarked that this stanza "seems to clinch the connection between the exile of the seasons and the exile of home."²⁹ Having written in the coldest season of the year, she yearned for spring and summer, and at the same time also for her home.

The sense of isolation was so intense in them that despite their best effort to fight it out and endure their routine life, they failed miserably. As the Parsonage was isolated from the main habitation of Haworth, the Brontë children were thrown upon themselves. As a result, they developed a strong bond of love and friendship among themselves. In course of time, when

situation compelled them to break up, they suffered from excruciating pangs of separation. Anne Brontë mournfully expresses:

There is a friendly roof I know
 Might shield me from the wintry blast;
 There is a fire whose ruddy glow
 Will cheer me for my wanderings past.

Anne Brontë calls her home ‘a friendly roof’ because a pleasant atmosphere prevailed there. It was a home where love and understanding flowed abundantly. She is confident enough that it would shield her from the wintry blast. The ‘wintry blast’ could have a double meaning, signifying the cold seasonal cycle and the disgusting cold human relationship which she experienced with her employers. Her home alone could shield and protect her so that she would enjoy the warmth of the fire as well as the warmth of their love. Her only consolation is

Though far I roam, that thought shall be
 My hope, my comfort, everywhere,
 While such a home remains to me.
 My heart shall never know despair!³⁰

Anne Brontë is certain that no matter how far away she was from home, the memory would be a source of hope and comfort that such love and enjoyment awaited her. She had such hope in her earthly home as well as in her heavenly

home. When such joy and comfort lay in store for her, she would not allow despair to conquer her.

As governesses, the sisters lived with the rich and wealthy families like the Inghams, the Sidgwicks and the Robinsons. Though they lived in beautiful houses, they experienced disrespect and were not happy. This theme finds its fullest expression in the novels. They would naturally express their longing for their home:

Restore to me that little spot,
 With grey walls compassed round,
 Where knotted grass neglected lies,
 And weeds usurp the ground.

The Parsonage was not an attractive house. The compound was also unkempt but she would still like to go back home because home is home, a place of sweetness, love and affection. She therefore states that

Though all around this mansion high
 Invites the foot to roam.
 And though its halls are fair within –
 Oh, give me back my HOME.³¹

The 'mansion high' or the palatial house could not attract them because of the hollowness of its inhabitants. The outward beauty did not charm them and in agony Anne Brontë would cry, 'Oh give me back my home.'

Emily Brontë too shared the same feeling and experience as did Anne. She suffered from homesickness. She could not forget her home. She recollects:

There is a spot 'mid barren hills
 Where winter howls and driving rain,
 But if the dreary tempest chills
 There is a light that warms again.

The house is old, the trees are bare
 And moonless bends the misty dome
 But what on earth is half so dear.
 So longed for as the hearth of home?³²

Emily Brontë gives a detailed description of the Parsonage set against the background of winter. It was an old house situated amid barren hills and it is said that "whether the sun shines, or there is snow or rain, there is always a wind at Haworth."³³ The wind chills the whole atmosphere but the hearth of home remains always bright and warm.

Emily Brontë could not get her mind out of the moorland. It haunted her everywhere. The Parsonage, beside the moorland, was located at the highest point of the Haworth peak. In the front view “it faced down into Haworth but at the back it looked over the miles of open moorland where Yorkshire meets Lancashire.”³⁴ Emily was always under the spell of this moorland. Juliet Barker remarks that “to those who love bleak and dramatic scenery there is something almost heart-wrenching in the beauty of the sweep of moorlands round Haworth.”³⁵ The call of the moor was too powerful for her to resist, and in agony she would cry:

For the moors, for the moors where the short grass
 Like velvet beneath us should lie!
 For the moors, for the moors where each high pass
 Rose sunny against the clear sky!

For the moors, where the linnet was trilling
 Its song on the old granite stone;
 Where the lark – the wild sky-lark was filling
 Every breast with delight like its own.³⁶

Emily Brontë loved the moorland passionately. It was too beautiful for her to forget. The short grass is compared to velvet. It was enchantingly beautiful with the songs of birds like the linnet, the lark and the skylark. The beauty is not only visual but audiovisual. Charlotte writes: “My sister Emily loved the moors ... flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath

for her: out of a sullen hollow in a livid hillside her mind could make an Eden.³⁷ Emily had already created a very beautiful picture of the moors in her mind and this remained in her forever. She expresses her desire to go back to her moors, where she could live in close association with nature and vegetate as nature itself does.

Charlotte Brontë also expresses her love for her native land. She had seen many beautiful places with sweet fragrant flowers, fountain springs, melodious songs of the birds but nothing could be better than her native hill:

Though its barren, lonely wildness
 Every heart with dread might chill;
 Though beneath no heaven of mildness,
 Yet I love my native hill.³⁸

All the three sisters gave a similar description of the Parsonage as – barren, lonely, chilly and so on, but despite these deficiencies, they still loved their home. In Charlotte's younger days ambition ruled over her and she wanted to leave her home and venture out, but experience taught her a lesson and so she regrets later:

Long ago I wished to leave
 'The house where I was born';
 Long ago I used to grieve,
 My home seemed so forlorn

In other years, its silent rooms
 Were filled with haunting fears;
 Now, their very memory comes
 O'er charged with tender tears.³⁹

Charlotte Brontë was then low-spirited, pining for the loss. She realised nothing could compensate or substitute her home and its people. Now the house has become empty and the silent rooms grieve her and their memory fills her with tears. In 'The Teacher's Monologue' she again expresses her nostalgic feelings –

Sweet dreams of home my heart may fill,
 That home where I am known and loved;
 It lies beyond, yon azure brow
 Parts me from all Earth holds for me;
 And, morn and eve, my yearnings flow
 Thitherward tending, changelessly.
 My happiest hours, ay! all the time,
 I love to keep in memory.
 Lapsed among moors, ere life's first prime
 Decayed to dark anxiety.⁴⁰

In this stanza Charlotte Brontë, like Emily and Anne, expresses her longing for home. It is the only place where she is known and loved. She wanted to preserve the childhood happiness in her memory.

Throughout their stay outside their home, their minds were filled with nostalgic feelings and their longing for re-union grew intense and they were in emotional agony. For Charlotte and Anne, a good number of their poems express their agony in frustrations of love but they differ in nature. While Charlotte mourned for unrequited love, Anne mourned the untimely death of a lover. Charlotte fell in love with her teacher Constantin Heger. Perhaps it was a deep infatuation for his qualities, for “he was a gifted teacher, knowledgeable and insightful, appreciative of his serious students, responsive to their intellectual and emotional requirement.”⁴¹ Her feelings for him were very intense but he did not reciprocate, for he was already a married man with children. Failing to get any attention from him she expressed her frustrations:

He was mute as is the grave, he stood stirless as
a tower;
At last I looked up, and saw I prayed to stone:
I asked help of that which, to help had no power,
I sought love where love was utterly unknown.

Charlotte Brontë desperately sought for his help and his love but he remained as silent as the grave and as motionless as a tower. Her endeavours to win his love were futile. He was like a non-living object. She writes:

Idolator I kneeled to an idol cut in rock!
I might have slashed my flesh and drawn my
heart's best blood:

The Granite God had felt no tenderness, no shock;
 My Baal had not seen nor heard nor under
 stood.⁴²

Charlotte compares him to Baal, an idol worshipped in Canaan. The idol god cannot see, hear nor feel the penance made by the penitent. Similarly, he did not understand her. Like the idol god he was mute, devoid of sense and feelings for her. Charlotte's description is fitting to David's description of Baal:

But their idols are silver and gold made by the hand of man
 They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes but they cannot see.
 They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell.
 They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk;
 nor can they utter a sound with their throats.⁴³

Unable to get any sympathy she cried in agony and exasperation. We see her ~~wreathing~~ ^{writhing} herself in wrenching emotional agony:

Oh! Love was all a thin illusion;
 Joy but the desert's flying stream;
 And glancing back on long delusion
 My memory grasps a hollow dream.⁴⁴

After the passing storms of love, she came to her senses. She realised that love was just an illusion and she had deluded herself too long in the

hollow dream. She had wasted her time, strength and energy in a useless attempt. In her later life she repented for her injudicious act and confessed to Ellen Nussey, "I returned to Brussels after aunt's death against my conscience, prompted by what then seemed an irresistible impulse. I was punished for my selfish folly by a total withdrawal for more than two years of happiness and peace of mind."⁴⁵ Whatever be the source of love, it was a bitter experience and she suffered much from it. She cries in agony:

I have been but they transient flower,
 Thou wert my god divine;
 Till checked by death's congealing power
 This heart must throb for thine.⁴⁶

The stanza expresses her agony in love for the man she loved, and by extension and sublimation to the God of love that she loved. For when the soul suffers for the communion with God, the soul is in agony.

For Anne Brontë, her love poems are a lament on the death of William Weightman. Before their love blossomed, Weightman died. Anne poignantly expresses her unfulfilled love and sorrow in such a number of poems as the following:

I know that in the narrow tomb
 The form I loved was buried deep,
 And left in silence and in gloom

To slumber out its dreamless sleep.

Anne knew that Weightman was buried in a narrow tomb; whenever she sees the tomb she is reminded of him and is filled with sorrow and sadness. The dead lies in silence and gloom and in eternal slumber. The only reminder left of him is

A few cold words on yonder stone,
 A corpse as cold as they can be;
 Vain words and mouldering dust, alone, -
 Can this be all that's left of thee?⁴⁷

Anne Brontë had nothing left of him but an epitaph inscribed on the cold tomb and the memories. She could not believe that her dreams and plans had ended with his death. Fighting the pain and sorrow she would console herself and say:

If I may ne'er behold again
 That form and face so dear to me,
 Nor hear thy voice, still would I fain
 Preserve for aye their memory.⁴⁸

Anne Brontë knew that she would never see him or hear him again on earth, so she would preserve him in her memories and would meet him, perhaps in heaven.

The death of Weightman was profoundly mourned. It was a great loss because she had lost in him a comforter, a guide and a faithful friend. In agony she would accept the inevitable:

With none to comfort, none to guide,
 And none to strengthen me,
 Since thou, my only friend, hast died,
 I've pined to follow thee.
 Since thou hast died! And did he live
 What comfort would his counsel give
 To one forlorn like me?⁴⁹

Anne grieved his death. There was nothing that could replace him or fill the void left by him. It is the living who has to bear the pain of loneliness and emptiness. Anne had to lament his death till the end of her life. By immortalizing him into her sweet, shapely verses, she would relieve herself of the harrowing emotional agony and reach a state of spiritual serenity. If recollecting of him was rage, writing of him was peace. Both of them together could now be viewed as canonized in love. But so long as she lived after his death, the theme of unrequited love haunted her until it reached sublimation in her poetry of faith.

The subject of loneliness, partings and death are a recurrent theme in their poems. Sickness and death afflicted the family. The untimely death of their mother and their two eldest sisters – Maria and Elizabeth – was a great

blow to the family. The gloom and darkness hovered in their mind. Charlotte poignantly states:

When the death in their cold graves are lying
 Asleep, to wake never again;
 When past are their smiles and their sighing
 Oh! Why should their memories remain?⁵⁰

Though she loved the departed souls, their memory brought her only pain and agony. To think of those persons whom she could not see again brought her misery alone, but in 'Presentiment' while mourning the death of Emma she sees a ray of hope in life after death.

The snow will whiten earth again,
 But Emma comes no more;
 She left, 'mid winter's sleet and rain,
 This world for Heaven's far shore.
 On Beulah's hills she wanders now,
 On Eden's tranquil plain;
 To her shall Jane hereafter go,
 She ne'er shall come to Jane!⁵¹

The world keeps on moving. The season keeps on changing. The entire natural world with its natural objects is in a state of flux. They are always on the move and meet decay. They are all temporal. Opposed to the temporal is the eternal which has neither beginning nor end. Emma has left the temporal world for the

eternal. Though the theme of the poem is death it ends in hope. Charlotte says that Emma has left this world for Heaven's far shore and is wandering on 'Beulah's hill' and 'Eden's tranquil plain'. They symbolise paradise, the heavenly abode for the souls.

Emily Brontë also expresses her agony, for the memory of the dead always disturbed her. She could not even enjoy her sleep;

Sleep bring no rest to me;
The shadows of the dead
My waking eyes may never see
Surround my bed.⁵²

The vision of death made her sad and lonely. 'My waking eyes may never see' is a pathetic expression. As a mystic, with her eyes closed, she could experience the presence of the departed souls. It is however, a total experience of grief which reaches the climax of emotional intensity in mourning the death. It is not only the death in the family but the sight of the churchyard also would remind them of the helpless state of mankind, for the corporeal world is ceaselessly subject to 'Time and Death and Mortal pain.' And so she would burst into the following terms:

I see around me tombstone grey
Stretching their shadows far away.
Beneath the turf my footsteps tread

Lie low and lone the silent dead;
 Beneath the turf, forever cold,
 And my eyes cannot hold the tears
 That memory hoards from vanished years;
 For Time and Death and Mortal pain
 Give wounds that will not heal again.⁵³

The gloom of the graveyard loomed large on the Parsonage. The picture of death haunted her persistently because “the view from her nursery window was of this graveyard and afterwards that nursery was her bedroom. And she saw this churchyard and the tombs and the everlasting moors beyond it.⁵⁴ The tombstone thus was a regular reminder of the brevity of human life as well as of the loved ones who were enclosed in it ‘beneath the turf’ and ‘beneath the mould’ in the cold and dark. The remembrance of the dead brings tears to the eyes, consequently she had to live in agony. The death scene is poignantly expressed again:

I dream of moor, and misty hill,
 Where evening gathers, dark and chill,
 For, lone, among the mountains cold
 Lie those that I have loved of old,
 And my heart aches, in speechless pain,
 Exhausted with repinings vain,
 That I shall see them ne'er again.

Emily grieved for the physical parting but she is full of hope for the soul, for she is fully convinced that the soul would not perish with the flesh;

O not for them should we despair;
 The grave is drear, but they are not there:
 Their dust is mingled with the sod;
 Their happy souls are gone to God!⁵⁵

These lines speak of Emily's faith. Only a believer could be so sure and definite and could have such an unquestioning faith.

She rejoices in the immortality of the soul, for if the corporeal is perishable, the incorporeal she believes is imperishable. And the incorporeal that lies within is both human and divine and the former is lighted by the latter. Only a person of faith realizes this truth. But so long as a person of faith hungers only and fails to participate in the divine, he experiences rage and agony and alienation. Emily expresses her conviction in a state of anguish:

Deep down – concealed within my soul
 That light lies hid from men
 Yet glows unquenched though shadows roll.⁵⁶

The themes which the sisters delved deeply are subjects like 'life' and 'death'. Death however, as they realized, is not a terror, for death is the gateway or entry to the eternal life. The cessation of the physical body is the

beginning of the eternal life. Though the sisters lament death and express the bitterness of it, yet they were not afraid of such an end, for the sisters experienced an unbroken chain between life here and life hereafter. Emily breathlessly expresses this truth time and again in her poems and stands convinced of an uninterrupted continuity between life and death. We change but we do not die. And change for the better is and should be the principle governing life.

Having been brought up in a strict evangelical background, the sisters suffered when they went outside the realms of their religion and conscience. Charlotte Brontë confesses that her mind often wandered far away from God, if she went outside her particular faith. The deviation would turn her anguished and unquiet.

Tempted by a false prospect of her marriage with St. John, but later disillusioned, Jane in *Jane Eyre* confessed her guilt, “Religion called – Angels beckoned – God commanded – life rolled together like scroll – death’s gates opening, shewed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all her might be sacrificed in a moment.” It is a call of conscience coming from the heart, which saved her. But the whole utterance unlocks her emotional and spiritual agony in an agitated but controlled language. Back to the God of her conviction, she realized the truth: “The dim room was full of visions.”⁵⁷ She sacrificed her ‘self-interest’ rather than her soul. Jane thus emulated her creator

Charlotte Brontë, who recognized: “The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest.”⁵⁸ The ‘self-interest’ stands for our sensuous passion for all that the beautiful visible world offers us, and the sacrifice of the sensuous passion is never without pain and agony. This is what Charlotte Brontë experienced when her passionate love for Heger remained unrequited.

The same situation she describes in the following lines where she expresses the ‘same voice’ of conscience washing away ‘a hundred hidden sins.’

Again I find myself alone, and ever
 The same voice like an oracle begins
 Its vague and mystic strain, forgetting never
 Reproaches for a hundred hidden sins,
 And setting mournful penances in sight
 Terrors and tears for many a watchful night.⁵⁹

Charlotte Brontë faced ‘Reproaches for a hundred hidden sins.’ Such reproaches restrained her wandering thoughts from committing sins. She yielded to the rebuke of the great voice of God. All through the night she did penance, and repented for her sins. She was an erring child, who attempted to reform herself and go back to the God of her religion;

Oh! it longed for holier fire

Than this spark in earthly shrine:
 Oh! it soared, and higher, higher,
 Sought to reach a home divine.
 Hopeless quest! Soon weak and weary
 Flagged the pinion, drooped the plume,
 And again in sadness dreary
 Came the baffled wanderer home.⁶⁰

The soul longed for the purging fire to cleanse her from all uncleanness. In all her imperfection she wanted to reach the perfection, soaring higher and higher. Though it seems to be a hopeless quest, and though she is weak and weary and often loses all strength, yet, her attempt is to reach the divine. And the ascent is always fraught with rage and agony, mostly spiritual.

Living in a sinful world they were subjected to trials and temptation, sometimes they even doubted their belief. Anne expresses her moments of weakness;

Often in my wild impatience
 I have lost my trust in Heaven,
 And my soul has tossed and struggled
 Like a vessel tempest-driven.

Anne Brontë is remorseful for her impatience and unbelief. She was tossed like a vessel by the tempest of life. Often her faith wavered and so she repents her loss of trust:

When from nights of restless tossing,
 Days of gloom and pining care,
 Pain and weakness still increasing
 Seem to whisper, 'Death is near'.

This is a defeatist tendency which takes over us in our weak moments. And so she continues:

... I almost bid him welcome
 knowing He would bring release,
 Weary of their restless struggle
 Longing to repose in peace - ⁶¹

Life was full of pain and weakness, that seemed to be ever increasing. When there was so much gloom her only refuge seemed to be death. She believed that death would release her from physical suffering of life. Death does so. But as long as one lives, one should live heroically with God overhead. And this is the true Christian spirit.

The sisters felt imprisoned psychologically as well as spiritually by the sufferings of life. The physical world with all its environment appeared to be as hostile as the prison to them. Imprisonment – physical, psychological or spiritual is a central thematic metaphor in the Victorian fiction in general and in the Brontës' fiction and poetry in particular. Dickens's characters, specially

his women characters, such as Rose in *Oliver Twist* and Louisa in *Hard Times*, to name only a few, feel strangled in a murky and mercenary male-dominated society. And so they yearn for release and liberation into a freer, healthier and lovelier milieu. With the Brontë heroines the confinement is still more harrowing. And so we hear from Michael Wheeler the following words: "In the Brontë novels the physical confinement of the heroine often reflects her spiritual imprisonment in a hostile environment which is shaped and controlled by men. Whereas Charlotte's female pilgrims in a barren land seek a limited freedom within the bonds of Christian doctrine and ethics, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* presents a more radical attempt to achieve liberation from a confining, vindictively judgemental religious scheme."⁶²

The worldly milieu did not have much to offer them except pain and sorrow. When there was nothing to attract them it is quite natural that they shifted their attention to God. In the midst of sufferings it was God to whom they could turn and from whom they could seek help and relief. They sought for liberation in Him as they were wearied and worn out. Charlotte Brontë in anguish expresses:

Weary at last of ever onward hastings,
 Finding no resting place,
 Weary of grinding earth, of wildly wasting,
 Like dust, the human race,⁶³

Charlotte Brontë was tired of the life's journey. She was also tired of the 'grinding earth' which signifies the continuous hardship. She, therefore, longs for rest and liberty. Emily Brontë also yearned for liberty. She says:

And if I pray, the only prayer
 that moves my lips for me
 Is – "Leave the heart that now I bear
 And give me liberty.

Yes, as my swift days near their goal
 'Tis all that I implore –
 Through life and death, a chainless soul
 with courage to endure!⁶⁴

Emily loved liberty and she prayed for it. She was aware of her numbered days but she would still ask for the same. Liberation can mean two things, "Liberation suggests a pessimistic or unfavourable attitude to this world ... at the same time liberation is a release into something better and greater."⁶⁵ Emily's longing for liberation is not in the form of rejection, rejecting the world of suffering or with an attitude of hostility but with a wish to attain something better, higher and superior. Emily Brontë by nature is a lover of liberty and solitude. She is filled with joy in imagining that she is only a spirit without form and body, enjoying freedom:

I'm happiest when most away
 I can bear my soul from its home of clay

On a windy night when the moon is bright
 And the eye can wander through worlds of light -
 When I am not and none beside –
 Nor earth nor sea nor cloudless sky –
 But only spirit wandering wide
 Through infinite immensity.⁶⁶

This eight-line-poem expresses her intense yearning for liberty. She goes through a mystical experience. In a trance-like state she releases her spirit from her body and allows it to wander ‘through infinite immensity.’ In the process she tries to unite her spirit with the infinite. This experience is the happiest one and places her in an ecstatic state. Throughout her life she sought liberty. The highest point of her agony for liberty is to escape from this world, like Catherine’s in *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine admits and discloses:

And the thing that irks me most is this shattered
 prison after all. I’m tired of being enclosed here.
 I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world,
 and to be always there, not seeing it dimly through
 the walls of an aching heart, but really with it and
 in it ... I shall be incomparable beyond and above
 you all.⁶⁷

Catherine calls her body a shattered prison. She wants to liberate her spirit which is imprisoned in her body. Catherine is sick and tired of the miseries of this world. Her dreams and wishes are for the glorious world. She is in haste

but is not able to release herself, thus she is in agony. The same feeling is expressed in 'The Death of A.G. A', which is supposed to be the longest poem of Emily Brontë. She writes:

Angelica, from my very birth
I have been nursed in strife:
And lived upon this weary Earth
A wanderer, all my life.⁶⁸

Emily did not feel at home on this earth. She was a stranger and wanderer throughout her life, yearning for her true home. This caused a conflict between her soul and her body. When she is in such a state she cannot enjoy and in sorrow she implores, and rhetorically questions:

What bird can soar with broken wing?
What heart can bleed and joy the while?⁶⁹

Emily Brontë compares herself to a captive who is confined in a dungeon. The captive in sorrow cannot smile. She again compares herself to a bird with a broken wing. Though the wounded bird wants to soar, she stays fluttering only. These lines expose the state of her mind. Imprisoned and helpless, her only wish is liberty:

Ah! Could my hand unlock its chain,
How gladly would I watch it soar;
And ne'er regret and ne'er complain

To see its shining eyes no more.

Emily Brontë is in agony because she cannot ‘unlock its chain’. Had it been in her capacity to release her soul, she could liberate it and watch it soar away. Emily further consoles herself that our spirit would not always remain confined, for this is the spiritual law of nature. And so she writes:

But let me think that if to-day
It pines in cold captivity,
To-morrow both shall soar away
Eternally, entirely Free.⁷⁰

Captivity is therefore time-bound. When the flesh dies, the spirit will be liberated, and this liberation would make man ‘Eternally’ and ‘entirely’ free beyond the grip of time and space. Emily further adds,

I’ll not weep that thou are going to leave me,
There’s nothing lovely here;
And doubly will the dark world grieve me
While thy heart suffers there.

The dark grim world was not attractive to Emily as it has nothing to offer her. And “death, for her, was not annihilation but a positive force.”⁷¹ So she would not weep for the dead:

So, if a tear, when thou are dying,
 Should haply fall from me,
 It is but that soul is sighing
 To go and rest with thee.⁷²

The tears that she sheds would not mean mourning for death but tears of joy for liberation, a wish to be united with the Universal soul, and enjoy freedom.

Like Emily Brontë, Anne Brontë also felt chained. She expressed her downcast feelings and expresses her agony;

How can I rouse my sinking soul
 From such a lethargy?
 How can it break these iron chains
 And set my spirit free?⁷³

Here again is the picture of a prisoner in chains. Anne does not know how to liberate herself. She wanted to break free from all entanglement. In the poem 'The Arbour' also she conveys the same experience:

And winter's chill is on my heart –
 How can I dream of future bliss?
 How can my spirit soar away,
 Confined by such a chain as this?⁷⁴

The suffering in their lives sometimes prevented the soul to think of the future bliss. Anne longed to be free from the bondage and liberate her soul. In 'The Captive Dove', again the theme is imprisonment. This has some of the autobiographical elements. Anne means herself to be a captive dove which is a metaphor of the soul suffering in captivity. Just as the dove suffers in the cage, so does Anne suffer in this world. The dove prepares to fly but it cannot come out of its cage. So its attempt is useless;

In vain – in vain – Thou canst not rise;
 Thy prison roof confines thee there;
 Its slender wires delude thine eyes,
 And quench thy longings with despair.⁷⁵

Anne Brontë wanted to escape from the suffering of this world but she could not escape, so she had to resign herself to her fate and destiny and suffer in silence. Thus, her heart experienced agony.

Though loneliness, frustrations in love, and sickness and death tossed them from every direction, they were not disheartened. Such bitter experience rather steeled and directed them to turn to God for help and guidance. Through the emotional and physical thorns they found God in their lives. They had hope that the loving Lord alone could deliver them from their physical bondage and save them from the fallen world. Anne Brontë declares her trusts;

How, if a sparrow's death can wring
 Such bitter tear – floods from the eye,
 Will it behold the suffering
 Of struggling, lost humanity?
 The torturing pain, the pining grief,
 The sin – degraded misery,
 The anguish that defies relief?⁷⁶

God who loves even the sparrow would not bear to see the suffering of His children. He is a loving God who understands the pain and sorrow of His children. To such a God, Emily Brontë also confirms her faith:

O I would give my heart to death,
 To keep my honour fair
 Yet, I'll not give my inward faith
 My Honour's name to spare –⁷⁷

Emily Brontë is willing to give up everything, including her heart to death, but she is sure of herself that she would not give up her inward faith, for faith is the force and strength of her life. She would guard her inward faith with all her life and might. She was a dauntless heart given to God.

Though life was hard on them, yet the Brontë sisters knew that one day or the other not only they, but even “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”⁷⁸ Therefore, the sorrow and agony they continually experienced did not

defeat them, rather they courageously tried to overcome them. The source of their courage was generated from the perennial source of their faith which flowed like a fountain. This living water flowed from their heart, ceaselessly giving them strength and hope. Like the apostle Paul, they seem to be saying, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed.”⁷⁹

The suffering and misfortune, though agonised them, yet positively made them stronger individuals, and gave them a better and newer understanding of life to come, a life of faith to be nurtured on faith. Charlotte Brontë expresses her personal conviction that man under all circumstances is sure to secure his freedom from the captivity:

His dreams are of some other world,
 His mighty soul is free;
 His spirit's pinions all unfurled
 Rise high in radiancy.⁸⁰

Even in an era of doubt and unbelief the sisters held on to the fountain of their faith, for the sea of faith then seemed to be receding. And with this in mind, I open the succeeding chapter on ‘A fountain of faith.’

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⁷¹ Muriel Spark, *The Essence of the Brontës* (London: Peter Owen, 1993), p. 273.

⁷² Emily Brontë, *Poems*, p. 142.

⁷³ Anne Brontë, *Poems*, p. 26.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁷⁷ Emily Jane Brontë, *Poems*, p. 216.

⁷⁸ "Romans" 8: 20-21.

⁷⁹ "II Corinthians" 4:8-9.

⁸⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Poems*, p. 229.

CHAPTER IV

A FOUNTAIN OF FAITH

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As planned, I love to call this chapter 'A Fountain of Faith', for the essence of the Brontë poetry is to be appreciated against the Victorian spirit of adventure, exploration, and expansion of material progress and prosperity, and of scientific advancement and revolution in thinking – all in a throng bringing about a sea-change in the habits of mind in general, and in man's attitude to Christian faith in particular. Although seemingly all was well, yet something at the bottom was ailing the spirit. Body was fed fat, but the spirit starved. Gross materialism tended to be a threat to spiritualism. The senses seemed to subdue the essence as though man (the noblest creature created in God's image) too had the same destiny as the following plants of the botanical world:

The full-juiced apple, waxing over mellow,
Drops in the silent autumn night.
All its allotted length of days,
The flower ripens in its place
Ripens and fades, and falls...

If this process of nature is believed in respect of man to be holding true in its totality, then "Death is the end of life." He could be thought of to be a creature devoid of the soul. It was meaningless to view him as partaking of the

divine spark. And so putting words into the mouth of the Lotos-Eaters, Tennyson rhetorically asks:

Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?

Ironically enough, it could be useless to think in terms of the upward nobility of the soul for the attainment of 'peace'. Like 'the Lotos-Eaters', man drugged with the drink of mundane affluence tended to accept himself as one of "All things" that

... have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence, ripen, fall and cease.

There could be left nothing of man beyond his silence in the grave. He was as if unable to think of the peace that gives rise to the inward silence in which the soul begins to establish contact with the Eternal from which it remains sundered here in the body. It was then his greater inability to believe that here-after his soul would at all attain salvation in the Infinite. The celestial forgotten, all was terrestrial. And so in that state of inability and frustration he would surrender and say with the lotos-eaters: "Give us long rest or death, dark death."¹ What else the commercialised, dehumanised Victorian man could ask for? With all hope denied, his destiny was 'dark death', total damnation – the end result of his own making.

As the most representative poet of his age, Tennyson would not give only the dark and dismal picture of the milieu, but he would also feel spiritually constrained to shed “Tears from the depth of some divine despair,” the divine despair caused by the lack of hope as referred to above. The days of faith he felt were “no more”.² But as a man of faith and the poet that he was, he had a corrective and creative role and responsibility to discharge. He would, therefore, very emphatically exhort his countrymen to

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out narrowing lust of gold.

As if the exhortation did not work, he would also enthruse and moralize them to

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart and kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring ~~out~~ⁱⁿ the Christ that is to be.³

But how far and how long the Victorian man could inculcate in himself the valiance and freedom, to extend his larger heart and kindlier hand to remove with his property the poverty of the proletariat (there reigned then a spectacle of poverty amidst plenty) is more than obvious. So also we can only surmise whether or not such a Victorian man could remove the spiritual darkness of himself and his land, and establish the empire of faith in Christ.

But one thing is evidently clear, that in spite of the compromise suggested by Tennyson (as has been mentioned in the Introduction) and his praiseworthy efforts indicated here, there remained a fissure in the consciousness of the English culture to which Matthew Arnold was to give before long classic expression in his poetry, notably in 'Dover Beach'.

A lover of sweetness and light, of integration and progression, Arnold was agonized at the loss of faith in the contemporary English society. He found the all-compassing science devouring religion, the advancing materialism replacing Christianity. So he recollects with a sense of loss that

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of bright girdle furled.

The imagery of Sea first for faith in its fullness and secondly for a bright girdle fully furled round the earth holistically indicates that the world then was fully protected by and integrated with faith, that law and order, and spiritual harmony supported the world in its completeness, and that, above all, the planet enjoyed all-round spiritual light. But the Victorian world unfortunately saw the same Sea of faith receding and retreating, leaving the planet naked, unprotected. And so Arnold was sad to say

But now I only hear

It's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar
Retreating.⁴

The Brontë sisters had nothing to do with the eternal note of sadness that Arnold heard from the 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar'. Nor did they dread the 'roar' as if the Deity of faith itself was angry with the Victorians for their spiritual insensitiveness and religious poverty. Also, they did not feel the need for working out a compromise, either, as did Tennyson. Not that the sisters were unaware of the spiritual disintegration, but that they deliberately kept themselves tenaciously clung to a different stream of thought and experience, away from the main stream. Intact from the fretful din of urbanization and mechanization, the fountain they bathed in was self-generated, and so was the spiritual light they basked in.

Away from the Sea of faith which was being experienced as receding in the national and international consciousness, the Brontë sisters enjoyed their 'fountain of faith' flowing ceaselessly and perennially in the humble Parsonage in the Haworth village, situated in the isolated corner of Yorkshire in the northern part of England. I call it a 'fountain' because it is slender in size and spatially limited, but again it is something whose perenniality speaks of its life-giving attributes as though it flows from the heart and soul of the Creator. And then it is a 'fountain of faith', the faith which implies the *living reception of religious belief* which ensures our eternity in the bosom of the Eternal. Naturally, Emily Brontë believes

To reach, at last, the eternal home –
 The steadfast, changeless shore.⁵

And we may like to hear on Faith something more authentic and authoritative from *the Bible*:

Now faith is the substance of
 things hoped for, the conviction
 of things not seen.⁶

If one attempts a definition of faith, he would only demean and belittle it, and yet this beautiful definition from the book of *Hebrews* is a suitable one for the believers in general and for the Brontë sisters in particular. As women of faith, they hoped for the incorruptible spiritual world and they sought to attain it. Though it was not visible to their physical eye, with their spiritual eye they could experience the world beyond. It was this experience which could enable them to sustain the afflictions of this temporal, terrestrial world, and did set their minds for the celestial world. They had a strong conviction of the celestial world and things not seen. Not to have seen ‘things’ is the inability, deficiency of the individual person, not of ‘things’. The ‘things’ not seen do exist. The sisters had experienced the existence of such “things-not-in-themselves” but by their “phenomena”.⁷

The sisters experienced more of pain and sorrow than joy or happiness in their brief life on this earth. The suffering turned them to gain wisdom, which was a hard-learned lesson, for “It [wisdom] cannot be taught, each must learn it for himself through his own folly and out of the bitterness of his own end. It is the understanding of the relationship of the particulars to the whole, and this understanding is achieved only when the whole comes into view – that is to say, at the end. It is the sense of what is important and unimportant, of proportion, of what is ultimately rewarding, and it is to be gained only when it is “too late” to change anything, but when there is still time for forgiveness, for contrition, and for leaving everything in God’s hands.”⁸ As for the sisters, wisdom was occasionally gained through ‘folly’, but mostly through ‘pain and suffering, and this brought them to the realization of what was important and rewarding. This is explicitly expressed in Anne, who says:

Let patience have her perfect work;
Lo, strength and wisdom spring from grief,
And joys behind afflictions lurk!
It asked for light, and it was heard;
God grants that struggling soul repose
And, guided by His holy word,
It wiser than its teachers grows.
It gains the upward path at length,
And passes on from strength to strength.⁹

Anne believed that grief and afflictions would give birth to strength, wisdom and joy. So what is expected in a believer is patience and strength – physical, moral and spiritual. The lines quoted above have an allusion to the Bible, where the psalmist says:

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
 For they are ever with me.
 I have more insight than all my teachers,
 For I meditate on your statutes.
 I have more understanding than the elders,
 For I obey your precepts.

It is faith that gave them strength and courage. They believed in the transforming power of God that consists in His ‘commands’, ‘statutes’ and ‘precepts’, and corresponds with the psalmist who says again:

If your law had not been my delight,
 I would have perished in my affliction.¹⁰

God alone gave them knowledge, wisdom, and changed their personal life.

The sisters’ understanding of faith and religion is closest to Martin Luther’s definition of faith. The father of Protestantism defined that: “faith was not primarily belief in the church’s dogmas but rather a whole-hearted trust in the divine grace and love revealed in Jesus Christ... faith is not the belief that

God exists, that he is three in one, and so on, but is an attitude of trust and self-commitment to him.”¹¹ The sisters did rely on God with a strong personal conviction. Being deeply rooted in God, they remained unshakable when tried by life’s trial.

Their writings exhibit an enormous manifestation of faith. It made them submissive and resigned to the sufferings of this world but not without hope to receive the greatest reward which is eternal life. Faith is tacitly manifested in their personal life and actively in their communion with God. It was faith that held them, strengthened and sustained them. For shaping them to such a life of devotion and loyalty, the credit can be accorded to their parents, who indeed were true believers. Edward Chitham comments: “Both parents were genuine, unswerving believers in this dimension; neither their lives nor the books of any of the children can be understood without realizing it.”¹² Charlotte’s own words confirm her upbringing:

I – who upon my mother’s knees,
 In childhood, read Christ’s written word,
 Received His legacy of peace,
 His holy rule of action heard;
 I – in whose heart the sacred sense
 Of Jesus love was early felt;
 Of His pure, full benevolence,
 His pitying tenderness for guilt;
 His shepherd-care for wandering sheep,

For all weak, sorrowing, trembling things,
 His mercy vast. His passion deep
 Of anguish for man's sufferings.¹³

Jesus' 'legacy of peace', His love, His benevolence, His pitying tenderness, His passion – all these are guaranteed to us in the form of the lasting relationship that exists between the shepherd and the sheep. It is a relationship of mutual trust and responsibility which symbolically finds a similar expression in Blake's 'The Shepherd':

How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot!
 From the morn to the evening he strays;
 He shall follow his sheep all the day,
 And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lamb's innocent call,
 And he hears the ewe's tender reply;
 He is watchful while they are in peace
 For they know when their shepherd is nigh.¹⁴

Though they lost their mother at their tender age, the knowledge of God was imbibed in them by their father and aunt Miss Branwell, who were staunch believers. But the aunt's religious discipline was sometimes rather harmful than helpful.

Their faith tested by bereavement, sickness, loneliness and frustrations ultimately reached refinement. As gold whose genuineness is tested and purified in fire, so were they tried, and did prove their worth. It transformed them from vulnerable humans into strong beings. Emily Brontë speaks about this transforming power of God and expresses:

Why did I doubt? In God's control
Our mutual fates remain;
And pure as now my angel's soul
Must go to Heaven again.¹⁵

She believed that when the soul of a believing man leaves his body it would be in a purified form and would go to heaven in its pure form like that of an angel. Until then we as believers remain alienated souls emerged from the one super sensible soul, called God. By awakening and purifying the essence in us we establish communion with Him here, and reach Him hereafter. Such a conviction was strongly held on by Polonius.¹⁶

The main sphere of their literary creativity is restricted to their faith and belief which was their personal experience. But what they experienced was a universal experience and can be identified with every individual's. The expression of faith and hope in their verses is like a sweet fragrance for the posterity to enjoy its sweetness. Though their life was beset with trials and obstacles and they had to cross hurdles after hurdles, the pain and suffering

could not extinguish the flame of hope in them. Life's trial for them was a means of spiritual development and refinement because it put them on a higher plane and convinced them to hold on to their faith. And ever since then their poetry as a fountain of faith has been quenching the spiritual thirst of the thirsty humanity in this fallen world. The ascent up from the fallen world is possible only by revitalizing the essence in us which otherwise remains usually dormant.

Out of their trials and suffering flowed the fountain of faith. This fountain flowed in its purest form, uncontaminated by the outside world of industrial din. It dwelt in their heart which was the seedbed and the perennial source of hope. This fountain did not at all dry but ceaselessly flowed on generating faith and hope until they breathed their last. The sisters' ultimate concern was for their spiritual essence. They believed that man is ultimately a spiritual being and cannot live without God, because "He [God] has set eternity in the hearts of men."¹⁷ This is the reason why man yearns for God, and cannot live without God. The psalmist says:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?¹⁸

Like the psalmist, the sisters yearned for God and express their desire to unite with God himself. This is explicit in Anne who says:

I knew that my Redeemer lived
 I did not fear to die;
 I felt that I should rise again
 To immortality.

I longed to view that bliss divine
 Which eye hath never seen,
 Like Moses; I would see His face
 Without the veil between.¹⁹

Anne is a true believer who had a personal relationship with God. These lines speak of her total trust and dependence on God and also the reason for her hopefulness. She longed to view that 'bliss divine' and to see Him face to face in the eternal world, for she was confident that 'I [she] should rise again to immortality.'

The sisters' view of religion was not based on tradition and convention but on personal conviction and experience, for faith can be classified into two types – Institutional faith and Personal faith. They did not believe in Institutional faith which is based on such traditions and is regulated

accordingly. The personal faith on the other hand is that faith which is generated in the heart and is purely from within. Thus, faith without personal conviction is hollow.

Like the women of their age, the Brontë sisters were going through a paradigm shift of new ideas, new freedom and new opportunity. But in the current of 'newness' their choice was God. They found strength and comfort in their relationship with the living God. The three sisters in their distinct individual way expressed their personal faith. While doing so, they also expressed the most fundamental question of the Christian faith which concerns itself with salvation. They also talk about contrition, repentance and forgiveness in Christ. They were also concerned about the inner personality which is also called the divine quality in man. Emily Brontë in particular and the three sisters in general were interested in this subject and believed in the immortality of the soul.

Anne accepts the sinful nature of man but at the same time she believes in the redemptive power of God, which is salvation. She expresses her submission:

Oppressed with sin and woe
A burdened heart I bear,
Oppressed by many a mighty foe;
But I will not despair.

With this polluted heart,
 I dare to come to Thee,
 Holy and mighty as Thou art;
 For Thou wilt pardon me.²⁰

Man, created in the image of God, was in a state of innocence and holiness but his disobedience marred his relationship with God and alienated him from Him. It is only natural for man that he is soiled and 'polluted' here. But the loving and merciful God is ready to forgive anyone who seeks Him. The holy and mighty God pardons us.

The conviction of sin did not drive her to despair or self-loathing but to repentance and confession. She sought forgiveness from Him and expresses:

My God (oh, let me call Thee mine,
 Weak, wretched sinner though I be).
 My trembling soul would fain be Thine;
 My feeble faith still clings to Thee.

Her God is a compassionate God whom she could own. The perennial faith in her helped her to cling to Him, and her love of Him sustained her. She therefore surrenders herself to Him and places herself in His hands, requesting Him to deal with her as he decides and elects. She stresses the simple and austere purity of the relationship in an humble and direct attitude of love and trust. She perceives genuine piety in her soul- surrender rather than in the

strictures of the institutionalised faith. As a devotee of any order, she willingly yields herself to His grace and takes shelter in his loving kindness. When we destroy our own little self and replace it by perfect confidence in God, He will save us. This is what Anne submissively believes in, for God asks of us (devotees) total self-giving, and gives us in return the purified spiritual strength to qualify ourselves for His graciousness and love, and eagerness to take us back to Him. He is waiting, ready to take possession of us, if we only surrender and open our heart to Him exposing our weakness. It is not only our ascent to God but His descent as well to us, that builds the relationship. She further continues in the same vein of humility:

I cannot say my faith is strong,
 I dare not hope my love is great;
 But strength and love to Thee belong:
 Oh, do not leave me desolate!²¹

Anne Brontë was all the time aware of her little faith, but a faith as small as a “mustard seed” can with His love and strength move mountains. Paradoxically, it is the small faith which is the great faith, the faith that rests on God’s free grace. Only His grace can help us to be virtuous. Then some of us are elected for heaven, not because we deserve it, or we are good, but because God’s grace is bestowed on us. No other justification except God’s unmotivated choice can be given as to why some may be saved and others may

not be. St. Augustine advocated it, Anne believed in it, with the addition that she also believed in universal salvation.

Anne positively speaks about the gracious act of divine forgiveness. A sinless man would never know of God's grace and redemptive power but a repented sinner experiences the forgiveness of God and His acceptance. Redeeming grace is shown on the cross when Jesus said to one of the criminals crucified with Him: "Today you will be with me in paradise."²² Anne expresses the power of His grace explicitly:

Then those hands outstretched to save me
Seemed to call me back again;
Those eyes did so implore me
To once more let reason reign.²³

While salvation, which is the greatest gift of God is an open invitation, it is again exclusively for those who believe and accept. "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." The offer however is universal. Emily Brontë, like Anne, also trusts in the merciful God and says:

No; *that* I feel can never be;
A God of *hate* could hardly bear
To watch through all eternity
His own creations dread despair!²⁴

Since He is a loving God, He does not hate anyone, nor does He want to see anyone perish. This demolishes the concept of eternal damnation.

Anne Brontë and Emily Brontë were strong upholders of the concept of 'Universal Salvation'. Anne's poems, 'A Word to the Elect' and 'To Cowper' are anti-Calvinist poems. She out rightly rejects the Calvinist doctrine of Election, which believes in predestination, that God elects some to salvation and some to reprobation and damnation. Such a God would be a partial and unjust God. Such act would also fill the 'Elect' with spiritual pride. Anne speaks of this danger:

You may rejoice to think *yourselves* secure;
 You may be grateful for the gift divine –
 That grace unsought, which made your black
 hearts pure,
 And fits your earth-born souls in Heaven to
 shine.

The unmerited grace or grace unsought would be dangerous because man would not strive for perfection whereas God desires in us: "that we may present every man perfect in Christ."

Again she focuses on the damned:

But is it sweet to look around, and view
 Thousands excluded from that happiness
 Which they deserve at least as much as you -
 Their faults not greater, nor their virtues less?

And wherefore should you love your God the more,
 Because to you alone His smiles are given;
 Because He chose to pass the *many* o'er,
 And only bring the favoured *few* to Heaven?

Under such situation we would be constrained to see God as a terror and a tyrant, and the question of atonement would never arise. Therefore, grace and salvation which is the theme of the *New Testament* would be made meaningless.

Sometimes a question is raised as to why quiet, gentle, pious Anne would occasionally fall into fits of religious doubt and crises. The usual answer to the question is that she did so because of the gloomy influence on her of her gloomy aunt Miss Branwell. We are traditionally told to view her (the aunt) as constitutionally gloomy and of an arid temperament, dogmatically expounding her Methodism as a religion of fear rather than of love, as though she understood the truths of the *Bible* more through the law than through the gospel, more as a requirement from God than His gift in His son. But then, another question arises as to why should Patrick Brontë at all allow his darling child to be so governed, indoctrinated, influenced? – especially when he