

Society's Denial on Jane Eyre's Autonomy and Subjectivity: A Martha Nussbaum's Critical Reading

R. Hariyani Susanti

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim

Riau, Indonesia

E-mail: radenhariyani@uin-suska.ac.id

Abstract

Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory provides a lens for analyzing the experiences of the main character, Jane, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. This literary study aims to analyze the type of objectification suffered by Eyre by applying Nussbaum's theory. According to this theory, objectification occurs when a person is reduced to a mere object for someone else's use and is not recognized as an autonomous being with their own desires and interests. In the novel and TV adaptation, Jane is subjected to objectification by several characters, including Mr. Rochester, who tries to mold her into the perfect wife, and St. John Rivers, who views her as a tool for his missionary work. Through these experiences, Bronte highlights the damaging effects of objectification and the importance of valuing individual dignity and agency. By demonstrating the harm caused by treating people as objects, the novel serves as a critique of the societal norms that perpetuated such treatment and reinforces the importance of treating all individuals with respect and empathy.

Keywords: *Objectification; subjectivity; autonomy; gender study*

1. Introduction

Issues related to women's independence have emerged since the 19th century when women's realization and courage formed the first wave of feminism. The issues now and then are related to women's freedom in politics, marriage, society and work. However, the main problem that is actually more prominent in this issue is society's failure to see women as members of society and not just complementary objects.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte is a classic novel that has captivated readers for over a century and a half. The novel's themes of love, independence, and self-discovery are timeless and continue to resonate with readers today. In recent years, the novel has been subject to critical analysis from various perspectives, including feminist and philosophical readings. One of the most significant philosophical readings of the novel is the work of Martha Nussbaum, who has offered a unique perspective on the central themes of *Jane Eyre* (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 285).

Nussbaum is a philosopher and literary scholar who has made significant contributions to the field of critical theory. In her readings of *Jane Eyre*, Nussbaum

focuses on the central theme of women's autonomy and subjectivity. She argues that the novel can be read as a critique of the limitations that 19th-century society placed on women, and as a celebration of the human capacity for self-discovery and self-expression. Nussbaum argues that the central character of Jane Eyre represents a model of self-discovery and autonomy, as she defies the expectations of society and asserts her own identity (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 75-77).

Nussbaum's critical reading of *Jane Eyre* offers a unique and insightful perspective on the novel. By focusing on the theme of women's autonomy and subjectivity, Nussbaum sheds light on the ways in which the novel speaks to the struggles of women in 19th-century society, and to the challenges that women continue to face today (McCloskey, 2022, pp. 5-6). Nussbaum's reading also highlights the central role that literature can play in shaping our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Jane Eyre, a character created by Charlotte Brontë, is a warrior who indirectly shows a side of women that society failed to see at that time. As written by Santoso (2015, p. 4) who stated that the characteristics of Jane Eyre were contrary to the standard of the ideal woman during the Victorian era, and from this you can see Charlotte Brontë's efforts to fight against the standardization of feminine characteristics that prevailed during the Victorian period. Here, Santoso relates Jane Eyre's 'rebellious' attitude to the social conditions at that time where women were still expected to be submissive and follow the destiny given to them by the patriarchy.

The definition of rebellion in the above sense is how Jane Eyre dared to make decisions for herself and voice her wishes openly, which at that time was considered deviant so that Jane Eyre was labeled as a daughter who could not be trusted. It was as if he claimed to be 'property' to those in power over him, in Jane Eyre's case they were his aunt Mrs. Reed then moved on to Mr. Brocklehurst, owner of the Lowood school, then Rochester, then finally his cousin St. John Rivers. This ownership then led them to believe, even Jane Eyre herself, that they had the right to decide where and what to do with Eyre. Jane Eyre's willingness to ignore some orders from the male side in this series shows her awareness that she is an individual who has the right to herself.

2. Review of Literature

The approach used in this paper is the objectification concept initiated by Martha Nussbaum. Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object (Nussbaum, 1995). In his article *Objectification* (1995), Nussbaum identified seven characteristics contained in the concept of treating a person as an object. These characteristics are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1995).

Of the seven traits, there are three characteristics that can be found in the Jane Eyre series directed by Julian Amyes in 1983. They are denial of autonomy, denial of

subjectivity and ownership. For the meaning explained by Nussbaum himself, denial of autonomy is the treatment of those who lack autonomy and cannot determine their own destiny. Then denial of subjectivity is treatment that ignores the experiences and feelings of the weak and finally, ownership, treatment of people as if they could be owned, bought, or sold.

The research related to Jane Eyre and the objectification of women that the author refers to here is from Rima Lahdji which was published in 2015 and Edy Santoso which was also published in the same year. Both of these studies raise the issue of women and feminism. If Lahdji makes popular dangdut songs and their lyrics as research objects, Santoso uses Jane Eyre as objects but with a different theory. Santoso uses an analytical approach to the views of the author in his research.

3. Research Method

The research will begin with an extensive literature review on Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory and its application in literary analysis. This will involve studying Nussbaum's works, particularly her discussions on objectification and autonomy, as well as scholarly articles and critical analyses that have utilized her theory in examining literary texts. Additionally, a thorough review of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and related secondary sources will be conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the novel and its themes.

The primary research method employed in this study will be a close textual analysis of Jane Eyre. The researcher will carefully examine specific scenes and interactions involving the character Jane to identify instances of objectification as defined by Nussbaum's theory. Close attention will be paid to the relationships between Jane and other characters, such as Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers, in order to analyze how they treat her as an object rather than recognizing her autonomy and subjectivity. Through this analysis, the researcher aims to highlight the different manifestations of objectification in the novel and their impact on Jane's character development.

To enhance the analysis, a comparative approach will be adopted by considering both the original novel and a TV adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. By comparing and contrasting the portrayal of objectification in different mediums, the researcher seeks to explore how visual representations can further emphasize the objectifying experiences endured by Jane. This comparative analysis will provide additional insights into the ways in which objectification is conveyed and perceived, and how it contributes to the overall themes of the story.

Finally, the research will critically apply Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory to the findings from the textual and comparative analyses. This will involve interpreting the data gathered in relation to Nussbaum's framework and identifying the specific dimensions of objectification experienced by Jane in the novel. The researcher will examine how these instances align with Nussbaum's theory and discuss the implications of such objectification on Jane's autonomy and subjectivity.

This critical application will offer a deeper understanding of the novel's critique of societal denial and provide valuable insights into the importance of valuing individual dignity and agency in contemporary society.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. Denial of Autonomy

Refusal to recognize one's freedom is a key characteristic of this one. These rejections arise because those who feel more powerful over women feel they are not individuals capable of making decisions for themselves. They feel that women should receive guidance because they are too weak to do anything.

Jane Eyre has become a figure that has received much attention from feminist critics because of her attitude that rejects the standard of women at that time. However, there is still acceptance shown by Jane Eyre in terms of objectification of herself. He still gets treatment as an object from certain parties who feel they have power over him.

The scene that shows the rejection of the recognition of freedom for women in Jane Eyre is when she is admitted to the Lowood School. Even though Jane Eyre wants to get out of the house, her aunt doesn't like her, Mr. Brocklehurst spoke as if he were not an individual with free speech. Even when she gave her opinion, she was immediately perceived as a rebellious and mischievous girl. Even though Jane Eyre at that time only expressed and denied the accusations directed at her, as in the conversation below taken from the first episode (minute 17:53-18:21):

Mr. Brocklehurst: No sight so sad as that of a naughty child, especially a naughty girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?
Jane Eyre : They go to hell.
Mr. Brocklehurst: And what is hell?
Jane Eyre : A pit full of fire.
Mr. Brocklehurst: And should you like to fall into that pit? And be burning there forever?
Jane Eyre : No sir.
Mr. Brocklehurst: What must you do to avoid it?
Jane Eyre : I must keep in good health and not die.

Jane Eyre's answer above made both Mr. Brocklehurst and Reed's aunt label Jane as too naughty and passionate. This is not an ideal characteristic in their eyes for a woman. Aunt Reed even hoped that education at Lowood could improve Jane's character, which she thought was too fiery, and make her more submissive, as was society's expectation of women at that time. This shows it as if Jane is not an independent individual who has the right to choose what she wants but is merely an object to complete the social order.

Comparing Eyre's experiences in the TV series that aired in 1983 with the experiences of the majority of women today, there is still no significant change for women considering that there are still many cases of sexual harassment and violence (Segal, 2002). This TV adaptation is a good attempt to highlight this important issue.

Similarly, the novel highlights the theme of women's denial of autonomy and how women were treated as objects, rather than individuals, with their own desires, opinions and rights. This essay will discuss the various ways in which women's autonomy is denied in the novel and how Jane Eyre struggles to gain her independence and autonomy.

The first example of women's denial of autonomy in the novel is seen through the character of Bertha Mason, who is confined to the attic of Thornfield Hall. Bertha is depicted as a mad and dangerous woman who is locked away because of her behavior. This serves as a warning to other women about the consequences of defying societal norms and expectations. Bertha's confinement is a clear example of how women were controlled and limited in their autonomy. They were not allowed to express themselves freely, or even to make decisions about their own lives, as Bertha's family decided to lock her away. This symbolizes the fear that society had of women who were considered deviant or who didn't conform to societal expectations.

Another example of women's denial of autonomy in the novel is seen through the character of Jane herself. Jane is an orphan who is raised by her abusive aunt and sent to Lowood School where she is subjected to harsh conditions and mistreatment. Jane is also denied the right to make decisions about her own life, as she is constantly told what to do and where to go. This lack of control over her own life is a common theme in the novel, as many women of the time were denied the right to make decisions about their own lives, including marriage and career choices.

Despite these limitations, Jane remains determined to gain her independence and autonomy. She refuses to be a passive character and instead takes control of her life by leaving Lowood School and becoming a governess at Thornfield Hall. This is a significant moment in the novel, as it shows Jane taking the first steps towards gaining her independence and autonomy. Her decision to become a governess is a bold move, as it was considered a respected and relatively well-paid position for women at the time. This choice also allows her to escape the oppressive conditions of Lowood School and the mistreatment she endured there.

One of the most significant moments in the novel is when Jane realizes that she is in love with Mr. Rochester. Despite her love for him, Jane is torn between her desire for love and her desire for autonomy. Mr. Rochester represents the traditional patriarchal society that denies women their autonomy, as he tries to control Jane and make decisions for her. However, Jane refuses to give up her independence and instead, leaves Mr. Rochester and Thornfield Hall to find her own path in life. This is a powerful moment in the novel, as it shows Jane's determination to maintain her autonomy and independence, even at the cost of losing the man she loves.

Jane Eyre highlights the theme of women's denial of autonomy in 19th-century society. The novel depicts the various ways in which women's autonomy is denied, including confinement, mistreatment and the lack of control over their own lives. Despite these limitations, the character of Jane Eyre serves as a symbol of hope and determination, as she strives to gain her independence and autonomy. Her journey represents the struggle for women's rights and autonomy, and the novel remains a timeless reminder of the importance of these issues.

4.2. Denial of Subjectivity

The 1983 television serial adaptation of Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* is a powerful representation of the theme of women's denial of subjectivity in 19th-century society. This essay will examine how the TV adaptation portrays the various ways in which women were denied their subjectivity and individuality, and how the protagonist, Jane Eyre, defies these limitations and asserts her own identity.

Subjectivity, in this context, refers to a person's sense of self and their subjective experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Vidaurreta & Vidaurreta, 2020). In 19th-century society, women were often denied their subjectivity and reduced to objects, rather than individuals, with their own unique perspectives and experiences. This denial of subjectivity is evident in the way that women were treated, including their limited access to education, their restricted mobility, and their dependence on men for financial and emotional support (Wang & Sun, 2022).

In the 1983 television adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, this denial of subjectivity is portrayed through the character of Jane. Jane is an orphan who is raised by her abusive aunt and sent to Lowood School, where she is subjected to harsh conditions and mistreatment. Despite these limitations, Jane remains determined to assert her own identity and to gain an education. Her determination to educate herself and to understand the world around her is a powerful example of her assertion of her subjectivity and her refusal to be reduced to an object in the eyes of society.

Another way in which the denial of subjectivity is portrayed in the TV adaptation is through the character of Bertha Mason, who is confined to the attic of Thornfield Hall. Bertha is depicted as a mad and dangerous woman who is locked away because of her behavior. This serves as a warning to other women about the consequences of defying societal norms and expectations. Bertha's confinement is a clear example of how women were controlled and limited in their autonomy, and how their subjectivity was denied.

Despite these limitations, Jane remains determined to assert her own identity and to gain her subjectivity. Her relationship with Mr. Rochester is a significant moment in the TV adaptation, as it highlights the tension between Jane's desire for love and her desire for subjectivity. Mr. Rochester represents the patriarchal society that denies women their subjectivity, as he tries to control Jane and make decisions for her. However, Jane refuses to surrender her own subjectivity and instead, leaves Mr. Rochester and Thornfield Hall to find her own path in life. This is a powerful

moment in the TV adaptation, as it shows Jane's determination to maintain her subjectivity, even at the cost of losing the man she loves.

The TV adaptation also highlights the importance of female relationships and solidarity in asserting subjectivity. The friendships that Jane forms with other women, including Helen Burns and Miss Temple, are significant, as they provide her with support and encouragement to assert her own identity. These relationships serve as a reminder of the importance of women supporting each other and empowering each other to assert their own subjectivity (Sasson-Levy & Lomsky-Feder, 2022).

Ignorance of one's feelings and experiences are at the heart of this characteristic. This is related to someone's arbitrary decision for the objectified party regardless of how they feel because they are not considered as independent human beings. This can be seen in the scene when St. John Rivers wanted Jane to accompany him to India to become a missionary as his wife.

In the end Jane did refuse her cousin's request in order to return to Rochester, but St. John Rivers, who seemed to feel that his choice for Jane's life was the right choice, showed that he felt that Jane's considerations were not too important. This can be seen in the scene from 13:01 to 13:12 minutes in episode 10.

St. John Rivers	: What does your heart say?
Jane Eyre	: My heart? My heart is mute.
St. John Rivers	: Then I must speak for it.

The conversation shows that the cousin of St. John Rivers argues that Jane was unable to make decisions for herself and made St. John Rivers seemed to feel that he understood better what was best for Jane himself. He knows that Jane still has feelings for Rochester but he chooses to ignore it because he feels that the path with him is the best for Jane.

4.3. Ownership

Possession is the most frequent feature of objectification in the case of feminism. Where men feel they have women and are entitled to their lives. This also happens in the case of slavery where there are parties who feel entitled to buy the weaker party and make it their own.

The concept of ownership and objectification is a prevalent theme in various adaptations of Charlotte Bronte's classic novel, *Jane Eyre*. This theme is a reflection of the patriarchal society depicted in the novel, where women were often reduced to objects to be owned, controlled, and manipulated (Sheff, 2005). Through the portrayal of the protagonist, Jane Eyre, the novel critiques this societal attitude towards women and offers a vision of female autonomy and self-determination.

In many of the adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, the theme of ownership and objectification is explored through the relationship between Jane and her employer, Mr. Rochester. Throughout the novel, Mr. Rochester is depicted as a man who seeks

to control and possess Jane, viewing her as an object to be owned. This is reflected in his repeated attempts to manipulate and control her, such as his insistence that she marry him despite her objections, and his attempts to keep her isolated from the outside world.

This theme is also evident in the way that women are depicted in the various adaptations of *Jane Eyre*. Women in the novel are often depicted as objects to be owned, whether it be by their husbands, fathers, or employers. This is reflected in the way that women are confined to domestic spaces and denied opportunities for education and self-expression. It is also reflected in the way that women are reduced to their appearance and expected to conform to societal standards of beauty and femininity.

Despite the oppressive nature of patriarchal society depicted in *Jane Eyre*, the novel offers a vision of female autonomy and self-determination. Through the portrayal of Jane, the novel offers a model of female empowerment and resistance against the forces of oppression. Jane defies societal expectations and asserts her independence, refusing to be owned or controlled by others. She also resists the pressure to conform to societal standards of femininity and beauty, embracing her individuality and rejecting the idea that she is simply an object to be possessed.

This theme of female empowerment is reflected in the various adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, particularly in the portrayal of Jane as a strong and independent woman. In many adaptations, Jane is depicted as a woman who refuses to be owned or controlled by others, and who asserts her independence and individuality. This is reflected in her refusal to marry Mr. Rochester, despite his attempts to manipulate and control her, and her decision to leave him and strike out on her own.

In this TV series, *Jane Eyre* seems to get a claim as ownership from two parties, the first is from Rochester and the second is from her cousin, St. John Rivers. Rochester, who loves Jane Eyre shows his love by wanting Jane as 'his' and only 'for himself'. Even though the gesture looks romantic, here Rochester is showing an act of ownership towards other living things.

Rochester : Jane, I must have you for my own. Entirely my own. Will you be mine? (*Jane Eyre*, Episode 7, minute 13:06-13:25)

The concept of marriage at that time was to have a woman and that was what society and *Jane Eyre* accepted. She accepted the concept of marriage which made herself an object and later became her husband's subordinate because that was the ideal woman and wife at that time.

St. John Rivers : Your answer is not clear.

Jane Eyre : I am willing to go as your fellow missionary, but I cannot marry you.

Susanti, Hariyani, R. (2023).
Society's Denial on Jane Eyre's Autonomy and Subjectivity: A Martha Nussbaum's
Critical Reading.

IJOTL-TL (2023, May), 8(2): 51-60. DOI 10.30957/ijotl.v8i2.725.

St. John Rivers : How can I, a man not yet 30, take with me a girl of 19, unless she be married to me? **I want a wife, a sole helpmeet I can influence in life, and claim obedience from**, and retain absolutely until death.

Jane Eyre : I will give missionary my work, but not myself. (Jane Eyre, Episode 10, minute 15:17-15:50)

The obedience of the wife desired by St. John Rivers shows the thickness of patriarchal power at that time. This makes women subordinates rather than equals, or someone who can influence one another. In his words, St. John Rivers wants someone he can influence, in a free sense this indicates that only he is the one who will influence his wife's thoughts later and impart the knowledge he has to him.

5. Conclusion

Jane Eyre has become a character loved by many feminist figures because of her strong will and attitude towards patriarchal power. There are so many sides of oppression against women that are shown in the series if it is related to the social conditions of the era she passed through. One of them is objectification by women. Although Jane's rebellion has been seen in many aspects, there are still sides where she is used as an object, and she agrees with the movement or gives a subtle rejection. The concept of ownership, disregard for freedom and neglect to acknowledge the existence of women's opinions are just a few of the forms of objectification of women shown in this TV series which was first broadcast in 1983.

The critical reading of Jane Eyre by Martha Nussbaum offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse about the novel. Nussbaum's focus on the theme of women's autonomy and subjectivity adds depth and richness to our understanding of the novel, and her insights offer a valuable perspective on the ways in which literature can shape our understanding of the world and ourselves. The 1983 TV adaptation of Jane Eyre is a powerful representation of the theme of women's denial of subjectivity in 19th-century society. The TV adaptation portrays the various ways in which women were denied their subjectivity and individuality, and how the protagonist, Jane Eyre, defies these limitations and asserts her own identity. Jane's journey represents the struggle for women's subjectivity and autonomy, and the TV adaptation remains a timeless reminder of the importance of these issues. On the other hand, the novel offers a vision of female autonomy and self-determination, as embodied by the character of Jane Eyre. Through her resistance against the forces of oppression, Jane serves as a model of female empowerment and a symbol of hope for women seeking to assert their independence and individuality.

Susanti, Hariyani, R. (2023).
Society's Denial on Jane Eyre's Autonomy and Subjectivity: A Martha Nussbaum's
Critical Reading.

IJOTL-TL (2023, May), 8(2): 51-60. DOI 10.30957/ijotl.v8i2.725.

REFERENCES

- Lahdji, Rima F. (2015). *Objektifikasi perempuan dan tubuh: wacana tubuh perempuan dalam lirik lagu dangdut populer tahun 2000-2013*. Surabaya: LAKON UNAIR Vol. 4 / No. 1 /2015-06.
- McCloskey, D. N. (2022). On Agreeing with Martha Nussbaum: The Tyranny of Outside Theory. *Journal of Contextual Economics – Schmollers Jahrbuch*, 140 (3–4). <https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.140.3-4.283>
- Nussbaum, Martha. (1999). *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Santoso, Edy. (2015). *Feminisme Dalam Novel Jane Eyre: Analisis Pandangan Pengarang*. Yogyakarta: UGM
- Sasson-Levy, O., & Lomsky-Feder, E. (2022). Gendered gratitude: the civic subjectivity of israeli women soldiers. *Citizenship Studies*, 26(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2022.2053838>
- Segal, N. (2002). Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis by Mari Jo Buhle . *Psychoanalysis and History*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.3366/pah.2002.4.2.247>
- Sheff, E. (2005). Polyamorous women, sexual subjectivity and power. In *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Vol. 34, Issue 3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604274263>
- Vidaurreta, L., & Vidaurreta, L. (2020). Bodies and subjectivities: Women in Cuban Paralympic sports. *Studies in Psychology*, 41(1).
- Wang, S., & Sun, J. (2022). Embodiment of feminine subjectivity by women of a tourism destination. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2053858>