



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05, Issue 02, 2026

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



Negotiating Voice and Power: Silence and Speech in Female–Female Interactions in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre

Khushbakht Irshad ¹ Yusra Ali ²

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received 2026-03-20 Revised 2026-04-18 Accepted 2026-05-08

Citation (APA):

Irshad, K & Ali, Y (2026). Negotiating voice and power: Silence and Speech in female–female interactions in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(2), 144-151. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.02.527>

Abstract

This paper investigates the proportion to which silence and speech is an interdependent power negotiation strategy in female-to-female interaction in Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte. Although comprehensive study on feminist scholarship on the verbal agency of Jane against the agents of patriarchal society has been carried out, there is still relatively little focus on the linguistic relationship that arise between females. This study focuses on the critical aspect of the relationships between Jane and female characters like Mrs. Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram, and the Rivers sisters Diana and Mary with the help of textual analysis. This study uses feminist narrative and discourse-pragmatic approaches as framework. The analysis highlights that Bronte creates an economy of women speech, voices, and silence, whereby morality, affection, resistance, and the bargaining of social order are manifested with the use of speech and silence as tools. Silence serves as a communicative act of purpose for enforcing repression, emotional restraint, moral superiority or subversive defiance. Speech acts, on the other hand, are contention, sympathetic, and power areas. This discussion helps in widening the critical perception of the gendered power relations within the novel. It paved the way for larger discussions about the topic of women use of language for constructing gendered norms in the Victorian novel by emphasizing the role of a female-to-female communication narrative as opposed to the traditional male-female dynamic.

Keywords: Silence, Power, Female Interactions, Gendered Language, Relationships.

¹ Monitoring Officer, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education and Monitoring Authority, Pakistan

² M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Institute of Management Sciences, Peshawar, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Khushbakht Irshad, **Correspondence through:** khushbakhtirshad@gmail.com



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work’s authorship and initial publication in this journal.

Introduction

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte (1847) is an innovative text in the English literature of the 19th century, focusing on the issues of gender, identity, and authority. This novel got much attention at the time when feminine voices were often suppressed in the domestic and social context, the novel broke the barrier of traditional patriarchy, highlighting the role of women as a leading figure in society and her struggles against the lack of moral and emotional, as well as language power. The Scholars also showing interest towards the relationships of Jane with male characters and especially with Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers and the qualities of her speech are viewed for the elements of resistance to the power the patriarchy. However, this focus has often overshadowed the equally significant female to female dynamics in which moral awareness and voice are formed in Jane.

This study highlighting silence and speech as an important tool for projecting power, opposition, and unity among women in Jane Eyre. By close examination of Jane's character and her relationships with Mrs. Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram and the Rivers sisters, the paper explores how Bronte projected the idea of female communication that showcase the moral and social limitations of Victorian womanhood. In this exchange, Bronte reinstates silence as a representation of submission to speech, as a representation of rebellion in exchange, as a representation of mutual understanding. The relevance of the paper is in the attempt to shift the central vision of the male-female domineering associations to the subtle, somewhat neglected, female-female associations, which support the moral and language world in the novel. Those conversations and silence present an idea of feminine form of power, which Bronte imagines as based on not domination but moral power, empathy, and a sense of command over oneself.

This study, through the analysis of the linguistic practices and silences among women in Jane Eyre, brings the predictive approach to communication as a key facilitator of female empowerment. It states that the voices of women that Bronte portrays, either vocal or not, divert the Victorian hierarchies of genders and redefines the meaning of having power in words. Finally, Jane Eyre can be viewed as a story of voice, a story where women discover how to speak, as well as how to control the significance of their silence.

Literature Review

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte has been re-read several times as a text where silence and the articulation of speech are at the heart of the formation of female subjectivity and resistance. Their canonical feminist reading argues that silence and the representation of madness in the novel are both forms of muted rebellion: the characters of Bertha Mason and Jane represent repressed female anger and the silenced voice of the woman of this century respectively. The fact that Jane becomes an increasingly skilled orator signifies a new female authorship and female identity (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979).

Showalter calls Bronte as one of those women authors who claim narrative as discovery of authority. She shows that Jane taking control of her narratives is part of a larger cultural trend in which women oppose the silence imposed on them by creating first-person testimony (Showalter, 1977). It is based on formalist and feminist issues that Lanser in her work on feminist narratology explains that the female narrator develops rhetorical authority in a hostile social system. In the case of Jane Eyre, the first-person voice transforms differences and silences into symbolic means to negotiate power (Lanser, 1992). These literary readings are subjected to various criticisms with linguistic and pragmatic perspectives being some of them. The sociolinguistic analysis of gendered

speech patterns presented by Tannen that distinguishes between cooperative and competitive speech can be used to interpret the pragmatic patterns in the conversation between Jane and female figures. The constant use of mitigations and indirectness and the instances of holding the speech back in conversation with the female figures can be interpreted as the attempt to maintain the social order or avoiding the dangers of open conflict in the male-dominated world (Tannen, 1990).

Commending this, Butler theory of performativity claims that silence speech acts are not mere absence but performative refusals: oppositional social effects and reconfigure subjectivity can be resulted due to silence and restrained utterance, a view that reexamines Jane's submissive silences (Butler, 1997). Literary silences, a part of pragmatics literature typified by Amer and Naser study of cross-genre, stipulates unique models highlighting how silence works as a communicative tool that generates implied meanings, resistance and emotional depth, concluding that silence bears pragmatic content through many genres, backs readings of unspoken words among female characters of Jane Eyre as something carrying meaning rather than merely absent (Amer and Naser ,2019)

Historicist and genre-based readings add important insights to put this study into context. Griffin's early study argues that silence in women's fiction simultaneously signals repression and a site of creative control: the tension between being silenced and exercising narrative authority shows Victorian women's struggle for linguistic agency (Griffin, 1980). Belsey similarly emphasizes that language and ideology collectively construct subjectivity; her work points out that limitations on what can be spoken constitute ideological pressure, so Jane's transformed her silenced position to authoritative one (Belsey, 1980). Peters studies the way Victorian heroines evolve dialogic forms which modify moral firmness along with social conformity; her results explain how the interactions between Jane and her female counterparts in the novel create a phenomenal movement of silence to moral and discursive self-possession (Peters, 1993). The analysis of the figure of a governess by Dolin finds restrictions on speech in the classes and institutional structures. The limited voice of the governess and her control over it, is an extension and enforcement of social lines, which can be used to discuss the limited speaking seen of Jane in female dominated areas such as Lowood (Dolin, 1999).

In this work, a closer attention is taken in particular to the female-female interactions presenting new perspectives. Bashir (2021) reevaluates the communicative role of silence in Jane Eyre, the author believes that silence usually serves as an emotional connection, a kind of solidarity that goes unspoken, establishing alternative sources of power outside the discourse of patriarchy.

All of these studies were brought together on several substantive points. First, feminist critics (Gilbert & Gubar, Showalter, Lanser) identify the narrative voice and the way in which women speak as crucial to female subjectivity in Jane Eyre and reveal the political role of narrative voice. Secondly, as to language-based work, Tannen (Amer & Nasser) demonstrate that conversational style and silence are pragmatic phenomena that can be analyzed and have predictable interactive effects. Third, theorists of performativity and ideology (Butler; Belsey) offered the conceptual apparatus to read silence as a socially productive rather than simply an absence of sound. Fourth, historicist analyses (Griffin; Peters; Dolin) place those communicative practices within Victorian gendered and classed speech norms. Finally, recent empirically oriented readings (Bashir) begin to unpack the solidarities and emotional economies produced in unspoken female-female exchanges.

Research Gap

Yet despite the above studies, important gaps remain. Much canonical feminist criticism takes silence at the level of symbolic or psychoanalytic meaning (e.g., Bertha as the repressed) or interprets Jane's overall narrative power, but rarely isolates female–female conversational exchanges as a systematic site of analysis. Linguistic and pragmatic studies provide models for analyzing speech acts and silence, but few studies combine feminist narratology and fine-grained pragmatic or discourse-analytic methods to chart how Jane's speech strategies vary specifically across her interactions with different women (e.g., Mrs. Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram, Diana and Mary Rivers) over the course of the novel. Bashir's recent study begins this work but focuses primarily on thematic readings of solidarity rather than on micro-level, empirically grounded patterns of interaction. In other words, existing research tends either to portray silence in broad symbolic terms or to apply sociolinguistic models at a general level. However, there is limited empirical work that systematically links narrative voice, speech-act behavior, politeness strategies, and the rhetorical functions of silence specifically within female–female interactions and groups in Jane Eyre.

Significance of the Study

This study will address that gap by combining feminist narratology with a pragmatic, speech-act and discourse-analytic approach: it will perform close readings of Jane's interactions with key female characters and, where appropriate, use small-scale corpus methods to identify recurrent lexical-pragmatic patterns (mitigation strategies, interruptions, elisions, and instances of deliberate silence). By doing so it will show not only that silence and speech function politically in the novel, but precisely how different forms of silence, and different other patterns operate in to bargain power among women. This approach synthesizes the symbolic insights of Gilbert and Gubar and the narratological framing of Lanser and Showalter with the empirical rigor of pragmatics (Tannen; Amer & Naser) and the critical insight of recent readings (Bashir). Thereby creating a narrow contribution that demonstrates the minor patterns of voice and power in female female interchange in Jane Eyre.

Research Methodology

Research Question

1. What is the representation of silence and speech between female characters in Jane Eyre?
2. How do these linguistic options highlight or disrupt gendered power politics within the novel?

Research Objectives

1. To examine functioning of silence and speech in establishing female characters' power relations in Jane Eyre. •
2. To find out how Bronte conveys silence as a communicative act, not as a mere absence.

Research Design

The current research is based on qualitative research design, utilizing the textual analysis to make a detailed examination of how silence and speech are used as a negotiating and power tool by feminine characters in Jane Eyre. The qualitative methodology is also appropriate in this study since it enables comprehensive explanation of the words, silence and gendered communication patterns in a literary work in comparison with means. It is a mixture of the postulations of feminist literary criticism and linguistic pragmatics (especially speech act theory and politeness theory) that

contribute to the discussion of the manifestations of women voices and silences to expose power relations and self-positioning.

Participants / Data Source

The participants in this study are instead the female characters in *Jane Eyre* that interact significantly with the main character, Jane Eyre. These include: Helen Burns – speaking of moral and spiritual voice. Mrs. Reed – symbolizes power and suppression. Blanche Ingram – embodiment of social competition and social superiority. Intellectual and emotional sisterhood: Diana and Mary Rivers. With every encounter, it will be seen as a communicative act, particularly the verbal conversations and silences that will occur between Jane and these women.

Data and Data Collection

The information will be borrowed directly out of the books of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and will refer to the dialogues, monologues, and narrative commentaries between women. About 15-20 key passages of the conversation will be picked up by hand in the novel. Each of the passages will be selected according to the way it is related to the issues of speech, silence, and power. Other critical commentaries and prior studies on the feminist will also be considered to put the interpretation into perspective and substantiate the analytical arguments.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be done through qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis models. These stages will be included in the analysis: Coding and Categorization: The dialogues chosen will be coded based on recurrent themes of assertion, submission, resistance, moral persuasion, silencing, and solidarity. Pragmatic Analysis: Directives, assertives, commissives, and instances of silence will be examined in order to comprehend why communication creates or interferes with power relations. Interpretation through Feminist Lens: The interactions will be viewed through the prism of the feminist literary theory, specifically, the works by Gilbert and Gubar (1979) and Showalter (1985) to explore how the voices and silences of women can be interpreted as both agency individuals and as victims of patriarchy. Comparative Discussion: Results in the various relationships among the females will be contrasted in order to outline the changing trends of empowerment or repression in the course undertaken by Jane in determining her identity.

Discussion/Analysis

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* builds a complex thread of female voices, where silence and speech function as combined mediums of expression. In female-to-female interactions, Brontë turns to play how women use language, and strategic silences, to assert moral authority, affection, and social hierarchy.

• Jane and Mrs. Reed: Silence as Moral Resistance

In the starting chapters, Jane's interaction with her aunt, Mrs. Reed, reflects how silence and speech delineate power. Mrs. Reed exercises patriarchal authority through verbal dominance, silencing Jane's protests with moralistic superiority: "Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 4) This command portrays silence as discipline, reflecting the Foucauldian notion of discourse as a tool of power. However, Jane later diverts this enforced silence through assertive speech in her famous outburst: "I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved you; but I declare I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 4) Here, Jane's speech act is a direct assertion (assertive), performs an act of rebellion. Through this moment, Brontë reverses the usual power

dynamic between adult and child, mistress and dependent. Jane's voice becomes an ethical instrument, transforming silence into moral self-assertion. The episode exemplifies Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) argument that female speech in the nineteenth-century novel is reflective of rebellion against patriarchal silencing.

• **Jane and Helen Burns: Silence as Spiritual Voice**

In Jane's friendship with Helen Burns at Lowood School, Brontë redefines silence from repression to virtue. Helen's speech is calm, moralizing, and rooted in Christian endurance: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 6) Helen's measured and philosophical speech opposes Jane's authoritative outbursts. Jane admits, "I could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance; and still less could I practice it." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 6) Helen's silence and her rejection to endure injustice becomes a sign of spiritual authority (Glenn, 2004). While Jane initially takes silence as weakness, Helen's serene acceptance transforms it into a form of moral superiority. Thus, silence here redefines power, not as domination but as inner strength and self-command. This relationship illustrates that female silence in Jane Eyre can represent ethical discourse, questioning the connection of silence with passivity. It shows Showalter's (1985) idea that women's moral voice often emerges through culturally sanctioned limitation rather than open defiance.

• **Jane and Blanche Ingram: Speech as Social Weapon**

Jane's interactions with Blanche Ingram disclose how speech is used as a performative tool of social hierarchy. Blanche's speech is marked by sarcasm and theatricality: "She [the governess] is not worthy of notice; governesses are strange beings." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 17) The voice of Jane is the counter-discourse of the scene, although it does not speak. The internal voice of narration allows Brontë to give Jane the interior authority to interpret, to "talk back" to the reader in the process, turning silence into critical reflection. In Butlerian terms, the scene is an example of gender performativity: Blanche embodies femininity in her charming demeanor and in her flirtations with her sister's husband; Jane redefines femininity in her moral reflections and her self-discipline...

• **Jane, Diana, and Mary Rivers: Speech as Sisterhood**

In the novel, there are also egalitarian conversations between Jane and Diana, and Mary Rivers, later in the novel. The exchanges between them demonstrate mutual respect and intellectual engagement: "You are worthy of love and respect, Jane, and we shall be proud to call you sister." (Brontë, 1847, Ch. 33) The mutual respect and intellectual engagement of the Rivers sisters are different from that of Mrs. Reed or Blanche. Female voice in their interactions is not confrontational, but collaborative, affirming Showalter's (1985) conception of the "female community" as a place to be redefined as a female. Here silence has become a symbol of repression, but of comfort and mutual understanding, nonverbal communication. The path of change of silence-as-punishment (Mrs. Reed) to silence-as-understanding (Diana, Mary) is a road of Jane to communicative equality and emotional freedom. All these exchanges are played out in a range of female voice, from enforced silence to outspoken voice to dialog harmony.

Every relationship reconstructs the definition of power in communicating:

- Mrs. Reed-Jane: Talk denounces subjugation.
- Silence: Moralizing power.
- Blanche-Jane: Pretension to sociality is criticized.

- Rivers Sisters-Jane: Egalitarianism is reached.

Conclusion

In the case of Jane Eyre, the interaction between female to female is what brings silence and speech to the forefront and in doing so, Charlotte Bronte subtly builds a discourse of female agency within the framework of patriarchy. Using the relationships between Jane and Mrs. Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram and the rivers sisters, Bronte sees silence and speech not as mutually exclusive strategies, but as mutually supportive ones, where women discuss power, identity and selfhood. Silence, which is frequently imposed upon as a form of repression during the first few chapters, is gradually turned into a form of moral power and retrospective control as we see in Helen and later Jane herself. Starting as a kind of rebellion, speech becomes a tool of equality and understanding, especially during her conversations with Diana and Mary Rivers. The two interactions show that communicative behavior, such as verbal assertion or deliberate restriction, is ideologically significant and restructures gender hierarchies by women. Using the feminist literary theory and practical discourse analysis, the present work establishes that Bronte reforms female expression as an active engagement of voice and silence to disrupt the gender order in the Victorian era. Jane Eyre therefore emerges as a linguistic and moral adventure of silent to self-articulation of voice, in which the voice of a woman is just as powerful in her words as in her silences.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- Amer, E. S., & Naser, A. A. (2019). *Silence as a tactic of communication in pragmatics, novel, and poetry*. *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3(3), 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no3.4>
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Bashir, S. (2021). Silent solidarity: Reassessing female communication in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Journal of Feminist Literary Studies*, 12(2), 88–104.
- Belsey, C. (1980). *Critical practice*. Methuen.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.
- Dolin, T. (1999). *Governess discourse: Class, gender, and speech in Victorian fiction*. *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 54(1), 23–45.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Vol. 1. An introduction*. Pantheon.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Glenn, C. (2004). *Unspoken: A rhetoric of silence*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Griffin, S. (1980). *Silence and anger: The politics of gender in Victorian fiction*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lanser, S. S. (1992). *Fictions of authority: Women writers and narrative voice*. Cornell University Press.
- Peters, J. (1993). The heroine's voice: Women's negotiations of morality and speech in Victorian fiction. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 21(3–4), 71–85.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. Ballantine Books.