

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

The Room Beyond Confinement: A Study of Spatial Authority and Material Entanglement of the Red Room in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Himankar Das

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Bhattadev University, Assam, India

Email: himankar200@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.4.87](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.4.87)



Article info

Article Received: 10/09/2026
Article Accepted:15/10/2026
Published online:25/10/2026

Abstract

This paper interrogates the setting of the red room in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* through the outlook of spatial studies and new materialism to document how the entanglement of space, materiality, power and human subjectivity can interact and participate in the production of fear and psychological disorientation. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's conception of space as a product of social relations and power discourse and Karen Barad's views regarding material agency, this paper argues that the red room acts not merely as a site of Jane's punishment, but as a material and ideological space of disciplinary control and psychological confinement. Its spatial structure demonstrates the unequal power relations in the Gateshead household, thus transforming the domestic interior conventionally associated with security and familial care into a space of authoritarian control. Moreover, a New Materialist reading illuminates the material agency of the room's material features, specifically the mirror and the imposing bed, in shaping Jane's perception of herself and amplifying her experience of fear, isolation and psychological disorientation.

Keywords: Spatial Agency, New Materialism, Entanglement, Embodied Subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Eyre is regarded as one of the prolific novels in the history of English literature that primarily reflect the themes of gender relation, marriage, trauma and psychological development. The majority of the research scholarship on *Jane Eyre* has dealt with the text through the outlook of feminism and gender inequality, social class and Victorian society. Above all, the theme of gendered

marginalization embodies the core outlook. While I do not intend to offer an extensive exegesis on the theme of gender dynamics in *Jane Eyre*, I take up a few arguments regarding women's deplorable conditions as represented in the novel because these are necessary for demonstrating the psychological disorientation of Jane in the red room. Documenting the theme of gender dynamics in *Jane Eyre*, Katherine Hobbs (2024) illuminates that the literary

frameworks of gender relation in *Jane Eyre* intersect with the socio-political debates regarding women's position in 19th century Victorian society, thus underscoring the view that Brontë's exegesis on gender dynamics is not solely a reflection on Jane's condition, but enumerates the socio-cultural realities of women in Victorian England. Like most of the literary narratives, the prospect of gender relation in *Jane Eyre* presents the precarious position of women in Victorian society. Women in Victorian England were deprived of the fundamental standard of autonomy as their lives were confined within the domestic household. Such precarity within the domestic household evokes the very discourses of gender relation, patriarchal authority and social values, thus transforming the nurturing domestic space into an oppressive site, wherein the conventional epistemic rationality concerning gender marginalisation deepens. Moreover, this stringent domestic space further results in the psychological collapse of women's epistemic agency. The relationship between Jane and Mrs. Reed and John Reed in Gateshead Hall serve as an initial articulation of the psychological disorientation of Jane. It further illuminates the crippling state of women in Victorian society. While Hobbs' arguments position the novel within the historical realities of gender dynamics in Victorian England, Abaker (2019) argues that Brontë's construct of Jane further advocates for the women's resistance against the gender exclusion of Victorian England, thus documenting the dissenting and feminist undertones present in the novel.

The above discussions largely underpin the contested category of gender dynamics in Victorian society, characterised by both the dominant and dissenting forces. Here, the dominant forces indicate the patriarchal authority and the dissenting forces signalise the resisting voices of women against institutionalised oppression. However, in this discussion, I would like to place emphasis on the specific event of the red room which I would view as a space wherein spatial agency and nonhuman material objects in the room intersect with Jane's diminishing identity and her internalisation of domestic authoritarian control. In his paper on *Jane Eyre*, Das positions the red room as a marker of prohibition and

death, showcasing its association with the death of Mr. Reed (Das, 2025). While Das's argument of the red room contributes to display the gothic elements and its impact on Jane, the portrayal of the red room as an active ideological site where the space and material objects serve to Jane's psychological disorientation, remains underexplored. The novel begins with Jane being punished for her physical confrontation with John Reed, the son of Mrs. Reed. Jane, being an orphan, was treated as an outsider and on account of her rift with John Reed, she was condemned to stay locked in the red room. The red room is not merely a setting in *Jane Eyre*; it embodies the physical and psychological confinement of Jane. Moreover, it serves as a compelling space that shapes the entire childhood of Jane characterised by emotional abandonment and psychological emptiness. Building on this argument, I would intend to investigate that the space of the red room embodies the contours of social hierarchy and gender marginalization, structuring psychologically diminishing human subject. Moreover, a close analysis would again be placed on investigating the agential directiveness of the different material objects in the red room to demonstrate how along with the space, the nonhuman objects can be studied as influencing the psychic dimensions of Jane.

The emphasis on space as an active reflection of power structures and social values gained prominence in the realm of theoretical discourse through Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. In this book, Lefebvre theorises space as a contested category, wherein different power dynamics, cultural practices and political discourses interact (Lefebvre, 1991). Such interpretation offers an ideological framework to space, challenging conventional representation of space as a mere setting for social interaction. In *Jane Eyre*, while the thematic concern of gender exclusion has been demonstrated through various lexical conflicts, physical confrontation and implicit exercise of power, I would like to extend this argument by developing a conjecture that the spatiality of the red room also serves as a product of social and ideological discourse. This conjecture further advocates that Jane's forced confinement in the room not merely serves as a consequential punishment for her physical confrontation

against John Reed; it transforms the room into a broader space of authoritarian control, where individuals fail to accommodate their psychic dimensions.

While the space serves as a socially active site intertwining different ideological parameters and power dynamics, the material objects in the red room can be advocated as possessing similar vibrant agency which conjures the epistemic rationality of Jane. This conjecture of material agency can be narrativised through the contemporary discourse of New Materialism, which negates humans as the epicenter of epistemic rationality, bringing forth the view that human actions, emotional dynamics and relations are shaped through their interactions with nonhuman objects. In *Jane Eyre*, the material arrangements of the red room, specifically the mirror and the furniture can be viewed as intensifying Jane's sense of isolation, fear and psychological confinement. Rather than functioning as mere background elements, these material entities participate in shaping Jane's emotional experience, reiterating her outlook of the room as a space of punishment and authoritarian control.

ANALYSIS

Spatial Oppression: The Red Room as a Weapon

In his notable book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that power is exercised not only through physical confrontation and force, but also through the regulation of human behaviour, identities and bodies (Foucault, 1977). This disciplinary exercise of power makes the dominant authorities utilise their power over others almost invisibly, suggesting that individuals remain psychologically captive to the vicious intentions of those regulatory authorities. The red room in *Jane Eyre* can be identified as a disciplinary space where Jane's emotional behaviour, her worldviews are regulated and surveilled, ultimately resulting in the saturation of her psychological schema. The red room is described as "chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent... it was known to be seldom entered" (Brontë, 1847, p. 17). This illuminates that the red room in *Jane Eyre* is not merely a

background, its bleak atmosphere metaphorically evokes spatial agency which embodies the unequal distribution of power in Gateshead Hall and the power to influence the psychic dimensions of Jane. Jane's movement has been restricted within the walls of the red room, thus structuring the space of the red room as an external manifestation of disciplinary control and gendered marginalisation. Observing the cruelty of such a space, Jane illuminates, "No jail was ever more secure" (Brontë, 1847, p. 16). The comparison of the red room with jail is significant as it transforms the domestic room into an oppressive space.

Furthermore, the spatiality of the red room can be associated with the contours of gender exclusion, illuminating that the red room serves as a contested space of authoritarian control and psychological confinement. Lefebvre (1991), in *The Production of Space* (Originally published in French in 1974, English translation 1991) argues that space is not merely a physical setting but a social product shaped by social discourse, power structure and cultural practices, articulating the ideological equation of space. While traditional literary studies treat space as a mere background, spatial studies acknowledge space as an intersection of power, authority and social discourse. In *Jane Eyre*, the red room could be viewed as an agential space of control and surveillance, where Jane's physical confinement mirrors her social and psychological marginalisation. The Gateshead hall envisages the patronising power imbalance manifested through Mrs. Reed authoritative status and Jane's deplorable condition. Jane notes, "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there" (Brontë, 1847, p. 18). In this line, the metaphor of "discord" could suggest how Jane is treated as an outsider. Moreover, the word "nobody" further exemplifies the emotional disorientation of Jane in Mrs. Reed's household. Such interpretations highlight how Jane's life in the locked red room in opposition to the autonomous lives of the other members in Gateshead Hall transforms the space into a site of emotional abandonment and psychological exclusion.

Consequently, the visual images of light and darkness in the red room further transform

its space into a site of psychological emptiness and mental paranoia. As daylight fades, the spatial structure of the red room becomes increasingly dark and frightening. Jane notes, "Day light began to forsake the red-room" (Brontë, 1847, p. 19) This suggests how the space of the red room acts as an active carrier of fear and desperation with the approaching of night. The physical darkness of the room mirrors the psychological disorientation of Jane. The mysterious surrounding of the red room is further structured when Jane sees a moving light on the wall. While this event can be identified as a portrayal of the supernatural elements, the emergence of the suspicious light in a darkened room could evoke how the spatiality of the room intersects with Jane's diminishing psychological agency. While the red room can be defined as treating spatiality as a category for exercising disciplinary power, it can further be examined as evoking a resisting force. This hypothesis can be clarified through Jane's realisation of her psychological torture. It is in this same space Jane realises the oppressive behaviours of Mrs. Reed. Jane's condemnation of such behaviour can be advocated in the line, "unjust-unjust! said my reason" (Brontë, 1847, p. 18). At this moment, the red room represents not merely a manifestation of disciplinary control, but serves as a space of resistance and psychological growth. Therefore, the red room doesn't simply silence Jane. It becomes part of the circumstances through which she begins to articulate resistance.

The red room further exposes the assumption that domestic spaces are free and nurturing, illuminating the arbitrariness of the socially produced categories of space. While domestic space is perceived as an embodiment of warmth and familial care, the domestic household of Gateshead hall and specifically the red room embody the perils of authoritarian control and gender exclusion, exemplifying how the domestic setting of the red room is transformed into an oppressive space where social hierarchies are exercised.

Material Agency: The Entanglement of Objects and Psychological Experience

Barad, in the notable work, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* argues that

"Matter is agential, not a fixed essence or property of things" (2007, p.137). Barad puts forward an argument that negates the passivity of matter as a mere physical object that has mass and occupies space. Instead, it postulates the New Materialist outlook arguing for the view that even matter and nonhuman objects intersect with the human world to produce meaning. Human beings do not exist independently of the material world. Our bodies, emotions, identities and experiences are shaped through our relationships with material environments. In *Jane Eyre*, the different material objects in the red room can be viewed as possessing a material vibrancy which intersects with Jane's mental paranoia to produce the feelings of fear and anxiety.

The mirror in the red room seemingly embodies the agential directiveness that anchors the psychological state of Jane. Whenever Jane sees her image in the mirror, she notes, "the strange little figure there gazing at me" (Brontë, 1847, p. 16). Jane's identification of herself as a little figure is quite suggestive in this regard as it evokes how the oppressive environment of the red room has disoriented Jane's psychological rationale. Moreover, the representation of the mirror is also suggestive in order to accommodate the psychic dimension of Jane. The mirror could be understood as an agential object that participates in shaping Jane's perception of her own body. The interaction between Jane's emotionally divested state and her physiological reflection in the mirror interact with the vulnerable environment of the red room to a moment in which her familiar identity becomes unstable. The scene therefore challenges the view that identity is constituted entirely within an autonomous individual. Jane's psychological disorientation is manifested through the material objects, reinforcing how meaning is produced through entanglement.

The other objects in the red room further contribute to the idea of power relation. One of the objects that embody agency is the bed which is placed in the centre of the room supported by massive pillars of mahogany and surrounded by deep red curtains. The bed occupies a central position in the room and its massive pillars and heavy curtains make it

visually imposing which is evident in the line "The bed rose before me; a high, white bed, with its curtains drawn" (Brontë, 1847, p. 15), suggesting how the structure of the bed connects with authoritarian control. Moreover, the bed's placement amid the room could evoke the spectral presence of Mr. Reed who used to live in the red room. Brontë notes that Mr. Reed died in the room and his coffin was carried out from there. This connects the material environment with the memory of the past, reiterating the dread atmosphere of the room. From a New Materialist outlook, the bed can be understood through the concept of "intra-action" which argues that entities do not exist in singularity but emerge through interaction and entanglement with others (Barad, 2007). In the red room, the bed can be understood as participating in the production of Jane's emotional experience through its material characteristics, spatial arrangement and historical associations. It demonstrates how a conventional domestic object can acquire agential significance within the corpus of material and affective relations.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that the red room itself mirrors the gender inequality, authoritarian control their deplorable effects on an individual. However, the interiority of the room which is saturated across furniture, carpets, locked doors, bed and mirror doesn't remain merely as passive objects, but actively engages with the power structure, emotional dynamics and psychological confinement. Therefore, the space and material objects in the red room dissociate from its conventional understanding as mere passive and subordinate things. Moreover, at the conclusive section of the red room episode, the novel portrays how within the same oppressive environment of the room, Jane begins to realise the oppression inflicted upon her by the familial authorities, thus directing the same material objects and environment into an embodiment of resistance.

Conclusion

The red-room episode in *Jane Eyre* illuminates that space and objects are neither socially neutral nor materially insignificant. Through confinement, spatial isolation and the regulation of Jane's body, the room serves an embodiment of disciplinary power within the

Gateshead household. Its locked door, furniture, mirror and association with Mr. Reed's death contributes to the production of Jane's fear and alienation. A New Materialist reading deepens this interpretation by showing that Jane's experience emerges through relations among her body, the room's material features, the household's social arrangements, and the memory of past events. The room does not simply reflect an already existing system of oppression; its material organisation helps make that oppression effective. At the same time, the red-room can be viewed as a site of resistance. Jane's recognition of injustice challenges the moral authority of those who punish her. The episode therefore uncovers a productive tension: the same material space that attempts to discipline Jane also becomes a condition through which she begins to recognise and resist the power exercised over her.

References

- Abaker, B. H. G. (2019). The image of Victorian women as depicted in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 7(6), 49–58.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.
- Das, A. (2025). Listening to the perpetual mind's inward tale: A study of the psyche of Jane in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *World Journal of Research and Review*, 20(5), 29–31. <https://doi.org/10.31871/WJRR.20.5.17>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Hobbs, K. (2024). "Odd and incorrect": Convention and *Jane Eyre's* feminist legacy. *Brontë Studies*, 49(1-2), 6–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2024.2308841>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)