

THE GRIP AND GRIT OF HIDILYN DIAZ AND JANE EYRE

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There is a quote in the book *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee that I absolutely hated. It said, “A woman’s lot is to suffer.” While it is true that a woman undergoes through a lot of pain in her life like dysmenorrhea, labor pains, act of childbirth, rearing children, I believe there is more to women than suffering.

Recently, I re-read *Jane Eyre* written by Charlotte Brontë. It was my third time to read it. I was pre-pubertal when I first discovered it in my grandmother’s *narra baul* in Cagayan Valley. Under the title in the front page, my grandmother wrote the words “Currer Bell” in her meticulous and neat teacher’s handwriting. The name held no meaning for me then. Unknown to me, “Currer Bell” was the pseudonym adopted by Charlotte Brontë to give her name a more masculine edge when it was published in 1847. During that time, male authors dominated the literary scene and she aspired to acquire a different persona. The second time I read *Jane Eyre* was when I was an idealistic yet angst-filled college student in UP Manila. It was a refreshing non-required reading in the midst of books by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Erica Jong, and Adrienne Rich. At the height of the COVID-19 delta variant surge in Iloilo where our family was already based, I splurged and bought myself a Canterbury Classic version in purple flexibound leather cover recently since my grandmother’s copy was already thinned out and falling apart.

It is funny how our perspectives can change as we read the same book in different stages of our lives. When I was 12 years old, I admit that *Jane Eyre* failed to connect with me deeply. I regarded the female character in the book as a fiercer version of Cinderella and nothing more. Like the popular fairy tale, I got a satisfying ending and that was that. The second time I read it, I enjoyed the romance between Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester. The possibility of love loomed in my inexperienced heart, its full and delicate fabric of being barely woven. Though Mr. Rochester was a flawed character and may not be as dashing as Heathcliff or Mr. Darcy, I thought that he had an air of complexity that held more appeal and mystery. However, it was only in my third reading of the book that I was able to focus and fully-appreciate Jane Eyre’s character and womanhood.

Having encountered several female book characters in the past, I have my own list of favorites: Nancy Drew, Scarlett O’ Hara, Elizabeth Bennet, all of Anita Brookner’s female characters, Jo and Amy March, Circe, Daisy Buchanan. Except for Scarlett O’ Hara, these female protagonists are not exceptionally beautiful or extraordinarily talented. Jane Eyre was even described as being plain and ordinary. All of them have, however, one trait in common: they all have strength.

Jane Eyre is now on top of my strongest female characters list. Strangely, Jane Eyre reminds me of Hidilyn Diaz, Philippines’ first Olympic gold medalist.

Jane Eyre and Hidilyn Diaz came from humble beginnings. Jane Eyre was an orphan forced to live with her step-aunt when her own parents died. She was treated rather shabbily and harshly, even worse than a maidservant. Hidilyn Diaz grew up in rural Mindanao. Her father was a tricycle driver and farmer. Through sheer tenacity, both women were able to rise above their circumstance

knowing that there was more to life than what they had. Jane had her books while Hidilyn had her weights as building blocks of life.

Jane Eyre diligently studied in an austere boarding school called Lowood where children were treated like prisoners from concentration camps in the guise of discipline and asceticism. Yet she persevered despite the difficult living conditions forced upon them. During an outbreak when half of the school population was afflicted with and succumbed to typhus, Jane managed to survive. After several years in school, she became a private governess. Hidilyn, on the other hand, persevered through her chosen sport, weightlifting. This sport, far from the ordinary, requires a lot of consistent training, mental toughness, and hard labor. Though she lacked support for her training and was even tagged in a controversial conspiracy matrix, she maximized what she had and learned how to improvise. In her early years, Hidilyn had to use makeshift barbells made of cement-filled tin cans or water jugs during training.

There was a scene in the book when Jane Eyre lost all her belongings in a train. She had no earthly treasure with her as she trudged through a desolate and unknown town. After several days of walking in unfamiliar streets, she almost died of starvation. She knocked desperately on strangers' doors, hoping to be fed, wanting badly to survive. Ironically, it was when Jane Eyre lost everything she had that she gained something she never knew she had: her grit. Years of resilience that started from childhood stretching into adulthood strengthened her quietly and unknowingly.

As Hidilyn gripped the 127-kilogram bar with her resolute hands, every muscle fiber in her body tensed. As she lifted it at the level of her shoulder, there was a palpable pause and an inaudible gasp. Everyone watching at home or in the venue held their breath. When she lifted it above her head forming a perfect V, her leg lunged forward while the other leg moved back to maintain her stability. She then released the weight and clasped her hands together in utter disbelief. Shock reverberated throughout the world. Philippines had its first Olympic gold. Hidilyn made her-story.

Jane Eyre's triumph may not be as historic and monumental. Her story was far from a tidal wave that swept all over the world. Her story was slow and steady, like low waves washing upon rocks on a distant shore. She chose to marry a broken man whom she loved and chose to lead an unremarkable life by teaching. Jane lived a life of quiet strength.

There was a quote in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* which translates to "Don't let the bastards grind you down." Both Jane Eyre and Hidilyn showed the world that women's lot in life was not merely to suffer. They can endure. They can persist. They can desist. They have power. They can bring forth glory. Through Hidilyn's powerful grip and Jane's silent grit, they demonstrated that women are made of pure gold.