



THE INTANGIBLES: FEMINISM, REVENGE AND REORDER IN EMILY BRONTË'S WUTHERING HEIGHTS

Dr. LEEMA DHAR
Guest Lecturer

ABSTRACT

The Brontë sisters were way ahead of their times. Even though *Wuthering Heights* was the only known novel by Emily, she made sure that she became a voice of the future generations as well. Through the characters of Catherine and Heathcliff, Emily highlights on the complexities of human nature. Love, obsession, revenge and spiritual connection are the themes that resonate throughout the novel. Emily becomes the guiding light as she walks her readers through the dark tunnel of female subjugation, abuse, dominance and oppression. This paper studies the aspects of feminism, the strengths and weaknesses in the character of Catherine and her decision to reject her love just to gain social acceptance.

Keywords: Brontë Sisters, Fiction, Feminism, Gender Roles, Patriarchy

FULL PAPER

The Brontë sisters wrote during a time when there was widespread gender discrimination, strict patriarchal rules, biased opinions and restricted women roles. Initially they wrote under male pseudonyms, unable to find support for their original female voices. During the Victorian age people dared to approach the subject of gender bias, inequality and the right to have an opinion. On one hand, while male writers wrote about their times, the Brontës wrote on topics that were way ahead of the times.

Emily Brontë chose a free voice and even though she wrote one prominent novel, she indeed paved the path for the voice of future generations. *Wuthering Heights* was a powerful novel that directly addressed the patriarchal Victorian society. It spoke of obsession, love, class, rank, revenge and reorder. Some female writers (contemporary to the Brontës) had different approaches in writing. Often, in most of the Victorian novels, one may find female characters who are nothing more than a 'trophy wife' or a puppet in the hands of men.

Very few novels included the gender roles that was required to bring about a transformation in the society. While on one hand, men were allowed to do anything they wanted and pursue any profession as per their desires. Women were mostly restricted to domestic confines and their role of pleasing their man. They had no voice for themselves. At the most, they could be a teacher in an elite family or a governess. Women during those times were expected to be obedient and follow the social norms set by the dominating society.

Jan Marsh writes an article on the gender expectations and shifts which says, "the process was vigorously contested and by no means achieved." Gender roles and boundaries were not flexible and therefore it did not to give the necessary autonomy and a sense of freedom to women. Men had opportunities at their disposal which women could not question.

Marsh continues, "As women gained autonomy and opportunities, male power was inevitably curtailed. Significantly, however, men did not lose the legal obligation to provide financially, nor their right to domestic services within the family."

The power hierarchy and gender roles were so rigid that many nineteenth century women writers started voicing their opinions. They looked within their own homes and experiences in order to highlight the struggle of women. Through their writings the women writers (especially the Brontës) tried uplifting women and also create a sense of self awareness of what was happening around them. It was a way to educate ‘the Second Sex’ and make them feel driven towards a cause.

Writers such as Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jane Austen and the Brontë Sisters tried questioning the injustice prevalent in society and focused on the historical background of their age in their writings. But the Brontës tried to present a clearer and a more realistic picture of the issues during the times. Emily Brontë chose to write this novel with a purpose.

She focused on the character of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* who is stuck between what the society wants and what she wants for herself. At times we find the intangibles gaining a personified shape in the novel and it is there that we realise that had Emily written more she could have been the ‘female Shakespeare.’ She had a vision in the novel and included the elements of Gothic and supernatural to highlight the mystery of human emotions. The characters, surrounding and landscape constantly haunt the readers making them aware of the setting of the novel.

Brontë displayed “profound knowledge of human emotion” which is evoked within *Wuthering Heights* (Bhattacharyya 1). The characters in the novel have a mind of their own and through the scenes and dialogues we can clearly identify the emotional rush and turmoil that they are experiencing. “Through nearly all the characters in the novel emotional energy rushes in with the turmoil and elemental force of a storm” (Bhattacharyya 3). “What Brontë is trying to convey to her readers is the scope and danger of these emotions.” (Bhattacharyya 3).

Critics Peck and Coyle write that the novel seems to be “caught between an old way of life and the new world of the Victorians” (Peck and Coyle 178).

The book gives a thorough narration of how the Victorians “withdrew into themselves or detached themselves from other people” (Peck and Coyle 178).

The characters were a representation of the symbolic chaos in the novel and takes us deeper during the British times which included dominance, suppression and subjugation. Literature during that time emphasised the “masculine point of view that is oppressive to women” (Homans 9).

“He shall never know I love him: and that, not because he’s handsome, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made out of, his and mine are the same.” (Bronte, 74).

Emily Brontë never lets the reader forget that the governing force of the house will always be men.

If Emily Brontë made women the governing force in the novel the story would have taken a different course but she knew that a more realistic representation of the times would allow the reader to feel more connected with the characters.

The novel has its own share of Gothic elements and at times points out the raw form of love. Just like Heathcliff’s words when he dug out Catherine’s body from the grave.

“I got the sexton, who was digging Linton’s grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again—it is hers yet—he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose, and covered it up—not Linton’s side, damn him! I wish he’d been soldered in lead—and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I’m laid there, and slide mine out too. I’ll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he’ll not know which is which!” “You were very wicked, Mr. Heathcliff!” I exclaimed; “were you not ashamed to disturb the dead?” (Bronte, 256).

Catherine as is very evident from the beginning of the novel actually loves Heathcliff but simply because Heathcliff lacked the societal rank, status, class and wealth she chose Edgar. She was a representative of what most Victorian women had to go through. Eagleton, a critic writes that “she rejects Heathcliff as a suitor because he is socially inferior to Linton” (101). In doing this, Catherine trades her authentic selfhood for social privilege” (Eagleton 101).

Heathcliff's dejection in the hands of Catherine shocks the reader because it eventually comes to a point when we realise that Catherine married Edgar only to climb the social ladder. What Catherine wanted was a proper husband or husband who actually fits the societal role model of an ideal man. She valued her own selfish nature as compared to her truest feelings. She rejected Heathcliff because as a woman she wanted social acceptance. Most women during the Victorian times suffered violence and abuse in their households. If they knew any way out to escape from the trap of being 'classless' they knew they had no other choice but to marry a man of higher rank.

Since women were being controlled by men they had no other way of controlling themselves. Probably men would be afraid to give away their charge because that would mean a newer world away from the strict authority. Women knew that they needed stability in their lives and the goal of the novel was to remind both the sexes that nothing is permanent in a life that is temporary.

'My love for Linton is like the 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!... You know as well as I do, that for every thought she spends on Linton she spends a thousand on me! . . . If he loved with all the powers of his puny being, he couldn't love as much in eighty years as I could in a day. And Catherine has a heart as deep as I have: the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough as her whole affection be monopolized by him... It is not in him to be loved like me . . . ' (Bronte, 76).

Women were expected to lead an ideal life, marry a suitor who was in a higher social position than herself, give birth to children, look after the household and raise the children in their best capacity. They were hardly considered individuals with a free mind. Women had no option to choose a career for themselves or to gain financial stability because as per the societal roles women should not step out of the house. The earning member was usually a man. So the woman was either dependent on the father, brother or husband. Brontë's highlighted that women were also expected to be beautiful, lovely and pleasing for their husbands and their only job was to keep the man satisfied. Catherine is mostly a powerful female protagonist but we see her weakness being highlighted in her hesitant confrontation with her father. That exchange between a daughter and a father highlights the deepest aspects of female subjugation.

Catherine can also be studied in the context of a 'damsel in distress' where she is unable to fight for her own rights. As the character develops we see that she has the potential to establish her identity but fails to do so and gives in to the rules of the age.

Emily Brontë wanted the readers to feel the pain that Catherine was going through. She wanted the readers to know that her female protagonist was always supposed to be judged by the male characters and society and was constantly in a dilemma.

Also, women during the Victorian age and even during the contemporary times are often objectified by men.

Even Lockwood finds it hard not to study Catherine's physical appearance.

"Her position before was sheltered from the light; now, I had a distinct view of her whole figure and countenance. She was slender, and apparently scarcely past girlhood: an admirable form, and the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding; small features, very fair; flaxen ringlets, or rather golden, hanging loose on her delicate neck; and eyes, had they been agreeable in expression, that would have been irresistible. (Brontë, 12)

Bronte was aware of the discrimination that existed in the society. Even as a woman herself she was subjected to various forms of oppression.

Bronte "develops the idea of passion that is so intense that it transcends individualism which directly reflects how Victorian society [was] restructuring itself" (Peck and Coyle 178).

Even Catherine's daughter, Cathy's words throughout the novel is a conscious attempt to remind the reader that somewhere her heart resonates her mother's emotion. And love as an emotion surpasses social wealth and rank.

“‘Oh, you see, Nelly, he would not relent a moment to keep me out of the grave. *That* is how I am loved! Well, never mind. That is not *my* Heathcliff. I shall love mine yet; and take him with me: he’s in my soul. And, added she musingly, ‘the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all, I am tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there: not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart: but really with it, and in it. Nelly, you think you are better and more fortunate than I; in full health and strength: you are sorry for me- very soon that will be altered. I shall be sorry for *you*. I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all. I *wonder* he won’t be near me!’ She went on to herself. ‘I thought he wished it. Heathcliff, dear! you should not be sullen now. Do come to me, Heathcliff.’” (Bronte, 143).

In the end of the novel, we find death finally unites Heathcliff and Catherine. Because in death there is no judgement, no rules.

REFERENCES:

1. Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. New Delhi, Fingerprint! Classics, 2013.
2. Coyle, Martin, et al. *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Routledge, 2013.
3. Eagleton, Mary. *Feminist Literary Theory : A Reader*. Malden, Mass., Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
4. Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism : A Norton Reader*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.
5. Hannam, June. *Feminism*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.
6. Homan, Sidney. *Playing Offstage : The Theater as a Presence or Factor in the Real World*. Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2017.
7. Marsh, Jan. *Bloomsbury Women : Distinct Figures in Life and Art*. London, Pavilion Books, 1999.
8. Susmita Bhattacharya. *The Victorian Perception of Child : A Study Based on the Novels of Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte & Emily Bronte*. Varanasi, Kala Parakashan, 2002.

