



# The Female Voices of ‘Wuthering Heights’: Challenging Patriarchal Norms

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**Abstract:** Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* has been classified as one of those seminal texts that shook the foundations of patriarchy. This paper delves into the novel through a feminist lens, shedding light on the female characters who courageously resist the oppressive norms and conditions imposed on women during the 19th century. Emily raised the issue of gender equality through her work. From the passionate and rebellious Catherine Earnshaw to the more subdued yet determined Cathy Linton, these women characters assert their rights to freedom and autonomy at various points in the narrative. Isabella Linton's ill-fated marriage to Heathcliff and Nelly Dean's role as a narrator further illuminate the patriarchal nature of the society in which they live. All the women characters in the novel have raised their voices against patriarchy and social norms and conditions imposed on women of that time at some particular point in time. They all are well aware of their own rights of freedom.

**Index Terms -**Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte, Gender Roles, Female Voices, Female Conscious

## I. INTRODUCTION

‘No coward soul is mine,  
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere:  
I see Heaven’s glories shine,  
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.’<sup>1</sup>

*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, which was first published in 1847, is one of the greatest works of English literature. A tragic story of romance and revenge set in the Yorkshire moors. Early critics did not like the work and criticized it for being rude and overly passionate. The author's second edition was released in 1850, two years after her death. It was more successful when sister Charlotte prefaced it sympathetically, and the novel's fame has subsequently increased as a result. Since the time *Wuthering Heights* was released, there has been a negative tendency towards this work. Despite the fact that some of its early critics praised its strength and originality, everyone thought it was strange, and many found its depictions of cruelty and defiance of conventional morality repugnant.

Feminist literary criticism is a critical approach that seeks to interpret and study literature through the lens of feminist theory. It aims to understand and challenge the ways in which literature reinforces or challenges societal norms and power structures, particularly those related to gender. This approach has significantly influenced how we read and interpret literature, expanding the literary canon to include more diverse voices.

One of the key objectives of feminist literary criticism is to uncover and celebrate the rich tradition of women’s writing, which has often been overlooked or undervalued. It also aims to reinterpret traditional texts from a feminist perspective, challenging the male-centric interpretations that have dominated literary criticism. Due to her wit, independence, and unshakable determination, which are evident in all of her writings, some critics consider Emily Bronte to be one of the literary pioneers of feminism. Emily demonstrates courage in showing that a woman might achieve a balance between a shy, timid, angelic Victorian image and a self-aware, powerful soldier even in a constricting era like the Victorian.

In this paper researcher wants to showcase that Emily has successfully portrayed the female characters who are self-aware about their rights and continue to struggle for their freedom despite being in a world where women were not treated as equal to men.

## II. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1818, Emily Jane Bronte was born in Yorkshire's Thornton. Two years later, Patrick Bronte, her father, was made perpetual curate of Haworth, a town close to Bradford. After their mother passed away, their aunt raised her, her sisters, and her brother in a desolate environment. They formed their own closely integrated society and, in the Biological Notice to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte writes: 'We were wholly dependent on ourselves and each other, on books and study, for the enjoyments and occupations of life'.<sup>2</sup> They wrote tales, fantasies, poems, journals, and serial stories, and brought out a monthly magazine. Some of Emily's most fervent poems were inspired by her work on the Gondal cycle, which she co-wrote with Anne. However, she is most known for her lone novel, which was released a year before she died unexpectedly from TB and it was written under the pen name Ellis Bell.

## III. STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

The Victorian period, in which she was writing, was hard for women. The Victorian feminine ideal was a woman who was 'the angel in the house'; a feminine figure that ensured hospitality and a moral guide, and also a paragon of virtue. Women were seen as delicate, fragile, and immature persons who weren't suited for intellectual tasks. Despite having their own families, these women had no influence over decision-making at any level in their households.

Women were supposed to submit to the demands of the males who served as their guardians as they were the only ones with decision-making authority in the home. When women got married, their husbands got control of their property since it was impossible for them to own independent property from their husbands' holdings. Women in England throughout the 18th and 19th centuries had no legal position in society aside from their fathers or spouses and were not allowed to vote in elections. The system of property inheritance was primogeniture, in which the eldest son got all or most of the property upon his father's death.

Women's writings were not well received by critics at the time. In the biographical notice for *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Bronte says, 'Averse to personal prominence, revealed our names under those Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women.'<sup>3</sup>

To counter Heathcliff's plans to control both *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange, Edgar Linton decides not to leave the land to his daughter Cathy, but rather to put it in the hands of trustees for her to use during her life, and for her children if she had any after her. Of course, Heathcliff counters Mr. Linton's goal by bribing the attorney until Mr. Linton dies without having made such a will. Further, in the novel Heathcliff imprisoned both Cathy and Nelly Dean for which he is not ashamed because he treated both of them as his subjects.

Despite these limitations of the age and restrictions of society, each of the women in the work is portrayed with a certain amount of strength and protest against the patriarchy, which supports Emily Bronte's feminist ideas.

### 3.1 Catherine: -

Catherine is seen by many as a feminist role model and her independence at the beginning of the novel separates her from the female norms of this period. Catherine doesn't care for dresses and being pretty she would much rather play on the moors with Heathcliff barefoot. Catherine is also rebellious in nature. Her rebellion against her father is palpable in the novel when Nelly says;

His peevish reproofs wakened in her a naughty to provoke him; she was never so happy as when we were all scolding her at once, and she defying us with her bold, saucy look, and her ready works; turning Joseph's religious curses into ridicule, baiting me, and doing just what her father hated most, showing how her pretended insolence, which he thought real, had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness. How the boy would do her bidding in anything, and his only when it suited his own inclination.

After behaving as badly as possible all day, she sometimes came fondling to make it up at night.

"Nay, Cathy," the old man would say, "I cannot love thee; thou'rt worse than thy brother. Go, say thy prayers, child, and ask God's pardon. I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!"

That made her cry, at first; and then, being repulsed continually hardened her, and she laughed if I told her to say she was sorry for faults, and beg to be forgiven.<sup>4</sup>

'Such a scene clearly shows Catherine's offense against her father, her disobedience, and the old Earnshaw's contempt of her. Her father considers her not to be as good a girl as others. Catherine also refuses to accept her father's desires and even retorts. After her father died, Catherine's brother, Hindley, received everything from old Mr. Earnshaw. Hindley, unlike her father, has no feelings for Catherine and despises Heathcliff. Hindley treats Heathcliff like a servant, and he loses his cool if Catherine expresses any sympathy for Heathcliff. But still, in the midst of such difficulty, both Catherine and Heathcliff express strong and implied desires to be together, to be connected and unified.'<sup>5</sup> As Catherine says herself, 'My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary.'<sup>6</sup> However, we see how Catherine eventually falls into being a lady through her transformation at Thrushcross Grange. Nelly refers to Catherine's transformation as a "reform". This shows how women of Victorian society, can't lead a carefree life, conventions give security for women.

Catherine tells Nelly that she loves Edgar Linton because he is civilized and well-mannered. For some time after marriage, she behaves as a meek and submissive wife. Then it may be demonstrated that Catherine begins to rebel against her husband only when she is deprived of the right to experience her natural love. Catherine sees the similarity between the Lintons and Earnshaws, because like in Wuthering Heights in the Thrushcross Grange, she is continually under the tight control of the patriarch of the family. Catherine, who is imprisoned in Thrushcross Grange, displays deep depression and discomfort at being denied her independence. As a result, Catherine takes a different path. Catherine, who is strictly constrained by her family and partially robbed of the freedom to love, tries her hardest to rebel and transcend the power of a patriarchal institution to attain her individual rights. She fights back against her father, brother, and husband. She is angry with them because their domination over her violates her right to freedom and undermines her individuality. As a result, her denial of patriarchy derives from a deep desire to defend her self-awareness and individuality.

### 3.2 Cathy (Daughter of Catherine)

'Unlike Catherine's wild childhood, Cathy was growing up as a perfect Victorian lady. She dressed nicely; she never went too far from home and obeyed her father. She rarely even disobeyed Nelly, her servant. Unlike Catherine's, Cathy's father had no reason to scold her – she was a daughter any Victorian father could only wish for.'<sup>7</sup> Her first act of rebellion was when she, against her father's wishes, continued writing letters to Linton. According to Lyn Pykett, Cathy was more progressive than her mother. Despite her past resistance, Catherine adhered to Victorian standards when she picked Edgar Linton over Heathcliff. She displayed her weakness in this. Cathy did not act in this manner. Finally, she chose Hareton, an illiterate, destitute, nearly primitive individual. The surprising development is that, whereas her mother was a strong, rebellious child who eventually conformed and attempted unsuccessfully to settle in her adulthood, her daughter did the reverse. Cathy will grow from an obedient, innocent girl to a strong, aggressive adult. Her change began with the death of her aunt Isabella. After her death, Linton, Isabella's son, was sent to live with the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange. Cathy grew fond of him, but Linton's father, Heathcliff, arrived to take him to Wuthering Heights.

'Indeed, it is perhaps Cathy, rather than Catherine, who gives Emily Bronte the opportunity of writing "the scene of choice" in which the heroine chooses and demands her love...'<sup>8</sup> Cathy was mature enough to learn from her and her mother's experience and did not make the same wrong choices her mother did – she refused to conform to Victorian society's norms and chose a life with which she would be happy. Only Cathy has the courage to stand up against Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff also fears her, her positive and lovely attitude towards Hareton, made him realize the worthlessness of his desire for vengeance. She proved to be more confident and more assertive than any of the men in the Novel.

### 3.3 Isabella

Throughout the Novel, Isabella is described as immature, spoilt, and naive. No one can predict that a woman like Isabella has the capacity to stay firm in the diverse situation but her marriage with Heathcliff reveals otherwise. She is infatuated with Heathcliff's personality and marries him in spite of her brother's objection. Heathcliff was only marrying her to get revenge on Edgar Linton. After marriage, Heathcliff was cruel to Isabella. Once Catherine's older brother, Hindley, shows Isabella the rifle he plans to use against Heathcliff someday on her first night at the Heights. Isabella tells Nelly, 'I surveyed the weapon inquisitively. A hideous notion struck me: how powerful I should be by possessing such an instrument! I took it from his hand, and touched the blade.'<sup>9</sup> This is the first time that Isabella begins to consider the notion that she is not a victim. Isabella tells Nelly, 'I've recovered from my first desire to be killed by him: I'd rather he'd kill himself! He has extinguished my love effectually, and so I'm at my ease.'<sup>10</sup> Isabella does an amazing thing for a woman of her time and leaves her abusive relationship, striking out on her own to settle near London. Isabella shows that a woman can survive on her own as she cares not only for herself but for Linton, the child she delivers a few months after leaving Wuthering Heights.

### 3.4 Nelly Dean

The servant, Nelly, tells the most of the narrative. She is the storyteller. She tries to be impartial, but she is so close to her family that her opinions are affected by love. In this sense, she has control over the way the story is presented. She gives the characters in the novel honest advice and speaks her thoughts while also recognizing that she is not an equal. She despises Heathcliff's cruelty and Catherine's selfishness. She is open to expressing herself in both good and negative ways. Nelly becomes very protective of the second generation as if they are part of her own children. Her independence of thought is notable in the novel.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, Emily Bronte's heroines are not only in conflict with their fathers and brothers but also with the prevailing societal norms that oppressed women throughout the Victorian era. In contrast to the Victorian image of women as idealized domestic figures, Bronte described characters who engage with unconventional, even unsettling desires and challenges that were rarely explored in the literature of her time. Emily Bronte effectively shattered the established image of Victorian women by introducing upper-class female characters who boldly defied the social conventions of the period. These women emerge as powerful individuals, taking charge of their life decisions and aspiring to attain the same influence and autonomy typically enjoyed by men.

Both Catherine's in her works assert their authority, yet their ultimate objectives differ significantly. While Catherine, the mother, seeks retribution against those who have wronged her, her daughter embodies a more compassionate approach while remaining steadfast and dignified in pursuing her own gratification. Importantly, the female characters in Bronte's work particularly in Wuthering Heights are far from being mere victims. From their early years, they roam freely across the moors, and neither of the

Catherines in "Wuthering Heights" ever loses their inner strength or submits to the dominance of the male figures surrounding them. Even Isabella manages to liberate herself from an abusive marriage to Heathcliff, forging a new path with her infant son. Even in diverse circumstances, the narrator Nelly Dean stands resolutely protective of her charges. Brontë's women, without question, exude strength and succeed in navigating the complexities of their own lives. Engaged in their own stories: Catherine, Isabella, Nelly, and Cathy are strong-willed, rather than passively resilient.

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