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Gender and Identity in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: A Feminist Study

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Abstract: The present paper critically evaluates the role of women within the patriarchal framework of society in terms of gender and identity during the age of Emily Bronte through the novel, *Wuthering Heights*. The novelist projects the plight of women characters who are dominated and controlled by the male characters. The women have to conform to the strict social norms and gender roles of a daughter, wife and mother where men become the controlling authority with respect to their roles of a father, husband and son. The novelist depicts how the women characters, in the novel, are dependent on the males in their family, for their social and economic security. The novel presents a poignant story of two families with an outsider who takes revenge with them for the hatred and humiliation he faced because of them due to his social status. The novelist presents the concept of gender and identity of women as the important theme in the novel, by evaluating women's limited access to social freedom, marriage, patriarchal authority and resistance to conventional gender roles. The other prominent themes are the love between Cathy and Heathcliff and the contrast between the two places, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. In fact, these very places become the space of gendered confinement for women who reside here. Emily Bronte has presented the darker side of life where marriage is not based on mutual companionship, rather, it is a gendered confinement for women. The novelist has presented how gendered roles of women become the instruments of social power in the male dominated society. In the novel, Catherine, Isabella and Younger Catherine are the women whose desires and dreams are shattered after their marriage and they struggle to create a place for their self and identity. The novelist aptly presents how the social structures, even during the early Victorian period of her time, played a vital role in shaping the lives of men and women.

Index Terms: Gender, identity, marriage, women, society, self.

Emily Bronte is a well-known English writer having a towering personality, who is popularly known for writing her only novel *Wuthering Heights* in the year 1847. She was hardly three years when she lost her mother. Emily Bronte was not that social; she had a reserved nature. Arthur Compton-Rickett clearly mentions in *A History of English Literature* that Emily Bronte was of reserved nature and "she seemed to have absorbed the silence of the gaunt, lonely moors in her aversion to society, and her passion for the moors in all seasons and in all weathers made her almost as one of themselves" (519). Rickett further puts that Charlotte Bronte wrote about her sister, "In the bleak solitude she found many and dear delights, and not the least and best loved was liberty. Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils, without she perished" (519). She lived a short life span of around thirty years. Therefore, her literary output was limited to few poems and a single novel, *Wuthering Heights*. Though the novel, initially did not receive very favourable comments by critics, but is considered as a classic of English literature. Emily also co-authored a book entitled, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* with her sisters, Anne and Charlotte Bronte. Emily herself wrote the novel, *Wuthering Heights*, with the pen name, Ellis Bell, hiding her gender identity. The pseudonyms used by Emily and her sisters to write books, somewhere points towards the situation of the female writers during the early Victorian society in Britain. The novel reflects the contemporary British society where women's life was affected by patriarchy,

social class, marriage, religion and limited access to education and socialization. There were different standards to judge men and women. Men were associated with the public world whereas women were mostly confined to the private world of household works, rearing children, giving emotional warmth to the family and so on. Women did not possess equal rights in terms of voting, property or legal issues but marriage affected the women in the most constricted manner. Marriage was economically important for women to provide financial security. And working women had restricted choices. Anne and Charlotte Bronte worked as governesses whereas Emily Bronte taught at a school for some time where conditions were tough and demanding. Victorian society imposed strict moral code on women, though men enjoyed more liberty. This paper focuses on the plight and restricted choices of women during the age of Emily Bronte, as projected in the novel, *Wuthering Heights*.

The novel, *Wuthering Heights* is a story of two families, the Earnshaw family and the Linton family, and an outsider, Heathcliff. The story is narrated by Mrs. Ellen Dean or Nelly, the principal narrator, and Mr. Lockwood, who hears the story from Nelly and then reproduces it to the readers. The very title of the novel symbolizes the atmospheric tumult which is the dominant force in the world, that affects the lives of those exposed to it. In the novel, Wuthering heights is a place where the Earnshaw family lives and Thrushcross Grange, a place situated at a distance of about four miles from Wuthering Heights, is the residence of the Linton family. Catherine or Cathy and Hindley are the children of Mr. and Mrs. Earnshaw whereas Edgar and Isabella are the children of Mr. and Mrs. Linton. However, after their subsequent marriages, Hindley Earnshaw becomes the father of Hareton whereas Edgar and Catherine or Cathy give birth to a girl who is also named Catherine. Isabella Linton marries the outsider, Heathcliff. The novel belongs to the category of a gothic novel due to its gothic setting and atmosphere of terror, brutality, obsessive passions, haunted houses and so on. As we proceed towards the end of the novel, the younger Catherine is preparing to get married to Hareton. Thus, we find that the novel deals with the three generations. The novel is divided into two parts, the first one deals with the love story of Catherine with Heathcliff whereas the second part focuses on the growth of love between Cathy's daughter, Catherine and Hareton. The novel has a gripping plot with numerous dramatic situations that arouse the feelings of pity, fear, awe and suspense. The first part of the story is comparatively more interesting whereas the second part of the story draws our attention to the darker side of the life. Though the novel is somewhat gloomy but ends on a happy note with the marriage of younger Catherine and Hareton, and the reunion of Cathy and Heathcliff after their death. The stories about their spirits roaming together on the moors symbolize their union.

The novelist presents the plight of women whose identity gets divided between their inner self and the set social norms for a lady. Besides the issues of women, the novel also throws light on the dominance of class in social structure of the contemporary society. The protagonist, Heathcliff is victimized due to his social status which makes him revengeful. Cathy and Heathcliff grew together playing with each other. Gradually they fell in love with each other. But when Edgar Linton proposes marriage to Cathy, she accepts the proposal because of his social and economic status. She tells the housekeeper Nelly, that though she had Heathcliff in her heart but it would be socially degrading for her to marry him due to his low social status. Let us consider what Cathy tells Nelly about her decision to marry Edgar Linton in the novel:

I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. (85)

Cathy went on to tell Nelly that her love for Linton was subject to change but her love for Heathcliff was everlasting. This conversation between Cathy and Nelly was partially overheard by Heathcliff that for Cathy to marry Heathcliff would be a degradation. Heathcliff felt so upset that he did not wait to hear the complete conversation and left immediately for some unknown destination. So, even during that period, marriage played a dominant role in the society and served as a social and financial security for girls. Cathy had profound love for Heathcliff but could not marry him since he did not have any possession of fortune. The disappearance of Heathcliff caused tremendous pain to Cathy after which she became seriously ill. Let us see what she feels for Edgar Linton:

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! He is always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being. So don't talk of our separation again: it is impracticable...(86)

So, Cathy not only feels torn between her lover and her husband, but also between two versions of her inner self. She wants to be a part of both the worlds. She wants Heathcliff's companionship and Edgar's social status. When it comes to choosing between her desire and dreams and the existing norms of social order, she chooses Edgar's social status. Her marriage surely brought her social status but suppressed her inner self. Though she got economic and social security through her marriage but her inner self and peace got destroyed. In fact, the novelist has given a vivid description of the plight of women during her time. Not exactly wanting to marry Edgar, Cathy had to choose the prevailing social order. The divided identity of Cathy aptly presents the plight of a woman caught between her instinctive self and accepted social order. Her tragedy lies in the fact that she tries to live a dual identity; that of a wife of Edgar Linton to meet the expectations of a patriarchal society and to live her inner self in the companionship of Heathcliff. Indeed, she gets trapped into the socially recognized roles of a female identity in the patriarchal society; in the role of a mother, wife and a lady. The novelist presents how Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are not blessed places for the women in the novel, rather, they are the places of their gendered confinement and identity where women end up trying to create their own identity and contentment.

The novelist also projects how marriage becomes a gendered confinement for women in the novel through the characters of Cathy, younger Catherine and Isabella. The novelist does not present marriage as an emotional partnership or bonding, rather, he presents it as a social constraint. Catherine marries Edgar for social and economic security due to her helplessness to stay within the socially defined roles of a woman. Though in conforming to the social order, she torments her own self due to her passionate love for Heathcliff, but has no choice other than marrying Edgar for the sake of economic security. Isabella Linton's marriage almost becomes a nightmare of abuse and humiliation. She is completely imprisoned in her marriage though she tries to escape from it but could not be liberated. Her marriage confinement ends only with the end of her life. She tried to grab her dreams by eloping with Heathcliff who had no feelings for her, though her elopement lands her to the miserable life with her husband. Let us consider what Isabella tells Nelly about Heathcliff after realizing her misery caused by him within her marriage:

Don't put faith in a single word he speaks. He's a lying fiend! A monster, and not a human being! I've been told I might leave him before; and I've made the attempt, but I dare not repeat it! Only, Ellen, promise you'll not mention a syllable of his infamous conversation to my brother or Catherine. Whatever he may pretend, he wishes to provoke Edgar to desperation: he says he has married me on purpose to obtain power over him; and he sha'n't obtain it- I'll die first! I just hope, I pray, that he may forget his diabolical prudence and kill me! The single pleasure I can imagine is to die, or to see him dead! (163)

Heathcliff confirms this assessment by saying, "I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms wreathe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the increase of pain" (163). Thus, Isabella is confined in her marriage and suffers a tragic end. Young Catherine is forced to get married to Linton Heathcliff, though she later becomes a widow and suffers a lot. Finally, Hareton rescues her from her trap and then both decide to get married. Thus, the story ends with the pleasing prospect of the marriage between young Catherine and Hareton. The novelist convincingly projects through this novel, how the freedom, movement and choices of women were controlled by the patriarchal norms and social orders. This is evident through the characters of Catherine, Isabella and younger Catherine. Catherine gives up her love and companionship to stay within the patriarchal framework of society; Isabella gets trapped in her miserable marriage confinement and young Catherine is forced to marriage and physical confinement by Heathcliff. The projection of the female characters in the novel such as Catherine, younger Catherine and Isabella reflect the importance of marriage in the lives of women during the time of Emily Bronte in England.

In the novel, gendered roles of women clearly present the social power and male authority exercised over them. The novelist and her sisters did not reveal their identity as writers, rather, they wrote with their pen names. This act of hiding the identity of their female gender points to the kind of pressures women were subjected to, during the time of Emily Bronte and her sisters. The novel vividly presents the gendered confinement, marital oppression and identity crisis faced by women. Indeed, the novelist meticulously presents the domestic spaces not as safe place for women, rather, they are the place of confinement and misery for them. In fact, the novelist presents gender having close connections with social class, economic power and patriarchal authority. Bronte seems to challenge the Victorian notion of domesticity where marriage does not serve as a social security, rather it becomes a legalized way of exercising tyrannical power over women. Bronte, at one hand presents women characters having limited social freedom due to conventional restrictions placed on them, though she also presents female characters who learn to resist and negotiate. The novel has been a subject of considerable amount of controversy. *Wuthering Heights* is a gothic novel that brilliantly incorporates the elements of realism and psychology. Through the domestic abuse, problem of self-identity and lack of independence in marriage, the novelist tries to present that marriage, as an institution, does not provide any social or economic security to women, rather, it is an institution that legitimises patriarchal dominance. Thus, the novelist, by presenting the gender issues in the novel, draws our attention towards having a society where a woman can have a choice to choose her way of life and be happy without having anyone's dominance over her. Bronte finally suggests that reconciliation is possible but the dark past can never be completely erased. The union of the younger generation is based on love, care and affection, that ends the bitter feelings of revenge and hatred, erasing the difference between both the houses to live together.

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