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EMILY BRONTE AND THE GOTHIC: A READING OF *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Gothic' often brings up certain images into one's mind namely the supernatural, darkness, castles, love and mystery. Gothic elements are very common in the writings of many writers so far as the 18th and 19th century literature is concerned. However, Gothic genre has been divided in two different types by the recent study on the same. These are two gender-based groups: the male and the female gothic with their respective features and thematic concerns. *Wuthering Heights* is notable for its settings and its features such as ghosts, violation of graves, revenge motifs, sadism, trapped heroine, villain which rightly place the novel into the genre of Female Gothic. However there are some innovations that the novelists brings up in the novel by remaining intact to the Gothic genre. This paper in an attempt to read Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as an example of Female Gothic and also tries to highlight the digressions from the conventional features of a Gothic text.

Keywords: Gothic, Female Gothic, Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*

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The term 'Gothic' often brings up certain images into one's mind namely the supernatural, darkness, castles, love and mystery. Gothic elements are very common in the writings of many writers so far as the 18th and 19th century literature is concerned. It is a genre that combines fiction, horror and death the origin of which can be traced back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, a novel published in 1764. Originated in the second half of the 18th century, the genre had much success till the 19th century as proved by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Poe's phenomenal pieces of writings. The gothic fictions are always characterised by a young and innocent maiden, old and foolish women, hero, villain, with the setting being a castle or an abbey or a monastery or any such building that hides within it some secrets of its own. However,

Gothic genre has been divided in two different types by the recent study on the same. These are two gender-based groups: the male and the female gothic with their respective features and thematic concerns. Gothic literature cannot be studied without bringing in Emily Bronte and her works into the context. Her only novel *Wuthering Heights* is an example of the same. However, a brief study of what female gothic really means will make the attempt easier.

The term 'Female Gothic' was used by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976) for the first time which she easily defined as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called "the Gothic"' (Moers : pp.90). She stated, 'except that it has to do with fear' (Moers: pp.90) The female

Gothic fiction are thus texts which portray 'women's fear of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth'(Smith et al.: pp.1).

"Gothics are particularly compelling fictions for the many women who read and write them because of their nightmarish figuration of feminine experience within the home" (David: pp.192)

Thus, the term Female Gothic has been introduced by Ellen Moers to describe the texts or tradition which can be traced back to what Ann Radcliff has done in her *Mysteries of Udolpho* by reading which Henry Tilney of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* says, "I remember finishing it in two days- my hair standing on end the whole time". Another famous example of this genre is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel that appeared generation later after the pioneering Gothic text of Ann Radcliff and which in today's literary world is known as science fiction. However, with change of time, there was a change of style in writing. This novel of Mary Shelley is incorporated with the sense of terror but without a heroine and even without a female victim in it which were said to be the characteristic features of a Female Gothic text. *Frankenstein* however features a mad scientist who locks himself in his laboratory and secretly works at creating human life which turned out to be monster.

In the discussion of Female Gothic, Emily Bronte is a name that is inevitable. A Victorian writer, Bronte has contributed immensely to the genre of Female Gothic fiction by her single but most popular novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Though hardly appreciated by her contemporaries, Emily Bronte has wedged her way towards the front rank Victorian novelists through her extraordinary piece of work. And now she is admired by all as a genius, revealing flashes of extraordinary imagination which are however at a distant from the central interests of human being. Intrinsically different from her contemporaries, Bronte's work is devoid of the bustling, progressive urban world of the nineteenth century England which were the settings of many fictions of her contemporary writers. Her fictional world is quite different, inhabited by different characters, and she created it

from a different point of view. Thus, Emily Bronte stands outside the realm of Victorian world as well as the main current of the nineteenth century fictions. However, this aloofness in her writings can be because of her short aloof life in her father's parsonage in Yorkshire. Yorkshire during those days stood at the periphery of the urban world and the influences that shaped the literary society at that period of time. Life in this somewhat isolated land was very much like that of the Queen Elizabeth's days. A simple and unchanged life similar to the moors and storms of that region, a life of confined interest, untouched by the rush of Victorian urban lifestyle. This surroundings of Emily Bronte is very much similar to that of the setting of her novel *Wuthering Heights*. Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* says:

"The first readers of *Wuthering Heights* were struck as we are still today by the perverse aspects of the novel" She furthers says, "Emily Bronte's acceptance of the cruel as a normal, almost an invigorating component of human life sets her novel apart, from its opening pages to its close" (Moers: pp.99)

Wuthering Heights is notable for its settings and its features such as ghosts, violation of graves, revenge motifs, sadism, trapped heroine, villain which rightly place the novel into the genre of Female Gothic. There is a castle, in the form of the *Wuthering Heights*, oppressed heroines in the forms of Isabella and younger Catherine, villains in the forms of Heathcliff as well as Hindley in case of oppressing Heathcliff, and ghost of Catherine, Heathcliff's beloved, which appears right at the beginning of the novel. Although the novel has multiple narrator, it is the first narrator Lockwood, who establishes a distance between the world of *Wuthering Heights* and the rest of the world of the nineteenth century and also brings in the gothic element that is inherent in the novel. A man from London, Lockwood has come there as a tenant of *The Thrushcross Grange*, which has been occupied by Heathcliff after his comeback accompanied by wealth and mannerisms and after the death of Edgar Linton. Caught in the storms and unable to return home, Lockwood decides to spend his night in *Wuthering Heights*. It is

there, on that night that Lockwood encounters the ghost of Catherine or Cathy as a child ghost at the window, begging to be let in. "The intense horror of nightmare came over me; I tried to draw back my arm, but, the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, Let me in!" (Bronte: p.p. 25). It is noteworthy that Catherine too prayed for a child and wanted to return as a child and this desire is seen in the begging of the child ghost to let it be in. As Catherine dies very soon in the novel, Bronte thus intends to complete the figure of the heroine in Catherine's daughter. The younger Catherine, the daughter of Edgar and Catherine who not only bears her mother's name but also resembles her in terms of appearances. However, she has been brought up in Thrushcross Grange in complete isolation from the nearby surrounding and especially from Heathcliff's influence. And that is why, unlike her mother, she grows up to be matured and understanding women who has the mental maturity to understand herself as well as to accept the limitations and responsibilities of marriage.

The other narrator of the novel, Nelly Dean provides an account of Heathcliff's inhuman actions and the callous treatment towards his own wife Isabella, his son Linton and the younger Catherine thus portraying Heathcliff as a demonic figure. Heathcliff thus acts as a villain in castle of Wuthering Heights. Moreover, the journal of dead Cathy, which Lockwood finds in the room where he spent his night of the storm, is an important evidence that makes the readers aware of the existence of brutality in Wuthering Heights. One will be struck by its "successful and almost seamless stitching of mystical eloquence, metaphysical profundity, shrewd realism, and moral dignity to the faded paraphernalia of gothic mode". (Moers: pp. 99). The inhuman treatment meted out to Heathcliff by Hindley after the death of Mr. Earnshaw is noteworthy and is evident in the journal of Catherine. Hindley acts as a tyrannical character in the first half of the novel that sowed the seeds of hatred and revenge in Heathcliff's mind.

It is worth mentioning that there is an additional character in novel whose role is often overlooked by the reader. Isabella, the character as mentioned, shares the quality of an enclosed

heroine. Her inability to read Heathcliff's mind, a similar mistake that younger Catherine does later, leads her to a life of entrapment and destitution. The issue of entrapment and domestic violence in the novel comes up with the elopement of Isabella with Heathcliff. Heathcliff after his return to Wuthering Heights after a long gap is a totally changed man. He has earned a lot of money and has learnt the moral behaviours of a civilized Victorian society. From where does Heathcliff returns with such a change in his character and condition has remained a mystery in the novel. What is more important is that, a man who was mistreated as a 'gypsy' has changed himself so much that the daughter of that particular family who had mistreated him falls in love with him. Isabella Linton, a girl of Thrushcross Grange, the calm and civilized world, unaware of Heathcliff's monstrous intentions, elopes with the same, even ignoring the warnings of Catherine. Very soon does Isabella come to know the reality that he did not marry her for love rather it was a revenge. Her entrapment in the castle of Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff's ill treatment, an insane Hindley, an indifferent and uncooperative servant Joseph and lack of a civilized atmosphere in the place seem to match the condition of a heroine in Gothic fiction.

"Isabella temporarily loses herself to the abuse of the Heights and its lack of human decency" (Pike: pp. 379)

The unusual atmosphere of the Heights and the sudden change in Heathcliff's treatment towards her immediately after their elopement and her entry into the Heights traumatised her so much that she was compelled to ask Nelly, "Is Mr Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? I shan't tell my reasons for making this inquiry: but I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married – that is, when you call to see me: and you must call, Ellen, very soon" (Bronte: pp. 120) This words by Isabella clearly depicts her condition in the Heights.

The younger Catherine is also imprisoned by Heathcliff only to fulfil his crave for revenge. She was forced to marry the unhealthy Linton who soon dies leaving Catherine helpless to the authority of the cruel Heathcliff. In the meantime, Edgar too dies and Heathcliff becomes the sole master of both the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Both

the characters: Isabella and Catherine Linton resemble the Gothic heroine. Tyrants and obedient women characters are indispensable in a Gothic fiction. Here, Heathcliff appears to be tyrant who subdues every character under his tyranny in one way or another. Gothic heroines are brought up delicately, educated and kept away from the coarseness of the society as far as possible. The upbringing of these two women: Isabella and Catherine Linton is similar. They have been brought up in a civilized environment away from the influence of the uncultured male, in Catherine Linton's case, from Heathcliff. This makes them very prone to the dangers of the outside world and the cruelty of Heathcliff as they cannot understand the hypocrisy of the outside world. However, these women strengthen themselves against the tyrannical Heathcliff by enduring the oppressive situation created by the later. Both are entrapped by Heathcliff and undergo similar struggle to free themselves from the confinement. However, these two women after been oppressed and entrapped transform themselves from a naïve obedient women to a bold and revengeful women. They can be considered as Gothic heroine until their imprisonments but their struggle for survival makes them strong enough to fight against the fiend Heathcliff. While Isabella escapes the Heights and takes a revengeful attitude towards Heathcliff and curses him, Catherine Linton on the other hand, defies Heathcliff in his own house by developing a relationship with Hareton. Unable to bear the sight of Catherine and Hareton's relationship which reminds him of his love with his Cathy, Heathcliff goes mad leading to his death. Through Isabella and Catherine Linton, Emily tries to break the conventional assumption of a Gothic heroine and brings her own style of depicting the same. Moreover, it cannot be said that only the female characters face the oppression and brutal treatment. Hareton, the son of Hindley becomes the prey to Heathcliff's revenge. Earlier, Hindley who had assumed the role of a tyrannical master of Wuthering Heights after the death of his father Mr Earnshaw, deprived Heathcliff of a happy childhood and education. These ill treatments lead Heathcliff to become a revengeful fiend. And thus, Heathcliff

does the same to Hareton only to take revenge. He deprived Hareton of education and make him work like a slave in his own house and this is something that is exceptional in Bronte's text. Thus, revenge is something that is intricately woven into the text. It starts from the beginning with Hindley's revenge towards Heathcliff which has been later on turned as a revenge deep seated in Heathcliff's heart and soul.

. The novel evokes a Gothic mode "for there are the graveyard lusts and wandering ghosts; the mysterious foundling and a tyrannical father; the family doom, repeated generation after generation; the revenge motif; and the aroma of incest that persists from the introduction of the bastard Heathcliff to the family at the Heights, and to the bed he shares with the girl-child Catherine, his playmate, his sister his torment his victim, his beloved, but never his wife" (Moers: pp. 100). Sadism as a Gothic element is also inherent in the novel as seen in Heathcliff's brutal treatment and the satisfaction that he attains in torturing his victims. His exploitation of the grave of Catherine Earnshaw out of his obsession for her also adds an element of Gothic to the text.

The novel however, is also an attempt to socialise and educate the female readers along with a tendency to criticize the patriarchal world. Just like a conventional Female Gothic fiction, the novels has a happy ending with a contented and happily married heroine. Bronte's treatment of this genre can thus be justified. She incorporates the Gothic elements into her text but with certain innovations. Even though the novel breaks away from the conventional Gothic fiction, Emily Bronte maintains the Gothic atmosphere in her own way.

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