Wuthering Heights: Making of A Free Woman in Male-chauvinist Victorian Society

Dr. Saed Jamil Shahwan

Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Hail University, P.O. Box 2440, Hail, K.S.A.

Abstract
Looking through the lenses of *Wuthering Heights,* this paper investigates into the biographical elements of its author, Emily Bronte and fine-tunes her personal, social as well as cultural elements that prepared her to revolt against the contemporary Victorian patriarchal society and enabled her to create an epoch-making female character like Catherine who, while living in the very male-chauvinist Victorian society, excelled in restoring love, honor and self-respect of a woman.
Keywords: Victorian, feminist, male-chauvinism, individualism, feminine.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Male-chauvinist Victorian era looked down at women as 'housekeepers' where a woman's value was fixed in the society by all her integrity and skills to comfort their husbands. Women's intellectual works were ignored; so any attempt from a woman to achieve intellectual ability was seen as trespassing through the borders that the Victorian patriarchal society had set for them. Emily Bronte, in her own life, attempted to cross that male-chauvinistic border and proved that a woman could be at the same time a housekeeper and an intellectual; strong and naïve; tough and caring. When she created the character of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights,* she portrayed a Victorian woman who strived to break away with the shackles that her society had put around her. In the Victorian period, men used to pass stressful days due to hard work in 'Industrial England'; so, women were expected to maintain house to ensure adequate comfort for home-bound, exhausted male members. The society did not approve women of working outside home or indulging in intellectual pursuits as that would consume time and thus hamper men's comfort. This is how men used to set nature, scope, necessities and boundary of their 'comfort zone' and they desired women to maintain that zone properly with affection, skills and care.

2. LITERAURE REVIEW:

2.1. Relative positions of men and women in Victorian society:

The Victorian era of British history was the period of Queen Victoria's reign from 20 June 1837 until her death, on 22 January 1901. Some scholars date the beginning of the period in terms of sensibilities and political concerns to the passage of the Reform Act 1832. During the long reign of Queen Victoria over the United Kingdom from 1837 to 1901, there were certain social expectations that the separate genders were expected to adhere to.[1] The construction of male consciousness maintains a strong historical legacy. Since it was influenced by numerous aspects and factors such as domesticity, economy, gender roles, imperialism, manners, religion, sporting competition, etc., the concept of Victorian masculinity is extremely diverse. Some of these aspects seem to be quite naturally related to one another, while others are distinct. For men, the aspects brought much pride in their work, protectiveness as well as dominance over their wives and an aptitude for good social behavior. Beeton (2009) wrote:

> Whether married or single, all Victorian women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower incapable of making decisions beyond selecting the menu and ensuring her children were taught moral values. A gentlewoman ensured that the home was a place of comfort for her husband and family from the stresses of Industrial Britain. A woman's prime use was to bear a large family and maintain a smooth family atmosphere where a man need not bother himself about domestic matters. He assumed his house would run smoothly so he could get on with making money. (p. 23)

A male-chauvinist is a male who patronizes, disparages or otherwise denigrates females in the belief that they are inferior to males and thus deserving of less than equal treatment or benefit.[2] Hughes (2014) discusses relationship role of men and women in Victorian era:

> The two sexes now inhabited what Victorians thought of as 'separate spheres', only coming together at breakfast and again at dinner… The ideology of 'Separate Sphere's rested on a definition of the 'natural' characteristics of women and men. Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands labored all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties that were increasingly carried out by servants. Women received education but just to

prepare them for this role of 'Angel in the House'. Rather than attracting a husband through their domestic abilities, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as 'accomplishments'. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess.

In Austen's _Pride & Prejudice_ (1813), the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any 'accomplished' young lady:

> A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages….; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions…(Chapter 8)

Victorian poet Lord Alfred Tennyson sketched the real picture of the women of his age. In his poems, he depicted Victorian women staying by the hearth with their needles whilst men wielded their swords. Al-Rashid (2017) studied Tennyson's poems and came up with comments: "…the ideal Victorian woman was widely witnessed in various literary works of the Victorian Age. Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" gives an honest account of the divide that existed between men and women in terms of their roles during the Victorian Age."

Weston (2001) summarized the role and rights of women in Victorian era in the following manner:

> (a) Even in high places, Victorian men kept mistresses, but they still expected their wives or mistresses to be faithful whatever their own misdemeanors. If a woman took a lover, it was not made public. If it did become public knowledge, she would be outcast by society. But men could amble along to one of their gentleman's clubs and always find a warm welcome.
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> (b) It was a hypocritical period when relationships were quite artificial. Until late in the century in 1887 a married woman could own no property. Then in 1887 the Married Woman's Property Act gave women rights to own her own property. Previously her property, frequently inherited from her family, belonged to her husband on marriage. She became the chattel of the man. During this era if a wife separated from her husband, she had no rights of access to see her children. A divorced woman had no chance of acceptance in society again.
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> (c) A wealthy wife was supposed to spend her time reading, sewing, receiving guests, going visiting, letter writing, seeing to the servants and dressing for the part as her husband's social representative.
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> (d) For the very poor of Britain, things were quite different. Fifth hand clothes were usual. Servants ate the pickings left over in a rich household. The average poor mill worker could only afford the very inferior stuff; for example rancid bacon, tired vegetables, green potatoes, tough old stringy meat, tainted bread, porridge, cheese, herrings or kippers.

2.2. Emily's biographical influence:

Emily Bronte's Catherine in _Wuthering Heights_ represents the marginalized womenfolk of her time. Her experimentation in creating the character of Catherine is so successful that the whole world reads her even after several centuries and considers the novel as a classic of English literature. Readers consider Catherine as a revolutionary character. Before creating Catherine as a 'free woman', Emily practiced creativity in her own life. So, her psychology, personal life as well as family life have much influence on the setting, story and characterization of _Wuthering Heights_. Emily was born in Thornton, near Bradford in Yorkshire. Younger sister of Charlotte Bronte, a veteran English novelist of English literature, Emily was the fifth of six children of a curate. In 1824, the family moved to Haworth and its surroundings, environment and landscape flourished their zeal for literature. In childhood, after the death of their mother, the three sisters and their brother Patrick used to create imaginary lands which were featured in the stories they wrote, but little of Emily's work from this period survived, except the poems. In her childhood, Emily was lonely, moody and introvert in nature, so other children ignored her. Moreover, she was thoughtful of death, body, soul and the after-life. On the other hand, Charlotte was proactive and she took initiatives to publish a joint collection of poetry written by three sisters in 1846 as _Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Action Bell_. The Bronte sisters adopted androgynous first names to evade contemporary prejudice against female writers. All of them retained the same initials: Charlotte became Currer Bell, Anne became Action Bell and Emily became Ellis Bell. In 1847, Emily published her only novel, _Wuthering Heights_ as two volumes of a three volume act. Its innovative structure somewhat puzzled critics. Although it received mixed reviews at its first edition, the book subsequently became an English classic. In 1850, Charlotte edited and published _Wuthering Heights_ under Emily's real name.

2.3. A brief history of feminist criticism:

Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism informed by feminist theory, or more broadly, by the politics of feminism. It uses feminist principles and ideology to critique the language of literature. This school of thought seeks to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male domination by exploring

the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within literature. This way of thinking and criticizing works can be said to have changed the way literary texts are viewed and studied, as well as changing and expanding the canon of what is commonly taught.[5]

Feminist criticism contributes outstandingly to theory as well as the world of women. Feminist critics have various goals—some have been interested to rediscover the works of previous women writers who were over looked by male dominated society and others have started to review the books by male authors from a woman's point of view. A number of contemporary feminists have focused on the topics about women in post colonial societies, women's autobiographical writings, lesbians and literature in the construction of feminine gender. Feminist literary criticism must be seen as a function of a political movement for women's freedom which spread in Europe and America in 1960s to revive political and social issues which were associated with women. So, during 1970s and early 1980s, French, American and British feminists wrote from somewhat different perspectives. However, this is not the beginning of female protest. The voices of protest were found in the 5th century, 12020 B.C. in the works of Lysistrata, Aeschylus, Agamemnon, Seneca, Euripides, etc.[3] In the 17th century, Mary Astell wrote a book *Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest, (*1694) which created feminine consciousness in the society. In 1792 appeared Mary Wollstone's influential essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" which is considered as the first major document of feminism that gave women some scope to judge and think their own position the in society. Next, John Stuart Mill in his work "The Subjection of Women" which was published in 1869, raised his voice against injustice on women. Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (1929) was not a theoretical work in a conventional sense but served as the beginning of feminist criticism. One of Woolf's most significant contributions to feminist criticism was discussion on language.[6]

The view of language became a topic of discussion in feminist criticism from French feminists and feminist critics. French feminists shifted their focus to language and started analyzing the ways in which meaning was produced. They concluded that language as we commonly thought of it was a decidedly male-dominated realm. According to psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan (1977), "Language is a realm of public discourse." It is very surprising that children enter the linguistic realm when they come to grasp their separateness from their mothers and identify themselves with their fathers, who are the family representatives of the culture. Thus, a language reflects a binary logic. French feminists said that language only seemed to give women a narrow range of choices. Early French feminists such as Annie Leclere, Xaviere and Marguerite Duras suggested that there was something that might be called 'lécriture feminine' or 'women's writing'. Recently, Kristeva (1984) has said that feminine language is semiotic, not symbolic. The other French feminist Helene Cixous (1981) comments in favor of feminine language to describe women's bodily pleasure; while, some other French feminist critics such as Christian Fauré and Catherine Clément said that too much emphasis on the body might reduce the essence of feminism. American Feminist Critics of the 1917 and early 1918, Annette Kolodny, Kate Millet, Carolyn Heilbrun and Judith Fetterley gave emphasis to analyze literary texts rather than philosophizing anything abstractly.[7] Some critics endeavor to review the great works by male writers through examining the portrayals of women characters, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in such works and showing how clearly this tradition of systematic masculine dominance is inscribed in literary tradition. In addition to that, Dale Spender presented a different view of feminist criticism in *Man Made Language* (1980):

> The semantic rule which has been responsible for the manifestation of sexism in the language
> can be simply stated; there are two fundamental categories, male and minus male. To be linked
> to male is to be linked to a range of meanings which are positive and good; to be linked to
> minus male is to be linked to the absence of those qualities. (…) The semantic structure of the
> English language reveals a great deal about what it means to be female in a patriarchal order.
> (p. 43)

Gilbert (1979) studied women writers of the nineteenth century and discovered the same masculine concern, images and themes. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) developed feminism further. She used the term 'patriarchy' (rule of the father) to describe the cause of women's oppression. In the earlier phase of modern feminist writings on literature, the emphasis was often quite political for expressing women's 'political' awareness of their oppression by men. British feminists realized that the American opposition to male-stereotypes that degrade women often leads to counter stereotypes of feminine virtue that ignore real difference of race, class and culture among women. Thus, the French, American and British approaches have so thoroughly judged, influenced and assimilated one another that the work of most western practitioners is no longer easily identifiable along national boundary lines. Showalter (1985) identified a phase of women's writings called 'a feminine phase (1840-80)' in the history, a period in which women writers imitated dominant male writers' norms and aesthetic standards; then, a feminist phase (1880-1920) in which radical and often separatist positions were maintained; finally, a female phase (1920 onward) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience. In this connection, Showalter described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'androtexts' (book by men) to 'gynotexts' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics' meaning the

study of gynotexts. Gynocriticism is a broad term that covers history, styles, themes, genres, structures of writing by women; the psycho-dynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Feminist criticism of *Wuthering Heights*:

Based on Virginia Woolf's perception, "Intellectual freedom depends on materials things…and women have always been poor", Inga-Stina Ewbank's book *Their Proper Sphere: The Bronte Sisters as Early Victorian Female Novelists* (1966) contextualized the theme of feminism in *Wuthering Heights* in the biographical accounts of the Bronte sisters. While indentifying Milton's Paradise Lost as a culturally definitive story of 'woman's secondness' *The Madwoman in the Attic* analyzes *Wuthering Heights* as a series of strategies for negotiating 'Milton's bogey'. Davies (1997) argues that Emily Bronte was a 'free woman'. She argues that among mythopoeia works of fiction, *Wuthering Heights* raises the mother–principle to the status of deity, presenting it as the focal object of humor aspiration and the final end of Emily Bronte's language of desire. Like Juliet Mitchell, Davies sees the novel as preoccupied with childhood and the family; like Gilbert and Gubar, she acknowledges it's the story as 'stages of the fall'.

Wuthering Heights is an ideal specimen work for practical feminist criticism. First, it is a fiction written by a woman on women's lives, their sacrifice, their suffering and social atmosphere. The novel could be examined through Feminist literary criticism to rediscover the novelist's obsession on the repetition of names 'Catherine' as well as the sexual suppression; male revenge is also presented in such a way that women characters do not get enough scope to be 'individual figures'. So, Catherine was also confused in selecting her husband and to decide between Edgar and Heathcliff. She develops a double standard to accommodate her feelings for both Edgar and Heathcliff. As Hindley degrades Heathcliff continuously, Ellen said she was full of ambition and was anxious to ingratiate herself with the Lintons. The scene in her duality reaches its climax with her confession to Ellen that she has accepted Edgar.

The novel begins and ends with Catherine Earnshaw. Catherine begins life as Catherine Earnshaw and ends as Catherine Linton. Catherine's daughter, on the other hand, occupies each of the names in turn and traces back the route to her mother's first name. Although the names circulate through the text, they create a pattern of asymmetrical repetition, rather than of circularity. The story of the first Catherine hinges – as do most novels of the period – on her choice between two men. Selecting the right husband is the central task set for the central female characters in most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novels, particularly those written by women, but in *Wuthering Heights* marriage failed to solve personal and social problems. Rather, marriage complicated problems in Catherine's life and created contradictions. While growing up in a geographically isolated and in loosely organized working household as a motherless and subsequently a fatherless girl, Catherine reaches puberty relatively unnoticed. She spent her childhood rather with a boy—Heathcliff—in a private, unsocialized and ungendered moorland. Her encounters with adults culminated in the form of her brother's domestic tyranny and Joseph's rigid Methodism. Total ignorance to her rights and complete denial to her freedom as a human being marginalized her in her own house, but this spirit later prepared her for rebellion and resistance against domestic as well as social norms in the male-chauvinist English society. She was an assertive child associated with the realm of nature, its freedom and power, rather than with the domestic and its constraints. Emily sought out the relationship between the roles of society and biology on the development of a girl. Catherine's sudden and dramatic transformation into a genteel young lady during her short stay at Thrushcross Grange proves that biological transformation of a girl is also reinforced by society. Her transformation, described by Nelly as a 'reform', is shown as a process of formation or construction.

Catherine's life exhibits limitations of female power as well as its challenging nature. It also dramatizes the limits of female influence. She also becomes the object of a competition between two men. Both of the men want her to fulfill their respective desires. Catherine's final illness is, in effect, a withdrawal from both the worlds and the self. Her derangement enacts her experience of self-alienation. Like many other women in Victorian fiction, Catherine died in child-birth which attests two facts of the period: a very important identity as well as social recognition of a woman in that period was to be a 'mother', but the medical facilities for delivering children in that period which resulted a huge of number of death to women at child-birth. This poor medical service also points at utter negligence to women. On the other hand, if Cathy is a repetition of her mother, she is also a variation. Catherine resumed control of her own life and defined herself in a new manner. Moreover, Cathy reconstructed both herself and Hareton. Catherine was destroyed by her inability to reconcile conflicting images of herself and the contradictory definitions of the feminine which confronted her, but Cathy negotiated with them and ultimately constructed a new identity for herself.

3.2. Catherine's rebellion against patriarchy:

Catherine's fairly firm rebellion against her father carries three aspects: the offense against her father, the

negligence of her father's power, and the replacement of him by others. When her father lived, she lost his favor. Here's an example:

> 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.

Obviously, the episode demonstrates Catherine's offense against her father, her disobedience and the old Earnshaw's resentment towards her. Her father used to hate her and she, in return, refused to obey him. She was twelve years old when her father died in 1777. After his death, Hindley, Catherine's brother, inherited all the property. Hindley possessed no affection for Catherine and abhorred Heathcliff. Hindley degraded Heathcliff to a servant and also flew into a temper if Catherine showed any affection for Heathcliff. In fact, Hindley imbued the family with indifference, gloominess, dread and disorder. Here is an instance how he treated Heathcliff:

> He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labor out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm.

In such an adverse atmosphere, both Catherine and Heathcliff showed strong and implied yearning to be unified. Catherine told Nelly that her love for Heathcliff "resembled the eternal rocks beneath a source of little visible delight, but necessary". Without doubt, the love suffered her brother's strong opposition. Despite his objections, Catherine still refused to give it up; moreover, she joined her hands with Heathcliff to rebel against Hindley, and Hindley subsequently, deprived her of freedom and self-respect. It is her love that enabled her to realize her self-identity.

Before marrying Linton, Catherine told Nelly that she loved Edgar Linton, because he was civilized and well-mannered. After the marriage, she acted as a docile wife until the reappearance of Heathcliff. When Catherine felt robbed of the rights to enjoy her natural love, she began to rebel against her husband. From Catherine's point of view, the Lintons are never unlike the Earnshaws, for she is constantly under the tense control of the head of families. It seems that a Victorian woman could not refuse to accept the destiny of being controlled. Locked in Thruscross Grange, Catherine expresses a deep depression and a discomfort of being deprived of freedom and privileges. Catherine goes a different way. Strictly confined by the family and somewhat deprived of the freedom to love, Catherine tries her best to resist the authority of a patriarchal institution and to surpass it to realize her own individual validation.

A Victorian, weak woman and her Victorian, domineering men are confronted with him each other; each side refuses to yield to the other and intends to control the other. Catherine's eternal love for Heathcliff is the strongest opposition against her husband. In her eyes, everything related to Linton is superficial, unimportant to her; and her real, underlying life is permanently stamped with Heathcliff's. She resists against her father, her brother and her husband. She feels indignant with them, not that she does so irrationally but that dominance over her infringes on her right to enjoy freedom and diminish her individuality.

4. Conclusion

On the whole, *Wuthering Heights* represents the rigid, male-chauvinist Victorian society, but Emily focuses on a rather unusual issue. While most of the Victorian writers expressed their concern about moral and social issues of the contemporary society, Emily put all her efforts together for awakening women consciousness by examining their sense of self-respect through true love. In an attempt to raise consciousness and self-respect among contemporary women, she studied the inner-self as well as the outer-self of the female characters of *Wuthering Heights* to what they thought and expressed, how they were truly responding to other female members or the male members, as well as to the norms of the society. Thus, the writer presents glimpses of Catherine's psychology when she marries for a better life but still possess deep love for Heathcliff deep at her heart. In the male dominated Victorian society where women were not supposed to think on their own but to carry out orders of the male members, Catherine thought clearly, made a decision on her own and tried to fix a balance between her love and her social as well as economic security. As soon as Catherine discovers her own strength, true love, freedom and self-respect, she dares to rebel against the tyranny. Gender-equality is the most important factor in maintaining balance between opposite genders of the society and only the mutual respect between the genders can ensure this. Catherine cherishes self-integrity to utmost importance. Critics have termed

Catherine as a revolutionary character.[8] The torture, humiliation, conflicts and tension she has gone through have molded a role-model character for women of 19th century and the centuries that followed. She died in child birth which was also a common tragic fate of helpless Victorian women but her efforts to awake consciousness as well as sense of self-respect among women were carried away but millions of women that followed her.

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