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IDENTITY OF HEATHCLIFF IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY
- COLONIAL TRACES IN WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* reveals the story of passionate love and heart throbbing hatredness of Heathcliff. Emily depicts the character of Heathcliff as a transfigured beast. Throughout the novel he is treated as an animal more than a human. Nelly calls him as 'it' as if he is a thing than a child. Mrs. Earnshaw is ready to send him out. "They entirely refused to have it in bed with them, or even in the room...so Nelly put it on the landing of the stairs, hoping it might be gone on the morrow"(Bronte 79). He is addressed as a gypsy and as a cuckoo. Then his struggle to attain the social standards, to be one among the Victorian gentleman proved futile. In this regard this research paper aims to analyse the colonial mind set of Victorian people and their ill-treatment, which made him cruel. It illustrates how the civilized world has become the soul cause for Heathcliff's animalistic attitude. And shows his origin is not the reason behind his uncultured behaviour. The analysis will be done within the context of postcolonial framework with a cross reference to Marxist views. The argument here denies Charlotte's presentation of her sister as an unconscious artist who "did not know what she had done" (Chadwick 348)

Keywords: Heathcliff, colonial traces, Stereotypical notions, ideology, Victorian society,

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Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights* can be described in the words of Joseph Conrad as

"The dark powers, whose real terrors seen always on the verge of triumph are perpetually foiled by the Steadfastness of men" (93)

Here Heathcliff the dark villain is in possession of dark powers and have a hold on all other characters of the novel. The character of Heathcliff was drawn as a man of furious passions and robust attitude. He who

loved Catherine Earnshaw more than anyone in his life ironically became the cause of her peace less life and death. The burning passion in both of them outrages the societal norms in all walks. This characterisation, which was against the religious sentiments of Victorian society by Emily being an unmarried daughter of a parson, shocked the world in nineteenth century. Even one of the reviewers considered it as a “disagreeable story”.

In the minds of readers the question arises – Is Heathcliff a man of Victorian society? , Is he followed anything religious in his life? , Ultimately, is he a man or a monster? Because Heathcliff in contrast to Edgar Linton, who is a perfect Victorian gentleman and Hindley Earnshaw, a very gentle lover of his wife makes a sense that He is the one who inherits the uncivilized and uncultured behaviour throughout the novel.

Thus, the paper here examines the reason of his uncivilized and uncultured behaviour. It takes us back to look into his origin. The shocking fact is, he was an orphan picked up from one of the streets of Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw to Wuthering Heights. Here the place Liverpool in Britain was a main centre of slave trade to where ships carried thousands of slaves from Africa and another fact is, it was also a major place of Irish migrants who flood to Liverpool because of great famine during 1845-1849. The Irish people of Ireland were also colonized by British in 16th and 17th century (wikipedia.org). So they faced discrimination in Britain in all the walks of their life. The Historical account of Liverpool places Heathcliff's origin in one of the above colonies. And when we go deeper to know the proper roots we can point out Heathcliff as an African by the words of Mr. Earnshaw- ‘...its as dark as if it came from the devil’(Bronte 48) and Mr Linton declares Heathcliff as a ‘strange acquisition.. A little lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway” (Bronte 60)

In supportive to these observations Maja-Lisa Von Sneidern in his article “*Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool slave trade*” claims that Heathcliff is a man of “Racial otherness”. However, here the argument is Emily Bronte deliberately took this character from a colonial background to show the world regarding the horrors of uncivilized mannerisms contrasting Victorian societal standards.

Apart from Mr. Earnshaw and Catherine, all other in the novel points out the so called real Heathcliff, who is a savage and an evil spirited. Hindley just before his death addressed Heathcliff as a big fat cuckoo sitting in there nest as if he was already the master of the house- which can be interpreted as a dark African under the warm shelter of a British. It also tries to tell even though he was sheltered and brought up under such a civilized environment the savage in him never dies. It's because of his inheritance otherwise it would have perished as it did in Catherine when she accidentally enters Thrushcross Grange. By this Emily stated a generalized notion about the nature of ‘other’. As Patrick Brantinger argues in his book *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* that “the native could not be civilized because they could only mimic the white mans behaviour” (65)

Thus, one can observe the postcolonial binaries like savage/civilized, master/servant, good/evil, barbaric/gentlemen etc. which clearly traces the process of othering under colonialism and its cruel phase of master and servant relationship between Hindley and Heathcliff respectively. It is also evident through Hindley's violence against Heathcliff when they are young “off dog! Cried Hindley, threatening him with an iron weigh, used for weighing potatoes and hay... Hindley threw it, hitting him on the breast, and down he fell... (Bronte 50). Then Linton's who are more concerned about class and race suggests that they should do the country a favour by hang him at once (Bronte 69) and their ill treatment is evident in Isabella's words about Heathcliff: “frightful thing! Put him in the cellar, papa. He's exactly like the son of the fortune-teller that stole my tame pheasant. Isn't he Edger?” (Bronte 59) And the dog Skulker that is released to catch Cathy and Heathcliff is a symbol of brutality the higher social classes conceal together with their possessions according to Eagleton (401)

So it is Victorian society and societal standards stood as a venomous villain in the life of Heathcliff. Because he lost his innocence and love, from the day Catherine stayed in Thrushcross grange. Where, Catherine under their (bourgeois) influence becomes aware of her social statues and starts viewing Heathcliff as ‘other’. According to Eagleton it is the crucial turn in the novel. Catherine starts to feel that Heathcliff “is socially inferior to Linton” (Eagleton 396). On the other hand Von Sneidren marks it would be “degrading” for

Catharine to marry her slave (178). Whatever, it is the social construction which crops up difference in the name of class and race. Although her feelings towards Heathcliff have not changed, her mind is ruled by the Victorian ideologies. So she chooses Edgar, who is a perfect Victorian gentleman. It is like Catherine, forced to follow the institutionalized thinking than innate feelings. As D.H.Lawrence mentioned in his famous poem *The Snake*.

Soon, Heathcliff realised wealth and status matters more than love and servitude. And he who never wanted to be like Edgar Linton claims the ladder of Victorian society and changed himself from his gibberish language to more polished English, ragged, dirty clothing to gentlemen's attire, uncombed rough hair to neatly done hairstyle. But this materialistic achievement is not fully acceptable by Edgar, he calls him as a "gipsy-the plough boy" (Bronte 98). Then he reminds Catherine about Heathcliff's early position "... the whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother" (99). And with reluctance Edger addresses him as 'sir' (99) just to please Catherine as a sign of his gentleness.

Now, the irony is, Catherine Linton wants to be a girl again; "half savage and hardy, and free" (Bronte 126) shows that she is longing for freedom from suffocating social standards. Later the illness and death of Catherine is not self-inflicted as Heathcliff assumes. It is the Victorian world of fantasy (ideologies) ruled her life and ruined her to death. So the news of her death shattered the stubborn Heathcliff, "he dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast getting goaded to death with knives and spears" (155). This description through Nelly is given intentionally by Emily to show the savage in him never died even he attained social status and considered as gentleman. And indirectly supports Hindley pointing Heathcliff as he was just wearing gentlemen's cloth, the real he is a bastard gypsy.

Even in the initial chapters of *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood a man of outer world who is exposed to the modernity and modesty gives us a detailed explanation of fallen Heathcliff, who looks like a savage, inhuman, uncivilized nomadic living with his untamed ferocious dogs, loves to be lone than with the company of anyone.

"Mr. Heathcliff forms a singular contrast to his abode and style of living. He is a dark skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman..." (Bronte 21)

But it is in contrast to Nelly Dean's description of Heathcliff as a fourteen years boy in the house of Earnshaw a very patient child hardened with bad experience of life and ill-treatment never used to complain about anything:

....he was as uncomplaining as a lamb; though hardness, not gentleness, made him gives little trouble'.(50)

In the opinion of Von Sneidern this is a description of a child growing up as a slave and a description often used by Victorians to describe Africans, (176). But, its not mere description, it is the real condition of slaves. Who are later inflicted with evilness by Victorian people. So Heathcliff, who was a lamb changed into a beast under the cruel rule of white people. It's their ill-treatment fills the innocents with rudeness. For instance Catherine reveals it in her dairy

'My head aches, till I cannot keep it on the pillow; and still I can't give over. Poor Heathcliff! Hindley calls him a Vagabond, and won't let him sit with us, nor eat with us any more; and, he says, he and I must not play together, and threatens to turn him out of the house if I break his orders. He has been blaming our father (how dared he?) for treating H. too liberally; and swears he will reduce him to his right place'-(36)

It is also clear by the incident in *Wuthering heights*, when Lockwood, encountered with the ghost of Catherine through the window and who demands to let in for she has "come home" (38). "Who are you?" he asks, struggling to free himself. Then "Terror makes him cruel" (38) and he drags the "creature's" wrist against the broken pane until it bleeds (39). It suggests that the environment makes man cruel than one chooses to be. No matters with the race or class he belongs to.

So under the postcolonial analysis of the text, it is understood, the cruel rule of British masters like Hindley, Linton and its social standards are the causes of Heathcliff's inhuman behaviour. And even Emily Bronte seems to be with Victorian gentleman like Hindley and Edgar Linton, because again and again Emily upholds the wilderness of Heathcliff by many adjectives than sympathising him in any situations. The inhuman behaviour with Isabella, revengeful treatment of young Hareton, carelessness towards his own son Linton, selfish attitude towards young Cathy portrays him as a wretch. Then the way he digs up the grave of Catherine and spends his night sleeping with the wormed skeleton in the mid of nasty smell and horror filled burial ground makes us to feel he is a monster more than a man.

In this way Emily proved that only a dark skinned man can do such devilish things than a man of Victorian society. Thus Heathcliff sticks on to his first introduction i.e.

"...it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (Bronte 48)

But it is the pure love and passion which made him mad. It is his innate feelings bursts out and his innocence made him insane. And the animal in him came out to protect his love and life from the dramatic world of Victorians. Where, money is valued more than man and humanity. Then the Victorian ideology played the role of hand in glove. As, Louis Althusser explains, that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (294). And "this imaginary reality is usually imposed on a population by a small group of people who use the false reality to oppress that population" (295). Thus the revenge as an ideology influenced on Heathcliff's actions. He followed the footsteps of Hindley in ill-treating Hareton. He imitated Edgar to become a gentleman. He thought revenge will make everything right. Ironically, in the end he stands as a victim of these ideologies by committing several unpardoned errors. Thus the uncomplained lamb turned into beast as it grown up under the shelter of Victorians. In the words of Nelly 'He seemed sullen, patient child; hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment...' (Bronte 49). To conclude, it is in the process of socializing a child of 'other' the Victorian society inflicted Heathcliff with evilness and created a rootless identity.

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