YORKSHIRE MOORS AND CATHERINE AS THE LEAST EFFEMINATE GENDER IDENTITIES IN EMILY BRONTE’S WUTHERING HEIGHTS

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Abstract: Will we ever escape the gendering of nature, such a long carried out tradition in literature and culture, and will there ever be gender neutrality? A close analysis of Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights provides answer to this question. The concept of connecting women with nature dates back to the times of ancient classical mythology, with several goddesses being strongly connected to the earth. In this paper my attempt is to analyse Emily Bronte’s debut novel Wuthering Heights in which Yorkshire moors, the setting of the novel, along with the central character Catherine, escapes the feminine gendering. Bronte succeeds in presenting the character of Catherine as free from all the conventional notions of a gothic heroine. New approaches and eco feminism now a days, explain how women tried to get away from the notion that, nature can be looked upon only with feminine connotations. Critics who study these women's writings have been particularly interested to show how the “gendered” female landscape that is central to nineteenth-century male writing, is given more complex expression in works by women. They also show how female writing about the environment weaves together concerns about ordinary life and explores questions of community, gender, domination, and exploitation.

Keywords: Gendering,feminine, Ecofeminism, Environment, Domination

INTRODUCTION:

In Wuthering Heights, Bronte reacts against the patriarchal myth of treating women as submissive nurturing earth mother. Catherine, the female protagonist, and Heathcliff the male protagonist are equally close to nature; but later in her life Catherine tries to get away from nature and also from Heathcliff. She embraces a civilized life with Edgar Linton in Thrush cross grange, with nature(against culture) and Heathcliff (against Edgar Linton) still in the core of her mind.

Associating women with mother earth, a common theme of Romantic male writers is a real issue that attracted ecofeminist writer’s attention. Such kind of identification is not just for adoring her by giving such a venerable post, but to conveniently forget the fact that she too is a human being with human vices and follies. Likening her to Mother Nature and earth is just an act of silencing her by keeping her on throne which bleeds her. When nature is discussed in poetry there are usually feminine references to the issues of the life cycle such as fertility, bounty and reproduction. Nature is feminized because it is seen as possessing the same qualities as women at the time when most of the romantic writing was produced. Women were seen as being domestic, pious, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful, simple and beautiful; this was according to the nature of separate spheres: men and women were fundamentally different in terms of their characteristics as men were seen as hard-working, industrial, rational, assertive, independent and proud; none of which is easily connected with nature. Therefore nature was seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess and there are frequent references to this in literature, especially poetry. So many aspects of nature are ‘born’ from the earth and this can be likened to the opening of the womb to produce life; there are several literary references to reproductive terms such as womb and bosom. For the masculine ego, women and nature became instruments for self-definition and the feminization of nature suggests the romance of travel and perception.
First, we must note that Wuthering Heights is a place of wildness, passion and life. The constant emphasis on landscape within the text of Wuthering Heights endows the setting with symbolic importance. This landscape is comprised primarily of moors: wide, wild expanses, high, and thus-infertile. Moorland cannot be cultivated, and its uniformity makes navigation difficult. The very aspect is very important that in no way the landscape can be biologically connected to a woman character in the novel.

The Moors feature particularly waterlogged patches in which people could potentially drown. Thus, the moors serve very well as symbols of the wild threat posed by nature. In no way such a landscape can be conventionally synonymies’ with a typical, subordinate women character.

The frequent references to the Yorkshire moors speaks in volume about the significant role the nature and nature imagery plays in the life of different characters and in their mutual relationship. In Chapter IX Catherine finds herself having to decide between her love for Heathcliff and her love for Edgar. Description of Cathy’s feelings towards Linton and Heathcliff in terms of nature imagery is highly noteworthy. As far as Catherine was concerned, Heathcliff is synonymous with the great forces of nature and with herself, while for others who hate him, he is a devil:

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightening, or frost from fire…. 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. (108)

The application of landscape to characters is made explicit throught out the novel. To exalt the power of human feeling, Emily Bronte roots her analogies in the fierce life of animals and the relentless life of the elements. Conscious or rather unconsciously, Emily attempts to metaphorize human feelings and appearance with elements in nature, without any conspicuous gender bias. Here we met all characters despite their sex, as being compared to elements such as fire, water, wind etc. Male characters such as Edgar Linton, Heath cliff along with Nelly Dean and Catherine share their emotions with nature or presented as synonymic with different aspects of nature. Mark Schorer in his essay “The metaphors in Wuthering heights” writes like this:

Human condition is like the activites of the landscape, where rain floods, blasts wail, and the snow and the wind whirl wildly and blow out lights. For example, Mrs.Dean rushes to welcome Lockwood, exclaiming tumultuously; ‘Linton’s soul is as different from Heathcliff’s as a moonbeam from lightening, or frost from fire’; ‘your veins are full of ice water; but mine are boiling’; ‘hair flies, bodies toss or tremble like reeds, tears stream or rain down among ashes.’ (62)

Thus when Heathcliff over hears Catherine speaking to Nelly of such things he runs away this is described in the novel using ‘dark and cold’ connotations towards nature, which gives the reader a negative effect and sets the mood. Nature is presented as even sharing the feeling of Heathcliff in an empathetic manner. / “It was a very dark evening for summer: the clouds appeared inclined to thunder…there was a violent wind as well as thunder”/(110)

The Moors throughout the novel play a significant role in nature, as I believe this can determine the personality of the character. As Wuthering Heights the estate is prone to barren fields, and scarce trees.”...Descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its stations is exposed in stormy weather.” Descriptions such as “...Yesterday afternoon set in misty and cold…On that bleak hill top the earth was hard with black frost, and the air made me shiver through every limb.” 24

This shows that this type of environment is for people who are strong and independent as this is a central place in establishing Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship unlike Edgar, Isabella or Linton who show little interest in this barren ‘gothic’ like landscape. Again, In chapter XII Catherine is left in a mental frenzy due to the fight between Heathcliff and Edgar. Catherine drives herself to insanity by refusing to eat for several days, thus she begins to become delusional as having not left her room in days she insists on opening the windows. “Oh, I’m burning! I wish I was out of doors—I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardly, and free…” 150

Although there is no imagery of nature present in this quote, this alludes the presence of nature as when Catherine was younger and in a better mental state.

In Chapter XIII Catherine’s bodily health is back in shape, the moors are beginning to clear up and spring is arriving. “These are the earliest flowers at the Heights...They remind me of soft thaw winds, and warm sunshine, and nearly melted snow…”158. This is a representation of the shift in energy and mood in Catherine’s personality as her mental state is now positive as the ‘gothic’ elements turn to ‘bright’ elements.

In Chapter X, Catherine is trying to warn Isabella of Heathcliff’s personality by drawing to a metaphor exploring the nature of the book’s descriptive language. W. A. Craik in his work The Bronte Novels says:

While speaking to Isabella she keeps to such natural parallels like; “He’s not a rough diamond, apearl containing oyster of a rustic; he’s a fierce, pitiless wolfish man…He’d crush you, like a sparrow’s egg.” (128)

This quote reveals the contrast through the use of the beauties of nature which is then compared to old and beastly connotations.

Catherine the “heroine” of Wuthering Heights embodies the independent spirit and flawed morality coupled with the physical beauty and emotional volatility of the Gothic heroine. Catherine is intelligent and is capable of self-reflection, qualities which are traditionally absent from Gothic heroines. She does not merely relate
YORKSHIRE MOORS AND CATHERINE AS THE LEAST EFFEMINATE GENDER IDENTITIES IN EMILY BRONTE’S ......

her story, but she reveals her innermost feelings, thoughts and dreams. Catherine scolds Nelly,

“Shake your head as you will, Nelly, you have helped to unsettle me! You should have spoken to Edgar, indeed you should, and compelled him to leave me quiet! Oh, I’m burning! I wish I were out of doors! I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hard, and free.”(150)

Catherine’s speech would never have been spoken by a traditional Gothic heroine. She is overly harsh and demanding, even in her sickness she remains authoritarian and unforgiving. Catherine’s desire to be in nature and return to her youth shows her refusal to conform to the norms society laid out for her as a wife and mother. She even recognizes herself as “savage” and “hard.” Through the complex emotions of Catherine, “A heroine’s mind, Brontë is insisting here, need not be a blank one. It may sometimes be plagued by contradictory or self-defeating desires.”

Catherine never lets herself be controlled by the men in the novel. As a child, she rebels against her father and later her brother, while she has Heathcliff completely in her own control: “the boy would do her bidding in anything.”

Later, when she has moved to Thrushcross Grange and married Edgar Linton, Catherine again has the upper hand in the relationship. In a reversal of conventional gender roles, Linton is the submissive personality, who complies with Catherine’s every whim and demand. Likewise, Edgar’s sister, a woman more sophisticated and cultivated that Catherine, cedes control and power to Catherine. Nelly Dean remembers that they were both very attentive to her comfort, and it was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles, but the honey-suckles embracing the thorn. There were no mutual concessions; one stood erect, and the others yielded.

It is evident that Catherine has not only the strength to match herself which those considered more powerful by society, but she has the power to exert dominance over them. Even as she is dying, Catherine remains strong-willed and speaks her mind without concern of being too harsh or unfeeling. She tells Heathcliff, “I wish I could hold you till we were both dead! I shouldn’t care what you suffered. I care nothing for your sufferings. Why shouldn’t you suffer? I do!” (181)

While she does not let societal expectations or boundaries control her in her position or behavior as a woman, Catherine is nonetheless aware of the workings of her society and has ambition to ascend to a higher social status. After her recuperation at Thrushcross Grange she returns to the Heights an outwardly changed person: instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in. While Catherine outwardly conforms to society’s fashions, she still retains her free spirit, brutal honesty, and boldness. Her conflicting relationships with the civilized Lintons and the barbaric Heathcliff “led her to adopt a double character.”

Superficially, Catherine desires to be a person of class and culture, yet she can never suppress her wild nature. She desperately attempts to become a person of respectability and refinement, but only ostensibly for the fineries and the comforts wealth can bring. Catherine never actually expresses the desire to be a good, respectable wife and raise a family, as society (and Edgar Linton) encourages. Catherine explains, “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now,” and asks Nelly, “did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars?”thus choosing to advance into the more reputable world of Thrushcross Grange. In response to Catherine’s newfound desire for material wealth, Heathcliff goes out into the world to acquire riches and power. Finally, both realize that “such essays at material possession are finally not as satisfying as they anticipated, surely not as fulfilling as spiritual possession would be.”

Catherine exemplifies the innate curiosity often attributed to women: the curiosity for luxuries, wealth and a more lavish way of life. Due to Catherine’s initial curiosity to peep into the window of Thrushcross Grange, she is dragged into the temptations elicited by high society. Although Catherine desires all the comforts of a wealthier lifestyle, she refuses to conform to the expectations of her class, and rebels constantly against her husband.

Through the character of Catherine, Brontë has reorganized the idea of a woman perfectly obedient, pure and submissive. Nature, the Yorkshire Moors is also not conceived as feminine and maternal, but just as gender neutral setting which shares the feelings and emotions of both Heathcliff and Catherine, irrespective of their gender and often it assumes the role of a character. In most of the emotional speeches of Catherine nature imagery comes very often. Thus Emily Bronte succeeds in presenting nature as a life like character without any feminine biases. Yorkshire moors and its description has made the novel a significant one.

The location of Catherine’s coffin symbolizes the conflict that tears apart her short life. She is not buried in the chapel with the Lintons. Nor is her coffin placed among the tombs of the Earnshaws. Instead, as Nelly describes in Chapter XVI, Catherine is buried “in a corner of the kirkyard, where the wall is so low that heath and bilberry plants have climbed over it from the moor.” Moreover, she is buried with Edgar on one side and Heathcliff on the other, suggesting her conflicted loyalties. Her actions are driven in part by her social ambitions, which initially are awakened during her first stay at the Lintons’, and which eventually compel her to marry Edgar. However, she is also motivated by impulses that prompt her to violate social conventions—to love Heathcliff, throw temper tantrums,
and run around on the moor.

Set in the harsh and isolated Yorkshire moors in Northern England, Wuthering Heights practically makes a character out of its geography without any bias towards feminine or masculine character traits. Both Catherine and Yorkshire moors are the least feminine, in the conventional sense, despite their female charms and attributes. The novel is more about the cordial at the same time complex interrelation with man, woman and nature which itself is the dictum of ecofeminist writers. Unfortunate situations and unwise decision disturbs the relationship among the three but finally death eternally bring the two in close union in the lap of nature. So the novel is indeed a reaction against the gendered feminine landscape as reflected in the works of many male writers of the time. Neither the female protagonist Catherine, nor the Yorkshire moors are conventionally gendered. A close reading of the novel and its characters will reveal its gender neutrality. The novel delineates the complex interrelations among Heathcliff, Catherine and Yorkshiremoors without any conventional branding of “being feminine”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
