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**‘In Search of Bronte’:
A (Re)-reading of *Wuthering Heights* and Rethinking Feminism**

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Abstract:

Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights has been classified as one of those seminal texts which shook the foundations of patriarchy. Published in 1847, the story becomes not just a portrayal of a tumultuous love that ends in a catastrophe, but also challenged the conventions of love stories written in the past. Subsequent interpretations of the text by literary critics have focused on the powerful language used by Bronte, particularly the feminist critics who have located the text as a strong voice against patriarchal authority. Bronte has delineated herself from the patriarchal

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tradition by her use of 'striking images' coupled with 'bold themes' and a different narrative technique. While contemporary feminists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray have sought to identify this 'voice' as 'womanspeak', a language produced by a woman's libido and Bronte's desire to 'celebrate the body which has been more than confiscated from her by patriarchy', others such as Mary Jacobus positions this struggle as the 'author's desire to return back to the unconscious'. In this essay I would like to put forth a different argument.

Wuthering Heights marks Bronte's journey of creating a distinctive space for herself. But she does not transgress the boundaries of home to reach there. Instead she locates it in the domestic sphere. An interesting observation would reveal that throughout the novel, important events that had swerved the lives of the characters occurred in the kitchen.

Also there is a recurrence of 'starvation', 'hunger strike' which the two protagonists of the novel, Catherine and Heathcliff continually take recourse to voice their protest. By locating all these aporias in the text, the present essay will interrogate the following questions: Why is the kitchen given such a predominant position in the novel? Why are there hunger strikes? Can these be read as forms of resistance towards patriarchal dominance? If so what is the nature of this resistance?

Keywords: *Feminism; hunger; starvation; kitchen; patriarchy; voice; identity.*

Emily Bronte's '*Wuthering Heights*' is not just a love-story but a complex working of powerful emotions that leaves the reader grappling with unanswered questions. In Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, Emily created mythic figures in the grip of a titanic passion. They are driven,

tormented, violent lovers and there are no wedding-bells for them in the final chapter. Their love is like some immutable force of nature—a hurricane or an earthquake and in Catherine’s own words, “My love for Linton is like foliage in the woods...my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath...” (Bronte 73). Such emotions can’t be questioned or resisted or escaped. And it is as a love story that *Wuthering Heights* has variously shocked, baffled, haunted and awed readers since it was first published. But it is also a book profoundly concerned with food and hunger and starvation.

The metaphors of ‘food’, ‘hunger’, ‘starvation’ comes up repeatedly in the novel as powerful themes. Interestingly a biographical reading of Bronte would suggest that herself showed an antipathy to food and was famous among her siblings for her whimsical behavior and peevish temper. Clinical psychologists after a deep introspection of her life reveal the fact that she suffered from a syndrome: ‘anorexia nervosa’. Not merely her refusal to eat and her extreme slenderness and preoccupation with food and cooking, but also her obsessive need for control, her retreat into an ongoing, interior fantasy world, and her social isolation are all characteristics of an ‘anorectic personality’ described by psychiatrists such as Hilde Bruch, Peter Dally and R.L. Palmer.

‘Anorexia nervosa’ or preoccupation with food first came up in the Victorian period where women considered it to be a fashionable thing. Wearing a ‘bodice’ that would make it difficult to breathe was in vogue and more and more women would refuse food to keep up a prim and proper body. “The entire objective was to be pleasing to the public and appear attractive” as Brumberg argues (Brumberg 15). He considers anorexia nervosa as a social and cultural malady and distinguishes between religious asceticism and anorexic fasting.

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Of course the two conditions can be easily confused: voluntary fasting has long been the route to transcendence for religious mystics, and anorexic women often experience alterations in consciousness and distorted sense perceptions akin to those described in account of mystical trances. But the mystic is not overwhelmingly hungry, preoccupied with food, obsessed with power and control, and terrified of disorder. The 'anorexic women' is all these things and Emily Bronte was also not free from all these obsessions. She perpetually and deliberately denied herself food to be hungry.

The physical hunger presages the emotional hunger that pervaded in her life- hunger for power and experience, for love and happiness fame and fortune and fulfillment. At a very young age, Emily and her siblings were left at the disposal of her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell by the death of their mother. Her father being an Anglican priest largely kept himself locked up in the confines of the library. Isolated as they were, and intimidated too by the coldness of her aunt and her father the little children had no one but each other to cling to. They knew death too young and had learned helplessness and emotional starvation too early. Despite the two grown-ups that saw to their physical and emotional needs, they had become with Maria Bronte's death permanent orphans. "And it is here" as Frank says "we glimpse already the origins of the themes of abandonment, victimization and exile which permeate all of Emily Bronte's writing." (Frank 46). In *Wuthering Heights* we find a reiteration of the same motif where we find an apparent loss of a parental figure in the entire novel. Mr. Earnshaw offers a glimpse of love and protection to the young Catherine and Heathcliff and the tragedy sets in with the death of him. Nelly Dean acts as a 'surrogate' mother who perhaps never understood what Catherine actually wanted from her.

Even in her *Gondal* poems the recurrent theme of loss, starvation and the desire to be 'loved' haunts the readers time and again in some of the mysterious children in Gondal. Some are 'unblessed, unfriended', like Alexandria who is abandoned, in '*I've seen this dell in July's shine*'; pretty Blanche, who turned into a gypsy, the subject of '*This shall be thy lullaby*'. As Chitham observes "...that they are all *children* is also important" (Chitham 210).

Interestingly the breakfast, lunch and dinner time were heralded with the sound of a gunshot which was fired by Patrick Bronte, the father of Emily Bronte. The Bronte family was plagued by stomach and eating ailments: dyspepsia, loss of appetite, nausea. With the simplest and smallest portions and a few sips of weak, milky tea the children were satisfied. And it was only this skimpy, bland morning meal that they ate together with their father. Breakfast usually consisted of Scotch porridge and simple joints and milk puddings were cooked for dinner. Emily in fact made porridge or gruel as the staple food in *Wuthering Heights*. Food is in the form of gruel and it is the only way of sustenance to all the characters. Gruel was served to the prisoners and in the novel, Catherine feels herself incarcerated after marrying Edgar Linton and moving to the Thrushcross Grange yearning to return back to her beloved Heathcliff and the Wuthering Heights.

"The natural world for Emily Bronte" as Mrs. Gaskell observes, "was a realm of unpredictable, superhuman forces compounded of equal parts of beauty and violence."(Gaskell 62). Loss drove the sisters to create a counter- reality in which they could take refuge. While Emily created Gondal, a fictional land somewhere in North Pacific, Charlotte created Angria, an imaginary land in West Africa. The hunger for human contact in Emily was satisfied by Gondal where she could retreat as and when she liked. In one of her poems she makes this idea quite clear:

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So hopeless is the world without

The world within I doubly prize

The world where guile, and hate, and doubt,

And cold suspicion never rise;

Where thou and I and Liberty

Have undisputed Sovereignty. (Bronte 205-06).

Hunger strikes for Emily were a register for power struggle, the desire to have power, and the power above all to overcome her losses and all the other deprivations of her life. It emanated out of an intense desire to control and be in charge of everything happening around, falling to the lines of an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder neurosis. Katherine Frank aptly puts it as "...the acts of speaking and eating were strangely intertwined in Emily's life. She would often substitute one for the other: words for food and food for words. Or she would withhold one for the other, silence for fasting or fasting for speech." (Frank 98). Emily first resorted to hunger strike when she went to Roe Head School from Haworth Parsonage where she lived. At Roe Head, in the late summer and autumn of 1835, pitted in the company of strangers and removed far away from her beloved moors, Emily pined to go back and she refused as far as possible to eat or speak. Her refusal of food was, in fact, a kind of utterance. The journal entries of Emily suggest this steadfast belief, "I hate it here. I *will* not eat. I want to go home. I refuse to grow up, to grow big. I *will* make myself ill; starve even, unless I'm released." (Frank 99). Fasting became a leitmotif of 'individual assertion' over the 'universal order' which Emily used dexterously. So it is not

surprising when we see Catherine do the same in *Wuthering Heights*, when she feels herself stifled under the burden of marriage with Edgar. Caught up between the dichotomies of love and faith, the 'society' and the 'private', hunger strike paved the way for a bigger liberation for her, a release from the cruel and cataclysmic battle called 'life'. And in the end Heathcliff too goes on a hunger strike. He dies as much of starvation as from the torment of being separated from Catherine.

Emily's philosophy was simple- where words had failed; fasting would be used as a ploy to win the situation in her favour. One need never be entirely powerless and devoid of control. When one is besieged with problems and the answer is not known, one could simply refuse to eat. Then even the most parsimonious and unbending will be forced to relent. The theme of food, hunger, starvation, nourishment becomes bolstered as the story of *Wuthering Heights* is largely set in the kitchens- Emily's own particular domain at the Haworth parsonage.

Traditionally identified as the 'feminine space', kept under veil, the kitchen in the novel becomes a site of all the actions. The locus of the kitchen circumscribes in itself the matrix of power relations. The kitchen at the Heights is a room of warmth and comfort, with a roaring fire and the kettle on the hob, but the kitchen is also the arena where the most passionate and violent scenes of the novel take place. Lockwood's first intrusion into the private chambers of *Wuthering Heights* happens after he crosses the kitchen and Catherine declares "I am Heathcliff" to Nelly Dean in the kitchen at the Heights (Bronte 73). Edgar Linton confronts and assaults Heathcliff in the kitchen at the Thrushcross Grange. Hareton is confined to the kitchen at the Heights after a shooting accident, and it is in the midst of the ceaseless cooking of meals that the love between him and young Catherine comes into being, nourished by books and primrose studded porridge.

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The kitchen became the most important and most comfortable room in the house for Emily, the inner sanctum of the parsonage, where she could most freely be herself. Here she used to read and write sitting at the kitchen table where she also peeled potatoes and kneaded the bread dough, with a German book propped up behind the bread board. She began to take up the family baking on her shoulders. Privacy, even secrecy was necessary for her to consume books, knowledge and food. *Wuthering Heights* marks Bronte's journey of creating a distinctive space for herself. But she does not transgress the boundaries of home to reach there. Instead she locates it in the domestic sphere. By making the territory of the kitchen a terrain of contestations, Emily moves from the traditional discursive formations that seek to challenge the patriarchal structures, representing a different version of feminism.

This underlying tension of hunger and starvation that runs as a thin fabric in *Wuthering Heights* gets interconnected with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and there is the paramount importance of food in *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the novel Jane is passionately hungry. But there is a subtle difference. Instead of refusing to eat like Catherine and Heathcliff, she is consistently denied food- literal, emotional and intellectual sustenance by others: her aunt, Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst and his reign of hunger at Lowood School, and the heartless and cruel people who refuse to help her when she flees from Rochester and Thornfield. As she moves from one place to another, Jane actively seeks nourishment, especially bread, the prisoners' and invalid's fare comparable to the porridge in *Wuthering Heights* and the gruel that Charlotte herself was consuming to ward off illness during the winter months when she was writing *Jane Eyre*. Like Catherine Earnshaw, Jane rebels, but her rebellion takes the form of a relentless quest for food from a society which cruelly withholds it. Her strength of will seeks the opposite of Catherine

and Heathcliff. “Unlike them who goes on a suicide mission to fast themselves to death,” as Frank observes “Jane *will* be fed; she *will* survive; she *will* grow up, love and marry; she *will* become large and whole.” (Frank 229). Charlotte’s quest took her outside the realms of the house, while Emily decided to reach out from staying in.

Fasting for Emily meant liberation, rising beyond the limits of the body to transcendence. It is a sort of metaphysical fasting where she spurns everything which is ordinarily considered to make human life valuable. In one of her poems she articulates this view:

Riches I hold in light esteem

And Love I laugh to scorn

And lust of Fame was but a dream

That vanished with the morn. (Bronte 163).

There is a shift from the physical, bodily desire for food and hunger at once becomes a bigger metaphor in the anorectic’s life. It is this precept that makes psychiatrists classify anorexia nervosa as not merely an ‘eating disorder’ but a neurotic state of a person governed by overwhelming fear of chaos and an obsession with order and control. As a Victorian woman and the daughter of an obscure clergyman, Emily Bronte possessed scant power or control over the world she inhabited or over the course of her own life. As Frank explains “She responded to her helplessness in two ways, both of which granted the illusion of power: through anorexic behavior and writing’ (Frank 220).

While previous critical analysis of the text has only focused on Emily’s writing, her preoccupation with fasting has been largely undermined. If writing was her way of realizing her

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desire through the imaginary, fasting was the course to reach that ideal. These two existed as part of a dyadic structure so that the failure of one would lead her to fall on the other. It was a medium to voice her resistance against the patriarchal world, the bigger world over which she had no control. By refusing to eat she seized control of the only thing which was malleable: her own body. This was an essentially destructive reaction to the chaos she felt impinging on her. Her creative response was to reorder and restructure her lost world out of the broken images of her destitute life in which she felt herself trapped.

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily combined her two overriding preoccupations with words and food and disclosed their close connection. After the publication of the novel, even the critics seemed to have been infected by Emily's preoccupation with food and hunger. One reviewer quipped about *Wuthering Heights* that it was "eagerly caught by a famished public... There is an old saying that those who eat toasted cheese at night will dream of Lucifer. The author of *Wuthering Heights* had evidently eaten toasted cheese" (Chitham 209). For Emily Bronte, writing and fasting are two available responses to conditions of helplessness and powerlessness. Both provide the illusion of mastery and control. And yet there is a crucial difference between the two. While writing is essentially an act of rebellion by which one tries to create a better world in hyper reality, fasting is an act of despair and defeat. The body is punished because the environment one inhabits cannot be changed.

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