

Literary Research Review

Edited by

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Boundaries of the Self: Vignettes of the Female Gothic In *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette*

Dr Malini Mukherjee

“What were the use of creation if I were entirely contained here?”¹ Thus cries the agonised Catherine Earnshaw, trying to voice her desperate urge to move out of her claustrophobic existence and transcend her Self beyond the immediate, in *Wuthering Heights*. Indeed, a recurring female voice of discontent and suffering amidst confinement and persecution echoes repeatedly in women’s gothic fiction throughout the 18th and 19th century. The genre of the gothic gives dramatic form to female anxiety of Self. Gothic romance offers a vivid expression of psychological, religious, epistemological and social anxieties that resolve themselves into a concern about boundaries of the Self. The isolated at the heart of the female gothic is one of the many Emilys, Mathildas, Julias and Isabellas, who stand in their very interchangeability, for “Woman”—the true “separated one” at the heart of the social order.

As two of the most intensely passionate voices in English literature, Emily and Charlotte Brontë express this anxiety through their works. My paper intends to explore the paradoxical portrayal of constraint and emancipation through the nature and activities of the female protagonists in *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette*.

The theme of imprisonment takes on a new dimension in women’s gothic, exploring women’s confinement within the domestic space, their subservient role in the family and regulation by marriage and property laws over which they had no control. All these connect the Gothic with the Domestic, since both are concerned with women’s enforced confinement and the paranoid fears it generates. One is reminded of little Jane Eyre’s imprisonment in the Red Room and her terrifying initiation into adult sexuality. Jane’s illness following her confinement in the Red Room is paralleled in *Wuthering Heights* by the situation of the tomboy Catherine Earnshaw. Accompanied by her childhood companion Heathcliff at the age of 12, she trespasses on the grounds of Thrushcross Grange, home of the

1 *Wuthering Heights*, 81.

The PG Section of the Department of English, Shri Shikshayatan College, publishes an academic journal every session. In its tenth year, a compilation of essays was planned as the first ISBN publication of the department. Twelve essays were chosen for the volume, with contributions from both teachers and students as has been the practice with the journals. Between them, they map the landscape of English literary studies with remarkable diversity and distinction. Spanning several centuries of artistic output, the essays offer new readings of both canonical and alternative works, bringing together the classical and the contemporary in interesting comparisons and contrasts. Demonstrating a wide range of theoretical standpoints, the essays in this volume bear testimony to the richness of the discipline both as it is structured in classrooms and in its more unconfined avatars outside. Read individually or as a collection, the volume will provide stimulating and thought-provoking approaches to and interpretations of texts both familiar and novel to all students of the discipline.

This volume hopes to be the first of many to grace the research efforts of the postgraduate section of the Department of English, Shri Shikshayatan College. The effusive response to the call for papers and the stellar quality of the contributions have been heartening, and have provided hope for taking this publication initiative forward in the years to come.

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