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A Study of Revenge in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*

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Abstract:

Revenge has been one of the predominant themes of English Literature especially seen in plays. By all means revenge has relevance with human psychology. The question which remains to be addressed is what actually prompts a person to go for revenge? Can we say it is because of circumstances or is it because of some deep grudge which has worked like a catalyst? If there is grudge who is behind it? Even if we take circumstantial evidence into consideration does it signify that a person needs a specific tag to be a part of social fabric? These are the key components which are to be explored in this paper. Looking back to revenge it is always played between two parties or at times among more than two. Repercussions of revenge have been equally severe. What remains on the top is of course horror, violence and bloodshed. Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights* follows the same yardstick. It is none other than the hero himself, who goes for revenge and makes everyone's life miserable. But there is a reason behind all this. In brief this paper as the title suggests seeks to attempt in detail the causes behind revenge and how far the action of avenger can be justified.

Keywords: Revenge, Circumstance, Horror, Violence, Bloodshed.

If we take social scenario into consideration man has always been governed by society. To strive for companionship or to seek association has always been a part and parcel of human nature, because man as such cannot live in isolation. When it comes to association it is always seen within home and at times outside home that is with neighbours, friends, kith and kin and by all means with community. The interaction between man and society paved the way for so many things. To be more specific, this is what paved for the evolution of life. Had man not interacted with society then "Emotional development, intellectual maturity, the necessity of certain amount of material goods..." (Gisbert 44) was merely out of question. This can be taken as one part. But there is another side of coin and that lies in social hierarchy where each person has been assigned a specific place. It is obvious that one who attained an upper edge was always there to dominate others. This is what lead to the birth of class war. "In some societies persons both of noble lineage and of the aristocracy are accorded of superior rank in the social structure. In others the intellectual, the saint, the politicians or the businessman are held likewise in high esteem and encouraged in accordance with the scale of values of those societies" (Gisbert 20). Things turn chaotic only when there is an attempt of interchange. So far as human characters are concerned there we get a variety like introverts, extroverts, philanthropists, and sadistic. But when it comes to progress of society there

everyone has a right to contribute and lead a meaningful life. Everyone is blessed with one capability or another but what is required is to polish it. This is the task which mentors can perform. If we connect this with moral aspect, there philanthropists can play an active role. There is no harm in being compassionate to others who are in trouble. God is always there to reward for such selfless acts. But at the same time selfless act is not everybody's cup of tea. What takes person to the back foot is when he or she is made to understand that he or she is not like other. Consequently when he or she strives for progress it simply remains a dream because of the lack of support. The writing on the wall is clear that destitute, underprivileged ought to be kept on the periphery. They cannot be a part of mainstream line. This is where taboos play an instrumental role. But who has inculcated all this? It is again human perception which has created this web, where man is the worst enemy of man. On the one hand we are talking about the progress of society and on the other side we are more focused on social hierarchy. What is the outcome of this paradox? It means we are putting ourselves in quagmire which will lead us nowhere. When it comes to rights underprivileged class is not given an opportunity to raise its voice. Under such circumstances it is obvious that "Abusers often express their right to take out their frustrations, insecurity and anger..." (Singh 23). This speaks of the sad plight of all those who have been caught in this whirlpool. The worst outcome of it is seen in the form of revenge. What is more unfortunate is when demarcation line is drawn between haves and have nots.

Looking back to revenge, it gets connected with negativity. To seek revenge or to be revengeful is an abnormal aspect of human behavior. Sociologists and Psychologists believe that many a times revenge becomes the cause of every crime. There is always motive behind revenge and that is to compensate the loss suffered earlier. In some cases it is just to execute the task, no matter whatsoever the consequence may be which means that human psyche becomes blind to such an extent that difference between right and wrong is completely ignored. Who is to be blamed for it? It is again the association between man and society, which has worked like a catalyst. Does it mean that man ought to be back to primitive life? The answer will be no. The uphill task which lies in our hands is how to wipe out disharmony in society.

English Literature as such is full of examples where revenge has been one of the major themes. We have genre of Revenge Tragedy which flourished in England. *Gorboduc* the first Revenge Tragedy deserves to be mentioned. Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* can be taken as a role model. After this Revenge Tragedy came in quick succession. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*, Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are excellent examples. Violence and bloodshed formed an integral part of such tragedies. It was usual with dramatists to put emphasis on remorse, conflict, tragic flaw, malignant motives which paved the way for revenge. Poetic Justice was done in rarest of the rare cases. Even Romantic poets like P.B. Shelley too tried his hand in Revenge Tragedy. *The Cenci* can be taken as an example of Revenge Tragedy. Same strategy was adopted by dramatists in America particularly pioneers like Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and Miller's *A View of the Bridge* are outstanding

examples. So far as Victorian England is concerned, this was an age of advancement and progress but it had some dark spots like melodrama especially seen in the novels of Charles Dickens, Charles Reade and Willie Wikie Collins. What lead to melodrama is of course revenge. The concept of revenge formed a part and parcel of Crime Fiction as well. With the passage of time, this concept attained dominance in every genre of literature.

Likewise Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights* has come up with the story of revenge. Emily Bronte as such has not too much to her credit, but with *Wuthering Heights* she carved a niche for herself. *Wuthering Heights* can be described as one of the classics of English Fiction. What remains on the top is of course horror which makes us shiver. The surroundings around *Wuthering Heights* occupied by hero (Heathcliff) produce an atmosphere of awe. Primarily it is Heathcliff who is worst hit and goes for revenge. Once the process of revenge begins other characters become soft target for Heathcliff. He is always there to move heaven and earth so as to achieve his end. But before revenge reached its peak certain things have already ignited the spark. It would be more appropriate to give a look towards the plot of *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* is in the form of flashback and Bronte deserves a word of praise for it. The technique of flashback keeps us more engrossed and curious. *Wuthering Heights* presents a story of doomed relationship where beloved is not ready to accept her lover openly but in her heart of hearts she feel devoted towards him. She gets married to another man so as to be near her lover. Both lover and his beloved take a pledge for the ultimate union. Their pledge turns into reality not in this world but in the world of eternity. Apart from it what else is in *Wuthering Heights*? Bronte dwells in detail so far as the relation between two families (Earnshaws and Lintons) is concerned. The relation between siblings has been analysed in detail. We cannot forget Neally Deane (the housekeeper of Earnshaws) the sole witness of this heartrending tale and the omniscient narrator Lockwood who comes in contact with Heathcliff. Bronte directly takes us to *Wuthering Heights* the abode of Heathcliff where he is seen in conversation with Lockwood. Lockwood as such becomes curious to know the mystery which has engulfed the whole place. Neally Deane is always there to provide him with the update.

We salute Earnshaw (father of heroine) because he does the humanitarian service when he picks Heathcliff from the street. Who is Heathcliff? We can add numberless Adjectives like savage, and foundling to Heathcliff. Where are parents of Heathcliff? Bronte as such has nothing to reveal about them. So for Heathcliff life cannot be bed of roses but he is destined to accept the rising sun in the form of Earnshaw. The rising sun no doubt brings ray of hope but at times it comes under dark clouds. So is the case with Heathcliff, the very moment he joins with Earnshaws he is not given warm welcome because they take him as an outsider. Why outsider? The answer to this question lies in manmade barriers where line is drawn between civilized and uncivilized. None among Earnshaws except Neally Deane and Catherine Earnshaw (the heroine) is ready to be with Heathcliff. But if we see other side of the coin what comes at the very outset is that Heathcliff is a human being. It is all but natural for him to crave for settlement, love and affection. "Though certain qualities and characteristics of human beings are natural, humans are not necessarily limited to being solely what they naturally are. On the contrary improvement is both a practical and moral

imperative. What is given to human beings in or by nature must be added to or improved by human means in particular by the exercise of human reason through proper choice.” (Handler and Segal 20). If we stick to this concept Heathcliff as such needs grooming. But thorns are always laid on his path. Who is responsible for it? It is again human perception (as mentioned earlier also) which has played a pivotal role in it. The relationship which Heathcliff shares with Catherine Earnshaw blossoms into love but Hindley (brother of Catherine Earnshaw) is always there to bully him for one thing or other. With each passing day Heathcliff begins to realise that he is most unwanted in the house. What adds fuel to the fire is the incident when Catherine Earnshaw (who had gone for a walk) along with Heathcliff breaks her ankle and stays with Lintons (neighbours of Earnshaws). From there onwards is the courtship of Edgar Linton and Catherine which culminates in wedlock. This is one of the major setback to Heathcliff. Prior to this there is a strong confession on the part of Catherine that no one can separate her from Heathcliff preceded by his sudden disappearance. So what kind of love it is? Can love be like this? Can this love ever culminate in wedding bells? “Is it man’s nature to be able to love only what he cannot fully possess?” (Weinberg 182). If we reply to these questions in affirmative then love becomes a chase, where it may be either won or lost. The yardstick is applicable to both Catherine and Heathcliff. All we can say is that their path is full of obstacles. Their relationship speaks about the union of beauty and beast which appears to be little unusual. But love is an emotion, when it has to happen, it will definitely happen. It never happens by force. What is seen in *Wuthering Heights* is the conflict between love, wealth and rank. It is wealth which completely overshadows love. Love we can say is natural but wealth is manmade. Fight is between the two. This seen when Heathcliff (as a wealthy man) make a strong comeback, presents himself in front of Lintons and gets ready for combat.

What forms the crux of *Wuthering Heights* is one tragedy after another. The pall of gloom descends in *Wuthering Heights* (abode of Earnshaws) when Earnshaw (father of Catherine) dies. After Earnshaw it is Hindley who takes the lead. Hindley getting married, blessed with son (Hareton) and taking control of household adds twist to the tale. Same is the case with Heathcliff. He enters in wedlock with Isabella (Edgar Linton’s sister) not out of love but simply for revenge. Isabella and Heathcliff are blessed with son (Linton). Isabella as a person can well understand that her marriage with Heathcliff is just a game. Towards the end it is Isabella who deserts Heathcliff. This can be taken as a betrayal but Heathcliff as such is not affected by it. Where Isabella goes? Bronte gives no clue about it. Even Catherine’s life with Edgar is shortlived. She dies while giving birth to a girl child who too is named Catherine. What follows after this is the death of Edgar Linton. Hindley as such is in deep debt and it is Heathcliff who takes the control of *Wuthering Heights* (the abode of Earnshaws). Bronte shifts the tale towards Heathcliff and characters like Catherine, Hareton, Hindley, Linton and Nelly Deane revolve around him. Catherine and Linton become tools for Heathcliff and Heathcliff as such leaves no stone unturned to prove his supremacy. His annoyance, pain and jealousy knows no extent. To achieve his motive he wants Linton and Catherine to enter in wedlock. He makes Hareton’s life miserable. Hareton is always there to obey him like a servant to his master. Many a times Hareton tries to revolt but it turns into futile exercise. Why Heathcliff does this? The answer lies in agony and humiliation which has pierced like

an arrow into his heart. He is deeply hurt. So, why he will go back? He will not mend his ways. He seeks revenge from all those who have been his rivals. So Heathcliff becoming sadistic, ferocious and destructive is justified by all means.

The first generation of Earnshaws and Lintons is completely wiped out. The ball lies in the hands of Hareton, Linton and Catherine. What will be their fate? Will they be able to wipe out the dreadful memory of past and move towards new dawn? This Bronte keeps ambiguous. Catherine, Edgar and Heathcliff (as mentioned earlier also) meet the same fate because all the three die. Bronte towards the end provides us with a vision where Heathcliff and Catherine are walking together which means that love has attained dominance in eternal world. This speaks of her optimism despite the fact that events in *Wuthering Heights* present a dismal picture. Catherine, Edgar and Heathcliff formed a triangular love story. Catherine no doubt loved Heathcliff passionately. She is blessed with soft heart which makes her different from rest of the characters. It is her softness which paves the way for love. But she is not prepared to take the risk and face the outcome with bold heart. This is one of the major flaw in her character. So far as Edgar is concerned he is husband of Catherine. As husband he knows his duties well but he cannot acquire the place of Heathcliff. Had Heathcliff been not there it was obvious that Catherine and Edgar would have lived a happy marital life. What makes Heathcliff's life more tragic? Upto some extent we can say it is Catherine and odd circumstances where he is left with no option but to go for revenge.

The message which Bronte sends across through Heathcliff is that human life is governed by fate and birth begins with innocence. Man has a power to mend his ways but he cannot overcome his fate. It is fate and circumstance which has always played a significant role. In the very beginning we see Heathcliff in rags. Had everyone cooperated with him he would have cherished the dream of better life. If we keep Earnshaw aside the tragedy is that he lands in unsafe hands and as such gets trapped from everywhere. His psyche is let down to an extent where he feel that revenge is the only solution. Heathcliff is more remembered as a victim of manmade circumstances. We need to take his revenge in the positive sense, because there lies a genuine cause behind it.

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