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## **Politics of Authorship and Pseudonymity in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: A Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

A text that has successfully broken through the 'Jane Eyre Fever' and withstood the test of time, the story of the Earnshaws and Lintons in "Wuthering Heights" has well established itself as a cult classic in literature, hailed for its rebellion against the Victorian ideals of decorum and femininity. Read and reread globally by millions, it has become a regular fixture in almost every must-read list, and yet the construction of authorship in the novel, governed by a dynamic of secrecy and disclosure is a matter that intrigues readers to date. This paper attempts to go behind the novel and analyze from a feminist point of view the sexism of the Victorian literary marketplace in terms of the existing circumstances in the publishing industry and the reception history of the novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> c Victorian society as well as aspects of her personality as the possible reasons that may have made her employ a mask of anonymity.

**Keywords:** Ellis Bell, Victorian age, pseudonym, male chauvinism, feminist.

In a biographical notice written for the new edition of "Wuthering Heights" dated 1850, Charlotte Brontë revealed Emily Brontë and Anne Brontë as the real identities of the writers of "Wuthering Heights" and "Agnes Grey" respectively, an action that has become a seminal landmark in the academic reception of the Brontë sisters and additionally for the history of secret authorship. She makes three crucial points here namely, that the works published under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell are not the works of a single person but three different people i.e., her sisters and her (most critics initially referred to the novelist of "Wuthering Heights" as a 'he' or as the author of "Jane Eyre", believing the two to be same), the reasons for becoming these pseudonyms in the course of their writing and how they were the

absolute opposites of their male performative persona in reality apart from elaborating on the seemingly unfavorable reception of “*Wuthering Heights*” and “*Agnes Grey*”.

The pseudonyms chosen by the sisters fulfill at least 2 criteria- they carried their initials but were also common enough to not afford any clue about their identities. The name Bell is likely to have been chosen from the surname of their father's curate, Arthur Bell Nichols to whom Charlotte would eventually get married. While Currer seems to be taken from Miss Francis Mary Richardson Currer of Eshton Hall, one of the founding patrons of the Clergy Daughter's School and a neighbor of the Sidgwicks where Charlotte had worked as a governess, the name Acton is likely to have been inspired by the poetess Eliza Acton who had gained substantial success in her day and was patronized by the royalty. However, no definite source for Emily's pseudonym has been found. Speculations about it have been far and wide with some interpreting it as a tribute to her late sister, Elizabeth Brontë, the second daughter of Reverend Patrick Brontë, who tragically died of tuberculosis at the age of 10 in 1825 when Emily was only 6 years old., and others connecting it with people like Ellis Cunliffe Lister, the Brontës' parliamentary representative and the father of Mary Ingham, Anne Brontë's employer at Blake Hall of Mirfield, George Ellis, a friend of Sir Walter Scott to whom the introduction to the fifth canto of “*Marmion*” is addressed and Sarah Ellis, the author of “*Manuals on Womanhood*” and other didactic fiction.

The increasingly bourgeois society of the 1830s and 40s saw the professionalization of authorship. This was a time that witnessed radical transformations in society all of which greatly impacted the output of literature and established a mass market for it. The technological developments in the printing press coupled with the new distribution networks owing to improved roads and the emergence of railways, the hugely popular concept of circulating libraries as well as the general social and educational changes led to a great demand for printed materials, especially in the middle and working classes unlike previously when literature was more reliant upon its consumption by the aristocracy and patronage. As increasing literacy meant an increasing readership, this, in turn, hailed capitalism in the publishing industry as well where books too now became a part of the Industrial Revolution's commodity culture. The idea of the novel as a product consequently led to the idea of the author as the owner of intellectual property to whom legal protection was extended with the advent of Copyright. All these changes in the

idea of authorship and readership signified that authors and readers themselves became highly politicized notions, influenced by aspects of gender and class.

In “Professions for women” Virginia Woolf mentions how almost every female author of her age and the past has had to overcome the constraining shackles of “the angel in the house” concept to be able to assert herself on paper. This idea of docile femininity is especially true for Victorian women. The Victorian era was an age where women were labeled as the angel in the house and idolized as the guardian of emotional and spiritual values within the domestic realm. They were the objects of sentimental idolization, to be curbed and reigned in, in keeping with the cultural proscriptions against ‘forwardness’ in women or conversely that of sexual prejudice, if they dared to break boundaries. In keeping with this, the Brontë children too had been brought up within an environment of supposed respectability and chaperonage. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in “The Madwoman in the Attic” in discussing the gendering of authorship state that while male sexuality is the essence of literary power, female sexuality inherently denotes an absence of such power and how in a patriarchal society, the text’s author is almost always a ‘father’. This is, in fact, an argument that is mirrored by Austen’s protagonist, Anne Eliot in “Persuasion” as well, as she speaks of how “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.” and this explains a female writer’s need for a pseudonym in its barest outline.

Amid the patriarchal literary establishment of the 19th century that imagined the quintessential Victorian author as a ‘man in writing’, anonymity for the female novelists became a form of self-imposed repression to participate in the literary culture. Becoming an author in itself was a feminist act as it involved putting oneself in the public realm that was more appropriate for men. This does not mean, however, that there was any official censorship of female authorship. Women had been publishing novels, poetry, and nonfiction for nearly a century before the Brontës but the idea of whether a woman should write at all was still contentious and being debated. The general notion that prevailed was that women could solely be the themes of art and never the creators of art. Even if women were writing, they were always expected to address topics of domestic realism. Victorian female novelists were, thus, in a sort of double-bind where on the one hand, they expressed frustration at the sexual restrictions placed on so many aspects of literary tradition and practice and intensely wanted to achieve excellence

while competing with male authors on equal terms, on the other hand, they were also deeply anxious about coming off as un-womanly.

Pseudonyms have long been employed by several authors ahead of the Victorian era since it offers freedom for the actual author. With it, the author becomes two-fold—the pseudonym and the real person, the implied author, and the actual author. This pseudonym then can consequently take the place of the implied author by acting as the dominant force of the text without revealing the personal information of the flesh-and-blood author. However, the choice of the nom de plumes for the sisters goes deeper than a modest want for obscurity. In her account, Charlotte explains that their conscious decision of veiling their true identities with the use of sexually ambiguous pseudonyms was because they wanted to avoid their thinking and writing from being judged as conventionally feminine by the condescending critics.

The misogynistic mindset of the literary industry and its gender bias is epitomized by the remark of this one reviewer who had written that “Jane Eyre” would be “a triumph if written by a man, ‘odious’ if written by a woman”. Women were largely believed to be frivolous, frilly, dainty creatures with no knowledge of the real world, intellectually far inferior to men, and female writers were not perceived to have the credibility of their male counterparts by sexist publishers, critics, and even the general public. The personal exposure associated with a signed publication made it tougher for a female writer to exert political influence or explore conventionally masculine social issues. Projecting maleness on paper, however, allowed them to evade the essentialized notions of feminine voice and identity.

After a few delays, when Emily's novel was finally published in 1847, it was far from being a success, both commercially and critically. While the sales were considered good for an unknown author and there was some praise for the novel's unconventional subject and narrative style, “Wuthering Heights” was largely panned by critics to the extent that some scholars believe that the psychological distress from the negative reviews may have been one of the causes for her death in 1848, the very next year due to the five reviews that were found on her desk after she passed away. Judged as a strange inartistic story with no morals or purpose, epithets like ‘cruel’, ‘brutal’, ‘depraved’ and ‘vulgar’ were labeled at the text with one reviewer even going so far as to wonder how the author could have written such a story without committing suicide. Things were no better once Ellis Bell was identified as a female novelist. The censorious review in the *Athenaeum* shifted the main focus from the novel to her life, sparing only a single line to

mention how “Wuthering Heights” was characteristic, not only of the tales by Brontë sisters but more generally of how women write while Mark Schorer in his essay “Fiction and the ‘Analogical Matrix’” remarks how a young Emily, ignorant of life and nature after falling in love, was dazzled by its power and became aware of love’s limitations only while writing the novel, thereby assuming her to be unnaturally naïve. The reviews by critics like Edwin Whipple, Albert Guerard, James Haffley, Richard Chase, Arnold Kettle, and many more were no better, with all either focusing on the novel from the sexist angle as a stereotyped tale of superficial feminine longings or the moral angle as a representation of extreme brutality rather than appreciating the novel on its own terms. Though Charlotte’s Preface managed to somewhat bring the novel within the pale of respectability, the general perception about the novel still remained largely unchanged despite a few bright, dissenting reviews and this would continue throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> c roughly until the 1920s since when it came to be praised in both the commercial and critical opinion.

There are a few important female predecessors who have usedonyms before the Brontës- the Regency era writer Jane Austen who signed off her novel as “By A Lady” and afterward as “By the author” of “Sense and Sensibility” and the Victorian writer Mary Ann Evans who used the pseudonym of George Eliot. Even when their real identities were revealed, it had no visible effect on their writing, and Eliot, in fact, continued to publish under her pen name for the rest of her life. However, a crucial reason for this might well have been the content of their works. Another novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, who had earlier written anonymously, faced severe criticism and was morally condemned after signing off “Ruth” in her own name for writing about a fallen woman with an illegitimate child. In light of this, the conversion of gender within the context of a pseudonym can also have been for the approval and acceptance of works with, particularly un-womanly themes. This is something that Donaldson elaborates on in his essay “The Artist is Not Present: Anonymity in Literature” as he talks about how the “invisibility cloak” provides authors the freedom and safety to present ideas that might have been considered far ahead of the time, contemptible and possibly even dangerous. Hence, the gender ambiguity of her pseudonym gave Emily too, the creative freedom to work on controversial and seemingly anti-patriarchal themes that would be conceived by critics as an attempt at an unnatural border crossing while also appealing to a large audience. With its brutality and dominant sexuality, the novel’s nearly anti-Victorian refusal to adhere to moral and sexual codes of the time would

otherwise have been disastrous for the reputation of any woman author. Thus, Ellis Bell had to gain the power of authorship by abstracting her true self into a masculine pseudonym bearing social power in order to write something like "Wuthering Heights", in a society where men can get away with (writing) anything but women cannot.

In addition to this, some other points have also been hinted at by scholars over the years as interwoven with the need for a cloaked representation. While in the Preface, Charlotte makes a somewhat excessive attempt to retroactively domesticate Emily to protect her reputation, everything she says about Emily's reticent nature is very true. From a young age, the sisters had been extremely private about their writing, not even sharing it with one another. The manuscripts for "Jane Eyre", "Wuthering Heights" and "Agnes Grey" too, were anonymously sent to the publishing company Aylott and Jones. Numerous biographical accounts describe Emily, in particular, as a rather uncommunicative recluse, so much so that she was almost a stranger to her own villagers. She was the least accessible of the three sisters and is said to have been agonized about having her world within exposed to public scrutiny upon the publication of "Wuthering Heights". The emotional limitations that made her dread being unmasked before the world and face criticism aimed not only at her creation but also personally has been interpreted by some as the cause for camouflaging behind a male persona and shunning any form of public exposure. The fact that the Brontë sisters were reputed clergy daughters has also been posited as a reason for their writing behind a pen name.

Moreover, the choice to not publish under her name can be seen as a sort of voluntary censorship necessitated by the fact that it was considerably difficult for a woman to simultaneously handle the domestic and public worlds. Pseudonymity was, therefore, a strategy to smoothly mediate between her two separate identities- her masculine authorial persona and her real identity as a domestic woman.

Her use of an androgynous pseudonym has also been read as an allusion to her uneasiness regarding her own sexual orientation. She did not wish to be judged based on her gender because the only two origins of literature that were available to her were sexually defined and she did not want to claim identification with either gender.

"Wuthering Heights" is a text placed within an authoritative frame that has almost always been autobiographical but sometimes these biographically inflected discussions have been taken to the limit. In this context, another issue for the pseudonymity may perhaps have been the

unwarranted associations that are frequently created between a novel and the life of the female novelist, usually violating her privacy. Again, a sign of patriarchy, novels by women writers are often examined from a biographical perspective instead of critical distance. This had indeed happened once Emily's real identity had been disclosed. Taking a cue from Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship in the novel, biographers and creative writers from the Interwar period right up to the mid 20th century have often assumed that "Wuthering Heights" may well have been a fictional dramatization of Emily's relationship with her own brother, Branwell Brontë. Ella Moorhouse's "Stone Walls", Clemence Dane's "Wild Decembers", Emilie and Georges Romieu's "The Bronte Sisters" and Katharyn Macfarlane's "Divide the Desolation" are a few such novels that have sexualized the siblings' bond. A number of these texts even depict the novel as written either fully by him or at least jointly by the siblings with Branwell writing Heathcliff's sections', thereby reducing her creativity, crediting a part of it to someone else, and undermining the status of the author Emily Brontë to merely a girl grappling with forbidden desires.

At a time when literature was largely considered to be the business of men and literary power synonymous with masculinity, it is hardly questionable for authoresses like Emily Brontë to have used a pseudonym to write within the gender-imposed mold in the face of comments like "Does it ever strike these delightful creatures that their little fingers were meant to be kissed, not to be inked?" or that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life". In a society ruled by such vehement sexual politics, the Brontë sisters could enter the male preserve of professional authorship solely by their pseudonyms, the male privilege associated with this constructed persona, to tell a truth that the patriarchal culture prefers to overwrite.

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