



RESEARCH PAPER

**From Reflection to Rejection: A Postmodernist Analysis of the
selected Poems of Emily Bronte**

Faiza Zaheer

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University),
Lahore Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: faizazaheer@fccollege.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The major objective of this paper is to explore and analyse the selected poems of Victorian poetess and Novelist, Emily Bronte (1818-1848) and attempts to explore the multilayered Postmodernist interpretations that would provide a better understanding to the reader while analysing Emily Bronte's poetry. Emily Bronte's poetry focuses on wilderness, compassion, love, repulsion towards social values and traditions, deplorable status of women in rigid Victorian society and her intense sense of isolation. The major objective of this research is to examine the deep thematic structures based on her internal feelings and agony. The theory of Postmodernism has been incorporated in this paper to analyse the selected poems of Emily Bronte. Through different Postmodernist characteristics, this paper aims to explore a strong and intensive sense of misery, unhappiness, psychological revolt, and a passionate nature in Emily Bronte's poetry.

KEYWORDS Emily Bronte, Postmodernism, Psychological Revolt. Misery, Thematic Structures

Introduction

Emily Bronte (1818-1848) is one of the major and the most celebrated female Victorian Novelists. Her novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is still considered one of the best examples of modern, and psychoanalytic manuscripts before these terms got familiar. Born in 1818 in a humble household of Thornton, Emily used to be considered a darling child of her family and according to one of her maids, "the prettiest of the children" (p.1). Emily was born in Thornton and then after two years, the whole family went to Haworth which later became a major landscape for her poetry and her Novel. *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Emily, since her early childhood, had been an intelligent and sensitive child. Her love for nature and wilderness, her sensitivity towards deplorable human predicament and her vehement rejection of the social system are quite evident from her poetry and prose. The purpose of this paper is to explore the postmodernist traces in the selected poetry of Emily Bronte. Emily's poetry reveals multiple themes, and they can be analyzed and understood keeping in view the different components of Postmodernism. This paper will analyze the postmodernist themes in the selected poems of Emily Bronte to explore and analyze the multilayered postmodern interpretations.

Literature Review

Emily Bronte's biography written by Mary Robinson provides an in-depth analysis of Brontes' childhood and literary career in general and Emily's attitude towards Victorian life in particular. This book has been helpful to understand the various literary stages of Emily Bronte and the different themes and subjects she has discussed in her literary works. *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets* (2011) helps the reader to explore the different aspects of English poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) to Phili Larkin (1922-1985). This book also focuses on the multifaceted poetic expressions and thematic

interpretation in the poetic works of Emily Bronte and this manuscript also emphasizes the various aspects of English poetry in general and Emily Bronte's poetic world in particular.

Material and Methods

This research is based on qualitative method as the selected poems of Emily Bronte have been analyzed keeping in view the Postmodernist theory. The purpose of adopting this theory is to explore and analyze the Postmodernist aspects in the poetic techniques used by Emily Bronte in her work.

Results and Discussion

Emily used to be a somewhat different child who wanted to stay close to nature and yearned to appreciate both its beauty and sadness. As Anne Bronte (1820-1849), Emily Bronte's youngest sister, points her out:

A little girl loves her bird – why? Because it lives and feels? because it is helpless and harmless? A toad likewise lives and feels and is equally helpless and harmless; but though she would not hurt a toad, she cannot love it like the bird, with its graceful form, soft feathers and bright speaking eyes. (1847, p.122)

Though Anne wrote this in her novel *Agnes Grey* (1847) for a specific character, the description of the character is quite analogous to the nature of Emily Bronte who proved herself a different child from the rest of her siblings. She used to love every aspect of nature as she did not want to hurt it. Clement King Shorter, one of Charlotte's Biographers, reveals the character of little Emily:

Emily's reserve *seemed* impenetrable, yet she was intensely loveable; she invited confidence in her moral power. Few people have the gift of looking and smiling as she could look and smile. One of her rare expressive looks was something to remember through life, there was such a depth of soul and feeling, and yet such a shyness of revealing herself. (1896, p.179)

Her family and friends noticed in Emily's reserved behavior her power of imagination, though limited to Moors, yet strong and persistent to explore the world around her. Her nature shows a more compassionate and constructive representation of her imaginary world. Emily has a strong desire for solitude as her writing seems to be for her *self* (my italics). Within the precinct of the restricted environment, she explored herself and her surroundings and the range of her imagination was infinite. Her imagination focuses on escape, rebellion, hopelessness, horror, and sublime. Her poetry does not constrict itself to the limits set by the society as at that time women were not allowed to write so she and her sisters used to write with Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell.

Emily Bronte was not an individual who could have a demonstrative self, yet she attempts to explore the inner nature of her lonely and bruised individuality. She has an impressionable manner in her poetry to explore and expose the miseries created and *preserved* (my italics) by life. The reason to choose and italicize the word, 'preserve' is that this specific expression seems to demonstrate the misery as power which derives the author from sense of loss and leads him to the exploration of the creativity. This awareness of misery leads Emily Bronte to rebellious emotions and vehement rejection. Emily Bronte's poetry demonstrates a strong and intensive sense of misery, unhappiness, psychological revolt, and a passionate nature. Dina Birch mentions in her essay:

Emily Brontë [can be seen] as a free, rebellious spirit, close to nature, and doomed to die young – has given her the status of a kind of anti-Victorian woman, celebrated for her defiance of the conventions of the drawing room. Her admirers, including many who have never read a word of her writing, feel that they know her intimately. She has become a myth. (2011, p.408)

Emily Brontë's surroundings are limited but her literary world is vast and revolutionary. Her writings not only focus on Victorian youthfulness but demonstrate an intense expression of maturity and angst. In one of her poems, "Death, that struck when I was Most Confiding", she presents this notion of anxiety and protest:

Death! that struck when I was most confiding
 In my certain faith of joy to be -
 Strike again, Time's withered branch dividing
 From the fresh root of Eternity!
 Leaves, upon Time's branch, were growing brightly,
 Full of sap, and full of silver dew;
 Birds beneath its shelter gathered nightly;
 Daily round its flowers the wild bees flew. (Emily Brontë, p.24)

Emily Brontë's themes of death and self-exploration are quite evident in this poem; her feelings, and her morbid sense of expression seem to draw a line between her and the society. She exhibits her power through misery and morbidity, through death and loss, and through anguish and pain. Through these binary oppositions, she reveals her poetic and imaginative power as Dinah Birch mentions the *Athenaeum Journal* (1828-1921):

The *Athenaeum* thought her the most gifted of the three brothers (as the reviewer supposed the youthful poets Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell to be), remarking on the evident 'power of wing' in her poetry. 'Power' is a term that emerges in responses to Emily's work from the first. (2011, p.430)

Her poetry presents both power and resistance in the face of the circumstances she has been facing. In the above-mentioned poem, she tries to make a comparison between death and the life she explores the spiritual point of view through the *anéanti* (French word for devastation) she faces in her personal and literary life. Emily Brontë reveals her hostility and irritation through her poetry. She explores her elegiac condition and unfinished meaning which demonstrate the true presentation of life. Brontë's poetry records a certain sense of lament muffled in the suppressed anger.

Strike it down, that other boughs may flourish
 Where that perished sapling used to be;
 Thus, at least, its mouldering corpse will nourish
 That from which it sprung - Eternity. (Emily Brontë, p.24)

The words, 'flourish' 'perish', and 'mouldering' demonstrate certain inconsistencies within human behavior. Brontë's stress is not only on binary oppositions but also explores the undecidability in human nature. There is a logic of desire and exploration of illogical, there is a strong sense of loss but at the same time one can witness the intense spiritual experience. There is also a lingering sense of unease but concurrently, the reader can find a determined self who is eager to explore the poet's imaginative world. It seems that Brontë's poetry not only exhibits conviction but also the uncertainties and skepticism which transform her poetry both postmodernist and

experimental. Postmodernism in the words of Peter Brooker, “[Postmodernism describes] a tone of self-conscious, parodic skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual, and political life” (1992. P.175). Postmodernism borrowed disintegration, sense of loss, futility of existence from modernism, but has blurred the line between reality and fantasy as Postmodernism focuses on the indeterminacy of interpretation and blurs the difference of expressions. Postmodernist exploration of Emily’s poetry reveals the indeterminacy of her expression as in one of her poems, “Far Far Away is Mirth Withdrawn”:

Far, far away is mirth withdrawn
 'Tis three long hours before the morn
 And I watch lonely, drearily -
 So come thou shade commune with me
 Deserted one ! thy corpse lies cold
 And mingled with a foreign mould -
 Year after year the grass grows green
 Above the dust where thou hast been.
 I will not name thy blighted name
 Tarnished by unforgotten shame
 Though not because my bosom torn
 Joins the mad world in all its scorn;
 Thy phantom face is dark with woe
 Tears have left ghastly traces there,
 Those ceaseless tears ! I wish their flow
 Could quench thy wild despair. (Emily Bronte, P.34)

In this poem, Bronte brings forward the ideas of life and death and an expression of anéanti that have made her poetry a disposition of resistance. Her poetry is both melodramatic and rational and this attribute brings her literary work closer to a Postmodernist point of view. Ihab Hassan, a postmodernist, points out “Postmodernism veers towards open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences.....” (1981, p.125). According to Hassan, postmodernism reveals the approach of individuals living in an era where displacement and indeterminacy ironically shape up human existence. Bronte, in the above-mentioned poem, demonstrates anguish, dislocation, and disintegration. Her poetry reminds us of the anti-Feminist attitudes of Victorian era that had not provided a proper space and place to woman where she could groom herself both creatively and artistically. As Charlotte Bronte points out in her novel, *The Professor*, “pleasure and I had never met” (1857, p.101). Though this statement has been written in Charlotte Bronte’s novel, yet this reveals what kind of life females used to have at that time. Mary Robinson, in her biography of Emily Bronte, points out:

No one in the house ever saw what things Emily wrote in the moments of pause from her pastry-making, in those brief sittings under the currants, in those long and lonely watches for her drunken brother. She did not write to be read, but only to relieve a burdened. (1883, p.173)

Emily Bronte’s taste and approach towards poetry has been discussed in the above-mentioned excerpt. For her, writing has a therapeutic effect on her. Through her poetry, she observes the multiple interpretations in her sorrow, wilderness, melody, and loftiness. Her imagination is instinctive and musical, her approach towards poetry is emotional and scenic. To Emily, poetry is both magical and daydream. Her exquisite allusions to Moorish landscape, her rebelliousness and sorrow towards her situation as

a daughter of Country's Parson and her hauntingly emotional expression makes her poetry a solemn image of her time. Her poetry manifests the impulsive and terrifying expression of society which makes her life bitter, unbearable and cul-de-sac. In her poem, "The Prisoner"

Oh, dreadful is the check – intense the agony –
 When the ear begins to hear, and the eyes begins to see.
 When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again.
 The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain.

Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;
 The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;
 And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,
 If it but herald Death, the vision is divine. (Emily Bronte, p.240)

According to Robinson, the first four verses of this poem have been discovered by Charlotte in 1845 (Robinson, p.184) and she got stunned by Emily's overwhelming creativity, music, and poetic originality. In this abovementioned poem she focuses on the dreadfulness of life, chains, and death as blessings. These are the major themes developed by Bronte, manifest a sense of loss but at the same time demonstrate conviction and morbidity. In this poem, to her, heaven, and hell both are portrayed as the two aspects of poet's nature and her poetic world. She makes certain experimentation with her rhythmical capability, and this transforms her poetry into a Postmodernist point of view. In one of his books, Jean- Francois Lyotard states:

The power of sensing and phrasing are being probed on the limits of what is possible, and thus the domain of the perceptible-sensing and the speakable-speaking is being extended. Experiments are made. This is our postmodernity's entire vocation, and commentary has infinite possibilities open to it. (1989, p.190).

For Lyotard, postmodernism is based on experiments and unlimited possibilities, and it is in search of new ideas and forms as Kerstin Schmidt, in *Theater of Transformation*, provides an analysis of Lyotard approach towards Postmodernism, "Accordingly, Lyotard sees Postmodernism not as much as a chronological concept but more as state of mind...[it] is mainly a word without a particular fixed meaning" (2005, p.18). Kerstin highlights Lyotard's point of view regarding Postmodernism by revealing the absence of fixed meaning in its language usage. As the word, postmodernism does not follow a fixed and limited meaning, same is the case with the language used by the postmodern writers who use language not only to highlight its multiplicity but also puts forward the possible interpretations. This technique offers the reader a diverse literary point of view. Postmodernism is indifferent to centrality; it decentres the text to understand its language as well as themes. Emily Bronte not only brings forward the paradoxical façade of society but also makes her poetic point of view both subtle and austere. Her poetry does not strengthen clarity rather it intends to rebel while transforming the rigid social aspects into a chaotic limbo:

Hope was but a timid friend;
 She sat without the grated den,
 Watching how my fate would tend,
 Even as selfish-hearted men.

She was cruel in her fear;
 Through the bars, one dreary day,

I looked out to see her there,
And she turned her face away! (Emily Bronte, p.123).

Emily Bronte's hope is her 'timid friend' who fails to help her and seems to be scared of everything that is happening around the poet. Here she reminds the reader of Emily Dickinson's (1830-1886) poem 'Because I Could not Stop for Death' (479) in which she personifies Death as a human entity.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality. (Emily Dickinson, p.20)

Though the subject matters and thematic point of views in both poems seem different, yet both poetesses share the common approach towards the abstract concepts because they intend to explore a hidden self which is usually considered inaccessible. Both poetesses represent an abstract representation of the friend as both rebelled against the various social structures to ascertain a strong female self. Emily Bronte's world of poetry seems reserved, yet it shows her suppressed anger and frustration towards society. Her poetry seems to manifest the postmodernist characteristics i.e., uncertainty, indeterminacy and decentered thematic structures within society and the individual self. She does not provide any meaning rather she wants her reader to explore meaning and establish their own interpretations. As Terry Eagleton points out, "The typical postmodernist work of art is ...eclectic, hybrid, decentered, fluid, discontinuous and pastiche-like" (1996, p.201). These characteristics of Postmodernist literature can be traced in Emily Bronte's poetry as she asserts:

I am the only being whose doom
No tongue would ask, no eye would mourn;
I never caused a thought of gloom,
A smile of joy, since I was born.

In secret pleasure, secret tears,
This changeful life has slipped away,
As friendless after eighteen years,
As lone as on my natal day. (Emily Bronte, p.121)

This poem of hers reveals her inner turmoil and demonstrates an absence of sense of belonging. Emily feels completely aloof, lonely, and disoriented in society. She not only addresses the reader but also talks to herself. She mourns over the joy she never had, the pleasure of life she had never experienced and the friendless yet fearless existence she had had for eighteen years. Her injured self in her chameleonic poetic expression seems to demonstrate the postmodernist characteristics. What Emily Bronte feels, experiences, and exhibits in her poetry in fact establishes her not only as a Victorian poetess but also a Postmodernist.

Conclusion

Mary Robinson Points out:

While Emily Bronte's hands were full of trivial labor, while her heart was buried with its charge of shame and sorrow, think not that her mind was more at rest.

She had always used her leisure to study or create; and the dreariness of existence made this inner life of hers doubly precious now. (1883, p.172)

According to Robinson, Emily Brontë's sense of unease, dissatisfaction and misery are quite evident in her poetry. She aims to explore a different world in her poetry which is both alive and semi unconscious, exquisite, and ambiguous, and tranquil and turbulent. Her poetry seems to represent the postmodernist characteristics which made her the postmodernist poet before this era began. Emily Brontë's imagination is not perverse rather demonstrates a conquering force while manifesting diverse poetic techniques.

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