A postcolonial, feminist reading of the representation of ‘home’ in Jane Eyre and Villette

by Charlotte Brontë.

The first chapter will entail an examination of Jane Eyre concentrating on the way in which the concept of home is represented. “At times home is nowhere. At times one knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations” (hooks 1990: 47). There will be a focus on the various locations in which the female protagonist Jane Eyre is placed, and how this may be linked to her character development. Due to time constraints, I will be focussing on one of the surrogate homes, Gateshead. Jane Eyre is described by Gilbert and Gubar as a:

distinctly female Bildungsroman in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End).

Charlotte Brontë is described by Eagleton as having a “double-edged attitude to the question of secure settlement” (1988: 73). This highlights the concept of “home” as a coalition, as connoting both safety and security while implying a danger at the core. This concept may be applied to Jane Eyre, as through the female protagonist Jane, the ambivalent nature of ‘home’ is explored. Jane is orphaned, a status which emphasises the double marginality of a character who is female with no connections and no authentic sense of ‘home’ or identity as defined by domicile and relations. Therefore, every place in which Jane locates herself serves as a “surrogate” home and the temporary and impermanent nature of these ‘homes’ lends Jane’s sense of self worth and self a precarious and unstable quality. It is important to examine the
other female characters that are situated in every phase of Jane’s development. Each female character, from Eliza and Georgina Reed, Helen Burns and Diana and Mary Rivers to Blanche Ingram and Bertha Rochester serve as ‘role models’, allowing Jane to measure and establish her own identity and reject unsuitable models of femaleness in order to create a more viable self. Leavis explains that Bronte’s object “…was to show how the embittered little charity child finds the way to come to terms with life and society” (Leavis 1966:12), doing so through the creation of “…positives- the demonstration of the conditions for Jane’s growth into full life and possession of lasting happiness” (Leavis 1966:13). The following chapter will be structured according to the development of the character of Jane Eyre as defined through the various ‘homes’ she located herself:

Jane Eyre moves from stage to stage of Jane’s development, divided into four sharply distinct phases with their suggestive names: childhood at Gateshead, girlhood, which is schooling in both senses, at Lowood; adolescence at Thornfield; maturity at Marsh End [moor House], winding up with the fulfilment in marriage at Ferndean (Leavis 1966:13).

The idea of a “secure settlement” is examined during the first phase of Jane Eyre’s development in the novel, at Gateshead, the home where she lives as dependent of the Reed family. The pervading images of storms; shipwreck and disaster are “images which seem to express [Jane’s] own bewildered sense of what life is like, since they correspond with her condition in the home of the Reeds” (Leavis 1966:14). Thus the reader receives the impression that there is an instability associated with Gateshead as a home for Jane, a sense of impermanence entrenched by her orphan status and lack of familial ties. The novel opens with Jane reading, observing a cold and stormy day through the window,

At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast
Her orphan status renders Gateshead a “surrogate” home, as she has no direct family connections: “I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there…”(1998:16). Her cousin John Reed emphasises this state of dependence and lack of belonging when he states:

You are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma’s expense… all the house belongs to me (1998:11)

Gilbert and Gubar point out that the major preoccupation in the process of self-definition

For all Bronte’s heroines is the” [struggle] for a comfortable space” (2000:437). Jane’s efforts to clear literal and figurative space for herself in a home which is not her own and in which she does not feel she belongs, emphasises aspects of her lonely orphan status and also, how the temporary security and safety provided by a home may be quickly usurped.

I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement… ‘It is well I drew the curtain,’ thought I; and I wished fervently [Cousin John Reed] might not discover my hiding place (1998:8-9).
Throughout the novel, Jane Eyre struggles to assert her own sense of self-worth, and from the earliest phase at Gateshead, this process of self-definition is undermined. Pearson and Pope state that from the very beginning of the novel [Jane Eyre] is forced to strike out at her captors – asserting her own worth (1981:165). An early example of this occurs when Jane is discovered behind the curtain in her window-seat hiding place, unsettling any temporary security and safety she had established for herself. Cousin John proceeds to physically attack Jane and she, as the marginal outsider, is finally forced to retaliate: “...I received him in frantic sort. I don’t very well know what I did with my hands, but he called me “Rat! Rat!” and bellowed out aloud” (1998:12). Despite the fact that Jane acts in self-defence, she is severely punished, and the admonishment made by one of the maids serves to entrench the feeling of loneliness and marginality that Jane suffers:

‘For shame! For shame!’ cried the lady’s maid. ‘What shocking conduct Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son! Your young master!’

‘Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?’

‘No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep...’(1998:12).

Her status in the home is thus reduced to that below servant, she is truly a dependent in every sense of the word and increasingly made to feel unwelcome.

Leavis states that “each experience initiates a new phase of being for her, because she has learnt something new about the possibilities of being a woman, represented in the female role models throughout the novel, are made available to Jane in each new location/phase of her life. Jane overhears a conversation between the two maids, Bessie and Abbot, which highlights the role of femininity and entrenches society’s preconceptions about the value of the Victorian woman, and her own position in the social structure.

‘Poor Miss Jane is to be pities, too, Abbot.’

‘Yes,’ responded Abbot, ‘if she was a nice, pretty child, one might her forlornness; but one really
cannot care for such a little toad as that.’

‘Not a great deal, to be sure,’ agreed Bessie; ‘at any rate a beauty like Miss Georgina would be more moving in the same condition.’ (1998:27)

Not only is Jane given an idea of the value of beauty, represented by her cousin Georgina, but again her sense of worth is undermined. This may have something to do with the fact that, as an outsider and marginal figure, she feels she is not worthy of consideration, and this opinion is often perpetuated by others and not by Jane herself. These female role models are eventually rejected by Bronte as inadequate examples of femaleness. Mrs Reed serves as a poor nurturer, unsuccessful in raising Cousin John, who dies in disrepute, and failing in turn with her two daughters, Eliza & Georgiana Reed, who serve to reflect the inadequacy of the dualism of spirituality and passion. Eliza grows to become a harsh, stern woman, described in terms of a: “sallow face and severe mien…nun-like ornament of a string of ebony beads and a crucifix…” (1998:239). She is unable to function or relate to the outside world, humourless and lacking in all human attributes of passion and emotion, choosing instead to, “…seek retirement where punctual habits would be permanently secured from disturbance, and place safe barriers between herself and a frivolous world” (1998:246). Georgiana functions as the extreme inverse to Eliza, described by Jane as a “…full-blown, very plump damsel, fair as a wax-work” (1998:246) and scathingly portrayed by Eliza:

‘Georgiana, a more vain and absurd animal that you, was certainly never allowed to cumber the earth….Instead of living for, in and with yourself…you seek only to fasten your feebleness on some other person’s strength: if no one can be found willing to burden to her or himself with such a fat, weak, puffy, useless thing, you cry out that you are ill-treated, neglected, miserable’ (1998:247).

Jane recognises that these female role models are ill-suited to her own identity in the initial phases of the novel, and chooses to reject as opposed to assimilate the ideals of these females in her life at Gateshead. Eagleton observes that, living in someone else’s household and receiving none of the nurturing care and love of a normal child, as an “exile”, Jane is increasingly prompted to rebel (1998:72). Despite the constant demoralisation she suffers at the hands of the inmates at Gateshead, Jane is able to assert her own sense of self-worth by rebelling against Mrs Reed when she states “They [Jane’s cousins] are not fit to associate with me “(1998:28). Bronte deals subtly with Jane’s rebellion, ensuring that Jane is quick to point out to the reader that her outburst is not consciously calculated, “What would Uncle Reed say to you if he were alive?’ was my scarcely voluntary demand” (1998:28). Eagleton describes the interior conflict that exists within Bronte’s female protagonist, who functions as “both
enterprising individualist and hapless victim” (1988:64). Thus Bronte tempers Jane’s assertiveness, which may be viewed as manipulative and egotistical, by explaining her outburst as ‘involuntary’. Bronte continues to do this throughout the novel, often attributing acts of assertiveness on Jane’s part to outside forces such as fate; “fairies” and the voice of nature and heaven guiding her actions. In this way Jane is able to best Mrs Reed in a verbal attack, “Speak I must: I had been trodden on severely and must turn…” (1998:37), which would be seemingly unfitting for a young girl:

“My Uncle Reed is in heaven and can see all you do and think; and so can papa and mama: they know how you shut me up all day long, and how you wish me dead… I am glad you are no relation of mine…and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty” (1998:28, 38).

Jane acquires a sense of liberation from speaking her mind, “ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom…”(1998:38). She is finally able to establish some viable sense of self in relation to the subjugation she has suffered at the hands of the inmates of Gateshead. This subjugation and her position in that ‘home’ and society complicate the accepted myths associated with ‘home’. One such philosophical notion, proposed by Gaston Bachelard, is the idea of the ‘felicitous space’. He describes ‘home’ in the following terms, “…our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty…”(Bachelard 1969:4). Bronte complicates this notion, as Jane harbours very little sentimental attachment to Gateshead as a home. When questioned by Mr Lloyd, the doctor, Jane clearly illustrates her marginal position of exile within this ‘home’:

‘Don’t you think Gateshead a very beautiful house? Asked he, ‘Are you not very thankful to have such a fine place to live at?’

‘It is not my house, sir; and Abbot says I have less right to be here than a servant’ (1998:25).

Jane’s absent sense of belonging is reiterated at Lowood School, where she is sent by Mrs Reed. Despite the solitude she experiences, Jane is adamant in her belief that her new, albeit temporary home, is an improvement on the last: "I would not now have exchanged Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries.” (1998:78). This distorts Bachelard’s philosophical view of home as: “…the space we love….eulogized space…” (1969: xxxi; xxxii;
Thus, through feminist post-colonial debate, informed by Marxist views and principles of new historicism, accepted myths of home will be interrogated in the dissertation, as this dynamic and unstable concept is explored through a rereading of Charlotte Bronte’s work.