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"Decolonizing Feminism": Women's Power in Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall and Wuthering Heights

Majid S. Mgamis
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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"DECOLONIZING FEMINISM": WOMEN'S POWER IN *AGNES GREY, THE TENANT OF*

WILDFELL HALL AND *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Majid S. Mgamis

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2012

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Majid S. Mgamis

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____   _____

            Dr. Christopher Orchard
            Professor of English, Advisor

_____   _____

            Dr. Lingyan Yang
            Associate Professor of English

_____   _____

            Dr. Kenneth Sherwood
            Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

_____   _____

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: "Decolonizing Feminism": Women's Power in *Agnes Grey, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights*

Author: Majid S. Mgamis

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Christopher Orchard

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Lingyan Yang
                                 Dr. Kenneth Sherwood

Focusing on female characters in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* this dissertation runs counter to orthodox criticism of Victorian literature that highlights a pattern of male dominance and female oppression, reflecting the widespread belief that women are victims of male hegemony and possess very little power in both their relationships and in their place in society. On the contrary, through their strong wills, purposes, and desires, female characters in these novels have considerable power in their own lives as well as in the lives of others. This power is both constructive, enabling self actualization and independence, and destructive in terms of negatively affecting relationships with male characters.

Constructive power is demonstrated in both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In the former, the protagonist, Agnes, and the other female characters prove their economic independence and ability to make decisions independently of men. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen exemplifies women who are empowered to defy socially established laws and norms by leaving her husband, taking her child, posing as a widow and embarking on an artistic profession. The antithesis of this power is demonstrated in *Wuthering Heights*, where women such as Catherine and others manipulate men by exploiting their emotional needs, which ultimately leads to tragic ramifications.

The dissertation draws on psychoanalytic feminist theory, exemplified through the work of Shoshana Felman, Jonathan Culler and Helen Cixous. Felman's argument that male supremacy is just "a sexual as well as a political fantasy," Culler's strong contention of the centrality of a woman's role in society and Cixous' belief in the existence of an inherent female bisexuality will be used to describe the female characters in these novels and their relations with men. Ultimately, the dissertation does not aim to debunk the idea of Victorian patriarchy and female oppression, but it does seek to provide a balanced view of the power relations governing the interpersonal relationships of men and women in the Bronte sisters' novels.

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