

**A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE PORTRAYAL OF THE VICTORIAN LADY  
AND THE AMERICAN “NEW WOMAN” AS VICTIMS OF PATRIARCHAL CULTURE:  
JANE EYRE, WUTHERING HEIGHTS AND THE AWAKENING**

**Maria-Viorica Arnăutu, PhD Student, ”Al. Ioan Cuza” University of Iași**

*Abstract: In **Jane Eyre**, **Wuthering Heights** and **The Awakening**, the Brontë sisters and Kate Chopin address feminist issues that reflect the social background of their times. This paper analyses the novels from a feminist sociological critical perspective, thus revealing similar aspects of women portrayed as indirect victims of patriarchal culture. The female protagonists (Jane, Catherine and Edna) are white middle-class women deprived of autonomy and trapped within the household sphere. Their experience is enlightening in terms of identifying social problems that the average Anglo-American women are confronted with during the Victorian period (in England) as well as at the end of the nineteenth century within American society.*

*Catherine and the other female characters in **Wuthering Heights** are presented as victims of domestic violence, confinement and financial problems caused by social norms. Similarly, Edna is portrayed within the context of the “New Woman” debate over women’s limited rights to: financial security, professional and personal fulfilment. The same doctrine of female self-renunciation can be identified in **Jane Eyre** in which the prototype of the ideal Victorian woman is associated with Hindu women’s “sati” (self-sacrifice) by means of the feminist metaphor of domestic slavery.*

**Keywords:** *feminist perspective, Victorian woman, “New Woman”, domestic slavery, oppression.*

A comparison between certain feminist aspects (that reflect the social status of nineteenth-century English and American women) within *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Awakening* is possible and even rendered necessary since all three novels subscribe to feminist stages. Feminist analyst Elaine Showalter includes the former two writings into the “feminine phase” in the evolution of the female literary tradition, which turns them into ideal literary texts to be analysed from a feminist perspective.<sup>1</sup>

*The Awakening* in particular can be viewed as part of the feminist stage because the character of Edna can be best understood in the context of New Woman debates over the limited rights of married women to: property, sexual fulfillment and financial security. Moreover, the character's gradual rise to independence is shown as a reaction to domestic confinement as the female protagonist (Edna) strives to earn her right to a private space which, in Virginia Woolf's terms, could be referred to as “a room of her own”. As a result, to a certain extent, *The Awakening* can be included in the “female stage” as well.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the emphasis is on the concept of family as a power-structure in which women are oppressed by the masters of the household. Furthermore, by means of the association between black slaves and other social victims oppressed within Britain's white (class and gender) system, in *Jane Eyre*, “slavery” becomes a metaphor for the lower-middle class Victorian woman. Charlotte Brontë deploys the feminist metaphor of domestic slavery

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Showalter, E., ‘Toward a Feminist Poetics (Feminine, Feminist, Female)’, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Edited by Hazard Adams, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992, page 1231

by depicting Jane Eyre's protest against gender oppression<sup>2</sup> and expressing her own acceptance/embrace of nineteenth-century feminist individualism.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, through the character of Edna, Kate Chopin points out that the American "New Woman" does not feel oppressed as a mother or wife. She feels oppressed as an individual in a society in which women are not treated as such but rather as property belonging to their husbands, children or fathers.<sup>4</sup> She does not rebel against her own family. She ultimately rebels against the institutions of marriage and motherhood as well as social constraints in general.

Although the turn-of-the-century American woman has access to a greater variety of social means of self-assertion, gender oppression is not altogether annihilated. On the contrary, domestic tyranny 'survives' in different forms even up to the end of the nineteenth century. The ideal image of the white middle-class woman as a submissive wife is, therefore, preserved as one of the main cultural products of the patriarchal system of moral and social values.

### **The Conflict between Victorian Ideal and Social Reality**

In all three novels, the ideal image of family and of the mother/wife-woman is presented and criticized as a product of patriarchal culture. In each of these texts, the domestic model is undermined by the depiction of reality-reflecting dysfunctional family relationships.

In *Wuthering Heights*, there is a clash between the ideal Victorian image of family and domestic reality of the nineteenth century. The positive Victorian notion of family as a space of tranquillity and refuge within the social sphere is undermined by the violence and abuse presented as a direct consequence of the investiture of total power in the patriarch of the home – the master of the house – who abuses the members of the household physically as well as verbally and emotionally. The conflict between domestic ideal and domestic reality is evident in the tea-table scene witnessed by a male character in the novel – Mr. Lockwood. He is the representative of Victorian ideology according to which home is a refuge from the outside world and sees a "beneficent fairy" in Cathy who submits to the "happy" master of the house:<sup>5</sup> " [...] I'll venture to say, that, surrounded by your family, and with your amiable lady as the presiding genius over your home and heart – [...] you are the favoured possessor of the beneficent fairy", I remarked, turning to my neighbour."<sup>6</sup>

In Victorian mentality, Englishmen of middle and upper classes are not capable of abusing family members because they are thought to be kind brothers, fathers and husbands as a result of education and cultivation. However, Heathcliff, the Liverpool orphan, becomes violent only after he becomes a gentleman in manner and resource. The domestic ideal falsely

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sharpe, J., 'Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*', in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp 79-103

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Spivak, G. C., '*Jane Eyre: a Critique of Imperialism*', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*, Edited by S. Regan, Routledge, 2001, pp 216-25

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Worton, M., 'Reading Kate Chopin through Contemporary French Feminist Theory' in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, Edited by Janet Beer, Cambridge University Press, Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 3192-8

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jacobs, N. M., 'Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*', in *Wuthering Heights*, Edited by P. Stoneman, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993, pp 74-83 and Pykett, L., 'Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction*', in *Wuthering Heights*, Edited by P. Stoneman, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993, pp. 86-97

<sup>6</sup> Brontë, E., *Wuthering Heights*, Penguin, 1994, pp 26-7

depicted by Lockwood is in contrast with the tense atmosphere (at the dinner table) which is meant to suggest that the actual domestic reality is one of physical and psychological brutality located in a wealthy family:<sup>7</sup>

*'Is he to have any?' she [Cathy] asked, appealing to Heathcliff.  
'Get it ready, will you?' was the answer, uttered so savagely that I started. The tone in which the words were said revealed a genuine bad nature. I no longer felt inclined to call Heathcliff a capital fellow. [...] And we all, including the rustic youth, drew round the table: an austere silence prevailing while we discussed our meal.  
I thought, if I had caused the cloud, it was my duty to make an effort to dispel it. They could not every day sit so grim and taciturn; and it was impossible, however ill-tempered they might be, that the universal scowl they wore was their everyday countenance.*<sup>8</sup>

Emily Brontë conveys a powerful message by pointing out that absolute power of men over women (and not lack of education) is the source of domestic abuse, the solution thus being the balance of power between marriage partners.

Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, the ideal Victorian image of the submissive mother/wife-woman is criticized by Charlotte Brontë through emphasis on gender oppressive social reality. The doctrine of women's self-denial, devotion and self-renunciation is presented as the Victorian ideal model – for family relationships – promoted by patriarchal culture and undermined by the heroine's refusal to submit to male dominance and the comparison of white women's self-sacrifice to West Indian women's "sati". Sarah Lewis explains the doctrine in *Woman's Mission*:

*The one quality on which woman's value and influence depend is the renunciation of self [...]. Educated in obscurity, trained to consider the fulfilment of domestic duties as the aim and end of her existence, there was little to feed the appetite for fame, or the indulgence of self idolatry.*<sup>9</sup>

The protagonist does not seem to embrace the idea that women's duty is to dedicate themselves to men and their families by being willing and capable of self-denial. Instead, she proves capable of active self-determination that derives from social action in the public sphere. As a wage earner, Jane enjoys a certain degree of autonomy at Thornfield, scolding Mr. Rochester for assuming an attitude of superiority. However, the social status of a governess is not a model for female emancipation and Jane is aware of that, which is why she expresses her wish to experience more in life. She breaks social norms by agreeing to marry an upper-class gentleman (Mr. Rochester). But, at this point in the novel, Jane discovers that, despite the legitimacy of her forthcoming marriage, her future husband tends to treat her and speak to her as to a mistress (who has to be "bought" with expensive gifts) rather than to a wife. Rochester's behaviour is made obvious by means of Eastern references. For instance, he compares himself to "the Grand Turk" – comparison which determines Jane to offer him an answer through which she reasserts her independence:<sup>10</sup> "I'll not stand you an inch in the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, pp 75-6

<sup>8</sup> Brontë *op. cit.*, p 26

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, S., *Woman's Mission*, Wiley & Putnam, 1839, page 49 apud. Sharpe, J., 'Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*', in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, p 86

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sharpe, J., 'Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*', in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp 90-1

stead of a seraglio... If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you [...] and lay out in extensive slave-purchases [...].”<sup>11</sup>

Other notable Eastern references are the ones involving Hindu woman’s “*sati*” which refers to her “duty” to be burnt alive if she has become a widow. The protagonist distinguishes herself from Hindu women by means of refusing to become Rochester’s mistress (a status which would have transformed her into an inferior being similar to Clara, Giacinta and Céline who are compared to slaves by Rochester himself). After rejecting Mr. Rochester, Jane has to face another despotic master (St. John Rivers) who wants her to be an obedient student and then tries to convince her to join the Indian missions for which she feels she has no vocation because this type of work is guided by the spirit of self-sacrifice that she refuses to embrace.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Hindu women who fail to oppose the sacrifice that is imposed on them, Jane is capable of one final act of resistance, choosing to return to Rochester instead of entering a loveless marriage. However, Jane’s resistance to the doctrine of female self-renunciation is not complete. Despite the fact that she rejects this doctrine throughout the whole novel, at the end she seems ready to accept it – although not entirely.<sup>13</sup>

Jane does not embrace the concept of female self-renunciation until the end of the novel when she is willing to sacrifice by marrying and looking after a maimed older man. Nevertheless, the protagonist’s married life is different from the typical one because, in the last chapter, Jane describes her marriage as an egalitarian one. Therefore, *Jane Eyre* is an unconventional domestic novel in which the virtue of self-renunciation is devalued even through the seemingly Victorian happy traditional type of ending.<sup>14</sup>

As Victorian domestic types of fiction, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* reflect the ideal image of family and mother/wife-woman as the product of nineteenth-century British mentality. In *Wuthering Heights*, the typical Victorian ending, of overcoming obstacles in a competitive society and creating a realm of safety and family values is the result of emphasis on idealisation of family relationships. Moreover, the ending also suggests positive changes in nineteenth-century women’s social position. It indicates that the domestic ideal will be preserved and – to a certain extent – changed at the same time. The improvement in women’s social status is foreshadowed by means of: the changes in the life of younger Catherine (who uses her book knowledge to verbally attack her oppressor – Heathcliff – and gains control of her inheritance which provides her with financial independence), the transformation of the Heights into a space of safety and harmony and the emergence of the modern family (with a balance of power between the marriage partners) represented by Cathy and Hareton. Similarly, in *Jane Eyre* the redistribution of wealth that equalises gender power and makes this type of union possible reflects the incipient feminism in the apparently conventional ending.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Brontë, C., *Jane Eyre*, ch. 24 apud. Meyer, S. L., ‘Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*, Edited by S. Regan, Routledge, 2001, p 238

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, pp 95-6

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp 96-7

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Meyer, S. L., ‘Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*, Edited by S. Regan, Routledge, 2001, p 232

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pykett, L., ‘Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction’, in *Wuthering Heights*, Edited by P. Stoneman, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993, pp. 86-97

Although, in both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, it is suggested that only the positive aspects will remain while the negative ones will be completely removed from the social reality of the new generations of women, the ending of the turn-of-the-century novel – *The Awakening* – suggests otherwise. In American culture, most negative aspects of domestic tyranny are kept in many disguises. Gender oppression is annihilated only in its nineteenth-century social form whereas its essence is preserved well into the twentieth century.

*Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* reflect the ideal image of family and mostly that of the housewife, whereas, in *The Awakening*, the “perfect” mother is just as well portrayed as the submissive wife. The ideal image of the white middle-class woman is depicted as the product of a still pervasively patriarchal society and, through the female protagonist’s aspiration to become more than a housewife, the mother/wife-woman is presented as an undesirable model to imitate or follow:

*In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.*<sup>16</sup>

The one-sided maternal identity of another female character in the novel (Adèle) serves as a means of criticizing the maternal exaltation in American turn-of-the-century mentality. Adèle is a sickly woman whose life is reduced to maternal duties and instinct as she lives only to be a mother:

*That lady seemed at a loss to make a selection, but finally settled upon a stick of nougat, wondering if it were not too rich; whether it could possibly hurt her. Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her “condition.” Her “condition” was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation.*<sup>17</sup>

In contrast with Adèle, the heroine – Edna – seems reluctant to act in a motherly manner and wants to feel liberated from her status as submissive wife and loving mother.<sup>18</sup> The dutifulness required by society in general and derived from assuming these two roles is, for her, a source of constant frustration and genuine suffering and sadness.

### **Women as Property: Between Self-Ownership and Domestic Slavery**

After denouncing “compulsory motherhood”, Edna starts enjoying “voluntary motherhood” which she defines as the will to sacrifice what is unrelated to the very essence of one’s identity:<sup>19</sup> “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, pp 16-7

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp 17-8

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Heilmann, A., 'The Awakening and New Woman Fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, Edited by Janet Beer, Cambridge University Press, Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2812

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Kindle Location 2827

<sup>20</sup> Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 73

When the maternal role ceases to be a strategic technique of imposing domestic imprisonment on women and it starts being experienced according to mothers' expectations, it can actually become empowering as well as fulfilling, which is what Edna begins to enjoy after her celebrated self-liberation.<sup>21</sup> However, in the novel, the emphasis is on the aspects of motherhood that are a source of spiritual and emotional confinement.

The same type of domestic incarceration is depicted in *Wuthering Heights*. In Victorian mentality, the private space of the house is a refuge, but, in reality, it is a prison as many women felt incarcerated within their fathers' homes and saw marriage as an escape which, eventually, became a different type of confinement – the perfect example of that being Isabella who departs from the Grange only to become the victim of brutal domestic incarceration at the Heights. Like Isabella, Cathy is, at first, a prisoner of her overprotective father and is, afterward, imprisoned by Heathcliff's brute force and contemporary matrimonial laws that provided men with legal control over women.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Awakening*, the concept of "voluntary motherhood" opposes the notion of "domestic confinement" and almost becomes equivalent to "self-ownership" which is a term coined by feminists in the mid 1870's. "Voluntary motherhood" is the type of "self-ownership" by which mothers – and women in general – become entitled to refusing motherhood or sexual relations. Edna achieves self-ownership and self-sovereignty by completely freeing herself from all possible owners through the act of suicide – she withholds from motherhood by withholding from life. Edna's social role as Lèonce's wife has her converted into marital property. In the patriarchal property system presented in *The Awakening*, woman herself is portrayed as a piece of property. Throughout the novel, the bodies of women are depicted as assets belonging to the representatives of patriarchal culture – the opposite sex – which is why Edna refers to herself as an item of property and strives to own herself – to achieve self-ownership – by eliminating all other owners:<sup>23</sup> "Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself."<sup>24</sup>

The same concept of ownership of women in an essentially patriarchal culture is referred to in *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë uses slavery as an analogy for the lot of the lower-middle class (for the governesses who "serve" their "masters") and for Victorian women who have to endure gender oppression.<sup>25</sup> The idea Jane invokes to better convey the master/slave relation – and to point out her own condition – is taken from social reality: namely, the slave uprisings of Jamaica in 1808 and 1831, Barbados in 1816, and Demerara in 1823. The antislavery movement and the increased popularity of abolitionism in the 1820's led to English women's and workers' use of the moral language of the abolitionists for the expression of their own wish for equality: women compared themselves to West Indian slaves

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Heilmann, *op. cit.*, Kindle Location 2832-7

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pykett, L., 'Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction', in *Wuthering Heights*, Edited by P. Stoneman, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993, pp. 86-97

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Stange, M., 'Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, pp. 121-35

<sup>24</sup> Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 118

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Meyer, S. L., 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*, Edited by S. Regan, Routledge, 2000. p. 233

while the members of the working class complained about “white slavery” in English factories.<sup>26</sup> This particular type of “slavery” became known as industrial exploitation. It is, therefore, no coincidence that, in *The Awakening*, Edna’s despair (regarding the lack of value and integrity of her labour within the family) resembles the frustration of the industrial worker. In two particular scenes, her husband accuses her of not being a dutiful mother or wife:

*He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children.<sup>27</sup> "Mercy!" exclaimed Edna, who had been fuming. "Why are you taking the thing so seriously and making such a fuss over it?" "I'm not making any fuss over it. But it's just such seeming trifles that we've got to take seriously; such things count." The fish was scorched. Mr. Pontellier would not touch it. Edna said she did not mind a little scorched taste. She was somewhat familiar with such scenes. They had often made her very unhappy. On a few previous occasions she had been completely deprived of any desire to finish her dinner.<sup>28</sup>*

An analogy between the physical exhaustion of the labourer and the psychological torment of Edna Pontellier can be easily identified. Exhaustion leads to alienation of her labour and physical body as well as to the impossibility of ever achieving “self-ownership” except through suicide. The exhaustion and ultimate death/extinction of the worker’s body in the “late capitalist” phase is reflected in Edna's final swim which symbolizes the extinction of her body. In *Capital*, Marx and Engels focus on the practical consequences of the labourer's exhaustion: poor working conditions and inadequate nourishment for the human body performing a required task point to the “theft” performed by the capitalist speculator whose surplus value is taken directly from the resources that should instead be offered to the body of the worker in order to ensure its capacity of functioning in a normal and healthy way.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, “self-ownership” can be best understood within the context of the philosophical perspective provided by Marx and Engels on bodily labour. In the industrialized world, the mother/wife-woman becomes a sexual commodity through her self-sacrificing love for her children and husband. Feminists evoke the sacrificial figure of the mother to highlight the limited sexual independence of women and argue that a woman's autonomous selfhood is relinquished through the self-giving role as a “mother”.<sup>30</sup>

In the same novel, another aspect that can be analysed by employing concepts of Marxian bodily labour philosophy is the depiction of women's bodies as possessions belonging to the representatives of patriarchal culture – men, the gender oppressors. At the beginning of the novel, Edna appears as an item of property belonging to a man and her body is depicted as a masculine fetish: “You are burnt beyond recognition, he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sharpe, J., ‘Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*’, in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*, Edited by E. B. Michie, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp 80-3

<sup>27</sup> Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 13

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Rowe, J. C., ‘The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*’ in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, pp. 59-61

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 121

<sup>31</sup> Chopin, K., *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, Kindle Edition, p. 8

Such scenes highlight the fact that, in *The Awakening*, the physical body of the heroine – a figure representative of middle-class women in turn-of-the-century American society – is viewed as a commodity belonging to the representatives of patriarchal culture. In this type of system, female sexuality is perceived as labour from which speculators – men – can benefit. As a result, Edna’s rebellion – in all its forms, including the suicide act – appears as justified within the context of an analogy between the exploitation of the female body and the physical exhaustion of the industrial labourer. In *Jane Eyre*, there is also a connection established between the right of slaves to react violently to the slavery system and the heroine’s wish to rightfully rebel against her oppressors: men – the representatives of the patriarchal system of values.

### Men: The Gender Oppressors

The oppressed as well as the oppressors are associated with dark-skinned people. The fact that, in the novel, Mr. Rochester represents man as the oppressor is suggested by his association with the dark-skinned people: he lives in Jamaica for a short period of time and has a dark complexion.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, he compares his mistresses to slaves and affirms that he sees them as inferior beings. His own statement indicates that he is a gender oppressor who sees – and, to a certain extent, treats – women as slaves:

*‘It was with me; and I didn’t like it. It was a groveling fashion of existence: I should never like to return to it. Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading. I now hate the recollection of the time I passed with Céline, Giacinta, and now Clara.’*

*[...] I drew from them the certain inference, that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, [...] as to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory.’<sup>33</sup>*

As already stated, the male characters in *Wuthering Heights* also behave like slave owners. Physically abusing women and children is viewed as the legal right of the master of the house. Mr. Earnshaw is violent towards his own son and he even strikes his daughter, Catherine, to teach her good manners. As a result of his father’s behaviour, Hindley learns very early that being a man – and, especially, the head of the household – legitimises violence. Therefore, on becoming the master of the house, Hindley behaves similarly to – and, later on, even worse than – Mr. Earnshaw. The idea that the master of the house has the “legal” right to be abusive is reinforced by the fact that even Heathcliff postpones acting in a violent way towards Hindley until he himself has gained the legal and economic status of *pater familias*. Moreover, Heathcliff teaches his son to be cruel and violent to his wife, making him believe that it is a husband’s prerogative. As a result, Linton emotionally abuses Cathy, becomes envious of her and seems happy to see her punished by his father. Even Lockwood – who is the prototype of the civilised man – is capable of violence towards women. This is obvious in his shockingly violent attempt to ‘defend’ himself from the girl in

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Meyer, S. L., ‘Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*, Edited by S. Regan, Routledge, 2001, p. 236-8

<sup>33</sup> Brontë, C.. *Jane Eyre*, Penguin. 1994. p. 309

his dream. Furthermore, he tolerates the harm inflicted upon the women around him. He notices the savage tone with which Heathcliff addresses the younger Catherine and the tense atmosphere at the tea-table but refuses to acknowledge the reality of Cathy's confinement at the Heights.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in *The Awakening*, speculative economy is represented by gender oppressors such as Léonce, Robert and Alcée who only allow Edna to have roles and personas ("wife", "mother" and "lover") even though she desires a material selfhood and, ultimately, feels forced to achieve it by means of her last desperate act of self-assertion.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

All in all, the exploitation of the female body depicted in *The Awakening* can be best understood only by applying the Marxian philosophical view on bodily labour to the twentieth century American social context. Similarly, a sociological feminist perspective is the ideal approach within the analysis of the domestic oppression of Victorian women portrayed in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. These two types of feminist perspectives point out the main similarity between the Victorian lady and the American "New Woman": in order to "survive" in a patriarchal system of values, they have to choose between spiritual fulfilment and social acceptance. Catherine, for instance, sacrifices authentic selfhood for social privilege by choosing Edgar (financial security) over Heathcliff (passion, love). The compromise leads to her decline (fragmentation of self, illness) and death.

Edna also becomes aware of the fact that she cannot reconcile social norms and passion/affection. However, unlike Catherine, she refuses to make any type of compromise and commits suicide in an act of rebellion against patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Jane is forced to choose between a socially acceptable marriage (with John Rivers) and a spiritually fulfilling relationship (with Mr. Rochester). Jane's acceptance of Rivers' marriage proposal would be the equivalent of spiritual suicide, but, unlike Catherine and Edna who fail to oppose the sacrifice that is imposed on them, Jane is capable of resistance. She chooses to return to Rochester (who had tried to convert her into his mistress) instead of entering a loveless marriage. Although – in the end – Jane manages to escape compromise and Edna withholds from sacrifice by withholding from life, it is Catherine's story that best illustrates the destiny of the Victorian lady and turn-of-the-century American woman: a tragic destiny marked by the choice of committing either social or spiritual suicide.

*This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.*

## Bibliography

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Reading, Berkshire: Penguin, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jacobs, N., M., 'Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*', in *Wuthering Heights*, Edited by P. Stoneman, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993, pages 78-81

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Rowe, J. C., 'The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'*, Edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011, pages 59-61

- Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Reading, Berkshire: Penguin, 1994.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Classics. Kindle Edition, 2006.
- Heilmann, Ann. "The Awakening and New Woman Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. Edited by J. Beer. New York: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition, 2008.
- Jacobs, N. M. "Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights*" in *Wuthering Heights*. Edited by P. Stoneman. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993.
- Meyer, Susan L. "Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*" in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*. Edited by S. Regan. London: Routledge in association with The Open University. 2001.
- Pykett, Lyn. "Gender and Genre in *Wuthering Heights*: Gothic Plot and Domestic Fiction" in *Wuthering Heights*. Edited by P. Stoneman. London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1993.
- Rowe, John Carlos. "The Economics of the Body in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"*. Edited by H. Bloom. Landisville: Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011.
- Sharpe, Jenny. "Excerpts from *Allegories of Empire*" in *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: a Casebook*. Edited by E. B. Michie. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics (Feminine, Feminist, Female)" in *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Edited by H. Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "*Jane Eyre*: a Critique of Imperialism" in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: a Critical Reader*. Edited by S. Regan. London: Routledge in association with The Open University. 2001.
- Stange, Margit. "Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*" in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"*. Edited by H. Bloom. Landisville: Infobase Learning Company, Yurchak Printing, 2011.
- Worton, Michael. "Reading Kate Chopin through Contemporary French Feminist Theory" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. Edited by J. Beer. New York: Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.