

# Heathcliff in the Post-Racial World: A Transformation of Filmic Identity

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The racial identity of Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* hasn't been concretely constructed. She calls him 'a Lascar' and a 'dark-skinned gipsy in aspect' leaving the character's ethnicity open to debate. In his introduction to *Wuthering Heights*, Christopher Heywood calls Heathcliff 'a child of Africa', and says that while Heathcliff is '[m]isread as a Gypsy, Lascar, castaway, and prince of India and China' he is a 'son of Ham'. In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Terry Eagleton considers Heathcliff as 'quite possibly' Irish, but also says that he 'may be a gypsy, or (like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*) a Creole, or any kind of alien. It is hard to know how black he is, or rather how much of the blackness is pigmentation and how much of it is grime and bile'.

Right from the onset of Brontë's novel, with the arrival of Heathcliff in the story, the idea associated with him is that of otherness. The agency here lies with the white man Mr. Earnshaw who treats him something akin to a commodity. He tells his wife that she 'must e'en take it [him] as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil'. So Heathcliff looks like he came from the devil. His physical attributes and demeanor are qualities that are primordially and nearly 'brutally' - savagely - expressed at the wild edge of romanticism and 'nature'. In terms of themes, they accord with stereotypes of the racial other: specifically blacks and gypsies. And the power of blackness is associated with diabolicism: the power to disrupt social order, or property relations, hierarchy, sexual control and relationship proprieties. The heath, the wilderness, always stands at the edge of society, civilization, decency, control, propriety, order.

The gypsy threatens just too many things that civilizational politeness insists upon and takes for granted; notions of 'roots', 'place' and 'legitimate' domicile; the demarcation and sanctity of immovable/non-trespassable property; respect for the 'ethical' obligation of labor in an economy of relentless productivity; the importance of sexual restraint and behavioral propriety; the clarity of ethno-racial origins; ideas of cleanliness; decency and honesty; the taboo on 'violent and visceral drives'; the hierarchy of reason and passion on which the modern West is predicated. No one even knows where these Romans came from; or where they are headed. They look different and 'dangerous' and 'out of nowhere'. They threaten the great Occidental myth of control and order.

Heathcliff is accused of disturbing the order at the Earnshaw's dinner table. Mrs. Earnshaw expresses her resentment at this new inclusion in the family by asking her husband to tell her how he could bring that gipsy brat into the house, when they had their own children to feed, and fend for?; the accusation is thus both against Heathcliff's usurping of the rights of the Earnshaw's children and his 'Gypsy otherness'. As unclear as are his origins, so is his position in the Earnshaw's household. He is the servant-sibling-stranger, who is repeatedly denoted as 'gypsy' which might be merely synonymous with the 'dark ambiguous other'<sup>1</sup>

This ambiguity is also comprehensible in the possible non-awareness of someone like the narrator Nelly of racial differences and denominations, while living a life greatly unconnected from the larger society and its variegations. Whatever might be Heathcliff's origins, he is definitely not 'white enough' to gain assimilation in the white genteel household. He always lurks on the boundaries, neither an insider nor an outsider, a 'dark' lurking misfit. During the course of the narrative, it is interesting how this symbolic/physical darkness upsets the social order and sanctity which is problematical on the ethno-racial grounds. Would Heathcliff be ostracized in the same way from the Linton's household had he been a fair-haired white boy from the streets of Liverpool? His desire for revenge is instigated from the very rejection he gets from everyone. This revenge is initiated by the disturbing of power of balance in terms of property ownership, once Heathcliff makes a re-entry in the garb of an English gentleman. The source of his newfound fortune, which has been left mysteriously unmentioned, conveys shady undertones. And this 'sinister otherness' of him makes inroads and wreaks havoc by first taking the ownership of Wuthering Heights and then the Thrushcross Grange. And every act of commodity displacement leads to a violent rupture of the English-familial symmetry and is accompanied by moral and physical ailment of characters like Hareton/Linton and the death of Catherine/Linton. It is a persisting atmosphere of sadness and gloom with the invasion of this 'unhealthy darkness'. The initial commodification of the 'gypsy other' backfires when the unacknowledged outsider makes the assertive attempts of ownership of property, thus staying true to his 'essentialized, demonic darkness'; the order being restored only with erasure of this outsider and the property being restored to the rightful owner, i.e. Hareton Earnshaw.

*Wuthering Heights* has been subject to numerous screen adaptations. Apart from the uncertain artistic merit of these popular productions, what is still more surprising is how the character of Heathcliff has fared in the post-racial world of today. Heathcliff has always been played by Caucasian actors such as Laurence Olivier, Ralph Fiennes, Tom Hardy, Timothy Dalton. It is surprising why his racial ambivalence was never brought to the fore by getting an actor of a different racial background play Heathcliff. Even if the textual drama is not intended to be a specific indictment of racial injustice, this metaphorical 'otherness' cannot be suitably and powerfully underlined without exploring the racially charged dimension of the character of Heathcliff.

The 1939 Samuel Goldwyn production of *Wuthering Heights* casts the famed Shakespearean actor Lawrence Olivier in the role of Heathcliff and Merle Oberon as Catherine. Due to the major role that the casting of Olivier here plays, it becomes an anti-thesis to the character of Heathcliff and waters down the elemental passions that are the core of the demented heart of Brontë's work. It is significant here that for a popular, commercial genre of cinema, popular attitudes and expectations play their part. In the context of the historical time of the movie's production, nothing runs contrary to the expectation that they would churn out a conformist, non-subversive, romantically and commercially acclimatized version of Heathcliff and Brontë's novel. Also, the time in the United States was of the beginnings of the civil rights movement and of a pervasive segregation of the races and a consequent deep revulsion for black man-white woman relationship. So it does follow why the portrayal of Heathcliff by

anyone but a Caucasian would be perceived as a 'racial aberration' and hence would be intolerable.

Darkness has several connotations. With the unwillingness and incapacity to tackle the racial connotation, what seems to have been operated upon, in the 1939 production, is the metaphorical connotation of this darkness. It is an amorphous expression of this moral tendency, almost a satanic quality, something akin to nineteenth century Byron-Satanic heroes like Don Juan or Childe Harold. Also, there was, in the nineteenth century, a fascination with a 'demonic' darkness which is actually post-theological. This does not translate into racial difference which has to be kept understated, suppressed and non-provocative. A Byronic-Satanic understanding of Heathcliff is a romanticist thing, and a commercial filmography of *Wuthering Heights* could possibly go that far.

In the Samuel Goldwyn's production, Lawrence Olivier both plays and 'contains' the 'difference'. There are numerous references in the movie to Heathcliff's otherness: 'gypsy beggar', 'as dark as he came from the devil', 'a surly dressed up beggar, a lout, a boor'. Isabella tells Heathcliff, 'You are not black and horrible as they think of you. But full of pain.' It is surprising why this oft-mentioned 'blackness' is so apparent to the other characters in the movie while it isn't so to the viewer. Heathcliff is too polished, elegant and somewhat eloquent even as a child. Olivier has such a romanticist understanding of the character which is not really threatening at all, not subversive. It renders an insipid, innocuous tone to the story by making it 'acceptable'. One cannot have an innocuous, harmless *Wuthering Heights*, a tale in which race, class, gender, morality, sexuality, interior, exterior, nature/civility, everything and each contradiction is pushed to a 'dangerous' limit.

The 1939 adaptation doesn't really focus on the experiences of Heathcliff as an outsider, someone subjected to unimaginable oppression by his master Hindley which culminated in such psychic distortion, hatred and revenge. The story rather fits in a very romanticist and conventional pattern of love, separation and angst. 'Isn't she beautiful? That's the kind of dress I want to wear. And you will have red velvet coat and silver buckles on your shoes. O Heathcliff will we, will we ever?' It is a traditionalist vision of love and its goals have been foreseen: marriage, settlement, happiness. Catherine's love for Heathcliff seems to be totally driven by the dreams of matrimonial fulfillment. A nice house and husband thus characterize a 'lack' in Cathy's life which Heathcliff is unable to fulfill and thus she is driven towards Linton. The schism in Catherine, which makes her capable of unimaginable rebellion and sexualism, and romantic 'freedom', while at the same time capable of being co-opted into 'acceptable' feminine and class expectations, has been underplayed in this adaptation. This is what weakens the impassioned wildness that invests the affinity between her and the wild Heathcliff. Consequently Heathcliff's 'otherness' becomes secondary and less important. It is rather Catherine's shift towards permanent conformity from a weak and slightly wayward form of non-conformity that spins the tragedy of the story. Her developing possible union with Heathcliff seems to mimic, rather than providing a fundamental alternative to the Linton-Cathy marriage. Now that he is a genteel, acceptable, mainstream, all-white British gentleman of the Victorian era, they could have had a 'happily ever after' marriage. This would be the ideal happy ending for

them! The problem is that it does not materialize: and not that (as the truth is) it could never materialize in that form.

Also, there is no effective presentation of the multiple exclusions and victimization Heathcliff is subjected to. It is not an attempt to understand why Heathcliff becomes what he becomes: a rough, crude, cruel, boorish man who destroys a 'good' respectable marriage, and a woman. With the question of racial otherness erased, it is possible that the audience's understanding of the class-based oppression and resentment of Heathcliff has been considered as subliminal, and hence not deserving of any hard-hitting cinematic depiction.

Endless numbers of film and TV adaptations have followed the Samuel Goldwyn's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, with the role of Heathcliff invariably played by a Caucasian actor. Finally though, in 2011 Andrea Arnold, a British director came with her version of the story which has James Howson, an actor of African-Caribbean descent playing the part of Heathcliff. It radically implies how 'racial/ethnic outsidership' is the broad issue. The blackness of the actor essentially intensifies the association. In a tale in which nothing is moderate, and all passions are elemental like the force of nature, Arnold's version is a validation of it with her sparse 'naturalistic' rendition.

The movie opens with the scene in which Earnshaw gets Heathcliff (played by Solomon Glave) to *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff snarls at the pet dog, paralleling his own ascribed beastly otherness with it. He speaks gibberish, and even Catherine (first played by Shannon Breer and then by Kaya Scoledario) spits on him. 'It was the only Christian thing to do' - that is how Earnshaw explains Heathcliff's incorporation into the family. He seems to be on a Christian mission of controlling, cleansing and moralizing this unfamiliar 'heathen'.

This sentiment is underscored in the following scene in which Heathcliff undergoes Christian rituals - 'For I will take you from among the heathen. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Heathcliff, do you reject Satan?' In what seems to be a process of cleansing of a filthy heathen 'other', of exorcism of the possessed stranger, misfit; Heathcliff physically breaks free and runs away. Cathy runs away with him. Solidarity is established between the wild outcasts, as they run away into the mist, those two children of nature and wilderness.

Arnold's version stays true to the very different view of childhood in *Wuthering Heights* than in Dickens for example - far darker and more militant and 'uncontrollable'. The young Cathy's gender outsidership (at least until her incorporation) complements Heathcliff's racial, or familial-illegitimate, or class outsidership. It is her uncontrollable nature that makes it possible for her to rake through the moors with Heathcliff, denying the feminine bounds of containment and cleanliness. It is very important and the basis of their 'soul solidarity' right from childhood. It predates sexual fascination.

What makes Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* a compelling tale is how she places racism into perspective: the oppression, the societal prejudices, the deep betrayals, the multiple exclusions, the expropriations racism involves. 'We should hang you now before you

get any older' – this is what the Lintons consider of the 'the little lascar, the stowaway' Earnshaw brought from the streets of Liverpool. His attempts at acceptance are brutally mocked at. 'Look at him. He is all dressed up like a circus monkey' says Edgar Linton when Heathcliff cleans up for the family lunch. Heathcliff is not one of them, and no amount of cleaning and washing and scrubbing of the grim and dirt can make him one of them. He is, in several frames, shown looking through the window, peeping in with the voyeuristic gaze of an outsider who has been driven out from the internal inviolability of the white genteel family.

The treatment of Heathcliff by Hindley has been shown as horrendous. 'He is not my brother, he is a nigger' - the degradation of Heathcliff by Hindley is demonstrated as a brutal response to his ethnicity in Arnold's adaptation. 'Your choice nigger. Work or leave. Move in with the animals you belong' - Hindley establishes the master-slave hierarchy based on demotion to a subhuman species status. Heathcliff is banished to the farm. The boundaries have sternly been laid down. He is brutally beaten up by Hindley and Joseph when he leaves work and runs off with Cathy to the moors - 'Even the animals work around here'. One crucial thing that emerges is that violence isn't exclusively centered inside the 'black' or 'alien' Heathcliff - the vampire, gargoyle, gipsy, et al. On the contrary it is everywhere. It enters him precisely from the respectable, white, propertied, genteel world: Hindley's animality, his cruelty, his deterioration, his alcoholism and dissipation, his decadence and wasteful self-destruction. Evil and violence begin in the very white, bloodline; the respectable son and heir of Earnshaw. And this is something that surfaces when Arnold complicates the matter of class oppression with race. And it actually breaks up the divides: the moral divisions and binaries around class and race. It exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian morality. Hindley is cruel and sadistic to anyone he can establish his power over with humiliation and cruelty: anyone helpless. And then he and his wife Frances are showering cloying sentimental effusions of love upon each other. It is a great expose of another double standard in the Victorian age: the polite and lovey-dovey sentimental is not only absurd and infuriating; it totally mismatches the brutality and inner heartlessness of Hindley and Frances. They are amused by the destruction, punishment and cruelty they are now free to dispense.

What Arnold has notably not missed out in her adaptation is the positioning of racial oppression in Heathcliff's revenge once he is back to the Heights and how it stimulates his vengeful brutality. The anger and retaliation is not motivated just by the passion he has for Catherine, but also by a more primitive attempt at self-preservation that is intrinsic to his state of otherness and repression. In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson, adapting Nietzsche, proposes the idea of the 'ressentiment' of the repressed.<sup>2</sup> The term is used to convey the notion, that the repressed must inevitably strike back - in the form of the anger of those too long deprived and stripped of power and dignity. Heathcliff (played by James Howson) is no simple 'victim'. He is a sufferer of abuse, and he discharges it with interest. That is a 'satanic hero', a social revenger. Marital-sexual cruelty is something he suffered first, in his very destiny of exclusion from Cathy. So this revenge is very specific and particular. He was humiliated, expropriated, sexually demeaned and degraded. Now he'll do the same to his abuser. The revenge is not specific to the immediate perpetrator of violence and injustice,

Hindley. It is not 'personal' or 'individual' merely, but is visited upon a whole social sphere and its ideologies and so whole generations of the oppressing family/families must be destroyed and rendered impotent. Franz Fanon confronts us with an interesting transformation phenomenon by which racial inferiority or unacceptable transgressions are rendered tolerable.<sup>3</sup> Fanon argued that the oppressed black racial minorities, controlled by Christian morality, which is also used to tame the 'wild children' in *Wuthering Heights*, need to regain access to a visceral violent capability if they want to break free of their spiritual enslavement and thralldom. Racial self-liberation involves being violent and 'non-Christian' towards the oppressor. Violence restores your identity and autonomy. It is the sentiment and procedure of Heathcliff who re-enacts the cruelty he has always known. It is very destructive and also self destructive.

A critic has called Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* as a 'beautiful rough beast of a movie'. It so aptly conveys the sense of naturalism that is present in Bronte's novel. The cinematic language become effective as the ideas of violence, revenge, illicit passion, sexuality and gender transgression, are visually present to the eye; the radicalism of it is powerfully underscored. In fact the very form of the film is then part of its ideological challenge. There is a microscopic focus of the camera on detail – flora and fauna, moths fluttering, beetles and weed, decay and filth. It is a very naturalistic view of human life similar to the organisms in nature. This provides the framework for a Darwinian study of the effects of environment, the seamy side of life, the degraded, the gutter filth, and social morass dimensions. There are multiple still shots of the tempestuous, drab, harsh landscape. With these multiple still shots, the effect is that of tableaux that indicates a disposition of man and nature. It is not the nineteenth century Wordsworthian idealization of landscape as pantheistic, lyrical, sweet, pacific, 'poignant', and a savior. In *Wuthering Heights*, nature is wild, tortured, harsh, untamed, dangerous, spooky, and haunted. The impermissible becomes naturalized in such a landscape. The 'misfit' man is linked to this 'untamed' aspect of nature as opposed to home, family, civilization, morality: David Cecil talks of storm vs. calm.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the images, including montage juxtapositions, underscore this 'conflict'. The white face-black face / man-woman relationship - juxtaposed with the primeval landscape makes other points - about race, gender which links the framing of the depiction to European-genteel-rational vs. exotic-barbaric social types: the outsider, the other threatens societal safeties.

The use of hand held camera which, moves and shakes, creates a sense of discontinuity, disorientation, violence, seismic breakdown and destabilization (as also sexual turbulence). It is the disruption of racial expectation, which parallels the disruptive tempestuousness of nature. The camerawork style parallels the 'rupture' of the expected and the safe. The dialogues have been cut to the minimum with a profusion of cursing. The emphasis is more on visuality. Hence the 'colour' issue, i.e. the colour transformation (or re-blackening) of Heathcliff becomes sensationally foregrounded. The image of the black man on top of a white woman in the heath/mud moor is highly incendiary; a racial moral shock to the Victorian sensibility and repression of sexuality. The inchoateness of 'cursing' (impolite, abusive, violent, vituperative anti-language discourse) as the soundtrack, echoes a challenge to the 'literary' sensibility of the nineteenth century in a cinematic format and thus links to Bronte's general challenge

to polite discourse. There is also much direct animality and animal imagery and presences in the film – lots of primitive animal cries and howls, dogs chasing men, dead rabbits, Heathcliff's own nature paralleling his beasts, Heathcliff and Hareton hanging dogs. In fact the non-beastly parts of Victorian culture stand demystified, disrobed; they are just as 'beastly' or more so. It could be the part of the cultural critique and exposure of the polite-genteel pretenses of Victorian respectability. Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* is a violent, dangerous, seething dark work. A beast of a book, and now a beast of a movie!

Arnold's path breaking move with her 2011 adaptation of Bronte's work brings us to another significant question. Why was it thought of after so long? Why the racial ambiguity of such a popular literary character was not explored with a more diversified palette? It points to the habitual colour blindness that the film and television industry suffer so much from. This colour blindness somehow is always in favor of the white actors, while faces from the minority remain stuck in the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the popular media and film industry. Whatever is seen of these non-white faces in the mainstream cinema, it is always for secondary purposes. A non-white actor frequently makes appearances in cinema, assisting, counseling the lead main actor or providing a counterpoint to the white characters. There is no significant story of their own to tell, their experiences are merely not included. Neither is there any contestation of the status quo or stereotype which always favors the white characters. Ardis C. Martin talks of how due to these images; positive characteristics are associated to Caucasian characters on TV and negative characteristics to minority cultures, Latinos and African Americans in particular. The absence of minorities on TV, in general, makes the minorities feel that they are not worthy of 'attention' and the stereotyped and negative roles they encounter suggest that they are not worthy of 'respect'. It underlines a major devaluation of the other groups of a society.<sup>5</sup> A recent example of this racist colour blind casting is the adaption of the popular Nickelodian series 'Avatar: The Last Airbender'. Rather than casting Asian actors, it has white actors portraying the Asian characters. All the heroic characters are played by white actors and the villainous ones by dark skinned actors in spite of the fact the characters have distinct Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Korean characteristics irrespective of their goodness and badness.

The aspect of commercial profitability majorly predicates this practice of race-lifting. The racial identity of characters is ideally 'congruent' with the racial identity of audiences.<sup>6</sup> So in cinema, which is a commercial medium, viability of product requires more characters of the majority or the racially dominant group; thus monopolizing the bulk of depicted characters. This means that a number of figures of black or ambivalent ethno-racial groups would be 'racially lifted' to the dominant group identity. Also because of 'acceptability' - when a protagonist of conspicuously Afro origins, coloration and feature is seen in close-up engaging in sexual intercourse with a high-born genteel woman of white European lineage, it strains the ideological expectations of audience.

In her paper 'Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener's Tale', Camara Jones talks of 'Institutionalized racism' which is 'normative, sometimes legalized, and often manifests as inherited disadvantage' and how such a disadvantage persists because of contemporary structural factors that perpetuate those historical

injustices. Popular cinema is guilty of perpetuating this kind of racism. Even budding white actors have better prospects and choices with respect to casting than non-white actors. The pretense of impartiality of colorblind casting somehow always tends to favor the white actors. Such a situation is the result of certain supremacist assumptions - white actors are better than actors from the minority groups; they can pull more crowds; white audiences would not be able to 'identify' with non-white characters. But the implied expectation from the non-white communities to identify with an all white onscreen narrative calls attention to the duplicity that such an assumption involves.

Some wonder why it should matter. Why ethno-racial accuracy in casting has to be important in a 'post-racial' [be ready to explain this term] world? Such an attempt at glossing over stems from disinterestedness associated with 'white privilege' towards the interests of the non-white minorities. Race is a highly influential facet in the lives of the non-white communities and its effect and significance cannot be ignored. It is indicative of the cultures and histories, and the political and social framework they occupy. Their presence needs to be affirmed and their stories need to be told by pulling them out of the negative, convention-bound stereotypes and the invisibility they have been reduced to. In a still racist post-racial world, Andrea Arnold's choice of casting rouses hope and anticipation. It exemplifies how a breaking away from a monochromatic, socially-culturally tamed onscreen narrative can adorn a timeless masterpiece with powerful, untouched meanings and possibilities.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Bardi, Abigail Rothblatt, *The Gypsy as Trope in Victorian and Modern British Literature*, University of Maryland, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, 1982.
- <sup>3</sup> See Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 2008 and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 2005
- <sup>4</sup> See Cecil, David Cecil. *Early Victorian novelists: Essays in Revaluation*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1935
- <sup>5</sup> See Martin, Ardis C. 'Television Media as a Potential Negative Factor in the Racial Identity Development of African American Youth', *Academic Psychiatry*, 32:4, July-August 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> See Fischhoff, Stuart and Joe Antonio. 'Favorite Films and Film Genres as a Function of Race, Age, and Gender, *Journal of Media Psychology*, Volume 3, Number 1, 1998.

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