

A Struggle of the protagonist to define British National Identity Vs Belgian National Identity in Charlotte Bronte's Novel Vilette

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"Youth has its romance, and maturity its wisdom, as morning and spring have their freshness, noon and summer their power, night and winter their repose. Each attribute is good in its own season." Charlotte Bronte

Introduction: The Victorian Novel 'Vilette' is published by Charlotte Bronte in 1853. This is the fourth novel by Bronte, set initially in England and later the story shifts to Vilette a fictional French speaking town of Labesseccour in Belgium. This novel is written on Bronte's own experience as a teacher in Brussels. This novel has the characteristic features of both gothic and psychological genre. The protagonist of the novel, Lucy is introduced as poor, destitute, orphan , who has neither family, money nor friends and whose parents have died a mysterious death but educated in gentle class of the society. Lucy narrates the story in third person which shows the detachment and alienation not only form entire world but her own self.

This paper discusses the constant struggle of the protagonist of the novel, Lucy Snowy to define her British National Identity while she resides at Labesseccour in Belgium. As the newly emerged Belgium strives to create a coherent identity of its own free from foreign cultures, similarly fresh -off-the-boat Lucy also struggles to define her national identity in the foreign land with an interest in the French language and continental culture struggles to reconcile her fidelity to Britain.

Lucy Snowe is the protagonist of the novel. The meaning of the name Lucy Snowe is light and cold. Lucy narrates the story in third person which shows the detachment and alienation not only form entire world but her own self. Lucy is introduced as poor, destitute,

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orphan , who has neither family, money nor friends and whose parents have died a mysterious death but educated in gentle class of the society.

Objectives of the study:

1. To study the struggle of the protagonist to define her British National Identity while she shifts to Villette a fictional french speaking town of Labesseccour in Belgium .
2. To analyze the assertiveness and struggle of the protagonist to protect her religion and identity in the foreign land.
3. To compare and contrast the protagonist with the other female characters of the novel in the wake of identity and foreign culture.
4. To examine the differences in respect of tradition , culture and religion both in England and in Belgium and its impact on the protagonist.
5. To study the optimistic personality of the protagonist in surviving alone though number of times she is trust into poverty and loneliness.

The protagonist of the novel appears to be someone who always seems to be out of place and as noted by Gilbert and Gubar, she may feel out of place wherever she goes. Although her religious and national identity are under threat, Lucy keeps her religion, and even though she learns French, she keeps her English identity. In the end she gets a dual identity, both as a Labasseccourian and as an Englishperson. Eventually Lucy finds her way in Villette and is happy.

Gilbert and Gubar argue, for example, that Lucy has “to seek her identity on foreign soil because she is metaphorically a foreigner even in England” (405)

The novel 'Villette' in the view of critics:

"Villette is a still more wonderful book than Jane Eyre. There is something almost preternatural in its power."—George Eliot

The above quote by Mary Ann Evans an English novelist , poet translator and one of the leading writers of Victorian era, known by her pen name George Eliot description about the novel Villette.

"There are so few books, and so many volumes. Among the few stands Villette."—George Henry Lewes

The above quote by George Henry Lewes an English philosopher and critic of literature and theatre in description of the novel Villette.

"It is her finest novel. All her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, 'I love. I hate. I suffer.'"—Virginia Woolf

Lucy being an orphan and taken care by her God mother Mrs. Breton. Lucy visits her godmother Mrs. Breton's home twice a year. Mrs. Breton lives in a beautiful house in an ancient town of Breton with her son Graham. Mrs. Breton is a kind lady but does not have any particular affection for Lucy. Though Lucy likes to stay at her godmother's home but cannot expect love or any kind of favor from Bretons. No one talks to Lucy, takes a notice of her or even care about her..

While Lucy is on stay at her godmother's home a little girl Paulina Mary Home (Polly) daughter of Mr. Home a distant relative of Mrs. Breton's comes to stay with her while Mr. Home makes arrangements for their stay abroad. Mrs. Home dies of fever and the Polly is a neglected child. Graham is sixteen years young adult, described by Lucy as "handsome, faithless-looking." He is auburn-haired and well-grown. Whereas Polly is described as sensitive and melancholic in nature and just six years child. Polly develops a kind of liking for Graham.

Later Bretons suffer hard times so both Mrs. Breton and her son Graham Breton lived in London. Lucy cannot appeal to them for any kind of help from them. Once again Lucy is left destitute. Lucy is offered a job of nurse - companion for Miss Marchmont who is woman of fortune lives in the neighborhood of Lucy. Miss Marchmont is sick paralytic and cannot move from her sickroom. The job which Lucy is offered is too hard to accept but at least it is socially acceptable for an educated young lady. Especially for a young girl like Lucy who is poor and destitute, out of no other choice Lucy accepts the job though initially she dislikes it as she can imagine how distressing and limiting it would be both physically and emotionally for her.

Lucy gets adjusted with her job and develops respect for Miss Marchmont mean while one night there is terrible storm and Lucy suspects that there would be a change or death. Miss Marchmont narrates the tragic love story of her youth and dies. Lucy mourns the death of Marchmont as she was her only friend on the earth. Once again Lucy is thrust on the world in the same state of poverty as earlier. Lucy meets her old servant and gathers information that there is a demand for English governess abroad and are paid well and treated well.

"Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star. Villette By Charlotte Bronte.

Lucy decides to travel abroad in order to find employment and earn a living for herself. She embarks in a ship called 'The Vivid' meaning bright colored , clearly visible and full of life . She sails for Boue- Marine port in Belgium. Lucy happens to meet another young boarder by name Ginevra Fanshawe who is in her way to her school in Villette. Lucy and Ginevra conversate with each other and Ginevra gives the information that M.de Bassompierre was her uncle, benefactor and godfather. As Lucy makes judgments about the people based on their nature and appearances similarly she judges Ginevra to be selfish and her inability to endure sufferings unlike her which she could endure in her early adulthood.

Lucy lands in Boue-Marine hotel and very much unsure about what she has to do next. Lucy remembers the conversation she had with Ginevra aboard The Vivid. Lucy recollects that there is a vacancy for an English governess at the school that Ginevra attends in the town of Villette and the proprietress of the school is Madame Beck. With this reference Lucy goes to meet Madame Beck and luckily she is appointed as the English governess for Madame Beck's children. Impressed by her English speaking skills Lucy is appointed as the English teacher at the school where Madame Beck is the proprietress. In this way Lucy is raised from a homeless , unemployed young woman in the foreign land to a English teacher at Madame Beck's school.

Lucy gets to know that Madame Beck runs the boarding school by constantly spying her employees, students and teacher. Lucy suffers from interpersonal conflicts with both Madame Beck and her cousin M Paul headmaster of the school, who is an expert in physiognomy and can assess people by their facial features. Madame Beck and her cousin M Paul are Roman Catholics whereas Lucy is staunch follower of Protestantism.

Lucy views Madame Beck as reasonable and exceptionally successful, if ethically insufficient. Lucy tracks down that Madame Beck, while having a "levelheaded generosity," is altogether unfeeling, just getting things done for objective intentions and especially out of her own personal responsibility. All things considered, she runs an excellent school, where the understudies learn examples effectively and are well treated. Lucy respects Madame's restraint and solidness, however she knows her to have no unengaged empathy for any other person.

Over the course of this season of revelation, Lucy differentiates the traditions of Madame Beck's school with those of England.

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There is a parallel comparison of Belgium with the protagonist of the novel *Villette*, Lucy Snowe in the struggle for the creation of national identity. In the past history Belgium suffered from a series of foreign invasions like France, British, Dutch, Germany and was influenced by the cultures of these foreign countries. Belgian revolution took place in 1830 and gained independence from the kingdom of Netherland. As the newly emerged Belgium strives to create a coherent identity of its own free from foreign cultures, similarly fresh -off-the-boat Lucy also struggles to define her national identity in the foreign land. Lucy with an interest in the French language and continental culture struggles to reconcile her fidelity to Britain.

As Lucy struggles to define her British national identity, M Paul participated in *Villette's* revolutionary struggles and hence protects his Belgian national identity and track down articulation in frequent eruption against British for instance during the fete celebration in the novel (395-96). Whereas Lucy's Britishness disturbs Madame Beck and her students. Madame Beck, M. Paul and the students cling to Roman Catholic culture which was very evident in their daily routine of 'lectures pieuses' (133), which prejudiced Madame Beck tries to force upon Lucy but Lucy feels this as a direct offence against her Protestantism.

In *Villette*, the common nervousness of national uncertainty that Lucy imparts to Labassecourians like M. Paul or Madame Beck appears in shared observation. Lucy does, without a doubt, experience Madame Beck's and M. Paul's intrusiveness as a "Continental" peculiarity ("All this was very un-English: truly I was in a foreign land" [78]). Both in England and in *Villette*, she is a master eavesdropper.

Lucy shares this reviewing mentality. Surveillance and its consequences, suspicion and curiosity mark the start of Lucy's relationship with M. Paul when Lucy applies for a teaching job, he is approached to utilize his physiognomic abilities, and investigates the British guest. Nonetheless, Lucy herself additionally continually "measures the nearby students' height and calculates their strength" while interfacing with them (90). These practices, have more to do with question or inquisitive perception, which, however grounded in anxiety toward the cultural other, is an important initial move towards an acknowledgment of contrasts and their compromise.

Lucy's nature of defending her national identity, culture and Britishness in Belgium is in contrast with the nature of other characters of the novel whom she has acquaintance with them in her childhood in England at her godmother's home. The characters of Mrs. Bretton, Polly, Graham and Ginevra the cousin of Polly serve as a potential models of British reaction to the Continental, every one of whom have lived in the two sides of the Channel that both in England and in Belgium. At the point when she meets Ginevra on a boat heading for the Continent, Lucy has quite recently left London, a city concerning which she feels divided. Her feeling of homelessness is strange and mysterious: London both draws in and repels her, such that matches her uncertain sentiments concerning whether she "fits" in Britain and later in the Villette community. Brontë contrasts Lucy's intense and passionate feelings to Ginevra's indifferent attitude outings across the Channel.

"I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter."
Villette by Charlotte Bronte

Ginevra is a striking illustration of assimilation of British and Continental cultures, as represented by her high level bilingualism. She isn't just conversant in French, yet feels that she can communicate her feelings more satisfactorily in French than in English, and announces that she now "writes English badly" (60). She effectively mixes with the high society Labassecourian girls and concedes that she has quite forgotten her religion: they call her a Protestant but she is not certain whether or not she is a protestant or not and she doesn't surely understand the distinction among Romanism and Protestantism" (60). Lucy dismisses Ginevra's multiculturalism since it is careless and shallow:

Ginevra accepts the local culture, not by conscious decision in view of personal convictions, but rather through passive mimicry. Her remarks on religion possibly stunned Victorian readers not just on the grounds that they indicate a risky uncertain of limits between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, yet additionally in light of the fact that they uncover Ginevra as a young lady who, in contrast to Lucy, is reluctant to basically ponder hesitently. Ginevra and her cousin Polly, but unique they may at first show up, share a specific detachment.

Lucy, depicting the youthful Polly, noticed that she "had no mind or life of her own, however should essentially live, move and sarcastically takes note of her incredible fitness at imitation . In Labassecour, Polly's resignation lies in a careless dismissal. At the point when Lucy meets her in Villette, Polly doesn't appear to be keen on blending in with local people, and on second thought fosters a connection to Graham, an upsetting model of British "monoculturalism" abroad. Notwithstanding his insight into French and his work at the pensionnat, (a boarding school in France) Graham is promptly perceived as an Englishman by Lucy whenever she first sees him on the Continent. He and his mother endeavor to make in Villette a type of "miniature England" The progression of articles outward from England assumed a critical part in sending out a restrictive, unique kind of Englishness through a world that remained unmistakably non-English ...

Lucy Snowe suffers from interpersonal conflicts with Madame Beck proprietress of the school in Villette, her cousin M Paul, head master of the school and Pere Silas of French origin the Catholic Jesuit priest. Once he saves Lucy when she collapses on the steps of a building in Basse- Ville. He was the old tutor of M Paul and serves as a confessor of Lucy . Pere Silas along with Madame Beck and M Paul tries to convert Lucy to Catholicism. But Lucy strongly defends her Protestantism.

The day Lucy joins as a English governess to the three children of Madame Beck , she starts spying Lucy , the night Lucy is asked to sleep at Madame Beck's home , Lucy's belongings are spied by Madame Beck. Later in the novel when Lucy receives letters from Dr. John , these letters are secretly spied by Madame Beck and Lucy had to bury the letters under a tree in order to save them from spying.

Initially both Lucy and M Paul argue to defend their own religious conceptions . M Paul defends Roman Catholicism while Lucy defends her Protestantism. Lucy clarifies her challenges with Catholicism, and she attempts to persuade M. Paul that Protestants are not quite as terrible as viewed by Père Silas . That one of the principle precepts of Lucy's Protestant Christianity is that every individual's relationship with God is one's own liability is something that neither Père Silas nor M. Paul can comprehend. M. Paul actually trusts that Lucy will change over, and Lucy

excepts something similar for M. Paul. Finally both M Paul and Lucy reconcile and fall in love with each other setting aside their cultural and religious differences.

From the start of her visit on the continent , local people view Lucy as a staunch Protestant, while she perceives her Roman Catholic colleagues' conduct as generally wrong, a judgment that encourages her underlying seclusion. Mistrust of Roman Catholicism is obviously a typical quality of numerous Victorian accounts managing social contrasts in Continental Europe, and it normally colors British impression of Belgium.

Conclusion: Lucy Snowe fights a single battle from the beginning of the novel as an orphan till the end of the novel awaiting the return of Paul Emanuel whom she loves truly . Lucy struggles in the foreign land to retain her national and religious identity without losing hope , always longing for love and friendship . It is quite unfortunate for Lucy that whomever she loves, she gets separated from them. This repetitive pattern of separation from the loved ones is quite evident throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel after completion of education sponsored by her God mother Mrs. Breton, for the first time she joins as nurse-companion for a wealthy old widow, who dies after narrating her past one night after a terrible storm. Lucy feels isolated once again after the death of Miss. Marchmont , the only companion she had on the earth.

At the second instance , she loves Dr. John Graham son of Mrs. Breton her Godmother, after meeting him in Belgium but he loves Poulina , his childhood acquaintance and marries her leads a happy life. Once again Lucy suffers from solitude and falls ill seriously. Later on she loves Paul Emanuel head master of the school where Lucy teaches French. Paul is a cousin of Madam Beck though initially both Lucy and Paul have difference of opinion related to national and religious identity later both reconcile and love each other. The novel's ending is ambiguous, rather an open ending novel in which the ending is left to the interpretation of the reader as to whether Paul who is stuck up in the storm would return to Lucy or not. But Lucy never surrenders to the challenges that life throws up on her but faces them confidently and at the end of the novel awaits for the return of Paul sincerely as she loved him sincerely.

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