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From *Pasha* to *Cleopatra* and *Vashti*: The Oriental Other in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

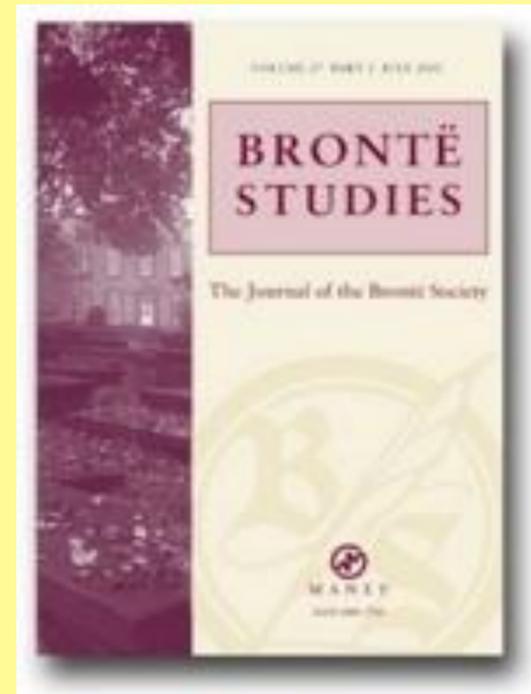


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KEYWORDS: Charlotte Brontë, gender, harem, Orientalism, race, *Villette*

ABSTRACT: Critics have argued that Jane's engagement with the Orient in *Jane Eyre* (1847) is grounded in the vocabulary of her role as liberator and the discourse of female slavery and male domination as represented by the use of the harem metaphor in the text. Yet little is said about how this same metaphor exposes in *Villette* (1853) the ambivalence inherent in the construction of a Western character that has been invaded by the so-called menacing influences of the Orient. In the novel, the Oriental familial institution of the harem is figuratively and literally seen as a contaminant that poses a threat to a racial and gendered colonial British character. It suggests that this contamination destabilizes this character, blurring the line that divides both East and West, fantasy and reality, and argues that the Oriental institution of the harem, the artistic representations of women as illustrated by the Orientalist portrait of Cleopatra and the actress playing Vashti and, finally, M. Paul, represent the different ways in which this character is gendered and orientalized.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

- ❖ To identify and assess the impact that nineteenth-century historical and sociological contexts had on British literature.
- ❖ To interrogate how emerging discourses on gender, race and colonialism in the nineteenth century intersect and are mutually intertwined within a novel written in this Victorian era.
- ❖ To illustrate the ambivalences and anxieties inherent in nineteenth-century imperialist discourse, in particular, on racial and cultural "contamination".
- ❖ To prove that nineteenth-century domestic novels can be implicitly informed by colonial ideology.

METHODOLOGY:

Theoretical and analytical examination of a literary text, interspersed with a review of historical and sociological materials about the specific period during which the text was written; critical study of both recent and rare periodicals and books.

RESEARCH OUTPUT:

An article appeared in a special edition of *Brontë Studies*, Volume 35, Number 2, July 2010, pp. 118-127. The journal is a quarterly publication on behalf of The Brontë Society by the reputable Maney Publishings. This peer-reviewed, highly-subscribed journal is listed in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index of ISI Thomson Reuters Master Journal List and SCOPUS. The article can also be accessed from www.ingentaconnect.com.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER:

Aimillia bt. Mohd Ramli is Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, IIUM. Her research interest includes nineteenth-century British literature, Orientalist literature and Malaysian Literature in English.

