

Reconfiguring Home: Charlotte Brontë Meets Njabulo Ndebele

Camille Tabosa-Vaz

This article derives from my MA dissertation, *A Postcolonial, Feminist Reading of the Representation of 'home' in Jane Eyre and Villette by Charlotte Brontë* (2007)¹. Focusing on questions of home, homelessness and marginality, the title arises from Brontë's overt preoccupation with conditions of female social marginality and orphanhood—issues central to the postcolonial problematic. A postcolonial feminist reading of the representation of home in Brontë's novels reveals the dynamic and unstable qualities of a concept that prompts a new and different reading of Victorian literature. One can begin to question the notions of home that are operative in the fictions of the old metropolis from a new centre (South Africa). This allows a reading across boundaries which has the potential to change the configurations of empire. It is also argued that a situated rereading of classic nineteenth century texts can shed light on more contemporary representations of home, homelessness, marginality and the subaltern. I pursue this possibility through a comparative reading of home and homelessness in Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*.

'Home' has a strongly subjective nature due, in part, that it is here where personal values are lodged, and that this initially indifferent space is imaginatively transformed by its inhabitants. It only becomes the 'home' when inhabited by people, who confer identity on it by giving it function and meaning, and who in turn, through formative experiences within the home, establish their own sense of self and ways of relating to others.

¹ The dissertation was supervised by Professor M.J. Daymond.

An analysis of the condition of nineteenth century women exposes the marginal figures in society who remain homeless and bereft of their histories because the process of identity formation has been radically disrupted, sometimes over several generations. By presenting her two heroines as orphans, we may see, through a postcolonial lens, that Brontë complicated the concept of 'home' and interrogated myths associated with this concept. Loyalty to the physical and symbolic location of 'home' and nostalgia associated with that place are sentiments which are destabilised by the protagonists' orphaned status and the fact that both Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are 'homesick with nowhere to go' (Martin & Mohanty 1986: 206). Thus, Brontë's exploration of the home and marginality reveals the 'surrogate' nature of home for the orphan figure, who is the marginal outsider and the woman, who is the imprisoned insider. Brontë questions the ideal of home and illustrates an ambivalent attitude toward home which may be seen to pre-empt postcolonial concerns with the instability of home and the question of liminality.

The situation of women in nineteenth century society was one of social marginality and constraint. Because women have historically been prescribed a specific place in the home as carer and nurturer, the space of 'home', which is sometimes seen as a creative area, is not always a nurturing place for women. For some, the 'home' has the potential to offer the freedom and security to explore the artistic imagination. For many women, however, the often enclosed and imprisoning space of 'home' finds them confined to the 'homeplace' and not permitted to pursue any aspirations which would take them outside the prescribed roles of the nineteenth century accepted and imposed by society. Economically, legally and socially subordinate, women were paradoxically situated as both marginalised outsiders and insiders who are imprisoned within the home. With regard to nineteenth century life, womanliness and accepted standards of behaviour and decorum were notions entrenched by both women and men. Women were not encouraged to explore a creative space in society which might jeopardise their place in the home, or take up any career (such as that of writer) which might affect the execution of their prescribed duties and transform the self-effacing, submissive 'angel' of the house into the ambitious, assertive 'monster'. Confined to the home, nineteenth century women did also not often *own* the space of home and so were relegated to position of housekeeper as opposed

to householder, a position occupied largely by men (Heyns 1999: 21). The fact that homeowners were predominantly male prompts the questions of who *belongs* to the home and who is entitled to the creative space of the home and, furthermore, at what price such aspirations are purchased. Thus women were allowed to develop as individuals only within certain confines and to exist according to certain prescribed regulations.

These nineteenth century women, who exist rule-bound and confined in homes they are unable to own, are therefore also subject to the experience of 'homelessness'. This problematises the concept of 'home' and proves the instability of this 'ideal'. Brontë writes about the home, exploring the universal, inherent need to establish a suitable 'home', while questioning the fundamental ideals upon which the concept of 'home' is founded. The home is not merely a physical structure that provides shelter from the elements. It is the place where life begins, where character and identity are developed, where the human soul is nurtured and where fond memories are created. Such places become symbolic, when a sentimental attachment to the home and what it signifies is formed, and feelings of loyalty are cultivated. These comprise some of the assumptions associated with the home, the sentimental attachments to a place often associated with childhood. 'Home' becomes more than a physical space, as ordinary as bread and children, but of vital importance to growth. Individual identity is derived from the sense of 'home'. The material objects serve to represent the house, representing family name and standing in society, and is symbolic of belonging in society and social aspirations. Belonging implies not only integrating into the space of home but into the space of society. The trope of the house reflects the significance of individual human life in relation to the social structure. Therefore, if you belong in the home, it may be inferred that 'home' makes a further 'place' for you in society, facilitating belonging in an intimate private space and in the public arena.

Brontë's idea of 'home' is an uneasy one and complicates these fundamental ideals mentioned above. The ambivalent attitude to home, expressed by female first-person narrators Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, who grapple with the task of telling their own story in a society of self-*less* women, is further complicated by their orphaned condition. The usual condition of homelessness in both novels is exacerbated by the protagonists' position as 'orphaned'—bereft of family, without social connections,

therefore economically and socially precarious. The stories told by Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, the orphaned female protagonists in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* respectively, represent the condition of the orphan as a position which emphasises the marginality of an individual, without connections and without an authentic sense of 'home' or identity as defined by domicile and relations. Every place in which an orphaned individual attempts to locate him/herself therefore serves as a surrogate home and the temporary and impermanent nature of these homes lends the individual's sense of self-worth and self a precarious and unstable quality. Jane Eyre's orphan status, for instance, renders Gateshead a surrogate home, as she has no direct family connections: 'I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there ...' (1998:16). Jane's cousin, John Reed, emphasises this state of dependence and lack of belonging when he states:

You are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals as we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense...all the house belongs to me (1998: 11).

Bretton is, too, a surrogate home for Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. There is a pervading sense of impermanence in her life, emphasised by her deliberately evasive story-telling technique: 'My godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence' (1949: 10). Lucy does not elaborate on the nature or familial ties of these unidentified 'kinsfolk' with who 'at that time' was fixed her permanent residence. There is no sense of real attachment to a place, no sense of a stable home or home life and the significant factor of her solitude is thus foregrounded.

This surrogate home plays a significant role with regard to the marginalised individual as the homeplace functions as the site for identity-formation. As the home initiates and nurtures identity, the condition of being *homeless* and not belonging impedes growth as the development of identity is halted. The question arises of how the orphaned condition of such individuals affects the construction of identity and sense of belonging in society. The home as nurturing space is a notion that is taken for granted and such conventional, accepted notions of the home do not take into account the

marginal figures which exist on the periphery, such as orphans, who function as deprived and excluded *outsiders* in society. These figures are *without*, literally and symbolically, as they are unable to locate themselves physically in any given site where they may begin to feel at home. These figures are significant to an understanding of the construction of a society, as the figures left on the outside and on the periphery serve to define those at the centre. The periphery comprises part of a whole and therefore marginal figures, while problematic, are necessary to existence. Thus, the orphaned marginal figures can signify an alternative to a socially constructed and controlled 'reality' as one explores how such individuals fit into the conventions and rules of society. Brontë's exploration of both the marginal outsider (an orphan) and imprisoned insider (a woman) informs an understanding of the position of the subaltern today, a position still defined by gender, class and, furthermore, by race. Therefore Brontë explores both the marginal outside and imprisoned inside. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe reflect the complex condition of liminality with regard to the home as they have *no* primary home and no sense of attachment.

The issue of place and space is another example of where postcolonial theory has the potential to offer an interesting new angle on classic nineteenth century texts. The question of belonging and the unstable location of orphaned marginal figures in society are underpinned by the practice of conferring an identity on space and making it *place*. Gilbert and Gubar point out that the major preoccupation in this process of self-definition for all Brontë's heroines is the '[struggle] for a comfortable space' (2000: 437), which is prompted by the lack of belonging and the absence of an authentic home. Lucy Snowe's attempts to discover a 'comfortable space' take place at the school, where her space-clearing gestures take on literal proportions when she encounters the '... deep and leafy seclusion' of a neglected garden on the school property (1949: 121). Lucy states, 'I made myself a gardener...I cleared away the relics of past autumns ...' (1949: 124). This fundamental process of clearing a comfortable or 'felicitous' space is developed by Bachelard, who observes that '... Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to measures and estimates of the surveyor...' (1969: xxxiii). Thus Lucy attempts to personalise the 'indifferent' space of the garden in order to create a place where she may begin to cultivate the traditional sentiments of loyalty and

nostalgia, feelings usually attached to the home. She chooses the garden as this cultivation may not be achieved inside the surrogate home of the Pensionnat. Jane Eyre's need for solitude is similarly evident when she finds a space which stands outside the structural confines of Thornfield. Similarly to Gateshead, the building itself does not necessarily provide the needed location of selfhood, and this provokes the space-clearing gestures on the part of Jane. Thornfield is not 'home' and Jane does not feel that she belongs, and therefore she attempts to 'colonise' a space of her own.

I walked awhile on the pavement; but a subtle, well-known scent—that of a cigar—stole from some window; I saw the library casement open a handbreadth; I knew I might be watched thence; so I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn...Here one could wander unseen I felt I could haunt such shade for ever ... (1998: 260).

Reading Brontë through a postcolonial lens promotes a re-examination of the fundamental requirements implicit in the connotation of 'home' of 'shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' (George 1996:1), needs that are not necessarily accessible to marginalised figures. These fundamental requirements of shelter, comfort, nurture and protection are interrogated by post-colonial critics, Barnes and Wiley, who contend that 'home is a form of coalition' (1996: xv). Their term coalition, serves to signify a concept of 'home' formed by the alliance of originally distinct elements, for instance 'belonging and exile':

Home is not always a comfortable place to be... home is always a form of coalition: between the individual and the family or community, between belonging and exile; between home as a utopian longing and home as memory; home as safe haven or imprisonment or site of violence, and finally, between home as place and home as metaphor (Barnes & Wiley 1996: xv).

This postcolonial interrogation of home as a 'coalition' informs an under-

standing of Brontë's ambivalent attitude to the home. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe endeavour to 'locate' themselves symbolically and literally as their attempts to create both a viable sense of self and an authentic place to call home are inexorably tied together. Barnes and Wiley state that, 'The relationship between self and place is an interactive and changing one; the politics of where we locate ourselves is an integral factor in the construction of female identity and subjectivity' (1996: xvii). When one reads *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* from a feminist, post-colonial perspective in which home is a coalition, as an ambivalent space it has the potential to provide safety and shelter *and* to represent danger. For instance, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane's traumatic childhood experience in the 'red room' in Gateshead causes her to imaginatively transform the indifferent space of the room into a threatening and dangerous place in the house. If we follow Bachelard's proposition that, 'there is ground for taking the house as a *tool for analysis* of the human soul' (1969: xxxiii e.i.o.), then we may infer that the imaginative transformation of the 'red-room' into a treacherous place reflects Jane Eyre's own feelings of insecurity and dislocation. Jane is locked in the 'red-room' as punishment for her retaliation and the element of the gothic is introduced, as the room assumes perilous and threatening qualities:

Mr Reed had been dead nine years: it was in this chamber that he breathed his last; here he lay in state; hence his coffin was borne by the undertaker's men; and since that day a sense of dreary consecration had guarded it from frequent intrusion no jail was ever more secure I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room: at this moment a light gleamed on the wall I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down—I uttered a wild, involuntary cry ... (1998: 14, 17f).

This scene provides a further example of how the structure of Gateshead, which may serve as the nurturing place of 'home' to the Reeds, does not hold similar connotations for Jane.

Reading the conclusions of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* through the prism

of postcolonial theory affirms George's notion that the home is a place that is 'fought for', as each female protagonist seeks to establish a home for herself. The idea that home is the 'exclusive domain of a few' informs recent post-colonial and feminist debates as it mirrors, for instance, the status of the marginalised immigrant in the post-colonial context, who struggles to establish a home in a foreign environment. The process of searching for a suitable 'home' is thus integral to the creation of identity, specifically in the case of the immigrant, where the establishment of a sense of self in new and unfamiliar surroundings is imperative to this marginal figure that is 'homesick with nowhere to go'. The marginalised female in feminist discussion struggles to escape the enclosed space of the home, thus having 'nowhere to go' in a different sense, and the process of establishing an appropriate homeplace is affected by the fact that women frequently occupy the position of housekeeper as opposed to homeowner.

George suggests that a representation of the experience of post-colonial homelessness is marked by '... an excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material'. This process of establishing a suitable homeplace also rests on the idea of material and spiritual belongings affecting the sense of belonging in the home. Jane and Lucy arrive at their respective destinations of Marsh End and Villette penniless and without any possessions. The precarious nature of their positions as penniless, female orphans and their subsequent vulnerability in unfamiliar and foreign locations is foregrounded. This raises the question of whether possessions (material, such as mementoes or spiritual, such as memories) 'impede or facilitate belonging' (1996: 171). In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the female protagonists struggle to belong in the various 'homes' which locate their characters and the lack of possessions and connections in society allow Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe to, in essence, create new, unfettered lives. However, they are unable to define their identity according to, for instance, the material possessions of mementoes (which store memories that construct identity) or draw support from connections which privilege other members of society and are forced at various intervals to accept assistance. In this way, the assistance facilitates a degree of assimilation into the mainstream of society as Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe fulfil their inherent need for 'home'. Similarities with postcolonial theorising are clear here and this theory may be used to confirm that the 'home' as explored by Brontë reflects 'home' as

it is understood in a contemporary context. For instance, Martin and Mohanty emphasise the sacrifice implicit in attempting to establish a home, as one learns at what price '... privilege, comfort, home, and secure notions of self are purchased' (1986: 203). Therefore, this assimilation into the mainstream, into conventional society is, in Martin and Mohanty's words, 'purchased' at a price by Jane and Lucy.

It is no coincidence then, bearing Marxist and New Historicist views of identity and class in mind, that the principal female protagonists in two of Charlotte Brontë's major works, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, are a governess and a teacher respectively, forced to seek employment due to their orphaned condition. Terry Eagleton mentions that Brontë's portrayal is symptomatic of a 'more widespread exploitation' of her sex, and the limited and often debilitating options available to women in the nineteenth century (1988: 8). Issues of entitlement, property rights, inheritance and class are related to the orphan status of the two women and the fact that they are forced to seek employment in the homes of others gives rise to their sense of not belonging. Jane and Lucy, are forced to seek out professions as governess and teacher respectively, common typecasts for women in Gothic fiction. These professions also serve to highlight the notion of home by exploring the limited options available to women with no familial ties in a patriarchal society.

To some extent, Jane and Lucy remain marginal figures in society as their success and happiness are tempered with tragedy and they are unable to achieve, of their own volition, the full measure of happiness available to members of mainstream society. The forces of nature, fairies and celestial influence, coupled with the male heroes in the story, provide aid in Jane and Lucy's quests. This confirms Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that 'when a heroine rises she does so through the offices of a hero' (2000: 67). The problem of marginality remains largely unresolved in the two novels. Jane is fulfilled in marriage in Ferndean, the last of the locations and final phase in her character's development in the novel. But it is both 'her good fortune and Rochester's catastrophe [that] lessen his social and economic advantage over her' (Pearson & Pope 1981: 167). Eagleton reiterates this idea, stating that the '... the 'lower' character [Jane] is able to exercise power because of a weakness in the 'higher' character: Rochester is crippled ...' (1988: 59). Thus, having lessened Rochester's social and physical advantages over Jane,

'Brontë provides both with the happy ending of an egalitarian relationship' (Pearson & Pope 1981: 248). One may infer that, due to the curtailing of Rochester's potential, Jane is able to progress and succeed in attaining some happiness. Lucy too, manages to achieve a similar sense of fulfilment when she obtains her own school and home at the last location of her story, Faubourg Clotilde. However, M. Paul Emmanuel dies in a shipwreck while returning to Lucy. Gilbert and Gubar state that M. Paul must die in order for Lucy Snowe to exist, as 'only in his absence ... can she exert herself fully to exercise her powers' (2000: 438). In a sense, *Villette* may be seen as a reworking of *Jane Eyre* as the socially acceptable sense of fulfilment Jane Eyre achieves at the conclusion of the novel, self-sufficient *but* married, is not what the experiences of Lucy Snowe lead her to realise. She progresses one step further, the reader assumes, and achieves fulfilment despite her final solitude. Brontë introduces the ideas of self-sufficiency and independence with the 'proud' Jane Eyre, but truly develops the concept of the new woman in the 'unfeminine' Lucy Snowe, whose assimilation into society is achieved on her own terms. Lucy Snowe is thus the prototype of the independent and self-sufficient 'new woman', an idea that the novel *Jane Eyre* briefly introduces but does not bring to fruition. Thus, it may be inferred that, though Lucy Snowe 'succeeds', it is only at profound cost. The conjecture made here may be both post-colonial and feminist in its inference that marginal female figures are entitled to or deserving of the 'privileges' of comfort and home and the associated establishment of an authentic identity only once they have made some sacrifice for their aspirations of self-sufficiency and ambitions for an assured sense of self.

The concern with 'home', relevant today, was anticipated by Brontë, who took up the idea of a marginal figure, and developed the fictional orphan figure that is both an insider and outsider to the home. Charlotte Brontë explored the possible life choices available for women during her time. Through her fictional representation of women and 'home' and her oppositional position, she simultaneously maintained and challenged accepted principles of femininity. Brontë presents a comprehensive portrayal of the marginal figure, yet inevitably, given her time, desires assimilation for her orphaned female protagonists, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. As a Victorian writer, Brontë evidently felt that she could challenge but not cross the accepted boundaries of her time, and thus she represented, to the best of

her capabilities within her cultural constraints, fulfilling destinies for her characters which would not be deemed 'improper'. The conclusions of her novels are testament to her conscious decision to comply with convention: in *Shirley* the narrator observes of recounted traditional, happy endings, '... There! I think the varnish has been put on nicely' (1949: 611). In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Jane and Lucy's direct address to the reader is further example of the anticipation of reader expectations: Jane assures her audience, 'Reader, I married him' (1998: 473), and Lucy lessens the blow of tragedy for her readers when she states: 'Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life' (1949: 558).

These concerns with the home and the socially marginalised continue to resonate in literature today. In the final section of this article, I consider ways in which a reading of homelessness in Brontë's novels can be made to reflect forwards onto (or back on) the exploration of home in Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. The reason for this choice is in all three novels, the main protagonists occupy a similar class position, that of lower middle class ambivalence. The question of home is particularly pertinent in South Africa, which may be considered a 'new nation', arising from the collapse of the old political structure of Apartheid. The condition of homelessness is one which may be observed in a South African context, applied to men and women and similarly linked to the problematic process of identity formation. This is commented on by Ndebele in his article entitled 'A Home for Intimacy', where he affirms that the state of homelessness and the loss of homes is '... one of the greatest of South African stories yet to be told' (1996: 28-9). Ndebele explores the unstable nature of the homplace further in his novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and what effect this has on construction of South African identity. One of the female protagonists in the novel, Marara Joyce Baloyi, reflects on this effect:

How has the growth of the imagination or the nurturing of new values been affected by the dramatic oscillation of individuals and communities between comfort and discomfort, between home and homelessness, home and exile, between riches and poverty, love and hate, hope and despair, knowledge and ignorance, progress and regression, fame and ignominy, heroism and roguery, honour and dishonour, marriage and divorce, sophistication and crudeness, life

and death, returns and departures? Have dislocation and contradiction becomes part of the structures of thinking and feeling that may define our character? A nation of extremes! Which way will the balance ultimately go between creativity and destruction? (2003: 70-71).

Here, Ndebele echoes the contention mentioned previously by Barnes and Wiley that 'home is a form of coalition' (1996: xv). The alliance of originally distinct elements is reiterated by Ndebele as he refers to a 'nation of extremes' that oscillates between, for example, 'home and exile'. This example of postcolonial theorising can be made to look back on the fiction of the past as it simultaneously illuminates more contemporary works. Ndebele states in his article:

There must be relatively few South Africans who can still point to a home that they associate with rootedness. At some point in their lives the roots of the social memory are cut, and traumatic fresh beginnings had to be made and endured. Individual and social growth became a series of interrupted experiences (1996: 28).

When Ndebele writes of 'interrupted experiences', he understands that the construction of identity is based on the expectations and aspirations normally taught within the home. Ndebele's thoughts on interrupted experiences may be used to illuminate the displacement felt by the respective female protagonists in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* as they shift from each surrogate home, forced through their circumstances to 'relocate', thus disrupting the experience of home and suspending attempts to establish some sense of belonging.

As Ndebele's arguments illuminate aspects of classic European texts, so Brontë's texts can be made to speak to present-day concerns. For all the differences of time and culture, the prevailing interest in home in Brontë's work has particular South African relevance, specifically with regard to the *loss* of homes and the condition of homelessness. The story of the loss of homes, through colonial invasion, migratory labour policies, evictions in line with Apartheid policies, all of which has resulted in the destruction of intimacy in family life, has become a South African narrative. Ndebele

questions the position of home in actual life in South Africa and his views bear pertinently on a rereading of Brontë's work, as concerns that Brontë raises may be seen to anticipate those of Ndebele:

Where so many homes have been demolished, people moved to strange places, home temporarily becomes the shared experience of homelessness... It is the loneliness of millions of South Africans who lost their homes. The loss of homes! It is one of the greatest of South African stories yet to be told. The demise of intimacy in our history of sensibility (1996: 28f).

The South African story—the loss of homes—continues to evolve, and Dennis Moss, a South African urban designer, advises: 'We must consider the act of dwelling', because '[y]ou can't divorce human life from place ...' (2006: 18f). Similarly, Max Ntanyana and Fonky Goboza, activists in the Mandela Park anti-eviction campaign, discuss the recent government evictions of squatters in Mandela Park, highlighting the idea that individual and community identity is defined by the home, and the intertwining relationship of human life and place:

Apartheid was undone bit by bit by endlessly multiple acts of resistance and lines of flight. By the early 1980s people were moving from the rural Transkei, where apartheid sought to keep them, and on to Cape Town in such numbers that the state lost the capacity to regulate the borders between its two opposed zones. Around the country *people who were taking control of new spaces gave those spaces names*. And the people who moved to the edge of Khayelitsha defiantly called their space Mandela Park in honour of their hope ... (2003, e.a.).

The reason the home is a site of contestation is explained by bell hooks, who illustrates the political significance of the home and the possibility of resistance inherent in the homeplace.

It is no accident that the South African apartheid regime systematically attack[ed] and destroy[ed] black efforts to construct

homeplace, however tenuous, that small private reality where black women and men [could] renew their spirits and recover themselves. It is no accident that this homeplace, as fragile and transitional as it may be, a makeshift shed, a small bit of earth where one rests, is always subject to violation and destruction ... (1990: 46f).

This is no doubt a factor which motivated the forced removal and destruction of homes by the system of apartheid; by destroying homes, the growth of individual and community identity was detrimentally affected. There is a close personal connection with the homespace, the sense of community implied by 'home' and the experience of homelessness. The 'sacred' memories of home, desecrated through historical processes such as Apartheid in South Africa, have been replaced; in place of the intimacy associated with 'home' is the experience of loneliness. A new story of homelessness comprises the history of South Africans. I intend to look at *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in the light of my previous argument regarding the condition of nineteenth century women in Brontë's novels as viewed through a postcolonial lens. It is useful to compare *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* with *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* because of their shared preoccupation with home and the liminal figure in society. In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the novel is described as '... an imaginary book about South African women during the long years of struggle against apartheid' (2003: 1). The three women in the opening chapters are understood to be the 'three descendants' of the *Odyssey's* Penelope, the 'remarkable woman who waited nineteen years for her husband, Odysseus, to return home from his wanderings' (2003: 1). The women in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* are presented as '... figures of liminality and incorporation, as symbolic threshold figures ...' (Samuelson 2007: 2). This is not to conflate the Victorian class concerns of Brontë's two white female protagonists with Ndebele's 'three descendants' but both may be said to generally share middle class concerns of the homeplace. These liminal members of South African society are similarly not entitled to homes and the temporary nature of the townships, for instance, mirrors the surrogate homes of the orphaned women in Victorian society. There is similarly no place for these liminal creatures in Victorian or contemporary South African society and this continuing search for surrogate homes becomes a shared experience of homelessness which extends beyond

South African borders and may be read back to the 'centre'.

This shared experience of homelessness which affects the construction of identity is again reiterated in *Cry of Winnie Mandela* when Marara Joyce Baloyi, asks:

Do you remember the experience of space, and the sense of distance and time through travel in the old days of apartheid? It was psychological time without space. I had to endure the absence of space. Space was no longer the sense of dimension beyond the self; it had become the claustrophobia of self; the self whose existence could be challenged at any moment in any form. (Ndebele 2003: 68f).

The idea of the violation of the fragile homeplace of South Africans in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* where a fire destroys the Mandelas' house:

... many years later this home, this very same home, was to be set alight by vengeful school children. The fire raged in a macabre ritual of emptying out. It is written: 'All the Mandela family records were destroyed in the fire, all the letters, all the photographs and all the gifts they had been given over the years. Also destroyed was the slice of wedding cake that Winnie had been keeping for Nelson's release In 1976, in the wake of the Soweto uprising, Mandela had a recurring nightmare. He dreamt that he had been released from prison. There was no one to meet him. After walking for many hours, he arrived at No. 8115. "Finally I would see my home, but it turned out to be empty, a ghost house, with all the doors and windows open but no one there at all"' It was an intuition of emptiness. The death of the dignity of memory at the hands of folly. An intuition for the emptying out of the vision by the squalor of the means of realising it. An intuition for the ultimate death of home (2003: 74).

As mentioned previously, George suggests that a representation of the experience of post-colonial homelessness is marked by '... an excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material' (1996: 171). The

same concerns are evident in Brontë's work and *Cry of Winnie Mandela*. In *Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the loss of Nelson and Winnie Mandela's material possessions such as mementoes (letters, photographs, family records) is shown to impede belonging, as Nelson and Winnie Mandela's relationship disintegrates. In this way, Ndebele foresees the 'death' of the home leading to a death of intimacy. Through testimony Mandela relates the events following his return from prison and reveals how the death of the home, whether through literal destruction or the mental devastation of repeated house invasions, leads to the death of intimacy:

For me, No. 8115 was the centre point of my world, the place marked with an X in my mental geography Ever since I came back from jail, not once has the defendant ever entered the bedroom whilst I was awake. I kept on saying to her: 'Look, men and wives usually discuss the most intimate problems in the bedroom I have been in jail a long time. There are so many issues, almost all of them very sensitive, I would like to have opportunity to discuss with you.' Not once has she ever responded I was the loneliest man during the period I stayed with her (2003: 76).

Ndebele, in his article, proposed that individuals need to restore the intimacy of home by establishing the place of home and restoring the relationship of people within the home. In this way, individuals are able to form a society that coheres. When examining the home, one simply cannot ignore the relationship of people to the home, as it is impossible to divorce human life from place. However, this fundamental relationship is complicated in a post-colonial context (as in Charlotte Brontë's fiction) by the presence of marginal figures, insiders and outsiders who maintain an ambivalent relationship with 'home' through their shared experience of the unstable homeplace. With regard to the South African situation, Ndebele refers to the change in the political and geographical landscape of South Africa, where inhabitants in African rural and urban areas were denied homes, evicted and forced to live elsewhere as buildings were demolished. These homeless South Africans were made marginal figures, and in a fictionalised setting, the 'double bind' of the female characters of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* being both female and 'non-white' exacerbates this liminality. The

ambivalent attitude towards home, explored by Brontë in her nineteenth century fiction, is echoed in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in Marara Joyce Baloyi's thoughts:

What on earth is a home? Is it a meaning of myself that has assumed the shape of a rectangular dwelling? Or is the dream of self-actualisation beyond the rectangular dwelling, that takes the form of conventions of behaviour acted out within and without that dwelling? What is it that one does within the privacy of one's home which transforms the home into an eye of society looking at you at every turn in your life? (2003: 66).

The unstable position of Brontë's female protagonists in society and in relation to the home is again echoed by Marara Joyce Baloyi as she states:

I have also become uncomfortably aware that I may no longer have the keen and vital sense of feeling for home as a specific place and a house with so many rooms, so many brothers and sisters and relatives, with family and community experiences stretching back many years. This kind of home for now has been mere convenience for me to live in from one day to the next. This thought has frightened me as I have begun to wonder about the fate of intimacy. Can there be any society without private lives—without homes wherein individuals can flourish through histories of intimacy? (2003: 71).

Now, enfranchised South Africans are attempting to resettle in areas of their birthright or establish homes in new areas of settlement. Ndebele's concern is that South Africans damaged by previous dislocation and alienation cannot successfully settle and carry out the work of establishing the relationships that properly belong in a new home. Thus a stable society is not being productively created. Those who comprised the margin of society now have voice, but as the boundaries shift it has become difficult to establish who we are in relation to where we live as the 'surrogate' impermanent nature of 'homes' in the new South Africa affects the process of identity-construction. Ndebele does not propose a 'happy endings' for the three

descendants of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and, like Brontë's female protagonists, the survival and success of the three female protagonists comes at a price.

In a contemporary context, however, there are further possibilities for such marginal figures. Currently a feminist and post-colonial understanding of the periphery sees it becoming a creative space in which people can begin to establish a productive 'homeplace'. Current commentators do not face the same restrictions of long-established settled customs as Brontë did, and bell hooks, for instance, seems to envisage a more permissive selfhood, where assimilation into mainstream society is not deemed a prerequisite to a happy and fulfilled life. hooks still recognises the value of and inherent need for the place of home, 'I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond the boundaries, yet I also needed to return there' (1990: 148), yet views the margins as a potentially creative location: 'There may be some value in the idea that the space at the margins of society may be perceived to be a radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity ...' (hooks 1990: 153). hooks suggests that the periphery has the potential to serve as a productive space, which is a step beyond Bachelard's earlier views regarding the transformation of indifferent space through the imagination. In her view, the often demoralising space of the periphery and margins may be adapted to serve as a positive, reaffirming place where the freedom of marginality may be celebrated.

The peripheral space occupied by marginal figures is viewed by hooks as a space of possibility, emphasising the agency of marginal figures and their potential to transform space:

I make a definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one *chooses* as a site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility (1990: 153, e.a.).

With regard to Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, their marginality is a result of the oppressive patriarchal structures which existed in the nineteenth century; however it is important to note that these women are able to reorganise and reorder these potentially oppressive sites through space-clearing gestures in their respective novels. Jane at Thornfield and Lucy at the Pensionnat make

concerted efforts to literally and figuratively make a comfortable space for themselves, namely in the gardens of their respective locations. Thus, the idea that hooks proposes, of the periphery serving as a radically open, creative space may be seen to have its origins in an understanding of the search for a comfortable space in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, which Gilbert and Gubar believe is the primary concern of Brontë's female heroines. These space-clearing gestures on the part of Jane and Lucy are testament to this search for a creative comfortable space, and an attempt as marginal figures to create their own 'felicitous space', however provisional. By modifying the environment, people create a viable place in which to begin to [re]create feelings of belonging. The possibilities available to marginal figures may be seen when reading forward to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, where one of the three descendants, Mannete Mofolo, is able to create a creative comfortable space of her own:

My shop and my house became village landmarks next to the road. Buses began to stop not far from my shop, until the bus stop came to carry my name: Ha'Mannete....I will show him the latest map of Lesotho which has the name Ha'Mannete against the many black dots that indicate places on the map....Great cities of the world also have dots against their names...I will hope that in his wanderings, my husband will have learned how to read maps. He will see how my name has become part of the world....Over the years I have built with my children a new home. Everyone can see it. It stands out in the village. I go in and out of it through big doors. From inside I can see the entire lovely valley through its huge windows. It has many rooms. At night, we flick on a switch for light (2003: 82f).

Thus the assimilation and acceptance into the mainstream which still rests largely with the presence of a husband or 'offices of a hero' is no longer the only limited possibility available to marginal female figures. The situation of 'homelessness' is, according to hooks, not necessarily destructive. hooks proposes that the 'homeless' need to establish a new 'homeplace', advising that these figures in society renew their concern with the homeplace in order to make home, '... that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole' (1990: 49). The

‘homeplace’ becomes imperative, according to hooks:

We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make a radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world (1990: 153).

George discusses the ‘strange empowering knowledge’ that Bhabha attributes to the immigrant (or marginal) figure and feels that ‘... those at the margins may read their marginality as a positive, even superior stance from which to experience the modern nation’ (George 1996: 189). This is pertinent in relation to the stories of Jane and Lucy, who may be seen to learn from their ‘interrupted’ experiences. Q.D. Leavis states (with regard to *Jane Eyre*), that ‘... each experience initiates a new phase of being for [Jane], because she has learnt something new about the possibilities of living and so can make a further demand on life’ (1966: 14). The difference is, however, that Brontë thought of her protagonists’ re-entry into mainstream society.

The situation of nineteenth century women may usefully be understood as a condition of ‘homelessness’, therefore the application of the postcolonial frame is appropriate. By drawing on Brontë to illuminate the concept of home, I have been able to understand the multi-faceted nature of this concept and the new possibilities inherent for marginal figures at what was once seen as the periphery. The rereading of classics such as *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* brings out the complexities and instabilities of home, something which may have been overlooked in previous analysis. Brontë explored and developed the marginal figure, and her characterisation of this circumstance may be seen to facilitate, via post-colonial and feminist criticism, further claims about the potential of ‘home’ and a reading forwards to the present. The current notions of home, liberty and creativity are evolving where new possibilities become available to previously dispossessed members in society and assimilation into the mainstream no longer becomes a necessity. Despite the fact that the concept of home will continue to confound expectations and assumptions and evade conclusive definition, the appeal of the elusive home remains the same. George suggests that, ‘... perhaps the stance to take, while writing and reading fiction as much as in living, is to acknowledge the

seductive pleasure of belonging in homes ...' (George 1996: 200). In South Africa, Ndebele suggests, 'home' is (still) a practical and psychic necessity rather than a lingering and seductive idea. The appeal of 'home' surpasses seduction to fulfil an intrinsic, perennial human need: 'It is in this new universe that new political meanings and values will emerge. It is there that we may find new homes' (2003: 71).

References

- Bachelard, Gaston 1969. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Barnes, Fiona & Catherine Wiley 1996. *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics of the Home*. New York: Garland Publishers.
- Bhabha, Homi K (ed) 1990. 'DissemiNation' In: *Nation and Narration*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Brontë, Charlotte [1847] 1998 *Jane Eyre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brontë, Charlotte [1849] 1949 *Shirley*. London: Allan Wingate.
- Brontë, Charlotte [1853] 1949 *Villette*. London: Allan Wingate.
- Desai, Ashwin & Richard Pithouse 2003. 'But we were Thousands: Dispossession, Resistance, Repossession and Repression in Mandela Park. <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/>
- Eagleton, Terry 1988. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly 1996. *The Politics of the Home: Post-Colonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra M & Susan Gubar 2000. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale.
- Heyns, Michiel 1999. 'Houseless Poverty in the House of Fiction: Vagrancy and Genre in Two Novels by JM Coetzee'. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*. Vol 11,1.
- hooks, bell 1990. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Leavis, QD 1966. 'Introduction and Notes. In *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin.
- Martin, Biddy & Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1986. Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with it?' In de Lauritis, Teresa (ed): *Feminist Studies/*

- Critical Studies*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade 1992. Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience. In: Barrett, Michele & Anne Phillips (eds): *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Moss, Dennis 2006. A Sense of Place. *The Property Magazine* January.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S 1996. A Home for Intimacy. *Mail and Guardian* 26 April—2 May: 28f.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S 2003. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Claremont: David Philip Publishers.
- Payne, Michael (ed) 2005. *The Greenblatt Reader: Stephen Greenblatt*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Pearson, Carol & Katherine Pope 1981. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. New York: R.R. Bowker Company.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani 1994. Identity, Intimacy and Domicile: Notes on the Phenomenology of Home. *Arkkitehti-Finnish Architectural Review* 1. http://www2.uiah.fi/esittely/historia/e_ident.htm
- Tabosa-Vaz, Camille 2005. A Postcolonial, Feminist Reading of the Representation of 'home' in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Unpublished MA Thesis, UKZN.
- Wilson, Karina 2005. *Propp's Analysis of Folk Tales*. <http://www.mediaknowall.com/Propp.html>

Camille Tabosa-Vaz
English Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Tabosavaz@ukzn.ac.za or 205511942@ukzn.ac.za