

Charlotte Bronte's Alternative Enlightenment: The Muslim Other in *Villette*

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Abstract

In her novel *Villette* (1853), Charlotte Bronte, unlike many of her contemporary British novelists deploys the Muslim *Other* as an effective rhetorical and figurative device. The main character in this late eighteenth-century novel, Lucy Snowe utilizes Arab, Muslim and in particular Turkish cultural allusions, symbols and images for the sake of verifying her day-to-day experiences. Lucy seems to achieve emotional security while using imagery from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The *Other*, according to Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (1995), "is the ultimate signifier of everything I am not[...] has often been defined as 'women' or African or Asian- and hence the Other is what is feared, what exists to be conquered" (p. 216). Bronte in *Villette* seems to use the Muslim other as a signifier of almost everything Lucy Snowe goes through in her daily life. Bronte in *Villette* represents a unique case of a British novelist who seemed to have truly believed in egalitarian Enlightenment ideas. Involving ideas of progress, tolerance and the removal of censorship, Immanuel Kant (1784) defines the Enlightenment in his famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" Kant explains that "it is the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point" (p. 2). Bronte reveals her freedom of reason while transcending in the novel national and entrenched cultural biases against Muslims. In many ways, Bronte in *Villette* creates an Enlightenment *cosmopolitan* space.

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