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Politics of Representation in Romantic Literature: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Fear of the Orient

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Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) has been widely read through the lenses of science fiction, Gothic horror and the consequences of transgressing natural boundaries. However, one analytical dimension of the novel that often goes unnoticed is its underlying Orientalist and colonial anxieties. This paper aims to explore how *Frankenstein* subtly engages with the Western fear of the Orient, embedded in the narrative structure and characterization of the novel. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism from his book *Orientalism* (1978) the study highlights how the novel portrays the East as both alluring and threatening, in terms of knowledge, rationality and even its human inhabitants. The representation of Victor Frankenstein's creation – the Monster – serves as a focal point for examining these anxieties. The delineation of the Monster's physical appearance, with its "yellow skin" and "lustrous black hair," has a subtle resemblance with colonial depictions of the racial "Other", specifically the Bengali subject in the aftermath of the great famine in 1770 under British rule. Furthermore, the novel's treatment of Safie and her Turkish father, Cleroval's Orientalist ambitions, and the framing narrative structure reinforce a hierarchical East-West dichotomy where East is deemed "feminine" and "weak" compared to the masculine West. Even the Monster's fate; exiled to the fringes of civilization and asking mercy from Victor represents the Western belief in the Orient's dependence on the Occident. Victor Frankenstein through its death is portrayed as the Godly superior. While the conventional readings of science, ambition-alienation and Gothic horror overshadow the academic discourse, this paper tries to examine the rich potential lying in the Orientalist fear. By critically examining the colonial undertones and European anxieties, this research seeks to broaden discussions on empire, orientalism, and the politics of representation in Romantic literature.

Keywords: Orientalism, Race, Colonial Anxieties, Romantic Literature, East-West Dichotomy

Frankenstein or, *The Modern Prometheus* which is widely considered the magnum opus of Mary Shelley was published for the first time on January first 1818. Immediately after the

publication it intrigued the critics and readers while facing a certain amount of criticism for its "unsettling content". Magazines and periodicals like *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review* criticized the novel for being overly horrific. While the primary aspects of the book like the dangers of ambition and knowledge, nature versus civilization is widely discussed and criticized for ages what goes mostly unnoticed in a liberal-humanist scenario is the Oriental and colonial undertones lurking beneath the exterior garment of *Frankenstein*.

Introduction to the novel Shelley responds to the questions that intrigued the readers as how a thirteen year old girl can think of such a hideous idea ; the publishers always wanted to know the source or what influenced Shelley in her invention of *Frankenstein*. While answering this she says "Everything must have a beginning ... and that beginning must be linked to something that went before", as, "invention ... does not consist of creating out of the void."¹ Close readings of this 1831 edition of the novel and the introduction makes it clear that there was some eastern influence inspiring or at least apprising Shelley to write *Frankenstein*, especially in portraying the hideous Monster. Like de Quincey, Coleridge and many other contemporaries, Shelley was definitely introduced to *The Arabian Nights* in her childhood. In 1802 William Godwin wrote a letter stating "I will put down the names of a few books, calculated to excite the imagination, and at the same time quicken the apprehensions of children."² Interestingly this list included books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Arabian Nights*. This reading practice was not limited to her childhood only. By the time she was composing *Frankenstein*, she herself was reading works like Bryan Edwards's *History of the West Indies*, Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*. More importantly, Byron's fanciful verse romances on Ottoman land and Shelley's Orientalist writings came out during this time ; for example : "Alastor" was published in 1815. Shelley had a family connection with Charles Lamb who was a servant of The East India Company. Godwin often took Mary to dinner at Lamb's place in childhood. Joseph W. Lew in his very famous essay "The Deceptive Other: Mary Shelley's Critique of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*" says "Although Lamb's dislike for his clerical position in India House is notorious, one cannot avoid thinking that he became the Godwin circle's principal informant for the latest news from the East. The fact of British power in India and the seemingly inextricable ties with the East India Company's commercial concerns became part of Mary's intellectual heritage. By looking at the careers of Robert Walton, Henry Clerval, and Safie, as well as at the physical make-up of *Frankenstein's* creature, we can see how this heritage becomes an integral part of the texture of Mary's first novel. This treatment of Western dominance of the Orient is pervasive but subtle (in the novel)."³

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, edited by M.K. Joseph, Oxford University Press, 1998.

² *Frankenstein*, edited by M.K. Joseph.

³ Joseph W. Lew, "The Deceptive Other: Mary Shelley's Critique of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1991, p. 257.

Before discussing the representation of the Monster in *Frankenstein*, I would like to briefly address the recurring references to the Orient throughout the text. These references illuminate the Western perspective on the Orient, making it clear to readers how the East is perceived in an extremely detrimental way in the novel. Joseph Lew writes that *Frankenstein* is “highly conscious of the Orient and Orientalist discourse” and is particularly “obsessed with the impact of Oriental texts upon western minds”. It is noteworthy to mention how the Oriental knowledge is indicated to be “feminine” in the novel. In the chapter 6 of the book Victor talks about his friend Henry Clerval’s interest on the Oriental knowledge system. He says “The Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit languages engaged his attention, and I was easily induced to enter on the same studies. Idleness had ever been irksome to me, and now that I wished to fly from reflection, and hated my former studies, I felt great relief in being the fellow-pupil with my friend, and found not only instruction but consolation in the works of the orientalist. I did not, like him, attempt a critical knowledge of their dialects, for I did not contemplate making any other use of them than temporary amusement. I read merely to understand their meaning, and they will repair my labours. Their melancholy is soothing, and their joy elevating, to a degree I never experienced in studying the authors of any other country. When you read their writings, life appears to consist in a warm sun and a garden of roses, –in the smiles and frowns of a fair enemy, and the fire that consumes your own heart. How different from the manly and heroic poetry of Greece and Rome!”. It becomes clear from the given passage that Victor wants to use the Oriental knowledge only for temporary amusement as it is not worthy to be judged critically. Although Frankenstein’s literary criticism seems very subjective and almost comically saccharine, he specifies that in the literary traditions of the Middle East and India, the implicitly feminine and organic claim a place not afforded in the “manly” classical and neoclassical traditions of the Western European canon.⁴ In *Frankenstein* Shelley introduces a character named Safie who comes from Arabia and remains peripheral in the entire text and hardly participates in any dialogue. As Safie is widely discussed already I would like to talk about Safie’s father, another unnamed Turkish figure in the text. The ideal family that appears at the core of *Frankenstein* gets disrupted only by this “brutal” Turk. The story of Safie’s father reminds a real life case of Al-Kahin Diyunyisius (known as Arab Jacobin) who was active in French politics in 1790s and was imprisoned at the end of the decade for unclear reasons – or, as the Creature puts it in the case of Safie’s father, “for some reason which I could not learn, he became obnoxious to the government”.⁵ Another reference of the Orient that is worth discussing here is the ambitions of Walton and Clerval. Both of them want to get to the Orient in a commercial capacity. Clerval studies Persian and Arabic, the most important commercial languages to run a successful trade in the Orient. Victor says “He came to the university with the design of making himself complete master of the oriental languages, and thus he should open a field for the plan of life he had marked out for himself.

⁴ Rebecca Nesvet, "Have You Thought of a Story? Galland’s *Scheherazade* and Mary Shelley’s 1831 *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1991, p. 374.

⁵ John Bugg, "Teaching *Frankenstein* and Race," *Keats-Shelley Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2020, p. 24.

Resolved to pursue no inglorious career, he turned his eyes toward the East, as affording scope for his spirit of enterprise”.

In *Orientalism* (1978) Said said “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an Ontological and Epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident”. Orient is the mirror image of the “inferior” against which Europe strengthens its superiority. There are three primary formations working behind the whole project. Our case in point is the second one where Said talks about various images of Asia and Middle East in fiction and paintings that project the Orient in a fearful and detrimental way. The first appearance of the Monster in the text marks it to be not European. At the very outset it is inscribed in the reader’s mind that the Creature is an “Other”. Starkly contrasting this introduction, is situated the introduction of Victor by the same person Walton; “He was not, as the other traveler seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but a European” (Letter 4 by Walton) Even after possessing human features he is constantly marked to be something other than human. In chapter 5 of the book Victor described “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriance’s only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips”. This is the physical appearance of the Monster that allows Victor to deny.

His responsibility as the creator. The noteworthy thing to mention here is the skin and eyes of it, two prominent features to detect race. The context of the Orient becomes evident here. Mellor uses this skin colour to suggest it as Bengali. Joseph W. Lew says “His "yellow skin" physically links him to scores of millions of Bengalis, whom the British rulers called "niggers." Like the creatures, their "lustrous black, and flowing" hair and "pearly white" teeth strongly contrast with each other and with their "yellow" complexion. Moreover, by 1818, the inhabitants of Bengal had suffered several generations of misrule. The British zemindari system strongly resembled Anglo-Irish absenteeism: farmers were economically discouraged from improving their land.....the soil of Bengal, overworked and inadequately watered, could no longer support the Bengali millions; in 1770, perhaps as many as ten million died of famine in Bengal alone. Millions of Indians, who, like Frankenstein's creation, had "yellow skin [which] scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath," could have watched the "Alastor" Poet as he walked unseeingly by, and smiled at him with the thin, "straight black lips" of famine”.⁶ Another instance that keeps monitoring the whole scenario is the framing narrative of the text. The narration opens up to the readers almost like a Chinese box where layers and layers of fiction comes once peeled. We get to hear the story of the Monster from Victor, whose story itself is depicted to the world via Walton. Above all these layers is Mary Shelley, an English author controlling the whole

⁶ Joseph.W.Lew, p.273-74.

narrative. In that way it is a very biased narrative where the voice of a marginalized Oriental is hardly heard.

The Creature is constantly referred to in the text as "it" rather than "he". The paper has already discussed how the text constantly associates the Occident to the masculine and Orient to the feminine. Clerval who is assumed to be an Orientalist is situated in the feminine realm as he nurses Victor back to his health repeatedly. Similarly the Monster is not given the masculine phallic power all through the narrative. The creature attempts to blackmail Victor into making, not another creature, but another creature. From this female Other, the creature will gain companionship, confirmation of masculinity, and a transformation from an "it" into a "he."⁷ The next Oriental reference that is very distinct is the Monster's similarity with Schahryar from *The Arabian Nights*. Like Schahryar, its revenge is very brutal, anti-social and derived from the frustration of its desire. The creature's intimidating promise "I will be with you on your wedding night" immediately reminds of Schahryar's promise to be with many women, including Scheherazade, on their wedding nights. In both the cases it becomes a death threat for the woman at the receiving end. Exactly like Schahryar's victims, Elizabeth is murdered by strangulation, which cuts off the voice, silencing before killing.⁸

I would like to conclude this discussion by talking briefly about the ending of the novel and specifically the tragic fate the Monster meets with. In chapter 24 Victor Frankenstein dies on the boat and the Creature suddenly arrives there lamenting awfully. The final words of the creature draw our attention. It says lamenting "In his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close! Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me?... He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars or feel the winds play on my cheeks." In this chapter the beast says itself to be the meanest animal and refuses to live anymore. It shows the supremacy of an Occidental creator who irresponsibly leaves his own creation. Although the Occidental man dies at the end being unable to conquer the Monster, he is the one who wins. The demise of the Monster indicates two things here. First of all it shows that the Orient cannot live alone as its survival depends completely on the Occident. More importantly the comfort of the Europeans is restored with its tragic outcome. It is noteworthy that the Monster is always found in the wild landscapes that are miles away from the society. Throughout the whole course of the narrative it does not meet any single person of the "civilized" society as that would threaten the British readers immediately. It is totally ostracized from the civilized society and not even granted a female companion as that would increase the chance of reproduction.

In *Frankenstein*, the fear of the unknown Orient significantly influences the narrative, reflecting the anxieties of a European era marked by colonial expansion and burgeoning

⁷ Joseph.W.Lew, p.275.

⁸ Rebecca Nesvet, p.376.

trade with Eastern countries. Through various references and the portrayal of the Monster's tragic fate, Mary Shelley masterfully addresses the West's apprehensions. Ultimately, she subtly curtails these anxieties by reinforcing a sense of Western superiority.

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