

Situating women as subalterns in Marry Shelley 's Frankenstein

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Abstract

This paper explores how Mary Shelley portray the women's suffering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. women in this novel are portrayed as naive and innocent characters. Explicit Portrayal as subalterns and severe social inequality between men and women both in the world of literature and life in general . *Frankenstein* or the *Modern Prometheus* one of Mary Shelley's novels , was first published in 1818. Shelley had enough trouble trying to express herself in regard to her inferior position as a woman in society, let alone trying to achieve an acclaimed status as a (female) British writer . The pertaining attitudes of the time toward women. Explores the social position of females of the time as well as the true significance of Shelley's almost entirely male-dominated narrative. *Shelley* depicts the inevitable negative outcomes of the strict gender division in the society. This meant that the public sphere of life was regarded as the male realm, while the private or emotional sphere of life represented the women realm. Her novel presents for women's struggle against man's power and the suffocated social norms by empowering Man over women, Her characters spend the whole time suffering from the mistreatment they get from their society and the men they love, and they spend their lives within only the domestic sphere. They are all described as being beautiful, fair, selfless, weak, and submissive to man's will no matter how unjust it might be, and they never try to change their fate . The novel takes place in a patriarchal society where man is powerful figure and women is obedient to his command.

The aim of this paper is to study the social inequality and the women issues which *Mary Shelley* raises in her famous novel *Frankenstein*. This study will further help in understanding the patriarchal structure of the British society during the Victorian era and how women were the passive victims of male dominated society .

KEY WORDS

Mary Shelley, Female Absence , Victorian era , Mary Wollstonecraft , male dominance, inequality , Mellor, patriarchal , John Stuart , Gilbert and Gubar.

Introduction

In nineteenth century British society was a patriarchal society in which the roles of gender were strictly defined. Regarding the status of women it can be said that they were represented as an object for dissection and analysis . In the novel *Frankenstein* ,women characters belonging to the aristocratic society (Elizabeth Lavenza, Maragaret Saville, Caroline *Frankenstein*) and the working-class(Justine Moritz), but the one thing common among them all is that they are considered incompetent to perform intellectual jobs or carryout tasks other than household duties.

During that time *Shelley* was writing *Frankenstein*, females were considered to be lower class citizens in relation to their male counterparts. They were seen as possessions for men, protected by men, and only useful in order to carry out their duties of daughter, sister, mother, and wife. It was unheard of for them to complain or even act as if their lives were not perfect. *Shelley* did a wonderful job of portraying women of this era. And she used the work of her mother and other feminists' to exemplify her ideas. *Shelley* used Caroline Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, Elizabeth Lavenza, Safie, Mrs. Saville, and even the female monster that Victor begins to create, as the backbone of what is considered one of the first science fiction genre novels of its time.

In this novel there are three women characters were strictly assigned domestic roles of housewives, mothers (Elizabeth Lavenza, Maragaret Saville, Caroline Beaufort *Frankenstein*) experience horrific events like brutal murder and degradation of female roles. Elizabeth Lavenza, the wife of Victor is brutally murdered by the monster. She is an epitome of an ideal Victorian wife displaying the qualities of submissive, tender, calm and poised 'angel in the house'. *Shelley's* incorporation of suffering and death of her female characters portrays that in the 1800's it was acceptable. The women in the novel are treated as property and have no right and freedom of their own , this inequality on the basis of gender in submissive to man's will no matter how unjust it might be, and they never try to change their fate.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* , the author characterizes each woman as passive, disposable and serving a utilitarian function . *Frankenstein* presents some of the associated issues of oppressions , brutality and adversity through its female characters . In *Frankenstein* Female characters are described in minimum details, which indirectly highlight the importance of the male characters. All the female characters in the novel devote their time and energy to the men in their life fulfilling their manly dreams, aspirations, desires and provide satisfaction. The result which the female characters receive from their male counterparts after showing their devotion is death.

Mary Shelley presents us the stereotypical roles that women were assigned in the Victorian era. The gendered division of labour is clearly visible in the novel *Frankenstein*. The male characters have been assigned the public sphere roles of public servant(Alphonse *Frankenstein*), scientist(Victor), merchant(Clerval and his father) and explorer(Walton) whereas on the other hand women characters were strictly assigned domestic roles of housewives, mothers(Elizabeth Lavenza, Margaret Saville, Caroline Beaufort *Frankenstein*). This inequality on the basis of gender in the Victorian period led to the subjugation of the female gender who were totally deprived the right to display their knowledge and skills in the public sphere. Shelley's incorporation of suffering and death of her female characters portrays that in the 1800's it was acceptable. The women in the novel are treated as property and have no right and freedom of their own .In the novel *Frankenstein* ,Victor considers Elizabeth as his private possession. After meeting Elizabeth ,Victor says :

"since till death she was to be mine only". Victor's mother objectifies Elizabeth as a mere gift which she would present it to his loving son Victor: "I have a pretty present for my Victor-tomorrow he shall have it" (*Frankenstein* , p.37).

The women are forced to be submissive,a trait that illustrates their submission towards men. Anne K.Mellor in A Feminist Critique of Science believes that the female characters in *Frankenstein* are portrayed as sympathetic ,guiltless victims, separated from their male counterparts by their lack of participation in their professional and scientific fields. In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein embodies the social superiority of men who fear what A. Mellor describes as:

"...uninhibited female sexual experience that threatens the foundation of patriarchal power" (Mellor, p.307).

The rejection of a women companion is evident throughout the novel, the men isolate themselves from the women and don't even think of them as equal companions to share their thoughts with. In one of the letters to his sister, Captain Robert Walton describes his loneliness to her and his need of a companion that understands him and eases the difficulties of his voyages. But ironically, this companion that he longs for is a male friend rather than a female. He even prefers to write his thoughts when he cannot find a friend to accompany him. And Walton here prefers to commit himself to writing down his thoughts rather than searching for a woman to share his life with. And even though he is in the sea for a long time, he doesn't think of going back home or to his sister when he feels this lonely. And if his sister can be considered a companion to him here via the letters he writes to her, the reader actually does not find a reply from her. He writes in the same letter that he "may receive [her] letter (though the chance is very doubtful)" (*Frankenstein*, p.12) .

it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world. From this declaration, I must except the pref- ace. As far as I can recollect, it was entirely .written by him" (*Frankenstein* p. 251)

This attitude to the female sexuality is very clear in Victor's response to the Creature's demand for a female companion. Victor 'tears to pieces ' the nearly completed female. He destroys what he is afraid of a female who might assert her own will, a female who might not be afraid of and obedient to the male, who may resist contracts made by the patriarchal society before her birth, contracts that would govern her very existence. Victor is also afraid of her ability to produce offspring and therefore usurps female reproduction power by destroying the passive female body. A. Mellor notes:

"What Victor Frankenstein truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner, and to propagate at will, can only appear monstrously ugly to Victor, for she defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive and sexually pleasing"
(Mellor, p.120).

Mother of *Mary Shelley*, Mary Wollstonecraft, a famous and important feminist who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) , believed that women should be treated as equals and said as much in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *Shelley* here follows the steps of her mother, though in a different way of her own. *Shelley's* novel lacks strong and active women characters who spend the

whole time in the novel suffering from the mistreatment they get from their society and the men they love, and they spend their lives within only the domestic sphere. They are all described as being beautiful, fair, selfless, weak . Women's role and status in the Victorian era , or lack thereof, did not only affect women on a personal level, it restrained them from having a career other than that of a housewife as well. The female sex was believed to be weaker, less intelligent and inferior to the male sex, which had the natural consequence that women were thought less capable than men when it came to activities categorized as masculine. Writing was one of them:

“writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to “female” characteristics” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 8).

By defining these characteristics as inimical to women, they naturally become male. It was simply believed that women were incapable of writing and nor were they supposed to, as exemplified earlier by John Ruskin's comment that a woman's power was not for invention or creation. If a woman did succeed in writing something worth reading (estimated by the male readers/authors) it was viewed as an abnormality, 'freakish', and unfeminine since it was, after all, a male characteristic . (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000,p. 10)

In *Frankenstein* ,Victor considers *Elizabeth* as his private possession. After meeting Elizabeth,Victor says”since till death she was to be mine only”. Victor's mother objectifies Elizabeth as a mere gift which she would present it to his loving son Victor:

“I have a pretty present for my Victor-tomorrow he shall have it”.
(*Frankenstein* ,p.37)

The women are forced to be submissive, a trait that illustrates their submission towards men. Women are seen as possessions for men to protect, and the women are portrayed as stereotypical women in that time period. Anne K. Mellor in *A Feminist Critique of Science* believes that the female characters in *Frankenstein* are portrayed as sympathetic ,guiltless victims, separated from their male counterparts by their lack of participation in their professional and scientific fields.

Shelley's female characters, Elizabeth Lavenza, because of her aristocratic background and the wealthy family she lives in, may give out the impression of a somewhat more prominent character, but her helplessness in relation to men is absolutely equal to the one of Justine Moritz who is a servant at the Frankenstein's house. There is absolutely no difference between the female characters regarding

this attitude that the woman should patiently wait at home doing things which Wollstonecraft refers to as “useless” or even “ridiculous” to fill her day while the man, whether it be a husband, father or a brother, could take on any task he wishes to do.

Elizabeth represents a perfect example of an affectionate woman who has from birth been constantly encouraged to suppress her own needs and desires in order to subject herself completely to a man and everyone else in need of her care. Arguably, she takes place as the most subdued female character in the novel because her subjection comes both from the outside influences, as well as from her inner, deeply rooted attitude that a woman should be always and inexcusably submissive. She cares more about Victor’s desires and feelings than her own and when Caroline dies Elizabeth makes sure to comfort the grieving (even though she herself is in sorrow):

*She indeed veiled her grief, and strove to act the comforter to us all.
[...] She devoted herself to those whom she had been taught to call her
uncle and cousins. Never was she so enchanting as at this time when
she recalled the sunshine of her smiles and spent them on us. She forgot
even her own regret in her endeavors to make us forget. (Shelley, p. 35)*

Mary Shelley draws a biting image of the idealized but passive ‘angel in the house’-women stereotype. At the end she becomes victim of Victor’s self-adoration and that can be interpreted as a punishment for her passiveness and obedience. All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (*Frankenstein* ,p.28)

Justine’s character is a very passive, victim of circumstance ,seldom vocal character in the novel. She is tossed back and forth between her family and the Frankenstein's , until she is ultimately framed for the murder of William Frankenstein. Justine defies the expectations of one wrongfully accused of manslaughter, remaining tranquil and peaceful. In her own words, she defenses of herself :

"God knows how entirely I am innocent. But I do not pretend that my protestations should acquit me; I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts..." (Frankenstein ,p.65).

"But I have no power of explaining it...I am only left to conjecture concerning the probabilities by which it might have been placed in my pocket". (Frankenstein ,p.66)

Justine Moritz is executed for a crime she never committed and Elizabeth is unable to save her, nor can she save herself on her wedding night. These women are in fact personification of nineteenth century, representing the dominance of men , in patriarchal society. That the women are not allowed a voice in the story is a direct parallel to the real world, where the male sex was authorized to speak and women were not. (...). (Frankenstein ,p.p.57, 73)

Caroline *Frankenstein* moves from being the perfect daughter, nursing her father until his death, to being the perfect wife and mother, who eventually dies as consequence of taking care of Elizabeth Lavenza who suffers from small-pox. Elizabeth is the ideal sister, cousin and future wife of Victor, their marriage being planned by Victor's parents long before (a contract that was characteristic for patriarchal society, as mentioned above). Elizabeth is confined to home while Victor Frankenstein enters the outside world.

The next female character encountered is the young cottager's daughter Agatha, whom the monster studies. Agatha's purpose, as a kind and gentle female, is to exhibit and embody all virtue and sensitivity. She is the most distant and passive female character in the novel and also the most necessary to the novel as a whole. Agatha most moves him in her interactions with her blind father:

"Agatha listened with respect, her eyes sometimes filled with tears, which she endeavored to wipe away unperceived" (Frankenstein ,p.93)

One of the ways by which the performance of female characters is proven to have little or no say and in fact no direct importance in the story, is the role of *Margaret Saville*, sister of Robert Walton. Firstly, readers are not given any information about Margaret's personal life or description to give them a better understanding of whom all these letters are being sent to. Instead, Margret is seen as the only thread connecting Robert to the world back home and the comfort he turns to for moral support. Secondly, the readers are isolated from Margret's emotions including fear

and worry for her brother. The readers can only infer what the deprived character might feel.

“You will not hear of my destruction, and you will anxiously await my return. Years will pass, and you will have visitings of despair and yet be tortured by hope.”

(Shelley, P.196)

the Victorian period led to the subjugation of the female gender who were totally deprived the right to display their knowledge and skills in the public sphere. John Stuart Mill in his most famous work “The Subjection of Women” mentions the gender divide prevalent in the 18th and 19th century as follows:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the Belief that their ideal of characters is the very opposite to that Of men; not self-will, & government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections((Mill ,p.28)

Moreover, as a woman in this novel, Margaret was forced to stay home and do what readers can infer were house duties, while her brother seeks danger and adventure to accomplish his dream. yet Mary Shelley still refuses to give them any intellect on this hopeless character. though all of the women characters mentioned were created by a woman author, each of them has a very demeaning characterization. Shelley’s women are objectified, used, abused, and easily discarded. None of them, save Margaret, survive the novel and all of them live their fictional lives to serve man’s life.

Conclusion

Mary Shelley uses *Frankenstein* to both reflect and criticize the position of women in the society in which she lived and wrote. The dangers of the repression of the feminine gender, either embodied in the female or its natural dimensions in the male, will be directly derived from her novel and the world she was acquainted with. Throughout the events of the story, women did not even possess a chance to describe who they truly were and interpret the story in their own view. Her representation of women as confined and content in stereotyped female roles as mothers, daughters, and wives may reflect aspects of society but is also an attempt to illustrate where the problem lies. That the women Caroline Beaufort, Margaret Saville and Elizabeth Lavenza were all victims of a tragic yet mind-blowing novel where all three were imagined as weak and insignificant characters. Every woman, are portrayed as naive and innocent, *Shelley* tried to strip the women characters of any direct speech. where the male sex was authorized to speak, especially in the public sphere.

Eventually, they are all dead by the end of the novel. They are killed by their obedience to the role prescribed for them by the male patriarchal society which deprives them of any ability to save themselves. *Shelley* uses Elizabeth's death to describe the merciless way she was left on the bed to be found. *Shelley* gave the initial feeling that she endorsed the fact that women are inferior to men, but upon further reading, research, and contemplation, it is obvious she used Caroline, Justine, Elizabeth, and her other female to uphold her mother's beliefs and teachings that men and women are equal and should be treated as such.

lastly a healthy society can only exist if both the genders are equally respected by giving due respect to their biological differences as both the genders are equally important in the general progress of society.

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