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Frankenstein: Mary Shelley's lost paradise

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Abstract

This paper seeks to attempt feminist analysis of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley focusing on how gender, motherhood, and the mingling powers of creating ostensibly manifest in the text. Within the frame of reference of feminist theory, the text is read to reflect patriarchal anxieties over the early 19th century female agency and reproduction, coupled with female intellectual independence. In fact, Shelley has constructed a character-defying technology when using Victor Frankenstein as a "male mother," whose attempt to supplant nature in birth leads to disorder and destruction. Absence in crucial moments of creations and decisions indicates silencing women's voices, not to mention the novel being an indictment against the kinds of male-dominated scientific and social orders. Characters like Elizabeth and Justine delineate how much damage could be done to women in patriarchal societies. This critique then gives a different perspective to Frankenstein, outlining its historical and cultural frames of reference, while manifesting that it has a lasting meaning as subversive regarding questions of gender and the consequences of silencing female agency.

Keywords: Feminist, reproduction, nature, gender, patriarchal

Introduction

A loss of something ever felt I

The first that I could recollect

Bereft I was-... (Dickinson, "A loss of something ever felt I")

Let us begin this discussion with Frankenstein. What actually makes Frankenstein a very potential subject for female critique are neither its conventional gothic elements or fictionalisation of an unscrupulous scientific experiment of an inordinately aspirant and frenzied scientist, to animate a dead human giant manufactured all by himself, but its focus on a highly sensitive and poignant issue of death and birth, parenting and family in respect of which the author's own experiences are unmistakably reflected in the depiction of the being, her "hideous progeny".

Deeply influenced by the debates and discussions which P.B. Shelley and Byron held frequently during their sojourn in 1816 at Geneva in Switzerland about death, the principles of life, alchemy and galvanism, Mary Shelley developed in her mind a hypothetical project of writing a kind of ghost story that would "cuddle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart." In fact, it was under the persuasion of Byron's proposal that "we each shall write a ghost story, and under Shelley's enticement that "a devout but nearly silent listener", Mary set up on writing such a story that ultimately developed into a path-breaking fiction of multi-dimensional connotations and increasingly important questions with the passage of time. In this context, must we refer to Mary's "acute mental vision" of a student of unhallowed arts, who had misconceived a "hideous phantasm of a man", which the mad student had galvanized into "semi-vital motion" This phantasmagoria virtually haunted Mary into animating it in the form of Frankenstein and the hideous progeny whom she bid "to go forth and prosper. It is to be kept in mind that unlike her husband, Mary Shelley practically disapproved of the romanticization of startling scientific experiments, aspiring to claw their way into the very recess of Nature and recreating the world by unshaping its natural environment that someone should hold up a warning sign to the effect that She believed Science and Progress weren't necessarily going to result in the best of everything" However, what makes the fiction so absorbingly interesting as a female study is unquestionably its reflection on the author's physical and emotional association with death and birth, so hideously mixed as in Frankenstein's workshop of "filthy creation" Mary's almost intermittent pregnancy ever since her adolescence and love with Shelley, her rather

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premature entrance into the complex domain of maternity and her even more pathetic experience of witnessing helplessly the death of her babies even before their Christening as well as her misfortune of her erudite mother's death at the time of giving birth to her, must have had a deep-seated poignant impact upon her mind and stimulated it to manifest it in *Frankenstein*. The myth-making of child-birth and death in particular is what makes the fiction so close to the author's painful personal revulsion against death and birth of a child. The God-forsaken scientist in her fiction says "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death." How close an association do we find in the author's personal pain-staking experience with the ill-fated Being depicted by her. Mary was motherless and so is the being. Her elopement with Shelley cost her father's disowning her and her consequent orphanage. Likewise, *Frankenstein* runs away and abandons the newborn at the sight of his repulsive look, nameless. We discern the echo of Mary's anguish over paternal abandonment in the cry of the creature: "I am an abortion to be spurned at and kicked, and trampled on..." Here I think, where, Mary Shelley's book is most interesting "the most powerful, and most feminine in the motif of revulsion against new-born life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences." (P 218, Ellen Moers, *Female Gothic: The monster's mother*).

We shall first of all try to understand the degree of Mary Shelley's obedience to Milton in the light of her treatment of Milton's epic in *Frankenstein*. The novel has reciprocatory mirror images, whose thoughts and actions reflect each others. For example, the parallels between the two Promethean over-reachers, Walton and *Frankenstein* are clear to the readers. *Frankenstein* asks Walton whether he shares his madness, just the moment when the misadventurous explorer remarks Satanically that "one man's life or death were but a small price to pay...for the dominion I acquire." (Shelley, 13, letter 4). The kind of fellowship they discover in each other is the fellowship of hell. To speak of Walton, he embarked on a dangerous voyage to explore the mysterious of the arctic pole, in disregard for his caring sister's love, the quiet and serenity of domestic life and the security of his crew. He is finally left alone. Like Satan, he attempts in desperation to make his way to heaven "country of eternal light", which is very much in common with Milton's "Fountain of light" (PL 3, P 375). What he achieves is an icy hell, "where he comes across *Frankenstein* and his monster." Mary's literary treatment here is Miltonic, as like the Fallen angels of *Paradise Lost*, these three wretches learn that "beyond this flood a frozen continent lies- "dark and wild.../the ther by herpy- footed furies hal'd/at certain revolutions all the damn'd/are brought..... From Beds of raging Fire to starve in ice." (PL 2, 587-600) K

Walton's outlandish ambition not just reflects his Satanic desire or equates him with his Satanic friend *Frankenstein*, but it has another significance. We come to know from his letter to his sister about his once cherished ambition for writing poetry that "lifted "him (His soul) to heaven" and that for one year he lived in a "Paradise" of his poetic venture. His Disappointment following his failure and fall from the heaven in being a poet covertly indicates Mary Shelley's childhood "waking dreams" of literature and her anxieties caused by her poet husband's insistence that she would have to prove herself "worthy of (Her) parentage and

enroll (Herself) on the page of fame." When cast in a Miltonic context, Walton's failure to be a poet metaphorically symbolises "a female fall from a lost Paradise of Art, speech and autonomy into a hell of sexuality, silence and filthy materiality." (227, Gilbert and Gubar, "Horror's twin: Mary Shelley's monstrous Eve")

Frankenstein's inherent evil ambition can be understood from his longing for penetrating into the secrets of the physical world, even at a sort of edenic stage of his life under benevolent parenting and charming Elizabeth's affection.

The seed of evil in *Frankenstein* later matured into a poison tree malignantly nourished by his irrational study of chimerical chemistry and Natural science in a misdirected manner. The filthy, obnoxious and horrifying creature that he had unnaturally procreated in a stinking laboratory-cum dungeon, is a deposition of his audacious usurpation of God's power to create, That is, to my mind, a Biblical/Miltonic judgement, to which Mary Shelley concedes.

But *Frankenstein's* felony, I reckon, is practically associated with female questions. In the words of Anne. K.. Mellor: When Victor *Frankenstein* identifies Nature as female- I pursued Nature in her hiding places' he participates in a gendered construction of the universe whose ramifications are everywhere apparent in *Frankenstein*." *Frankenstein* becomes a myth of tragedy because of the reckless scientist's audacious drive at usurping women's inviolable role in procreation and mothering. *Frankenstein's* plunder of women's natural right to reproduction is symbolically represented in his nightmare just after the animation of the creature, in which Elizabeth, his bride-to-be, is fearfully relegated into the corpse of his dead mother- "a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave- worms crawling in the folds of the flunnel." (P 53, F). So, Mary Shelley, is not too obedient a daughter of Milton as she is termed by some critics... Mary's, intention, hidden in a concentric narrative structure, is to fling sarcasm against the women- repressing patriarchy. It is acknowledged by Anne.K. Mellor," on the cultural level, *Frankenstein's* scientific project to become the sole creator of a human being supports the patriarchal denial of the value of women and female sexuality. *Frankenstein* can be safely considered to be a Satanic human mainly because he unscrupulously seeks to distort the very mechanism of creation in a frenzy of his gender-biased aspiration. Nothing other than the creation of a diabolic being can be expected of such a misogynistic aberrant. Victor's hellish mind "let loose" "a filthy demon" just as Milton's Satan's swelled head *produced* sin, which brought in its wake a dreadfully hilarious caber of death of all the innocents -the lovely William, the noble-minded Clerval, the cherubic Justine, so inconsolably axed on the chauvinistic alter of injustice, the angelic Elizabeth. The vengeful creature murdered them all in retaliation to his heartless creator's refusal to satiate his thirst for a female companion but in an impartial judgement, none other than *Frankenstein* is the actual murderer because it was his egotistical desire to be all in all, his vulgar, insolent desire for self-assertion at the expense of moral and aesthetic values that brought those incorruptible human beings to a pathetic doom.

Despite her general Miltonist leanings, she has we have already seen, expressed to *Frankenstein's* desire and action her critique against patriarchy. Her literary obedience to

Milton expresses itself in keeping the women in "the place" so as to say. Thus Victor's mother is an angelic house-wife, Elizabeth is a shrine-dedicated lamp". However, Mary's departure from the Miltonic doctrine and her implicit satire against patriarchy is intensely manifested in that, while Elizabeth has a genuine love and concern for Victor, she is no more than a plaything to him, and his affection for her is akin to his same feeling for a pet animal. I think the traditional fear of female sexuality and women's empowerment finds a most poignant expression in two acts of the scientist. Though, he initially responded in affirmative to the creature's appeal for a female companion and even sets about manufacturing her, he finally rejects it out of his fear at the prospect of a sexually potent female, who would procreate a race of her own species and assert her sexuality and power. In a frantic jiffy to reassert male control over the female body, he outrageously "tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (Shelley, 164), he had declaimed the female body and "felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being" (Shelley, 167). Thus Frankenstein certainly becomes a highly potential study into how in a patriarchal set-up gender-prejudice marginalises women and monopolises power in all its forms.

Significantly, in the patriarchal world of Geneva in this novel, female sexuality is simply subsumed under the covering of a devoted wife, a caring housekeeper, a devoted daughter so on and so forth. In this context, Elizabeth's murder by the vindictive creature on her wedding night is very suggestive. Mary Shelley schemed to have sketched out the scene of her death, most probably in an imitation of Henry Fuseli's eminent painting, "The Nightmare". Elizabeth's dead body is depicted to have been laid in the same attitude in which a succubus-ridden woman is painted by Fuseli. Frankenstein says: "she was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown-across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half-covered by her hair. (Shelley, 193). Fuseli's woman symbolically projects female erotic desire. Evoking this image, Mary Shelley implicitly indicates Frankenstein's fear of and aversion to female sexuality. His further act of embracing the dead Elizabeth with ardour signifies his prevented necrophilia to assert his masculine command upon the dead female, "the lost mother."

Judged by the Miltonic standpoint, Victor-Adam turned into Victor-Satan, may be said to have been ultimately an allegory of Eve. This appraisal of his role, I do make on the basis of the points that like Eve, who ate God-forbidden knowledge, Victor also ate such profane knowledge as led him into an association with grisely charnels and graves, soul-consuming morbidity. In his eve-like pride "I was surprised that I alone should be reserved to discover such a secret" (P 37. Chap 4).

Victor conceives, rather misconceives, a demoniac being; then again he re-enacts the role of Satan, as he is the true murderer of innocent lives, and a releaser of Sin and Death, just as Pandora's immoral curiosity-driven act leads to the unleashing of woes, ills and evils in the world.

The creature, like his UnGodly and inhuman "author" plays the role of Adam and Satan. Like Adam, he reminisces his bygone pristine innocence in the woods. But he soon gets metamorphosed into an outcast and Satan and hides in a Shepherd's hut., which he finds just as Satan finds Pandemonium as an exquisite retreat after "the lake of

fire." (P 90, Chap 11, Shelley)

The creature's mixed feeling of delight, envy and admiration at the sight of abode De Lacy's serene, and happy family in their pastoral is virtually akin to Satan's jealousy and admiration for the happy rural seat of various view", where Adam and Eve form together a Paradisical idyll asexual affinity.

In Frankenstein, the frequent references to Paradise Lost have made mainly in order to the creature's Adamic anxiety and puzzlement about who he is, whence he is and why he is. Though the creature is "in bulk huge/as whom the fables name of monstrous size," though he is fated to war like Prometheus on Jovian Frankenstein, he has not fallen from heaven; again, unlike, Satan, he has no arch angels to follow him. Recapitulating, his school days, in the De Lacy's pig pen. The creature tells Frankenstein: "I found myself similar yet at the same time, strangely unlike the beings concerning whom, I read and to whose conversation, I was a listener."

In the final analysis, of the creature's position vis-a-vis Frankenstein, I would like to associate him with Eve. In view of his utterly fallen and helpless state, in which women are generally cloistered in a stringent patriarchy. The creature's interpretation of the Miltonic epic in relation to his situation reveals that he is thrown into a situation which is even more pitiable and ignominious than those of Adam and Satan, "Like Adam, I was apparently united to any other being in existence." His complaint is true. And it shows him to be virtually a non-entity as Eve, who was born of a rib of Adam, just like our Radha is mythically described to have been born from the left side of Sri Krishna. Adam had come from the hands of God....guided by the special care of his creator.....but I was wretched, helpless and alone." The creature holds even Satan in a position higher than his as "Satan had his companions, fellow devils to admire and encourage him. But I am solitary and abhorred. Thus the creature like Eve suffers helpless loneliness. Preposterous it may seem to many, I, however discern, in the creature's painful grievance Mary Shelley's anguished voice that while she like Eve is threatened with fatal seclusion by the frowning patriarchy that involves her Adam as well, that "Adam converses with superior beings" (Byronic circles of intellectuals).

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