

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Through the lens of Feminist Criticism

Atlantica Boruah

Ex- Student, Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam (India)

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Corresponding Author

Email: boruahatlantica[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The emergence of feminist literary criticism is one of the major developments in literary studies. Feminist criticism deals with the "ways in which literature reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 83). This school of thought tries to find out the way in which females are treated as inferior to the male counterparts. Through this the feminist critic's questions the representation of women in literature as well as the language used in the literature as a tool to differentiate gender. The objective of this paper is to examine Mary Shelley's Frankenstein from a feminist point of view. This will further try to analyse the way in which the female characters are portrayed in the novel.

1. Introduction

The novel Frankenstein has been regarded by many feminist critics as a feminist text. Ellen Moers in her article *Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother* describes Frankenstein as women's mythmaking on the subject of birth which also depicts the ambivalence of Shelley regarding motherhood. Another critic Kate Ellis interprets Frankenstein as critique of Bourgeois family and separation of male and female spheres in her article *Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois family*. These two interpretations tell us about Mary Shelley's concern regarding the position of women in a patriarchal society. There are some aspects in the novel which we can interpret from feminist viewpoint. For instance, the anonymous publication of the novel, representation of female characters, the narrative style, the creation of monster by Victor Frankenstein and the nurturing of the monster.

The age to which Mary Shelley belongs is the Romantic period and the book Frankenstein is published in the year 1818. This age consists of many publishing houses and everything is in the hands of men. Shelley published her novel first anonymously perhaps only because it would have not been accepted otherwise. In the novel we find female characters portrayed as passive, disposable and having not a good position as the male characters of the novel. For instance, Elizabeth Lavenza is described as submissive, gentle character from the very beginning. "Her smile, her soft voice and the sweet glance of her celestial eyes were never there to bless and animate us." (25) The character of Justine Moritz is a very passive character in the novel. She is falsely accused of having murdered William the younger brother of Victor Frankenstein. In the court Mary Shelley presents her as a girl who lacks power in her voice to defend herself. Her statement in the court just goes like this "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." (67). Another women character Agatha is also portrayed as sober and of calm nature. She is the one who gave the monster his first lesson on how to build healthy human relationships. Safie, the Arabian girl is somewhat different from the other female characters. She comes to know that Felix, her lover is betrayed by her father.

And also she comes to know about his exile as a consequence of helping her father in running away from the prison. When her father leaves her alone under the care of a servant she plans to go to her lover. Margaret Saville's character is presented as more passive through out the novel. Margaret is the person to whom Walton is writing the letters narrating the whole novel. But we never meet her nor do we know if she ever gets the letter. She is the most distant and passive character whose physical presence is neglected in the novel. It is in the nineteenth century there seems to be a strict division of gender roles. The working areas of men and women were divided by the society. The domestic work at home was carried out by women and the works outside the home that is in public were assigned to the male counterparts. This is seen through the representation of the women characters in the novel *Frankenstein* where the female characters engaged themselves with works such as housewives, babysitters, nurses or servants. In contrast, the male characters have their workplace away from home as merchants, explorers, or scientists.

The narrative style which Mary Shelley uses in the novel to narrate the story is seen through the lens of feminism. The novel is narrated through a series of letters from Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Saville. Her voice has been not given importance anywhere in the novel. The other women characters whose voice were given in the novel were also not heard without the help of Victor or Walton. As the novel was narrated by the three male narrator, Robert Walton, Victor and the monster therefore they presented the story from male point of view. Through the novel Mary Shelley delineates the traditional approach of opposition among male and female.

As the creation of the monster by Victor Frankenstein is the main action of the novel, Victor works in his laboratory to create a new species. He wants to create or give birth to a kind of human completely by himself. Victor wants to resist the notion of birth. Birth seems to be the only right of a women and Victor by creating the being seems to negate the role of women in the process of procreation. It is seen that nature is used as a symbol of mother or of a women. Here in the novel also, the mother nature nurtures the monster. After the creation of the creature Victor was horrified by its large stature and he runs

away from the laboratory leaving the creature alone. Without having any knowledge regarding his surrounding the creature enters to the forest of Inglostadt. The forest gave him the shelter under the trees and when he feels hungry and thirsty he eats some berries from the trees and water from the brook. He enjoys the songs of birds and beauty of the forest before he encounters the human world. Like mother, nature serves him well, gave him shelter. In spite of negating the role of women in the procreation process Victor also decides not to create a female creature as a company for the male creature. He intends to create a particular environment that consciously omits women and accepts only men and through this he tries to show that women are needed no longer. From another point of view, if women are omitted from the procreation process, at the same time their sexuality would be denied. There is no hint of female sexuality found anywhere in the novel. Victor and Elizabeth seem to consider each other more as cousins. Felix and Safie, who love each other appear only in chaste family situations. Victor has his closest relations with men, namely, Henry Clerval and Robert Walton. But after his continuous claims to create a female companion for him, Victor create one female creature for him as a companion. But the moment Victor realizes the consequences he would face because of the

female companion, Victor destroys her. Through this Victor tried to restore the male supremacy over the female.

The monster created by Victor is a resemblance of feminine characters. The narrator in the story line of the novel depicts the predicaments of the monster how he was alienated and deprived from the human society. From the very first day when he was created by Victor, Victor himself felt uneasy with his characteristics. He wants to take part in the society but he was treated as other. The character of monster here resembles women of patriarchal society, who were always marginalized by the male counterparts. They both possess the same characteristics deviated, oppressed and exploited. As women were treated as inferior in a society in the same manner the monster too experienced the inferiority complex in a society blended with human beings.

2. Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the novel Frankenstein involves many instances which depict the position of women in a society of contemporary period. From the above discussion the novel can rightly be called a feminist text. Through this novel Mary Shelley tries to portray the patriarchal society of her time.

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