The Presence or Absence of Female Characters in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1979 – 1851), the daughter and later the wife of one of the keenest critics in England, wrote the novel Frankenstein (1818) when she was only nineteen years old. Since its publication, the novel has been the subject of many literary discussions due to the myriad controversial issues discovered in the novel in the light of different literary approaches; such as, eco-criticism, feminism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, queer studies and post-colonial studies to name a few. This paper aims to discover whether it is a fact that the novel is flawed, mainly due to the absence of forceful female characters. The novel's schematic arrangement of characters was deemed as deficient simply because, first of all, readers had developed the wrong kind of expectation from the author and secondly, they were not giving the novel the critical, observant reading that it deserved. Contrary to what a superficial reading of the work will reveal, this novel is not deficient at all if it comes to the presence of female characters. Instances from the novel can depict and illustrate this claim and it is only weak traditional readings of the novel which tend to overlook its intensely sexual materials. In the light of such findings, Frankenstein can be judged as one of the most bewildering, intricate works of literature of the Victorian era.

I. Introduction

British Literature has been a long tale of struggle of women authors for their identity as human being and of course the struggle to demolish the gender differences and social evils like racism and women as second class citizen of this world. Hence, female writers could not be as open as they wanted to and could not express whatever they desired due to ensuring their work's publication and obtaining good reception amongst the majority of people, they had to pay attention to what they wrote and depicted in their novels and tread lightly. However, despite such restrictions, all of them have broken the rules by portraying women who are powerful and do not conform to men, women who possess many masculine attribute and cannot be called conventional. Also have rebelled against patriarchy by creating male characters with feminine feature who are under the influence and dominance of the female characters and who need their support and assistance. Basirizadeh (2019) in her article entitled A Comparative Study of the Psychoanalytical Portrayal of the Women Characters by Virginia Woolf and Zoya Pirzad mentions that, "In de Beauvoir's view if women really want a status, they should deconstruct the structures of the masculine society and present their own definition of feminity. This definition would

be the proof of woman's presence and existence counter-intuitive to masculine canon of knowledge in power" (2).

One of the most influential observations on this novel is to evaluate Frankenstein (1818) as to its level of feminine depiction. It is interesting and fruitful to quote the opinion of critics who do not think Shelley, as the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneer in fighting for women's rights and equality of opportunities, could have written a novel which was so weak in its presentation of active and influential female characters. "Migration and diaspora are concerns of postcolonialism" (Qtd. in Zaheri birgani 12). The general expectation, of course, would have been for Mary Shelley to write a novel in which the protagonist was a woman and for the other minor female characters to be efficient as to the development of the plot. Historically, women have had no real power in the world and no place in the decision making. Narges Raoufzadeh (2020) in her article entitled "A Foucauldian Reading: Power in Awakening by Kate Chopin" describes a situation that a woman face in such circumstances:

"She lives in a society that encompasses traditional and patriarchal patterns in their most restricting sense. The community in which she dwells is a male-centered one in which the norms have described the female as the one who is dependent on the male, and is domestic and emotional. She should be "an angel in the house" taking care of her children and her husband. The female model of perfection is the sacrificial mother-woman who efface herself for her family's welfare. On the other hand, the male figure is described as independent and traditional. He should be in control of his family and especially his wife. He bears the responsibility of economic matters of his family. While his wife control the domestic affairs, he is responsible for social matters. She is surrounded by controlling men and mostly conventional women. In such a society, her efforts to become independent from her husband and male dominance meant a great opposition and threat to the dominating social and cultural structures (161).

Shelly portrays different female characters, although very pale but some of them are active and have a significant role to play in their positions and the other are passive. A precursory reading of the novel reveals a handful of women present in the novel; however, none of them have significant roles in the development of events. This criticism goes to the extreme when some even claim that the outright elimination of the female characters all together would not harm the sequence of events or the general presentation of the main themes in any way. Nevertheless, this superficial reading and hasty judgment cannot be valid because a psychoanalytical, deconstructive and feministic reading of the novel will enable us to perceive how cleverly and skillfully, Shelley has interwoven the existence of her female characters into the plot with astonishing results as to the outcome. The first and foremost, step is to extract the female characters and to separate them into different categories; the females who are feminine in sex and the characters which are feminine in gender. The latter step is to evaluate their level of passivity or activity and finally to come up with a judgment as to how successful or unsuccessful the novel has been in presenting female characters.

II. Research Methods

Sandra M. Gilbert (1936 -) American literary critic and poet. She has published many articles in the fields of psychoanalytic criticism, feminist theory, feminist literary criticism and is well known for her collaborative critical work The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writers and the nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979) with Susan D. Gubar (1944) American author and prominent professor in the field of English and Women's Studies at Indiana University. Gilbert and Gubar examine the notion 'angel" and "monster"

that women authors of the nineteenth century used to embody in their works. Virginia Woolf (1942) in "Professions for women" has mentioned "Women writers must kill the ideal through which themselves have been killed into art" (236). Gilbert and Gubar insist on the importance of killing off both figures known as "angel" and "madwoman" or "monster" for, none of them accurately represent women or women authors. They encourage female writers for eliminating these patriarchal views. As Caitlin Moran in her book How to Be a Woman (2011) has mentioned During the 19th century, deviation of any kind of the natural and expected behavior from a woman would lead to serious criticism from the society.

So women who stepped outside the normal conventions either in dress, speech, interests, or by living alone, would be ridiculed and sometimes banished from the society (Moran 37). The aim of this paper is to give a view of how Mary Shelley a leading female literary figure of 19th century portrays the oppression of women and what new ideas and definitions she provides. Through studying her novel, which undoubtedly mirror aspects of the ideology of her time. Shelly shows a society that encompasses traditional and patriarchal patterns in their most restricting sense. Narges Raoufzadeh (2019) in her article entitled "Analysis of Love, Death, Rebirth and Patriarchy in Two Contemporary Poetess Forough Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems" has mentioned "According to almost all feminist scholar's patriarchy refers to rule of the father in a male dominated society as a social and ideological construct which regards men as superior to women.

They are of opinion that men's domination over female sexuality is central to women's subordination. In fact, man is the head of the family who controls women's sexuality, labor, production, reproduction and mobility. Moreover, the effect of patriarchy can be traced in politics, public life and economy as well as in all aspects of social, personal, psychological and sexual existence" (60). Merry Shelly criticizes British male dominant society in which women are marginalized and haven't any voice in the society, she is seeking this voice and identity in her own masterpiece Frankenstein. Shelly shows this very cleverly by portraying various women and describing their real characters. Paper discusses the way through which patriarchal power functions in the society of Shelly's time.

III. Discussion

3.1 First Category of Female Characters in Frankenstein

The first category of female characters in Frankenstein will be allocated to women who are female in both sex and gender. This group consists of two subgroups; the first are living in the Frankenstein household, namely Caroline Beaufort, Justine Moritz, and Elizabeth Lavenza. Caroline is Victor's mother and Alphonse's wife. Caroline's father dies early in his life and leaves his daughter a destitute orphan, a young girl to be pitied and that is exactly what Victor's father does; he marries her and brings her into his house where she establishes a place for herself. Caroline, the mother and the wife is a manager and soon becomes the pillar in her house. She confirms her husband's decision to adopt Elizabeth into their house to fill the place of a deceased daughter. She is the one who decides it is best for Victor and Elizabeth to marry each other and insists that they do so even on her death bed. Her insistence is a sign that she probably knows both Elizabeth and Victor and knows what is best for them. She is aware of the true feelings and character of these two young people more they themselves are ready to acknowledge.

She loses her life in a sacrificial attempt at nursing Elizabeth who has contracted scarlet fever and has no regrets on her death bed. Her only anxiety is the young people and how they will manage themselves and the household after she has ceased to be. Taking all this into

consideration, it hardly seems fair to label her a neutral character who has no part in the development of events. The next

character to consider is Justin Moritz, the nurse and house maid who has sincerely served this family through thick and thin and with the aid of Elizabeth fills the empty position of the mother figure in this family. Her heart-felt kindness and her honest service prove how appreciative she is of the reciprocal feelings the Frankensteins have for her. The extremity of her gratitude is on display when found guilty for the death of little William, she makes no attempt to exonerate herself. Mistakenly, many see this as a sign of weakness; however, her decision is far from it. Her silence and the fact that she makes no attempt to extricate herself should not be marked as helplessness but it should be seen and judged in the light of the options that women in her position had in the Victorian era.

A lonely woman of inferior class is accused of murder; even if she were found innocent, there would not much she could do towards securing a position for herself and building up her future. No doubt she would have very few or almost no choices at securing another position and providing for herself. She would be regarded with mistrust for the rest of her life. Also, the death of her protégée is too hard on her; the mere traumatic experience has left her numb and different. The grief of losing William is so deep that she no longer cares what happens to her and so she silently and humbly accepts her fate. The last character in this group is Elizabeth. Like Victor's mother, she is a destitute orphan, but by no means a useless person. As she finds her place in the Frankenstein household, she secures her status in helping, supporting and encouraging which are as essential and vital elements to anyone as much as daily bread.

After Caroline's death, she becomes the mother figure and accepts the responsibility of the house which is more than Victor has done for his family. The fact that she 'patiently waits for Victor' and does nothing more, should be seen in the light of her time. She is a young woman of no particular financial or familial support and there are no other options open to her in her situation. Leading a secluded life, she has no other suitors and so constantly is thinking about Victor and his promise to marry her. Her sense of loyalty and deep love should not be judged as passivity. What critics like Gilbert and Gubar see as redundancy is not redundant at all; rather it is a sign of conformation and adaptation to the existing circumstances. Each one of these characters displays what was expected of a woman in their situation and since the prevalent idea with the Victorians was that the characters in fiction be true to life, then Shelley has acted wisely and carefully in characterizing her characters the way she did. Had either of them behaved differently they would not have become acceptable to the Victorian reader.

3.2 Second Female Characters in Frankenstein

The second sub-group is peopled by the minor females who are not redundant either because each one plays her role perfectly. This group consists of Agatha, Safie and Walton's sister. Agatha DeLacey is a loving and caring daughter who takes care of her blind father and manages her family in the best way possible. Her more important role is that she serves as a source of inspiration for the monster. She is the one who awakens instinctive feelings of love in the monster and so makes the events progress. Her influence on the monster makes the monster demand a wife and had this demand not been made, the central conflict of the novel would be lost. Safie, the dark-skinned foreigner, represents the notion of diaspora or the forced dispersal of people from their native land. In an analogy, her life, her rejection and how she is viewed in a systematical hegemony is actually presenting the situation of the monster to the readers explicitly.

As Ronald Bush maintains, "In case the horror of the monster viewing himself through the eyes of his European neighbors was not pointed enough for her readers, Shelley explicitly aligns his anguish with Europe's relations to the Orient" (56). Thus even as it may seem trivial, at first, but even Safie who has the least significant role in the general plot, serves her purpose. The next female character to consider is Walton's sister who does not even have a physical appearance in the novel; nevertheless, she is not to be considered redundant either. Walton writes his letters to her. She is the recipient of information, a lending ear, and the actual patience stone. Her role is to add credibility to the story by showing that if a story deserves to be listened to, then perhaps it deserves to be believed and this is one of the goals of any fiction writer to make her story a representation of real life as closely as possible.

3.3 Third Female Characters in Frankenstein

The next group of females consists of members that are not female in sex but are female in gender. This group includes the protagonist Victor and nature, the setting of the novel. Victor is involved in the act of creation; Victor has a baby. His 'pregnancy' and childbirth are obviously manifested by the existence of the paradoxically huge being who emerges from his " workshop of filthy creation," but even the descriptive language of his creation myth is suggestive: the "incredible labours," "emaciated with confinement," "a passing trance ," "oppressed by a slow fever," "nervous to a painful degree," (chap.4) Thus, Victor not only gives birth to a monster but also becomes Eve and eats the fruit of forbidden knowledge, learning the secrets of the human frame. Victor is Eve both in his procreation and his curiosity to find out what tantalizing knowledge lies in that which is denied. Both in actuality and in mind, Victor is female and being the protagonist of the novel, it is assumed that the female is not weak or absent anywhere in the story. The main motifs are birth and forbidden knowledge so there can be no doubt about the presence of the female when these two fields are subjects of discussion.

The last place to seek the strong presence of the female figure is nature itself, the natural setting of most of the episodes in the novel. After the monster 'is born', it discovers that due to its monstrosity, it cannot live among other people and within the boundaries of the human society, so like an orphan, the monster takes refuge in nature where he feels in peace and there are no prying eyes to upset his calm. Very much like a mother who embraces her child at times of hardship and unrest, the lush nature of Switzerland opens its arms to the monster who has been shunned and has no other place to turn to every time the monster wants to see Victor, he emerges from among the trees or down road that descends from the mountains; the image of the birth channel is Every time the monster wants to see Victor, he emerges in one way or another always present.

In chapter ten of the novel, very straightforwardly, the monster complains to Victor about his loneliness and abjection. "The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I do not only fear, are a dwelling to me and the only one that man does not grudge. These bleak skies, I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings" (Frankenstein 100). Nature shelters the monster when he has no other refuge and provides him with food when he is starving and these are behaviors expected only of a mother or mother figure. Whenever the monster dares to encounter people and is rejected, he runs towards the woods, like a helpless child who has no else to return to except its mother. For the monster, nature is equivalent to safety and serenity, circumstances traditionally provided by a mother.

In this respect, the importance of nature as a mother figure to the orphan monster becomes evident.To further this argument, it can also be noted how the conflict in the latter part of the novel revolves around the monster's demand for a female companion. All the

disastrous events that take place in the aftermath of Victor's refusal to provide the monster with a wife go to show the necessity of her existence. The presence of a female is deemed necessary to the continuation of a healthy, sane life and this points further to the role of the female sex and the reason of why it is reasonable to think that her strong presence should be felt everywhere in the novel.

IV. Conclusion

To sum up, Merry Shelley didn't follow the traditional dichotomous and misogynist views. She described altered versions of male and female relationships. Shelly has, so far, ignored the patriarchal norms and created her own definitions of men and women's roles and statuses. The novel, Frankenstein, is one of the most controversial literary pieces of work produced during Victorian times. As Fred Botting claims about this novel, "[it is a] product of criticism, not a work of literature" (1). Obviously, one has to wonder what status and reputation the novel would have now if it were not read in the light of different literary approaches, and it is not strange that throughout times, the first literary approach which is selected by critics is feminism. This only proves how invalid and unfair it is to say the novel is flawed because of its weak depiction of female characters. The novel would not have won such notice had it not been read and 'rediscovered' by feminist literary critics. It is the "mother-lode" of feministic criticism and has been put to the test of feministic outlooks from myriad perspectives. Contrary to short-sighted speculations and an uneasy underpinning of 'masculine' philosophy, Frankenstein is a 'woman's book' if only because its author was caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time when she wrote the novel (Gilbert: 221-222). Hence, the idea and the presence of the female, whether bodily, mentally or spiritually are not hazy at all because the female and the essence of the female is omnipresent.

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