



ENLIGHTENMENT OPTIMISM AND ROMANTIC IDEALISM IN MARY SHELLEY 'FRANKENSTEIN' (1818)

Neema Susan Mathews

Research Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, St Thomas College,
Kozhenchery, Pathanamthitta, Kerala.

Abstract

'Frankenstein', the novel written by Mary Shelly in 1818, is regarded as a fable of science gone wrong. The eponymous character is not the central focus of the novel. Frankenstein who is a aspiring scientist who creates a monster compiling dead bodies in proportion on a colossal scale, for the creature was eight feet tall. The result was hideous. Unlike to Pygmalion, who falls in love with his creation, Frankenstein despises his handiwork. The novel is based on the tension between the Enlightenment optimism and Romantic idealism. Mary Shelley concludes her novel by reinforcing the significance of human relationship (which is exemplified through De Lacey family) and the consequences of a morally transgression catalyzed by the Enlightenment aspiration and the Romantic idealism. This paper aims to analyze the struggle between the two gigantic movements of the early nineteenth century-Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Key Words: *Enlightenment Optimism, Romantic Idealism, Gothic Novel, Mythic Framework.*

On the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's Gothic novel, Frankenstein(1818), it would be appropriate to examine the gruesome masterpiece that tells the story of a monstrous creation The subtitle-' The Modern Prometheus' and the following epigraph – ' Did I request thee ,from my clay / To mould me man ? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?' (Book X, 743–745) an excerpt from John Milton's **Paradise lost** provide the novel a mythic frame work. This enhances the tension, which the novel based on, between the Enlightenment optimism and Romantic idealism.

Victor Frankenstein, who successfully accomplishes a Promethean scientific innovation, is made to stand against the nameless created object, who echoes Adam when he questions the creator about the judiciousness of his invention. Prometheus was the Titan God of forethought and crafty counsel who was entrusted with the task of making mankind out of clay. His attempts to make man's life better result in his own destruction. Similarly in the novel Frankenstein, a young scientist from Geneva creates a eight feet tall human being out of bones and limbs collected from charnel houses, dissecting rooms and slaughter houses. But later unlike Prometheus, Frankenstein abandons the creature because of its deformity, leaving the creature on a rampage.

Frankenstein was written in the Romantic age, an age of Imagination, sensitivity, feelings, spontaneity and freedom. The idea behind the age was to go against the ideals that set apart by the Enlightenment age, which were too objective. The Enlightenment philosophies saw man in common, that is, as creatures endowed with Reason while the Romantics saw diversity and uniqueness. Rousseau's (1712-1778), autobiography, 'The Confessions' (1781), began with the following words: '...I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different...' (5).In the Romantic age each individual was considered to have a characteristic identity for sensibility and imagination are of the very essence of individuality, while the reason tends to the general.

Mary Shelley's writings were influenced by the visionary reforms suggested by her parents as she was the daughter of the feminist theoretician, Mary Wollstonecraft and the rationalist philosopher, William Godwin. Her marriage to Percy Shelley and further associations unveiled her to the most advanced scientific and intellectual trends of her time. In the introduction to the 1831 edition of the book, 'Frankenstein', she mentions how she was confronted with a 'hideous' idea. One night, she recalled ,the group-which also included Byron's eccentric young Physician, William Polidori -were amusing themselves by narrating tales contain supernatural elements. This session had prompted her to fashion the tale that led finally to the novel. Lack of direct associations with the scientific



inventions unable her to be a precise critic as such, but like the other Romantics she attempts to analyze the heights of Enlightenment aspiration.

In the Enlightenment period reason was considered to be the axle of all human endeavors. But it is ironical to think about the failure of these intellects to foresee the consequences of the 'rational' actions that they had been committed. Like Lucifer, the fallen angel in the Bible who contrived to make his throne higher than the God or like Icarus who flew towards the sun with his wax wings or like Dr Faustus who was considered to be the most learned man but failed to make wise use of his genius, the Enlightenment man often failed due to the irrationality of its own claims and endeavors. Lack of discernment of these intellects is frankly critiqued in the novel.

'I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river' (Frankenstein, 3).

This is an excerpt from the first letter that Walton writes to his sister. It echoes the imperialistic aspiration, to discover and conquer the other unknown parts of the world, which was infused in English society in the 18th century. All his endeavors are meant to attain 'glory'.

While Shelley uses Walton to represent one of the aspects of the enlightenment aspiration, her portrayal of Frankenstein can be seen as a complete critique of the age. Drawing inspiration from the medieval alchemists, Frankenstein, the Renaissance man pursues the modern 'elixir of life' (Frankenstein, 36) to 'give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man' (53). Before the enlightenment period human actions were limited by a conscious thought on the higher supremacy of God. But in the Enlightenment period, the focus is turned to man and his capabilities. He was exalted and the idea of 'soul' was replaced by the idea of 'self'. Thus he began to explore the secrets of Nature which resulted in its exploitation.

'They penetrate in to the recesses of Nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascent in to the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the Nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earth quake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows' (46).

Frankenstein's world was a materialistic one where he has not given any place for God and his supremacy. This is accentuated by his study on the 'causes of life'. He 'observes the natural decay and corruption of human body'. These things do not remind him of immortality but of life as he sees 'how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain' and the 'corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life' (51). Thus he became 'capable of bestowing animation upon life less matter'. Soon after the description of his endless joy that he has felt when he achieved the 'desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world, he warns Walton, 'how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believe his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his Nature will allow' (53). This warning can also be seen as Shelley's response to the imperialistic aspiration which is elucidated in Walton's letters.

'A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent Natures would owe their being to me. No father would claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs' (54). The words filled with arrogance and personal glory, validate the significance of the subtitle of the novel. Frankenstein's blasphemous act, 'infusing a spark of being in to the lifeless thing' (58), can be seen as a repetition of the crime that Prometheus, the mythic figure, commits against the divinity.

Frankenstein seems very enthusiastic at the beginning of his endeavor yet his first reaction on the completion of the task is in deep contrast with earlier ones as he says, '...but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart' (59). The physical ugliness of the creature repulses the creator and it makes the creator to abandon the creature. In contrary to the book of Genesis in the Bible in which it



says that Adam is provided everything he wanted, food, shelter and a companion also (even before he desired for one), Frankenstein's creation is left orphaned, unaided and unloved. He is not even given a name thus he lacks an identity also. He retorts, 'I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? I will revenge my injustices. If I cannot inspire love, I will create fear: and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy, because my creator, 'Do I swear inextinguishable hatred' (174). Through this incident, Shelley projects Frankenstein's greatest discredit that he is reluctant to take the responsibility of his creation. The purpose with which he has made the creature seems to be drowned by the physical appearance. The deformity of the creature validates the inability of human beings to create or replicate the natural world there by Shelley propagates the Romantic view; Nature is a source of mystery and spirituality whose precincts must be respected.

Frankenstein's forbidden act, creating a living creature by assembling the parts of corpses, can also be analyzed as a transgression to the maternal world which wholly belongs to women. It acts against the 'female principle' that results in the complete elimination of women in the society. Through his revolutionary act he questions the necessity to have females in the society at all. Frankenstein's creature is male and he refuses to make a females. Shelley uses the predicament of the male creature to critique the marginalization of women, who enjoyed the most minimal rights in the early nineteenth century. Through the characterization of both Clerval and Safie, perhaps, Shelley is adding a note on the societal and cultural frame work of the society which has constructed on the Enlightenment claims of supremacy and dominance.

Frankenstein's creature is a product of a mechanical conception, a living thing devoid of spiritual, natural and maternal instincts. But he seems more rational than his creator. But his rationality is being misused by the callousness of the society. The process of 'monsterization' that the creature undergoes when subjected to ruthless society signifies the need for the traditional preserver and protector figures-the divine, the Nature and the maternal. Even though Frankenstein gives life to the creature he fails to become an efficient parent. Ultimately the creature becomes a menace to society and to his creator.

Being abandoned by Frankenstein, the creature finds shelter in forest where he satisfies his hunger and thirst. But he does not seem happy with the companionship of Nature as he says 'It was dark when I woke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened as it were instinctively, finding myself so desolate'(119). The coat that he picks up from the apartment does not give him enough warmth in the night. He fails to imitate the sound of the birds. As the days pass the food becomes scarce and he is forced to move near a human settlement. His movement towards civilization from the natural world undermines the Romantic notion of Nature as a well nourisher and supplier. For Wordsworth, Nature was his everything; his 'nurse', 'guide', and 'guardian of his heart and soul'. The Romantics considered Nature as the source of emotion, imagination and liberty, which are considered to be the congruous and vital characteristics of Romanticism. But in the novel, Nature is not shown as an ideal provider. It is De Lacey's family that generates emotions in creature. Creature learns language and culture by overhearing the conversations. The isolation that he feels in Nature is also shown towards the end when is found wandering in the polar region. By being realistic rather than being in a sublime mood, Mary Shelley reinforces the essentiality of familial atmosphere for the development of human mind.

The unromantic characteristics of Nature are shown in different parts of the novel. This is evident in Frankenstein's description while he descends the Rhine in a boat from Straburgh to Rotterdam. He sees 'rugged hills, ruined castles overlooking tremendous precipices, with the dark Rhine rushing beneath; and, on the sudden turn of promontory, flourishing vineyards, with green sloping banks, and a meandering river, and populous towns, occupy the scene' (188). The description of the night of the wedding day was horrifying with great violent wind, descending moon, swiftly moving clouds which is compared to vultures and heavy storm of rain.

Clerval is shown as a man of the age with his profuse Romantic zeal. He is seen as a foil to Frankenstein as Clerval's 'imagination was too vivid' (261) for the minutiae of science. By making him a victim of the monster, Mary Shelley is again calling the reader's attention back to the real world. Frankenstein's speech on Clerval's death is significant in this context. 'And where does he exist now? Is this gentle and lovely being lost forever? Has this mind so replete with ideas, imaginations fanciful and magnificent, which formed a world, whose existence depended on the life of its



creator; has this mind perished? Does it now only exist in my memory ?'(190). His words sanction the acceptance of human mortality and the supremacy of God, the sole creator of the universe. Romanticism often considered and worshipped Nature as God. Perhaps, this can be seen as Mary Shelley's rejection of pantheism which was popular among the Romantics.

Being a representative of the age, Mary Shelley has not completely banished the Romantic ideas in her novel even though she highlights the extremity of its application in real life. Romantics believed that Nature and human consciousness are inseparable. However, Mary Shelley projects the idea that both Nature and living things are the creations of God. One should not dominate the other but have to live in a harmony.

Both Frankenstein and the monster relate themselves to the archangel who fallen from the heaven. The monster quotes Lucifer's predicament in order to justify himself. But in the end Frankenstein compares himself to the archangel who 'aspired to omnipotence' and is 'chained in eternal hell'. Different aspects of the same myth are being used to depict the plight of both the creator and the creature.

'Must I then lose this admirable being? I have longed for a friend; I have sought one who would sympathize with and love me. Behold, on these desert seas I have found such a one; but, I fear, I have gained him only to know his value, and lose him. I would reconcile him to life, but he repulses the idea'(262). These words echoes Yahweh's dilemma which is written in the book of Isaiah in the Bible where He says, 'The children I raised and cared for have turned against me' (Isaiah 1:2). The main difference between Yahweh and Frankenstein is that Yahweh has provided everything that is needed for his creation in contrast Frankenstein orphans his creature.

In his behavior, the creature seems more emotional and rational than his creator. But he is a monster. He is like the immortal figure, Ashwatthama of Mahabharata, cursed forever. The creature embodies the extremity of both Enlightenment-fed rationality and Romanticism-fed emotions. That makes him an alien in the society. What Shelley gives importance in this novel is human values and relationship which is evident in Frankenstein's final speeches when he painfully recollects the memories of 'the soothing voice of my (his) Elizabeth, and the conversations of Clerval' (263). Frankenstein's obsession with studies and experiments keeps him away from his friends and family. This might have been the reason for his unsympathetic attitude that he shows to the monster.

Mary Shelley concludes her novel by reinforcing the significance of human relationship (which is exemplified through De Lacey family) and the consequences of a morally transgression catalyzed by the Enlightenment aspiration and the Romantic idealism. Thus in 'Frankenstein' Shelley employs a complex mythic frame work to highlight the dangers of both Enlightenment optimism and Romantic idealism.

References

1. Mellor, Anne K. 'Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein.' In Romanticism and Feminism, edited by Anne K Mellor Bloomington: Indiana university press, 1988.
2. Marilyn Butler, 'Frankenstein and Radical Science', in Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Paul Hunter, Norton, 1996.
3. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. Confessions. Oxford University Press, 2000.
4. Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. Frankenstein <https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/frankenstein.pdf>
5. The Bible. New Living Translation. Tyndale House Publishers, 1996.