ISSUES OF GENDER IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

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ABSTRACT

One of the major issues that Mary Shelley handles in Frankenstein, famous novel written in the gothic genre, is the stereotypical gender roles that men and women followed during the Victorian period. It dissects a patriarchal culture that separated sexes and pressured women into dependence on men. Women are presented as angels of full of kindness, compassion, moral guidance and figures of self-sacrifice. The writer characterizes women as passive, submissive and of secondary status compared to her male counterpart. It is highlighted in the novel that if gender roles are sharply caricatured than it leads to the destruction of the family and ultimately the society on a larger scale. The reason the writer gives is that if men and women stick to their individual spheres then it might lead to suppression of identity and loss of mutual understanding. So a peaceful and healthy civil society can only exist if these gender roles are not socially determined but mutually negotiated. My aim in this paper is to study and criticize the various gender 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.
Keywords: Frankenstein, gender, Victorian era, Mary Shelley, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The novel Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus written by famous British writer Mary Shelley was published in the year 1818. The period in which Mary Shelley wrote the novel is called as the Victorian era. The Victorian era was a period of wide extremes-characterized by

industrial reforms, cultural transformations, scientific progress, gracious living and grinding poverty and wars. The Victorian era lasted from 1837-1901, when Queen Victorian reigned, although many historians believe that the Reform act of 1832 signifies the inception of the Victorian era.

The 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, and as a collective 'problem' for solution, which demonstrates the way Victorian social structures and institutions tried to impose a single version of ideal feminity in the period, much at odds with women's own sense of their experience. In Victorian culture, women were idolized, protected and oppressed. The qualities of female innocence, purity and passivity that were routinely celebrated in written and visual culture and continuously reinforced through religious teaching, medical and psychological theories and the law, also 'justified' the exclusion of women from the institutions of power that shaped their futures.

Women of the Victorian era were referred as "The Angel in the House", a term borrowed from the famous poem of Coventry Patmore entitled "The Angel in the House" in which Patmore presents the picture of an ideal wife:

> Man must be pleased; but him to please
> Is woman's pleasure; down thegulf
> Of his condoled necessities
> She casts her best; she flings herself […]
> She loves with love that cannot tire;
> And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
> Through passionate duty love springs,
> As grass grows taller round a stone.

Later in 1941, Virginia Woolf, a modernist writer, in a lecture delivered in 'Women's Service League' stated that "killing the angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. According to Woolf the Angel in the House:

> immensely sympathetic, immensely charming, utterly unselfish.
> she excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed
> herself daily…in short, she was so constituted that she never
> had a mind but preferred to sympathize always with the minds
> and wishes of others. Above all…she was pure. Her purity was
> was supposed to be her chief beauty.

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At the centre of the bourgeois view of women was the philosophy of the separate spheres. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Ruskin enthusiastically summarized this belief:

> *Women were best equipped for the private or domestic realm; and men were*
> *Naturally suited to the active,aggressive and intellectual domains of public*
> *life,including commerce,government and the professions. In this gender*
> *Ideology,biological differences,together with assumptions about the*
> *Contrasting psychological make-up of women and men, fixed social*
> *expectations. Theories about women's bodies,innocence,emotional*
> *(rather than rational) temperament and maternal, self-sacrificing*
> *Instincts underpinned the concept of the Victorian female presence as*
> *Spiritually inspiring. Women had few opportunities to enter public*
> *Life.They were excluded from higher education until the last quarter of*
> *The century, and did not have the right to vote. While working-class women*
> *Out of necessity supported their families by laboring alongside men in*
> *Factories, in the field, inservice, or struggling with piecework.Social pressure*
> *Restricted middle-class women to domestic, 'nurturing' employment, such*
> *as teaching and governess work.*

Thus women in the Victorian period were given secondary status and they were mere puppets in the hands of men.

Summary of Frankenstein:

The novel begins with a sequence of letters by Captain Robert Walton, a sea-explorer to his sister, Margaret Saville. The main character Victor Frankenstein is introduced to the readers through the letters of Robert Walton. Robert Walton meets Victor on his voyage to the North Pole. Later on the story is narrated from Victor Frankenstein's point of view. Here the readers are told about his early life and family members. Victor studies Natural Philosophy and Chemistry in the University of Ingolstadt. During his research Victor is striked by the idea of creating a creature by joining old body parts. Victor succeeds in his experiment of creating a living creature. Though he is successful he is horrified by the monstrosity of the creature and plans to return back to Geneva. Before leaving Ingolstadt, Victor is informed by his father about the murder of his youngestbrother, William. While returning to Geneva he catches sight of the monster and is convinced that the monster had murdered his brother, William. After reaching Geneva, Victor is deeply hurt to know that an innocent girl named Justine Moritz was executed on the false claim of murdering Victor's youngest brother, William.

While Victor is on a vacation, he encounters the monster. The monster admits that he murdered William but also requests Victor to create a new female monster for his companionship. Victor agrees to the monster's request and starts working on creating a new monster but destroys his new creation midway fearing that it might lead to the destruction of future generations. Later that night Victor dumpsthe remains of his new creation in a lake for which he is punished.

Shortly after returning to Geneva with his father, Victor marries Elizabeth but Elizabeth is murdered by the monster on the wedding-night. Later on Victor's father also dies due to grief and then Victor decides to take revenge by finding the monster and killing him.

Victor in his quest for the monster, finds him northward into the ice. In a long chase between the monster and Victor, the monster narrowly escapes from Victor's grip. At this point Walton encounters Victor, and the narrative catches up to the time of Walton's fourth letter to his sister.

Victor due to ill-health dies shortly and knowing that his creator has died, the monster also decides to end his life.

Gender Issues:

Apart from the themes of science, revenge,isolation one of the major themes which Mary Shelley handles is that of gender roles. Through the novel Frankestein, Mary Shelley presents us the stereotypical roles that men and women were assigned in the Victorian era. The gendered division of labour is clearly visible in the novel Frankestein. The male characters have been assigned the public sphere roles of public servant(Alphonse Frankestein), scientist(Victor), merchant(Clerval and his father) and explorer(Walton) whereas on the other handwomen characters were strictly assigned domestic roles of housewives, mothers(Elizabeth Lavenza, Maragaret Saville, Caroline Beaufort Frankestein). 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. The three women characters in Frankestein namely Elizabeth,Justine and Caroline 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.In the novel Frankestein,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" (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 Frankestein are portrayed as symphathetic,guiltless victims, separated from their male counterparts by their lack of participation in their professional and scientific fields. Kate Ellis in *Monster in the Garden: MaryShelley and the Bourgeois Family* claims that most of the female characters are to be seen as ineffective, passive, and ultimately a detriment to all the characters in the novel,divided from the men due to their domestic roles in a traditional family setting. The novel takes place in a patriarchal society where man is powerful figure and women is obedient to his command.

Though during the eighteenth and nineteenth century society was making progress in the field of science but still the societal mindset was deeply orthodox and patriarchal. The situation of women remained the same irresespective of their social status to which they belonged. In the novel we are introduced to female characters belonging to the aristocractic society(Elizabeth Lavenza,Maragaret Saville, Caroline Frankestein) 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. 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(28).*

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 thefemale characters receive from their male counterparts after showing their devotion is death.

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The contrast between the male and female characters is very obvious in the novel. The male characters are described in great detail. The male characters have their individual opinions and voices, as the novel itself is narrated by three different male narrators. The men in the novel have the freedom to travel and explore the world whereas the female characters are restricted from it and their world revolves only within the four walls of the house.

CONCLUSION:

The novel Frankestein is a true representative of the gender inequality which was prevalent in the Victorian era. The writer Mary Shelley has tried to highlight the major gender differences through the specific roles which the characters are assigned in the novel. Truly women were the main victims of gender inequality which resulted in suppression of their personality development.

Finally 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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