

Decolonizing Classics: *Frankenstein* in a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract:

*Examining the characters of Shelly's *Frankenstein* through the lens of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and other postcolonial critics relocates the novel into a new realm of interpretation through a close reading of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the critical racial issues, and the state of "otherness" that the colonizer creates as an identification system of the colonized.*

Keywords: identity, mimicry, otherness, postcolonialism, race.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is widely considered as a milestone in both the Gothic and science fiction novels. This novel is a marvellous compilation of Gothic and Romantic elements combined into a singular masterpiece with an unforgettable story. However, bringing the subjects of race, the colonizer and the colonized brings upon a whole new interpretation of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Thus, the subject of this paper is to interpret Shelley's novel using postcolonial criticism. Looking at the characters of the novel through the lens of the studies of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and other postcolonial critics, the novel can be interpreted through a close reading of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the critical racial issues, and the state of "otherness" that the colonizer creates as an identification system of the colonized subject, cultural mimicry and the question of identity.

2. THE "OTHERNESS" OF THE MONSTER AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Homi Bhabha states that "the objective of colonial discourse was to construct the colonized as a population of degenerated types" (Bhabha 1994:70). This quotation can be seen in Shelley's novel through the characters of Victor Frankenstein and the monster, with Victor, the creator, functioning as "the colonizer" and the monster or the creation serving the role of the "colonized" subject. Victor Frankenstein is a colonizer and the monster represents the colony Victor created. However, unlike the prototypical colonizers, Victor has not only made the monster as an outcast of society, but he has refused to take any part of the monster's own life in order to control it. Thus, the monster is left on his own to seek a meaning for his existence and to figure out his unknown identity. At different points in the novel, the monster is referred to with most

abusive names such as “the creature”, “the fiend”, “the demon”, “the wretch”. Using these names by both Victor and the society further intensifies the monster’s state of “otherness”. Shelley causes the monster to question his own creation. He already knows that he is different and does not fit into society: “Of my creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no property. I was not even of the same nature as man” (Shelley 1818: 87). The “otherness” of the monster is clearly seen in his encounter with the De Lacey family in Chapter 15. After watching the De Lacey family closely and providing some aid to them, the monster’s feelings and emotions are erected: “my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures” (Shelley 1818: 96), he feels himself as a part of the family and decides that it is time to introduce himself to “his family”. However, the reaction of the De Lacey family eliminates all of the monster’s dreams. At the sight of the monster, Agatha faints, Safie runs out of the cottage and Felix dashes him to the ground. Disappointed and full of despair, the monster leaves his “adopted family” only to face another form of discrimination when, after saving a little girl from drowning in a stream, he is recognized as a “villain” and shot in the shoulder. He is not seen as the saviour he really is. This is a turning point in the story, because it marks the beginning of the monster’s vengeance, “Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind” (Shelley 1818: 104). It is at this point that the monster commits his first murder by killing Victor’s brother William, an act that further supports the question of identity in postcolonial criticism, a lost, unknown and variable identity initially created by the colonizer or the creator (Victor) and ignited by the oppression and rejection of society. Thus, Bhabha’s notion of ‘stereotyping’ is extremely evident in both Victor’s and the society’s attempts to create a particular identity for the monster that serves as a system of representation. Perhaps, the name of a monster must be attributed to Victor and his society rather than the creation. Throughout the novel, the monster shows pious characteristics by helping the De Lacey family members and saving the little girl from drowning. It is only when he experiences injustice, rejection and denial, he becomes full of disappointment and vengeance to all mankind.

3. RACIAL ISSUE IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

The issue of race can be seen through the lens of Edward Said’s concepts of ‘occident’ and ‘orient’: the colonizers continuous attempts of marking the colonized as ‘other’: an agenda of bringing a society down while bringing another society up. This discrimination between the “civilized” West and the “uncivilized” East” is visible through the character of Safie, “who, until several pages into Chapter 13, is only referred to as “the Arabian”” (Pinyerd 2016: 55). Pinyerd (2016: 55) further highlights that what is remarkable is that even the monster himself distinguishes Safie as being different from the other De Lacey members: “Her voice was musical but unlike that of either of my friends” (Shelley 1818: 84). Moreover, throughout the novel, Safie never participates in any conversation, she is totally ‘muted’ and only exists in the description of others as a trophy especially when the monster describes her in the eyes or thoughts of Felix who previously helped her father during his imprisonment: “the captive possessed a treasure which would fully reward his toil and hazard” (Shelley 1818: 89). As for the monster, Safie’s existence is beneficial for him in the sense that he gets another privilege of learning the De Lacey’s language as well as having memorable lessons in the history of Europe. Despite the fact that Safie is muted and objectified, As Pinyerd (2016: 56) suggests, Shelley projects Safie’s eagerness to marry Felix and her desire to leave her miserable country: “to Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again

returning to Asia and being immured within the walls of a harem...”, as well as remaining in a country that gives more freedom to women than her own “The prospect of marrying a Christian and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society was enchanting” (Shelley 1818: 90). Again, Shelley further exposes the otherness of Safie through this description, she supports Said’s concepts of elevating the “occident” Western Colonial society, while, on the other hand, demonizing the “orient” Eastern ‘colonized’ other.

4. CULTURAL MIMICRY IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

Bhabha argues that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable ‘Other’, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994: 122). What Bhabha suggests in his notion of colonial or “cultural” mimicry is the colonized continuous attempts to mimic or imitate the colonizer’s attitudes, language, behaviour or social practices. In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Bhabha’s notion is best seen in the character of the monster. Throughout the novel, the monster projects an ultimate desire to learn or acquire the language, emotions, social practices and even the feelings of his creator’s species. When the monster flees to the forest, he finds a “hovel” attached to the De Lacey’s small cottage. It is there where the monster starts to observe the family’s behaviours and life practices and starts to develop a kind of unexplained feelings which he describes: “I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced...I withdrew from the window unable to bear these emotions” (Shelley 1818: 77). In fact, this is the first time that the monster feels love and passion, however, he is unable to name or understand such kind of “emotions” . In his further attempts to mimic and acquire the colonizer’s attitude as well as to understand the feeling of satisfaction and happiness, the monster unconsciously becomes an aid to the family by helping them secretly in hauling the wood to the cottage and performing repairs. The monster’s affections grow day by day as he nurtures on the happiness he experiences by watching the modest life of the De Laceys to the extent that he dreams of presenting himself one day to “his family”, hoping that they will accept him regardless of the way he looks. Thus, the previous ideas can be seen in the context of the colonizer and the colonized ‘other’, the monster’s observations and deeds project the colonized attempts to justify their ‘otherness’, to learn or at least understand the colonizers world. Despite the monster’s knowledge of his hideous appearance, he makes a huge effort to be accepted as a “subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” In fact, postcolonial theory establishes the feeling that colonizers wish to make the colonized like them but an “imperfect version” of them (Said 1994: 28)

5. THE COLONIAL HYPOCRISY AND THE REACTION OF THE COLONIZED

The hypocrisy of the colonizer constitutes one of the main pillars on which colonial literature stands. One of the most famous examples of the previous notion is Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* which explores the bitter reality of colonialism and projects the true hypocrisy of the colonizer. In Conrad’s novella, the character of Kurtz represents the real face of a selfish, hypocrite colonizer; one who treats the natives as slaves and establishes himself as a god for the natives for a selfish and personal intention, that is, the ivory trade. Similarly, the character of Victor Frankenstein in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* parallels that of Kurtz. Victor’s creation of the monster is the result of his own selfish obsessions: “more, far more, will I achieve... I

will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley 1818:171). Victor’s creation has nothing to do with scientific development or social needs, it is a mere fulfilment of a selfish personal desire or obsession with glory. The selfishness of Victor is evident in his denial and abandonment of his creation, as the moment Victor sees his creation alive, he flees the scene leaving the creation without any explanation. Victor’s hypocrisy is even more evident when he goes back on his word after he pledges to create a female mate for the monster. In fact, Victor’s withdrawal is a matter of personal regret, as he re-examines his past and reflects upon his mischievous deeds. Thus, the colonial traits become heavily embodied in the character of Victor, as he projects true selfishness in the very process of creating an unknown kind of creation to fulfil personal desires as well as his denial to create a female mate as an act of personal remorse and fear without giving any concern to his creation’s desires or needs. On the other hand, Shelley projects the monster as a murderous character who reaches what he desires using threats and murder. However, taking a closer look into Shelley’s text reveals that the monster’s desires are his ‘normal rights’. Victor Frankenstein flees immediately after seeing his creation alive, leaving him without any reasonable explanation, then he refuses to create a female mate for his creation for personal reasons. Thus, the monster’s desires are the minimum rights that any creation, especially when nearly human, would ask for. Like any normal human being who formulates several questions about God or (the creator) and resorts to clergy men to answer these queries, the monster is absolutely ignorant regarding the origins of his being and through his journey of normalization with human species and his ultimate need to have a female mate, he encounters several falls and disappointments such as the rejection of the De Lacey’s, Victor’s denial of his promise, and getting shot after saving the little girl, which further infuriate the monster and as a result, he vows “eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind”(Shelley 1818:104). Therefore, a postcolonial reading of the monster’s behaviours would suggest that such behaviours are mere reactions to the social injustice imposed on him by his creator and the society as a whole. It is a prominent colonial notion that the colonizer has the right to practice all kinds of injustice, denial and torture on the colonized who, in turn, is not expected to react or revolt and the moment such actions take place, the colonized, in Shelley’s novel (the monster), is seen as a criminal, murderous and inhuman being.

6. THE REVERSAL OF ROLES

The realm of colonial narratives explores a continuous projection of the relationship between the binaries of colonial literature which are; the colonizer vs. the colonized and the oppressor vs. the oppressed. However, postcolonial criticism introduced a new way of seeing these traditional relationships in a context which suggests a reversal of roles. One of the most famous examples of this tradition can be seen in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe*, in which Friday, the classical African slave or servant of Robinson Crusoe, is also portrayed as a slave. However, Friday’s insubordination and resistance against the continuous attempts of Suzan Barton to reveal his story creates a reversal of roles as he subjugates the power of his oppressor, Suzan, and in turn becomes himself the oppressor. Similarly, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* begins with Victor’s fulfilment of his dreams by creating a creature that Victor abandons and flees from one place to another in order to avoid seeing his ‘monster’. However, as the novel unfolds, we notice a change in the narrative scene, the reversal of roles occurs when Victor becomes oppressed by the actions of his creation. The physical and psychological pressure that Victor endures

turn him into a “shadow of a human being,” and as mentioned in the previous section, the novel develops with the monster seeking vengeance of all human kind, however, the final chapters project Victor as a seeker of revenge seeking to avenge the death of his friends and family at the hands of his own creation, as he says: “I devote myself, either in my life or death, to [the monster’s] destruction” (Shelley 1818:152). Thus, Victor, the creator, who serves the role of the oppressor or the colonizer, ends up being oppressed and entirely controlled by the actions of his creation, who serves the role of the colonized ‘other’.

7. CONCLUSION

Roland Barthes strongly believes that readers must separate the literary work from its creator and liberate the text from such an ‘interpretative tyranny’. Although postcolonial criticism is relatively modern, it can be used as an encompassing flashback to shed a light on classical literary works. The use of postcolonial theory to interpret such a masterpiece is an eye-opening way of understanding previous literary works through an entirely different perspective. Perceiving Victor Frankenstein as a colonizer and his creation as the colonized other would not have been possible without the contributions of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and other scholars in the realm of postcolonial criticism.

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