

Analyzing Female Characters In Frankenstein (1818) And Wuthering Heights (1847).

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ABSTRACT

This paper will make an effort to present a critique of female characters of two prominent novels in the canon of English literature named Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus (1818) by Mary Shelley and Wuthering Heights (1847) by Emily Bronte. Both novels are considered as feminist texts. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus can be studied from theoretical lens of Feminism as Shelley has exposed a critique of conventional gender roles through the male and female characters of the novel. The female characters such as Safie, Elizabeth, Margaret, Justine and Agatha are found to be submissive, passive and selfless but essentially crucial and significant for constructing the entire narrative of the novel. Further, being in the centre of the society the male characters specially the protagonist, Victor Frankenstein are problematic from feminist perspective and, eventually, disastrous problems originated due to his insensitive using of power and desire. The novel is a representation of then-contemporary patriarchal English society. On the other hand, the novel Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte can be analysed for its subversive representation of Victorian gender norms in 19th century England through the female protagonist of the novel named Catherine Earnshaw. Other female characters, for instance Isabella, Nelly-the narrator, and Cathy (daughter) are projected with a feminine temperament of the Victorian society in a setting where men must be powerful and authoritative while women must be stereotypically pure and submissive. Bronte's feminist mindset is reflected through the characters of Catherine and Isabella.

Key Words: feminism, stereotype, subordinate, patriarchy, subjugation, Victorian, gender etc.

INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's significant literary work *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) can be examined through the feminist theory of criticism. The discourse of feminism always creates multiple debates in favour of women, her role, status, position and identity in the patriarchal world. It demands "equality, rights and justice" (Nayar, 83) from the society. Feminist theory of criticism concerns with gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, oppression, marginalization, patriarchy, women's identity and subordinate status in the society. Feminist literary and cultural critics argue against the stereotypical and unrealistic representation of women in cultural text or forms such as literature and various other forms of art, culture and media (Nayar, 83). In general, these cultural forms portray women as submissive, inferior, weak and devoid of any identity unlike the men. Earlier, women's identity in the male produced literary works was established in relation to men only, which is a problematic aspect from the perspective of feminism. In the late 18th and 19th century, the writings or literature, produced by women were not appreciated by the world and

not considered as worthy of publication. Due to this serious problem of the patriarchal domination in literary canon, female authors like Mary Shelley and Emily.

Statement of the Problem:

Due to patriarchy, women had in a problematic and marginalized position of the society in 19th century England. In literature also women were projected as other and subordinate by the male-dominated literary canon. Unlike the male authors, at that time, a few women writers such as Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte were trying to portray women in literary texts from a female perspective. This study will examine their representation of women in the aforementioned text which replicates the females' deplorable life and subordinate position in the society and will offer a critique of patriarchy.

Objective of the study:

- a. To analyse women's weak and submissive position in the society and their subversion with reference to *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and *Wuthering Heights*.
- b. To study the representation of women in the 19th century English literary canon by female authors.
- c. To address the issue of patriarchy in the field of literature and society in general.
- d. To have a comparative analysis of female characters with the males of the select novels.

Review of Literature:

Twentieth Century Interpretations of Wuthering Heights: A Collection of Critical Essays (1968) edited by Thomas A. Vogler has provided different critical views of noted critics of English Literature on the novel *Wuthering Heights*. American novelist and critic, Elizabeth Hardwick in her influential work *Seduction and Betrayal: Women in Literature* (1974) has incorporated a critical essay entitled 'The Brontes' along with several other essays. In this essay, Hardwick has minutely assessed Emily Bronte's fictional work *Wuthering Heights* and its female protagonist Catherine. Unlike the contemporary females of the society, Catherine is termed as 'nihilistic', 'self-indulgent', 'destructive' and 'unmanageable' by Hardwick in her critique. Harold Bloom's critical work *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1987) is a collection of several critical essays on the novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. This significant work provides crucial insights about the novel and its various themes, narrative techniques and images through the lens of 20th century literary and cultural criticism including Feminism. Anne K. Mellor, a prominent American literary critic and academician in her critical essay entitled '*Frankenstein: A Feminist Critique of Science*' (1987) which is also published in her book *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fictions, Her Monsters* (1988) offers an analysis of the novel from a feminist perspective. In this essay, Mellor asserts that Mary Shelley has criticized the "scientific method and its practical results" practiced by male-oriented society. Mellor's another essay 'Usurping the female' (1988) underlines that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is "...doubtless inspired by her mother's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, specifically portrays the consequences of a social construction of gender which values men over women" (115).

Apart from these works, several other significant research works, critical essays, reviews and articles written from female-centric perspective have been produced about *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* till now.

Research Methodology:

This critical study has used both analytical and descriptive method. It has been thoroughly analyzed by implementing theoretical method of feminism as well. Thus, the methods that are used here –

- a. Descriptive Method
- b. Analytical Method

All the data required for this study are collected primarily from the two select novels- *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) by Mary Shelley and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Bronte. The Secondary sources of data for the study are brought from research articles, edited books and chapters, journals, jstor essays etc.

Discussion:

The well-known rephrased line of Virginia Woolf, in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), is "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman" (41). This highlights the marginalization and subordination of woman in literature. Similarly, the novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* was also originally published anonymously in the year 1818. The cause of this fact is known as that, at that time women writers were not

entertained with narratives of such topics and areas e.g. science and horror as covered in the novel. Science, in general, is associated with intellect and horror with power; but, power and intellect of then Victorian society had never been considered in relation to women. So, it might be because of the theme, subject matter, story and the negative aspects of the patriarchal society that she wrote about, which was considered as quite unusual for a woman during that period of time. The male-dominated literary canon and society as a whole would not accept or often reject such level of calibre and intellect from a woman. It simply identifies that women's voice and free expression of thought were clearly denied. In such circumstances, by anticipating the rejection and disapproval from the publishers and readers, she decided to withdraw her name from the authorship of the novel and keep it anonymous as it might create a trouble in her life as a female writer. Emily Bronte, too, published *Wuthering Heights* in the year 1847 under a male pseudonym as 'Ellis Bell'. As we know that during that time, female authors were rejected for publication and got devalued their writings considering the male authored text as high importance and elite. For that matter female authors like Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), Emily Bronte (Ellis Bell), Anne Bronte (Acton Bell), Charlotte Bronte (Currer Bell) etc. had to adopt male pseudonyms. They were compelled to do so as this would give them opportunity to get published without any hindrance. Barriers and disadvantages faced by women to write, eventually, led them to challenge the male authors in terms of writings to establish themselves as authors in the male-dominated sphere. This is the stage of feminist literary criticism that covered the years 1840 to 1880 where female authors used to adopt male pseudonyms instead of the authors' real name known as 'feminine phase', put forwarded by Elaine Showalter. Women's literature were undervalued and neglected during that period of time. However, through the select works, Shelley and Bronte have clearly challenged the conventional gendered notion and norms of women's writings as they were often expected to write on trivial matters of domestic life only having no literary significance, artistic value and depth. While depicting, both the novelists conform to and challenge the literary standards, traditional gender roles, societal norms, issues etc. in their works. On the other hand, question on the originality of authorship of the text *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* still exists.

The two celebrated texts *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) are significant in the literary canon as women and their writings were subordinated, ignored and disregarded during the 19th century. The predominant male critics often considered women's writings as narrowly formulated around only certain themes such as "...domestic problems, children, clothing fashions and food" (Nayar, 95). Nevertheless, Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte are unusual of their time in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and *Wuthering Heights* as they have included some infrequent as well as relevant themes, plot and characters along with domestic occurrence and children in their respective texts-

"Shelley's is an enigmatic fantasy of metaphysical horror, Bronte's an enigmatic romance of metaphysical passion. Shelley produced an allusive, Romantic, and "masculine" text in which the fates of subordinate female characters seem entirely dependent upon the actions of ostensibly male heroes or anti-heroes" (Gilbert and Gubar, 34).

The protagonist of Shelley, namely Victor Frankenstein is a man of science and invention who creates a monster that dominates the novel throughout. Bronte's female protagonist Catherine is an unconventional woman who drastically makes her own choice. She is deviant in character and nature that brought her all the misfortunes. Both novels are 'curiously unprecedented'.

Mary Shelley has narrated the narrative of the novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* through three male narrators named Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature (monster). So, ironically, the readers of the novel have had a male perspective of the narrative chiefly. This seems to be the unique technique of Shelley or it may be that she has got influenced by the contemporary male novelists and their writing style. The protagonist Victor Frankenstein subverts the power of procreation of women by creating a male monstrous Creature with the use of science and his knowledge of natural philosophy. This odd creation implies how the patriarchal society exploits and dominates the feminine aspect of nature. Victor has completely negated the significance of women in the natural act of human reproduction.

The text is a critique of patriarchal norms of the society which subjugates and dominates women and predetermines their role. Mary Shelley has presented the text with a feminist perspective. The female characters of the novel are portrayed as weak, submissive and prominent. The feminist assertion of Mary Shelley is problematic in the text as she is silent and does not have a clear stand in favour of the women. The women were basically kind, subservient and self-sacrificing having full of nurturing quality. Victor's mother dies in the very

beginning of the novel. The other females of the novel do not possess any clear and free opinion in the text. The voiceless representation of women is symbolic of passive and subordinate condition of women in then contemporary society always living under the shadow of men. Justine, the female servant in Victor's house, merely accepted the accusations of William's murder without any defence of herself and eventually was condemned to death. She accepted her own tragedy. Here Justine is presented as weak, timid, virtuous and innocent woman who does not voice for her own stand. Moreover, she was threatened by the confessor of the court to confess his guilty that otherwise she would suffer in hell. Thus, the patriarchal society compels her to accept her uncommitted crime. She is poorly idealized as woman who supported the males emotionally, but she lacks strength to control or function the plot of the novel. The role of Victor in this matter, we can see, is really vain as he does not do anything for her although he was suspecting the Creature for the murder. He says, "I believed in her innocence; I knew it" (Shelley,95).

Elizabeth Lavenza is also a passive and dependent woman who is symbol of purity, tenderness, love and sacrifice. She is murdered on her very wedding night by the monstrous Creature. Elizabeth is depicted as a typical Victorian woman attributed with external beauty, love, compassion and innocence. She is an "angel in the house" detached from the worldly affairs and deals only with the domestic sphere. She made an idiotic and irrational attempt to save her dear friend Justine only with tears and prayers. As she says, "I will melt the stony hearts of your enemies by my tears and prayers" (Shelley, 72). This sounds so typical and dumb attempt of a woman to save her friend from being convicted. She is identified as retiring, modest and ideal Victorian woman completely different to egomaniac Victor Frankenstein. Again, Agatha is the symbol of a selfless woman who cares for her brother and her father De Lacey, without paying attention to her personal grief and in spite of the poor economic condition of their family. The monstrous creature demands for a female company from his creator Victor Frankenstein which he destroys later on, prior to giving her life. It suggests the undervalued condition and absence of women's importance in the society. On the other hand, though the monster killed many, it became difficult for Victor to dismantle the monster unlike the female one. Besides, both Elizabeth and Justine are victims of Victor Frankenstein's and the Creature's foolish and blind aspirations as well as drastic steps taken by the Creature.

Caroline Beaufort, the mother of Victor Frankenstein is a symbol of stereotypical patriarchal woman who is loving, kind and devoted. Victor considers his father Alphonse Frankenstein as a saviour or 'protecting spirit' of her mother Caroline from poverty that as a result of which she devoted herself to his love and care. In the novel Victor himself defines his mother Caroline as "...his angel mother" (Shelley,80). Caroline is full of self-sacrificing and motherly nature. She dies of scarlet fever, a disease she contracts while nursing Elizabeth although she was asked a lot "...to refrain from attending her" (Shelley,39) concerning to the contagious traits of the disease.

Nature is always symbolized with female or femininity. In *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* also, nature is found to be a feminine figure who consoles Victor and the monster Creature. After going against the laws of nature, finally, Victor took the shelter in mother nature at the time of danger in order to protect himself from the monster. The monster also gets food, water, shelter and basic necessities for his survival in the forest. Nature has become a source of solace, protection and self-realization for these two men where nature acts like a caring and compassionate mother. Shelley has projected the nurturing and self-sacrificing traits of women through Caroline and Nature.

The females were devoid of equal rights as the males in the Victorian society. Similarly, Shelley has not introduced her female characters of the novel in the central narrative rather projecting them as minor to the narrative that exist only in relation to men. All the female characters in the text are typically 'angel like' who sacrifices selflessly for others. They readily conform to the traditional patriarchal gender norms of the society. Women in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* are always passive, submissive, sacrificial, innocent, soft, loving and kind. Safie, however, is only exceptional in this regard as she is self-reliant and vigorous. She is attributed with all the feminine qualities along with the masculine.

In contrast to the female counterparts, the males of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* are not caring and dedicated towards the females. Victor was tied up with his own work and study for preparing to the University of Ingolstadt that he did not even help Elizabeth to look after his ailing mother. After the death of Caroline, Elizabeth became the motherly figure of the house that willingly took up all the duties and responsibilities without any question and hesitation. In terms of morality, ethics and other characteristics features the males of the novel are always in contrast with the females; as we can see females are always compassionate,

morally sound and responsible individuals.

The feminist perspective of the novelist is very much prevalent in the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte. The plot of novel is revolved around the patriarchal belief of the English society where women must be dependent on men for living a good life and securing a better future. The females of *Wuthering Heights* are different from *Frankenstein*'s. Catherine Earnshaw, the female protagonist of the novel is attributed with both common masculine and feminine qualities. She possesses the emotions and attributes which work as the driving force of the novel. In this regard, one can compare Catherine with Safie, the only exceptional female character from *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Catherine was brave, independent and sociable. She does not conform to the stereotypical Victorian norms of womanhood and negates the archetypes of Victorian women. Victorian women are supposed to be busy in their domestic sphere but Catherine is exceptionally outgoing and rebellious woman. However, later on, she transformed into an elegant Victorian woman with typical feminine attributes after her stay at Thrushcross Grange. It implies how in the influence of societal norms and etiquette women lose their true self and identity. She symbolizes the struggle between rebellion and acceptance. However, she did not leave her strong temperament and extrovert nature completely. Catherine's marital life as well as her love life were measurable. She failed as a wife, lover and mother. She is not an angelic submissive and sacrificial figure like the women in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.

Persuaded by materialistic value and dignified appearance of Edgar, Catherine accepted his proposal. She got married to Edgar because of his rich social status since women in the 19th century were appraised only by the men's status and position or otherwise they are subordinated as 'inferior'. Here, Bronte clearly suggests unequal societal implications of that time. In order to get power, dignity and position in the society Catherine had to choose Edgar over Heathcliff. She did not respect and admire her husband Edgar Linton. Even after being a married woman - she passionately desires for Heathcliff. Nelly describes about Catherine as-

"Her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going-singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same. A wild, wicked slip she was - but she had the bonniest eye, the sweetest smile, and lightest foot in the parish" (Bronte, 112).

As a woman, she had to go through inner conflict between her head and heart. On the one hand, she was passionate about to be with Heathcliff and, otherwise, to possess social repute of her time which could be acquired only by getting married to Edgar.

Catherine's husband Edgar was also a perfect blend of traditional masculine and feminine traits. Unlike the traditional manly figure, Edgar was timid, humble and docile. Edgar loves Catherine genuinely with a lot of care and devotion even after her cold and disrespectful behaviour towards him. During Catherine's serious illness, Edgar look after her sincerely in spite of knowing her love for Heathcliff. So, Edgar contrasts sharply with Heathcliff in terms of their nature and traits. Heathcliff was a brute, cruel, dominating and uneducated man often considered as 'Satan'.

Isabella is a Victorian woman whose life is influenced by the males such as her father, Edgar and Heathcliff throughout her life. But she took a courageous step and eloped with her lover Heathcliff without knowing his dark self. She eloped with Heathcliff as because her brother Edgar was against her decision of marrying Heathcliff. Thus, by choosing her partner all by herself and eloping with him, Isabella breaks and rises above the conventional norms of the society. Unfortunately, Isabella becomes a poor victim of Heathcliff's aggression, wild nature and revenge. Heathcliff marries her to acquire her property and mainly to revenge against her brother Edgar Linton. She was not treated well by her husband Heathcliff. She was controlled and abused by him. She expresses,

"He is ingenious and unresting in seeking to gain my abhorrence! I sometimes wonder at him with an intensity that deadens my fear, yet, I assure you, a tiger or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he awakens" (Bronte, 179).

Cathy, the daughter of Catherine is placed with clear contrast with Isabella. Cathy was purely treated by everybody with love and care like a queen at her home Thrushcross Grange.

Heathcliff is the symbol authoritative patriarchal society. Nelly considered him as 'mad' and 'devil'. Isabella challenges all the suppression and her complex marriage life by fleeing away from Heathcliff. It symbolizes her courage to break out of Heathcliff's hostile control over her. Here Isabella's stance is commendable as she tries to subvert the patriarchal domination. Victorian women were not allowed to break away from their marriage at any cause. Unlike the typical Victorian women she does not merely suffer her pathetic fate

with Heathcliff rather she takes a stand for herself. After her marriage with Heathcliff, her life became devastating. She was humiliated and treated brutally by her husband. She became a poor victim of Heathcliff and Catherine's failed romantic union. Heathcliff cowardly shows his revenge and frustration upon innocent Isabella. Because of her miserable life caused by Heathcliff, she abandoned him and ultimately resorted to a lonely life. In spite of being honest and without any fault except trusting a malicious man, she met with a tragic life. It is Heathcliff's revengeful attitude which made Isabella's life tragic that she suffered to the extreme.

Nelly, the narrator typically conforms to the Victorian norms of the society. Nelly is a helpless house-help who could not do anything but following her master's command. She was generous, compassionate and a dutiful housekeeper in Thrushcross Grange. She treats Hareton and Cathy with care and affection like a mother. Although she did not like Heathcliff, she was sympathetic towards him. She even nursed him when he was ill. She was a conventional Victorian woman. On the contrary, Cathy was obstinate and rebellious like her mother Catherine. She worked against her father's will and visited Wuthering Heights for which she had to suffer pitiless treatment of Heathcliff. Cathy, however, fought against the ruthlessness of Heathcliff and tries to escape from his inhumanity. Unfortunately Cathy could not be successful in her fight. Thus, it is the devastating end of every Victorian woman in the society when they try to fight against the flaws of society especially the males' oppression that they fail miserably. Bronte has put the theme of women as well as men's education in the text. Cathy taught her cousin Hareton to read as he was uneducated which helped him to develop better characteristic aspects in him. Heathcliff also could never match himself with Catherine in terms of studies. Thus, Bronte has presented the necessity of education where women play a significant role in the novel. Bronte shows women's interest and importance on self-education through 'reading' in the text as it was unacceptable and irrelevant in the Victorian Patriarchal society. Additionally, the only affectionate relationship between man and woman in the novel is seen through Cathy and her cousin Hareton. They shared a mutual bond of love, respect and faith without any serious conflict.

The women of *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* embody contrasts in regard to roles, power and position in the society despite having similarities in adversities and hardships undergone by them as women. Bronte's females may be flawed but strong women, whereas Shelley's are typically pure according to societal norms but frail and passive. These two works critically comment on the vices of the authors' respective societies. Shelley's women represent how they are deprived of rational and cognitive engagements of life and society, on the other hand, Bronte's women convey the challenges and societal compulsion imposed upon women. Besides, all the female characters are shaped by norms, restrictions and expectations of patriarchal society. Construction of females' identity is a matter of concern in the select novels as it is formulated in relation to the males in their lives. Simone de Beauvoir, in her notable work *The Second Sex* (1949) states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p.283). As we saw in these two novels that all the passive, weak, timid, typical, emotional, irrational, rebellious, subversive women are not born, these are not their biological traits, rather they are forced to be of such in the influence of the brutal and complex surroundings. Kate Millet's in her renowned text *Sexual Politics* (1970) vehemently criticizes the repressive nature of patriarchy and argues on its inability to dominate completely over men or women. This is suggestive of the fact that despite the strict control of patriarchy individuals do resist and subvert against the illegitimate norms and power structure of the society. In *Frankenstein* characters like Elizabeth, Justine are definitely passive women with traits and nature of ideal women within the repressive patriarchal system. But Elizabeth's letters to Victor can be regarded as male's incomplete domination over women, as the letters express queries, questions as well as concern about Victor's responsibilities. The letters would also call to his mind the threat of the Monster creature which is the repercussion of his extreme ambitious actions. While, on the other hand, in *Wuthering Heights* women in similar patriarchal structure, assert and act against traditional roles and control of men. Catherine Earnshaw's wild nature and rebellious spirit breaks away all the stereotypical and gendered norms of Victorian Era specially represented by Heathcliff.

Conclusion:

The above analysis unfolds the fact that women of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and *Wuthering Heights* are different in their ways. Mary Shelley has presented weak and submissive women who readily conform to patriarchal Victorian norms while Emily Bronte's female characters are subjugated but they are strong and rebellious at crucial times. Bronte's women fight against men's exploitation as per their ability instead of merely submitting their self to the power of male-counterparts. The distress, obstacles and oppression

experienced by the female characters mirrors the deplorable condition of women in Victorian world. Shelley and Bronte have presented a picture of patriarchal hegemony that victimizes the women in the society. Bronte's heroine Catherine was proud and stubborn who made several wrong decisions in her life. She is not devoid of fault that she herself ruined her life. On the one hand she loved Heathcliff passionately and on the other side she could not resist herself from the refinement and sophistication of Edgar. Although partly, women are responsible for their pathetic ends, but it is chiefly the men that made their lives miserable by victimizing them with their controlling and unkind treatment. Heathcliff intentionally or unintentionally mystified Isabella and Catherine. Victor Frankenstein and the monstrous Creature can be compared with Heathcliff who brought tragic crisis on the females of the respective novels. Both Heathcliff and Creature are devilish in their aim and action. However, Edgar is exceptional in this regard as he was dedicated towards Catherine. Further, as a brother he was quite controlling and possessive about his sister Isabella. Bronte through the female narrator Nelly has depicted a heroine who is very much unlike the other women of the time.

Thus, the female characters of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and *Wuthering Heights* outline a great deal of problematic norms of patriarchal Victorian society. Shelley's women are typical ideal women but Bronte's are not. Bronte is found to be phenomenal and atypical in depiction of strong and independent female characters like Catherine who tries to build her own norms of life. Catherine emphasizes on her personal preferences but failed in front of masculine power. Heathcliff made Isabella's life traumatic, but this docile being succeeded in her attempt to break away from his brutal subjugation. Mary Shelley presented women as 'angel' who did not survive at the hands of monstrous characters which unveiled a male-dominated Victorian society. All the female characters of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* accepted the oppression and privilege of the males silently without any objection. They merely accepted their fate and life without realizing that it is indeed subjugation of the males.

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