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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a Proto- Ecofeminist Text

Dr. Preeti Choudhary

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Government Degree College Bahua Dehat,
Fatehpur, U.P.

Email: pc.au001@gmail.com

Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* could possibly be one of the first texts of ecofeminism considering that the novel focuses on the interrelation of the domination of women, and nature, both suppressed under the thumb of male science. The novel takes a critical view on Victor Frankenstein's pursuit of the unnatural wish to control life, akin to conquering nature, and reflects the Enlightenment period. Shelley's depiction of passive women and the Creature's alienation illustrates the failure to acknowledge both emotional and ecological equilibrium. Nature, described to be both restorative and voiceless, breathes in the deep scars of civilization and remains, a polite observer. *Frankenstein*, through these aspects, reflects the worries of ecofeminism, slavery of nature and dispossession of the feminine are one and the same, and that the exploitation of nature is directly proportional to the negligence of the feminine, is absolutely clear on what science is misplaced and uncontrolled able to unleash.

Keywords – Ecofeminism, Creature, Nature, Frankenstein, gender justice, masculine, dominance, Otherness, rationalism, pastoral, sublime.

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus written by Mary Shelley in the year of 1818, is considered by many to be the first work of science fiction. It is still considered powerful in its

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

examination of the darker sides of human ambition, as well as responsibility, and subsequent isolation. The novel is structured as the manuscript of an Arctic traveler by the name of Robert Walton, which is intended for his sister Margaret Saville. He on his journey to the North Pole encounters a rather strange and sickly individual by the name of Victor, who also happens to be the one telling the tragic story of his life and the life of his creation.

Victor Frankenstein was born in one of the wealthiest families residing in Geneva, Switzerland. From the very beginning, he was attached deep in the fiction of alchemists and gaining the ability to create life. He was deeply involved in his studies at the University of Ingolstadt and dedicated himself to hard work. After completing his studies, he was horrified and in disgust at the vile enormity of the creature he animated from human remains. He left the creature to be on its own and defended for itself. The Creature was bewildered and now had to face the challenges of surviving in the wilderness. The Creature, despite its fearsome savage appearance, is characterized as kind and gentle. Unknown to the De Lacey family, whose members he was secretly observing, he had then learned how to read and speak. The Creature then attempted to reveal itself to the family but was met with violence which left him extremely hurt. The agony of abandonment from the creator and revolted from humans was too much for the Creature to the point where he also vowed revenge. The most important event being that he had to confront Victor and tell his tale. Talking to Victor clearly since he was heatedly involved with Felix. Victor could tell that he was deeply moved, and along with the rest of the people, could see that the Creature was obviously asking for a female partner to mitigate the loneliness he had. Victor is the one who ends up making a deal and as usual, from Victor's end, the deal was highly reluctant. The very last, is that he insisted himself with the fear of there being a new race of dangerous adore and decided to blow up his second creation. The Creature then made his next move, which was to unleash all the pent up fury he had for Victor unrelentingly.

Victor's dear friend Henry Clerval and later on kills his beloved wife Elizabeth on their wedding night. Grief stricken and buried in guilt, Victor vows to chase the Creature to the ends of the earth. In the end, he manages to reach the Arctic where Walton and his crew find him. Walton states that Victor, on the verge of death, told him not to get lost in pursuit of glory and warned him about the dangers that come with failing to contain one's imagination. Victor died and the Creature boarded the ship to mourn over his body. It feels terrible for the suffering it has caused and explains that its 'crimes came from a place of sadness and despair. It states its purpose, which is to end its own life, and fades away into the frozen landscape. This leaves Walton and the reader with thoughts on the stunning impact of ambition, neglect, and the human desire for connection.

Nature as a Feminized Force

In *Frankenstein*, profound deliberations of the obligations of Creators towards their creations is displayed. He attempts to understand the ethical limits relating to the boundaries of exploration and the extent to which one can 'play god'. The novel also attempts to understand the themes of

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

alienation and isolation at their core. Isolation is self inflicted as a result of pursuing knowledge at the cost of relationships, and on the other hand the Creature is socially isolated because of its outward appearance. In the end, both parties suffer greatly as the result of their actions.

In the end, *Frankenstein* is more than a horror novel, with a simplistic description of a monster. The story serves as a warning, to a careless abandon of pride, and the severe need to take embracing empathy and companionship. With thick and complex characters, and a narrative that is as deep, Shelley prompts her readers to ask who really the 'monster' is.

What is Ecofeminism?

The combination of feminism and ecology is what is known as ecofeminism. The core problem that ecofeminism tackles is the subordination which every woman and the nature suffer at the hand of patriarchal system. The same system which, result to the subjugation of the women, and the domination of nature, which is rooted in patriarch things. Beliefs of ecofeminism are just as old as the 1970s, as a result of the environmental and feminist movements of the time.

Analysts like Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva observe that women's roles as caregivers and their bond with nature gives them a special understanding of care giving. Ecofeminists criticize industrial capitalism and colonialism, pointing out that these systems damage the planet and worsen inequalities. The movement encompasses a wide range of beliefs, including spiritual ecofeminists who consider all of nature sacred and empathically intertwined with the feminine, as well as socially oriented ecofeminists who advocate for equitable labor and justice. Ecofeminism endorses the integration of equity, ecological balance, and gender harmony, calling for fundamental rather than piecemeal changes. This is the position taken by ecofeminism, which intersects environmental and gender justice. The argument is that these two and any other forms of oppressive domination that gendered world were made to endure, need to be simultaneously addressed in order to bring about a world that is more just and sustainable.

Like nature knows grace says Ernest Hemingway. Nature loses its grace when Victor Frankenstein attempts to replace the feminine process of creation. Victor is fully aware and letting go of the nurturing silence of the feminine reproduction and his dominion over her, descends into utter chaos and destruction. All that remains now are the disdainful spirit of the nectar. Shelley demolishes the restraints of the Enlightenment. Shelley's feminizing act towards nature promotes it from passive scenery to an active, moral being, one who nourishes but also chastises when violated. In *Frankenstein*, nature is not subdued; she resists, recalls, and eventually triumphs.

Creation without Feminine

The devastation that follows when life is created without a woman is an example of an utter failure of replacing a woman's biological function. The Creature is the end product of Victor Frankenstein's relentless scientific ambition severed from the emotional, community, caretaking, and responsibility bonds that mothering entails. Shelley's commentary on the isolation and rejection that is the result of the failure to form nurturing and relational bonds is a harsh critique

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

on the realities of society. Nature is described as nurturing and healing qualities. The following quote from *Frankenstein*, said by Victor Frankenstein, “The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal Nature bade me weep no more” (Shelley 103).

Shelley’s critique on the excessive, masculine rationality during the Enlightenment and its detachment from empathy and feminine creative force is evident. Victor’s unleash horror towards his creation and subsequent abandonment of it is a frequent occurrence of the father archetype and the creator who violently refuses to the emotional work the woman is socially expected to do. His destruction of the potential female companion for the Creature highlights his fear of female agency and reproductive power. The following excerpt of thought by Anne K. Mellor, “By stealing the female’s control over reproduction, Frankenstein has eliminated the female’s primary biological function and source of cultural power.” (Mellor 114)

As such, *Frankenstein* is a cautionary story about creation without balances—a universe where masculine reason seeks to supplant the feminine, with only dreadful results. Shelley’s book indicates the opposite as well: without the presence, or the affects, of the feminine, creation is not sufficient.

Women as Passive Victims

In *Frankenstein*, women are most often depicted as passive victims. This mirrors the greater societal attitudes of the 1800s, which positioned women as subservient. Elizabeth Lavenza, Justine Moritz, and Safie are all women in the narrative whose lives are subordinate to the men in their lives and lack personal agency. For example, Elizabeth is idealized and described as a “prize” by Victor Frankenstein and has no voice or agency and is ultimately killed in order to punish Victor. Justine, who is wrongfully accused of murder, epitomizes how women accept their fate and do nothing to change an unjust social order. Even Safie, who is purported to be seeking freedom, is seen through the male gaze and only partially escapes the passive archetype.

The following excerpt of thoughts by Victor Frankenstein explains how he consider Elizabeth as an extension of his desire rather than as a person, “Elizabeth Lavenza became the inmate of my parent’s house-my more than sister-the beautiful and adored companion of all my occupations and my pleasures.” (Shelley 31)

Shelley, on the other hand, gives a thoughtful critique on this victimhood by gender. The lack of strong, active women poses a danger in Victor’s downfall, which means that even in the more rational and powerful areas, the absence of women is harmful. The novel suggests that unchecked male ambition, represented in Victor’s god-like scientific pursuits, results in a world gone mad. Thus, the women in the novel, *Frankenstein*, are depicted as passive victims and Shelley uses their victimization in order to critique the social conditions of her time that constrain women, and therefore, the gender-based marginalization of women is a quietly radical answer.

The Creature and Otherness

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

Mary Shelley addresses the Creature and Otherness theme to critique social order and the periphery of humanity. The Creature is not, by any means, a monstrous figure. It is the world, and the world alone, that relegates him as ‘the Other’, due to the simple fact that he happens to be a bit different. It is this alienation of the Creature that Shelley uses to illustrate how society tends to shun, and even persecute, that which is illogical to them or that which they are incapable of controlling.

The Creature is undeserving of the title of ‘the Other’, for he is a victim of a society that ought to be thoroughly ashamed of itself. It is the world, and the world alone, that first relegates him as ‘the Other’. It is this alienation of the Creature that Shelley uses to illustrate how society tends to shun, and even persecute, that which is illogical to them or that which they are incapable of controlling. Around him, all, even his maker, frame him as unfit and abandon him in terror. The monstrosity is a result of social neglect and losing all humanity. Shelley attempts to do the same to the unabashed ideals of the triumph of reason and progress and show them its unshrinking consequences. Moreover, the Creature’s voice which is quite well ordered and thoughtful further

compels the audience to self reflect. *Frankenstein* as a cautionary tale exposes untamed ambition as well as the unearthly, relational responsibility towards the created and socially marginalized. Thus the text, in contrast, offers a substantial discussion on otherness and humanity.

Shelley’s Critique of Enlightenment Rationalism

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is, and should be, a contrast comment unlike Slavoj Zizek’s approval of the Enlightenment and its focus on uncritical reason, called rationalistic. Zizek should be reminded reason and logic. However, Victor Frankenstein typifies unbridled devotion to theorems, reaching the surpassing and transcending civilization of natural limitations. Nonetheless, to Mary Shelley, the abundant rational collapse of ethics and sensitivity is a lost value.

The novel highlights that knowledge unaccompanied by responsibility may end in ruination. Victor’s creation, a result of scientific thought, is equally devoid of affection and societal acceptance, and thus a testament to how Enlightenment philosophy can strip a being off its humanity. Shelley analyzes the unethical outcomes of scientific pursuit and takes a stance against the Enlightenment’s suppression of emotion, instinct, and the sublime. The monster’s suffering and Victor’s demise serve to underline Shelley’s assertion that reason devoid of humanity’s embellishments, is inadequate.

The Gothic aspects of *Frankenstein* equally serve to underscore the intensifying Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment’s rigid principles, focusing on the irrationality of the universe and the more hidden aspects of the psyche. Shelley’s critique is, in its essence, not an abandonment of reason, but a plea for equilibrium—an understanding that scientific rationality, unrestrained by kindness, modesty, and ethics, invites downfall.

The Sublime and the Pastoral

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

This fiction demonstrates the complex use of the Sublime and Pastoral in emotive and ethical expression, concerning especially Victor Frankenstein and his creature. In the novel, the Sublime, as defined by breathless wonder and terror, as well as the overwhelming force of nature, is recurrently manifested in the great The Alps, the Arctic, and the terrible storm clouds and bolts of lightening. These ensnaring and terrible scenes juxtapose Victor's emotionally tumultuous and destructive, yet ambitious, consequences. He becomes acutely aware of his diminutive self and the unimaginable forces of nature he has unleashed.

The Pastoral, on the other hand, is the rare, fleeting moments of rest and relaxation, usually associated with the country and simple life. They fleetingly appear in scenes in the Frankenstein family home or the De Lacey cottage, suggesting some degree of peace, moral rest, and bonding, which the creature yearns for, yet is habitually denied. Shelley, however, with social rejection and the overreach of science, makes the Pastoral easier to understand by exposing how ultimately fragile and ungraspable it turns out to be.

The co-existing Pastoral and Sublime describe a world in which beauty and terror frame a union. They transcend mere decoration with emotional and philosophical dimensions, as Shelley does, exposing humanity's complex conflict with nature and the terrible consequences of unbridled ambition. The following excerpt of thoughts by Victor Frankenstein explains that Nature is powerful, morally superior and emotionally restorative. "The mountains are my allies... they elevated me from all littleness of feeling; and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquilised it" (Shelley 122).

Science, Domination And "Masculine" Mind

Through the lens of Mary Shelley's works, *Frankenstein* exemplifies the critique of intersectionality, particularly with the realms of science, dominion and the so called "masculine" thought. Considered a scientific marvel, Victor Frankenstein holds ambitions tethered to domination and conquest. He seeks to further penetrate the essence of life itself and affirm control over nature. Interestingly, such a mentality has been philosophically recorded and masculinized: "rational", "objective", "mastery over the world and emotions". Let us consider the following excerpt of thoughts of Victor Frankenstein quoted from the book Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow. (Shelley 122)

During the Enlightenment, such principles dominated the epoch. Shelly warns of a possible predicament the crafting of life poses: abandonment, suffering, destruction. Intended as a work of science, Victor's project is devoid of empathy and ethical considerations. Such docile attributes, have been, and continue to be, dismissed as "feminine" traits in patriarchal systems. The following excerpt of thought of Anne K. Mellor, "The uninhibited scientific penetration and technological

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

exploitation of female nature is only one dimension of a patriarchal encoding of the female as passive and possessable, the willing receptacle of male desire” (Mellor 115).

By exercising his right and privilege to create life, Victor, unrepentantly, devoids himself of love, responsibility and connection. Admittantly, he is the very extreme of a detached intellectual. Victor succumbs to the arrogance of obsession, thus failing to realize the predicament the creature suffers. The suffering is not so much as a consequence of existence, as it is the consequence of Victor’s nurturance deficiency. Anne K. Mellor, in her work *A Feminist Critique of Science*, “In trying to have a baby without a woman, Frankenstein denies to his child the maternal love and nurturance it requires, the very nourishment that Darwin explicitly equated with the female sex” (Mellor 287).

Shelley underscores the importance of emotional reflection and moral accountability in every form of science. In her critique, she dispels the gendered assumptions rife in scientific practice and issues a caution against the unbridled influence of a ‘masculine’ mind, singularly obsessed with control. Frankenstein thus serves as a cautionary tale on the one hand of the unbridled advancement of science and on the other, the dominion of a perspective that considers power more valuable than kindness, and dominance more than nurturing.

Erasure and Silencing of Women

Mary Shelley’s keen political awareness is evident in her critique of the entire cultural and literary practice of the virtual absence of women, or the silencing of their voices. Though the novel is more often than not interpreted as a tale of scientific advancement and monstrosity, the portrayal of the female characters suggest grave anxieties over patriarchal control and gendered subjugation. In *Frankenstein*, Justine, Elizabeth, Safie, and Caroline Mersey are all relegated to the margins of the narrative, their silenced utterances manipulated for male dominators. They occupy the roles of caretakers, victims, or ethical guides, yet rarely, if ever, are afforded independence and agency over the narrative. Following quotes from the book *Frankenstein*, said by Creature “You are my creator, but I am your master;- obey!” (Shelley 146)

As an example, Elizabeth is labeled as Victor’s ‘property’, and her murder is used to aid the character development of Victor, rather than value and explore her as a real, complex person. Justine, who is unjustly killed, never gets the justice that is her due. Her innocence is ultimately used as a pawn to emphasize male shame rather than as an indictment of patriarchy. Even Safie, who at first seems to exercise the agency that comes with her decision to escape, is without further elaboration, relegated to the position of a ‘housewife’.

Shelley, as a young woman in a male dominated literary sphere, attempts to mirror this form of silencing in her own narrative structure.

Susan Snaider Lanser, in her work, *Women Writes and Narrative Voices* says that, “The creature whose voice, if not female, is also not humanly male.” (Lanser)

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

The story is framed in a set of male accounts — Walton, Victor — weaving a shroud over the woman's point of view and removing her voice. By doing this, Shelley highlights the pervasive culture in society that attempts to erase the voices of women. This makes *Frankenstein* a powerful example of the disguised feminist narrative.

The Monster: A Symbol of Alienation from Nature

In *Frankenstein*, the monster symbolizes profound alienation from nature, embodying the consequences of humanity's alienation rationally, as outlined in the Book of Nature. It is, unlike, living beings whose existence is in symbiotic harmony with nature, an artificial construct, put together with lifeless organic materials and reanimated through violent techniques. Such an origin alienates Frankenstein's Creature from the organic parenthesis of life and death, thus, placing it external not only to humankind but to the rest of the organic world as well.

The alienation of the monster in the novel is one of the more conspicuous themes, illustrated through his rejection and solitude. It experiences the absence of a primary birth and a sociological unit, alien to and having difficulty comprehending the severely narrow confines of identity. It is in nature that the monster's poignant suffering is paradoxically at rest, in the dungeons of primal, tragic, and foundational archetypes, devoid of fulfillment, deeply dislocated from the world. It reiterates the collective suffering, as a gateway of the culture, to the preponderance of the rage upon rising, barraged with estrangement from nature rationalized through science and untamed ethics.

The Creature is a portent of the restive consequences that come with detachment and rejection of the organic framework, a culmination of which is alienation, futility and sheer rage that one suffers in the throes of society's attempts to control or overcome nature. The following excerpt of thought by Merryn Williams in her work "Frankenstein Monsters", "Her novel is a feminist critique of science; Frankenstein attempts to make women redundant and deprive of their 'source of cultural power'; the result is a monster who is 'unmothered' and therefore becomes evil." (Williams)

Novel with a Focus on Ecofeminism: 'Frankenstein'

Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' is believed to be one of the first pieces of Gothic literature, and also a foundation of science fiction literature, while some of the critics also see a proto-ecofeminism angle to the novel. Ecofeminism is a term created in the late 1900s explaining the intersection feminism and the abuse of the environment. Shelley's work of fiction is more than a hundred and fifty years ahead of the movement, Yet, the work still serves to critique the known and unknown power dynamics and the beyond complex spanning relationship between gender, nature and humanity. Shelley's 'Frankenstein' can be viewed as one of the earliest texts of ecofeminism even though there was no intention behind it.

Victor's utterly reckless desire of creation is the reckless ambition of patriarchy, as he assumes a fatherly, God-like figure, without even considering the ethical and emotional turmoil

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

that is attached to the notion of ‘giving birth.’ Ecofeminism suggests that there is a rapport between the exploitation and degradation of nature, environment and women, and the reckless hubris that Victor exhibits is an indication of the nature-women exploitation that ecofeminism so deeply critiques.

Shelley’s novel describes nature as more than mere scenery and as an active force that shapes the characters’ feelings and fates. Victor’s soulless laboratory is juxtaposed with the sublime vistas of the Alps, the Scottish wild, and the Arctic, which act as places of rest and contemplation. These untamed environments, echoing Shelley’s eco-feminism, illustrates nature’s healing powers and the rest of its kind nature spreads. Victor’s separation from nature, demonstrated in his obsession with the unrelenting fields of science, is deadly. This is a life that is ecofeminism ripe with the peril of cutting life from the woven emotional and ecological existence. Within the text, the Creature captures the relationship of the subjugated, feminine, racial, or ecological and the effects of the oppressive patriarchal order. Its disavowal, being artificially born and subsequently abandoned by its maker and the entire community, positions the Creature as a direct affront to the socio-ecological violence under which women and nature together are shackled. The activities of the Creature, marked by extreme rage and an ever growing propensity for violence, is considered from ecofeminism to exemplify the deep-seated barbarism directed toward “othered” beings within the patriarchal order that targets the ecosystem as well. In this regard, the Creature’s failure magnifies the ethical inadequacies of a patriarchal scientific outlook that seeks to dismember life rather than foster it.

Lastly and alongside this consideration, the novel critiques the unequal distribution of knowledge and power across genders. Victor applies Enlightenment rationalism and scientific progress, while the novel’s implicit praise of sympathy, emotional intelligence, and bonding, which are linked with the softer side of the world, is in stark contrast. In examining the risks and limitations of science that is dominated by the masculine, *Frankenstein* is aligning with much later ecofeminist thinkers and activists who started to call for the integration of intuitive and relational ways of knowing that honor women and nature.

To conclude, though Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* does not engage with ecofeminist theory directly, which is difficult as the theory had not yet been named or formalized, the book mentions its important tenets. *Frankenstein* tackles the scientific hubris of patriarchy and the empathic nature of the book towards the marginalized Creature, which, alongside nature’s vital force, predicts ecofeminist apprehensions of the interconnected oppression that women and nature suffer. For this reason, *Frankenstein* can be treated as a precursor to ecofeminism, as it encourages readers to reposition themselves in relation to the rest of the world and to examine the consequences of domination, be it over nature or over people.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

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