

“I ought to be thy Adam’: Subaltern Resistance and Counter - Discourse in Mary Shelley ‘s *Frankenstein*”

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Abstract

This article entitled “‘I ought to be thy Adam’ : Subaltern Resistance and Counter - Discourse in Mary Shelley ‘s *Frankenstein*” re-examines *Frankenstein*, a science fiction, through colonial lens, posting the creature as a voiceless figure who articulates his stance as a form of resistance and counter discourse to the canonical texts. Mapping on Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins’ conceptual notion of the Empire Writes Back and Gayatri Spivak’s theoretical ideology of subalternity, this paper argues that the progress of the creature’s journey from silence to articulating representation challenges the imperial authoritative ideologies. Victor Frankenstein’s ambition of an enlightenment project parallels the colonial exploitation and abandonment. Reinterpreting the canonical texts and appropriating the language, unstabilizes the epistemological narratives on centre and power, projecting the ethical failure of power structures. Yet, it sets boundary to the Subaltern resistance as the creature’s articulation is mediated within the frame, stressing both the difficulty and necessity of resistance.

Key Words: subaltern studies, representation, counter-discourse, writing back and narrative authority.

Introduction

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has long possessed a central place in the field of literary criticism, promoting readings from feminism, psychoanalysis, romanticism

and science fiction. In recent days the novel has evolved as a canonical text generating post-colonial interpretation and arguments rooted in othering, marginalization, issues of power, and subalternity. Though predating the thematic colonial era of Britain's imperial dominance, *Frankenstein* resonates with the colonial ideologies and dynamics of empire.

This paper articulates through the frame of the *Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins. The creature evolves as a subaltern figure that undergoes exclusion from narrative legitimacy, society, dehumanization and suppression. Yet, the creature challenges its creator through his acquisition of language and self-centred narration that exposes the ethical failure of imperial dominance. At the same time, the narrative structure of *Frankenstein* produces its expression to the provocative question of Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin presents post colonial literature as a form of resistance and response to the imperial dominance that challenges the authority and articulative claim of metropolitan centre. Through reclaiming the legitimacy of language and narration, the colonial subjects resist the imposed identities such as historically marginalized and voiceless. Originated within the contextual frame of the imperial centre *Frankenstein* resonates the power relations of the colonial hierarchies.

The significant figure of the novel Victor Frankenstein occupies centre position as European, educated, male and scientifically empowered. The creature has been given with the position of the other who was created by the imperial power, for a purpose and rejected to recognize the same. Spivak's essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" examines how the subaltern articulations are distorted, appropriated and mediated by dominant ideological discourses. Though the subaltern attempts to speak, their articulation is translated, framed or authorised by power structures. This conceptual insight is significant to *Frankenstein*, as the creature's speech is recounted through Victor's articulation and Walton's transcription.

Victor Frankenstein reinforces the ideological foundations of elite claim such as rationality, mastery and entitlement. His ambition in creating the creature resonates his dominance over nature which aligns with imperial expansion. He envisages a race of creatures, created by him, would honour him as their creator thus, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (*Frankenstein* 54). This self- conception of god- like figure parallels the colonial ideologies that legitimize hierarchical power systems with the guise of civilization and progress. Victor spends time on creating the creature and reviving his enlightenment project. He prioritizes the creation project as he aims to

be the God of those creatures. But he sees the creature as his artistic failure which fails to attain his aesthetic expectations. Victor describes the creature as follows,

No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (*Frankenstein* 58)

Then he abandons it. This immediate abandonment without considering the state of the creature aligns with colonial exploitation continued by denial of navigating the consequences of colonial imperialism.

Victors' refusal in naming the creature is crucial as naming is the process of promoting and identifying power. The absence of creature's name embodies its subaltern state. He is acknowledged as a monster, daemon and wretch rather than an individual human being. The creature has no voice and identity in the beginning. He learns the language and routine of the human being through observation not through participation. "I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds... This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it" (*Frankenstein* 111-12). This notion aligns with the idea of Spivak that a subaltern is rejected to get access to representation. Despite the desire for union and connection with human being the creature undergoes rejection and violence. Though the creature attempts to aid the human race it is framed as attack. He is always excluded not because of his monstrosity but rather of social prejudice which reinforces that everything within the frame is constructed not inherent.

The creature claims articulation and exposes its emotion to Victor Frankenstein. Acquisition of language occurs through mimicking not through instruction or participation. Language from the perspective of the creature becomes both a source of pain, which makes him realize his state and a promoter of empowerment. As stated in *The Empire Writes Back*, "The language of these 'peripheries' was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power" (Ashcroft 8). This dual nature of education and language deepens the process of othering though it promotes resistance. The creature's access with *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch's Lives* and *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* epitomizes the colonial strategy of reframing the canon. As the creature reinterprets *Paradise Lost* thus, "... an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting... Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition..." (*Frankenstein* 129). The creature does not

simply read those texts instead it reinterprets them based on his lives and shared experiences. But it is denied as "... the subtext of the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism be recognized as 'subjugated knowledge', 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'" (Spivak 35). His association with both 'fallen angel' and 'Adam' destabilizes Milton's moral values and projects Victor as a failed master who disowns his creation. "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (Frankenstein 100). The creature critiques the canonical discourse and transforms it into a counter-narrative to stereotypical prejudices. This moment embodies the creature's attempt in 'writing back' and its appropriation with the cultural capital. But it is continuously denied as the colonial representations of the colonized align with identification of the creature.

The colonized subjects are represented as savage, uneducated, irrational, monstrous, or violent. As Sachin Sukhdev Bhumbhe, in his article edited by Nawale, quotes Erik H. Erikson's definition of identity as "... the answer an individual gives to the question – who am I? And who am I to be? ..." (Sachin 76). But here the creature's identity is framed rather occupied. The creature reviles these essentialist ideologies as he states "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (Frankenstein 100). Whereas Walton who does not know Victor develops affinity towards him as he writes to his sister that "My affection for my guest increases every day" (Frankenstein 26). Through this the creature interrogates the canonical discourses and frames violence as a form of resistance rather than inherent depravity. But it is projected as monstrous and irrational by the dominant ideological narrative where everyone traces the consequences of the resistance of the creature. The violence is not accepted anywhere instead it is projected to confront the ethical values and failure of power. Further, the creature belongs nowhere as he resides in "The desert mountains and dreary glaciers...the caves of ice,...(Frankenstein 100)". It is spatial marginalization as the creature's presence is denied amidst the habitation of human beings.

His exclusion drives him to inhabit liminal spaces for him such as mountains, forests and icy wastelands. Though it articulates it is transcribed by the words of Walton as Victor presents it to him. The process of layered narration embodies the imperial power and reminds the readers that the authority of articulation and language acquisition rarely become autonomous for the Subaltern. They can resist oppression and strive for authority but attaining it remains a process to be completed. Thus *Frankenstein* holds a liminal position and critiques the empire by challenging

dominant ideologies and acknowledging both the difficulty and necessity of ‘writing back’ as a form of resistance. Revisioning through the lens of *The Empire Writes Back* posits *Frankenstein* as a powerful meditation on resistance, subalternity and narrative authority. Through his reinterpretation of literary canons and appropriation of language the creature critiques the imperial authority reinforced by Victor. Yet, the resistance of the creature is limited as its articulation is transcribed by Walton and mediated by Victor. As Language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences” (Ashcroft, 38). Thus, the resistance of the creature is presented as violence through the dominant ideological narratives.

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