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Monsters of Empire: A Postcolonial Reinterpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Ai miei amici e a Venezia,

che sono il mio canto libero

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between colonialism and literature, more specifically in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The focus of this work is on the different themes that emerge from the colonial context, such as alienation, the master-slave relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, and how the body is perceived as a site of control, oppression, and objectification. Each chapter explores these themes in depth, exploring issues commonly found in colonial contexts and drawing parallels with *Frankenstein*, as it perfectly portrays similar challenges.

The main purpose of the research is to highlight the impact of literary works when they explore social themes that affect the human being's identity and social role, particularly in relation to experiences of oppression and inequality. This study has been conducted by providing pragmatic examples of how the phenomena of oppression, exploitation, and racism significantly impact onto the colonizer and, most significantly, onto the colonized subject. These dynamics have a profound psychological effect on the colonized subject, distorting his/her sense of identity, self-worth, and social status. Although these perceptions are false, they still undermine his/her mental self-image. Furthermore, the study provides practical examples of events in which the colonized individual successfully breaks free from the state of enslavement.

This investigation involves a comparative analysis of literary texts and events from colonial history, highlighting the persisting relevance of systemic oppression and alienation in modern literature. Despite the lasting impact of colonialism, this research underscores the significance of literature, cinema, and art in promoting justice and equality.

Keywords: Colonialism, Frankenstein, Body, Alienation, Master, Slave.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, the legacy of colonialism still echoes nowadays, shaping the social structures and involving every aspect of our society. The theme of colonialism touches every field of interest, including literature. This dissertation examines the direct connections between Mary Shelley's masterpiece, *Frankenstein*, and some issues in postcolonial theory. This comprises the analysis influential postcolonial writers' thought, such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Edward Said, whose ideas suggest several parallels with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a prominent work of the Romantic period. Even though that text does not directly refer to the theme of colonialism, themes such as otherness, alienation, and the body remain central to the novel, raising important questions about identity, marginalization, and the human experience. The aim of this thesis is to explore the parallels between a classic novel and colonial theory, demonstrating how themes such as exploitation, oppression, and the resulting negative emotions, including alienation and displacement, are central to these works. Moreover, these themes reflect universal human experiences that have long been portrayed in literature.

The first chapter begins with a general introduction to postcolonial studies, explaining how, despite being a relatively recent field, it manifests recurring patterns that existed long before the contemporary era. Furthermore, it mainly focuses on the theme of the body, a crucial topic that is highly debated both in postcolonial studies and in books such as *Frankenstein*. It deals with the issue of the exclusion from society in both contexts. After analyzing how the colonial power inaccurately and harmfully perceives the indigenous body, this work discusses several psychological and social processes that contribute to the emergence of racism. Moreover, it focuses on the way in which this theme has been treated in Shelley's novel, highlighting how the Creature is profoundly impacted by similar dynamics of racism and exclusion. These dynamics are closely linked to the main theme of the second chapter, which focuses on alienation. After offering a historical overview of how alienation

has been explored and experienced from various scholars like Marx, Hegel, and Fanon, my dissertation then shifts the focus to how this concept is presented in the novel. It specifically underlines the Creature's character, as he perfectly embodies the feeling of alienation, From the moment of his creation, he is linked to this experience, and will continue to experience it under every form throughout his entire existence. Additionally, it analyzes, in detail, how alienation is a theme strictly connected to a particular linguistic realm, and how this connection is perfectly represented in *Frankenstein*.

In the third chapter, the master-slave relationship becomes central, given that it perfectly exemplifies the power dynamics within the colonial context. In fact, the colonizer assumes a role of superiority that leads to the objectification and dehumanization of the colonized subject. This unequal relationship is clearly mirrored in the interactions between the characters in *Frankenstein*. Therefore, a parallel with Victor and the Creature's relationship is suggested, as it reflects all the power dynamics and subjugation typical of the colonial context.

The fourth and final chapter provides an analysis of *Poor Things* by Yorgos Lanthimos, a movie that exemplifies the perfect connection between Frankenstein and some of the above-mentioned postcolonial issues. Here, the themes of creation, alienation, the use of the body, and the exploration of the societal exclusion are extremely important. Through this final analysis, the exploration of the main points of contact between *Frankenstein* and postcolonial theory have been explored and highlighted from a more contemporary perspective, revealing how these themes can suggest a decisive relevance of those literary and filmic works for the reading of contemporary society.

CHAPTER ONE

Colonial Echoes in *Frankenstein*: Monstrous Bodies

1.1 Corporeal Resistance and Subjugation in Postcolonial Discourse

Postcolonial studies represent an attempt to give dignity and relevance to those countries that were the center of attention during the period of imperialism and colonialism. Countries such as India, Australia, Canada, Malta, and several others in Africa are only a few evident examples of territories whose culture, habits, and language have been permanently affected by European powers. Therefore, their identity, comprising their literature, was highly influenced by their colonizers, who portrayed an inaccurate representation of their culture. The aim of postcolonial studies is that to try to analyze the social, economic, and psychological effects that the colonized territories are forced to live due to the will of expansion of the colonizers.[1] Nowadays a lot of critics are trying to analyze the phenomenon of colonialism under a more modern point of view, including topics like gender, race, sexuality, in order to have a better understanding of the context. María Lugones is one of the critics that can be taken as an example, as her contribution to this topic shows how the dangerous effects of colonization affected the colonized individuals not only under the usual economic and social effects, but she highlighted the way in which it interfered with the gender relations and the social patterns within the communities.[2]

The process through which postcolonial literatures develop in the colonial context is not as linear and immediate as one could think, given that it undergoes through many stages. As critics like Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin observe:

- During the first stage, the colonizer plays a fundamental role within the

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[1] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.
[2] Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues", *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (2014), 116.

imperial context, since their position of power grants them an advantage towards the colonized subject. As a matter of fact, only a few literary élites, consisting of travelers, sightseers, and mainly "representatives" of the Empire was given the chance to produce literature. Notwithstanding their meticulous descriptions of their surroundings, language, and habits this kind of literature does not reflect in any way the native elements of the indigenous people who inhabited these countries long before their colonizers. Moreover, they used to privilege the imperial elements over the native ones, and this is highlighted by the fact that this kind of literature is written in the new language. Hence, this first stage erases the indigenous elements of the colonized country, so it does not contribute to the flourishing of a colonial literature.[3]

- The second stage, also known as the literature produced 'under imperial license' is characterized by a group of privileged writers, also defined 'natives' or 'outcasts' who had the chance to study and dedicate their leisure to produce literature in the language of their colonizers. Due to this privilege, they sort of joined a wealthier social status through which they can benefit of various advantages in the fields of education and language.

However, the ruling class still represents the superior force to which colonized individuals are subjugated in several aspects:[4]

> The institution of 'Literature' in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone license the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work.[5]

Since the English language keeps being considered the norm within the postcolonial context and consequently takes way the relevance of the native

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[3] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "The Empire Writes Back", 5.
[4] *Ibid*, 6.
[5] *Ibid*, 6.

languages, postcolonial societies have the moral obligation to break their bonds with the English language in order to develop a national identity through a native cultural production.[6]

Postcolonial studies critically examine how recurring terms such as race and ethnicity should be carefully distinguished, as they have different origins that are linked to different types of subjugation.[7] In fact, the term 'race' would be more appropriate to refer to the processes of racialization, namely how minorities are represented and categorized, based on the historical and social contexts, categorizing people based on their 'visible traits' such as their skin color, facial features, and so on. Throughout history, this term was often the cause of social inequalities and the creation of hierarchies. 'Ethnicity', on the other hand, is a term that is more attached to European migrations that took place during the two world wars. This term refers to cultural factors, and it focuses more on cultural characteristics, rather than on physical features.[8]

In this introductory section, I am going to focus on how the theme of the body as a physical entity is addressed from a postcolonial perspective, building upon the theories of Frantz Fanon, one of the leading figures in the realm of postcolonial studies. In *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Jean-Paul Sartre discusses the theme of prejudice when it comes to the field of physical appearance. He explains that since the skin color is the very first feature that one notices about another individual, they immediately judge the exterior of a person, forming judgements that are solely based on the exterior features, without taking into account the educational and social background of a person. Following this mentality, white people gradually started to despise black individuals, who slowly accepted their position of inferiority that was imposed upon them.[9] A similar concept can be applied to the idea of the body that is perpetuated in the colonial context, since the colonial ideology is based on a

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[6] *Ibid*, 7.
[7] Sneja Gunew, "Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity", *The Yearbook of English Studies* 27, (1997), 23.
[8] *Ibid*, 24.
[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 10.

differentiation of the individual's social position. For this reason, the colonized is destined to a social space according to a racial difference: on the one hand white meant superiority, civilization, and to possess rationality, whereas being black denoted being a member of a lower social class, that is illiterate, less sensible, and most importantly, uncivilized.[10] In 1963, Frantz Fanon addressed this issue by analyzing the sentiment of inferiority towards the indigenous populations, stating that they are perceived as lacking values, or more precisely, as people who embody the negation of values.[11] The indigenous individual breaks every pattern of aesthetic and morality, given that the white man perceives his traditions, habits, and myths as signs of degradation of society. In this sense, the colonized man is dehumanized by the white person, or even better, he is treated like an animal.[12] For this reason, when the colonizer addresses the colonized, he uses a vocabulary that belongs to the zoologic semantic field.[13] Hence, the entire conception of humanity changes here, since colonialism believes that black people are less human, leading the latter to have a distorted awareness of their own body and value as a person. The very encounter between the white and the black individuals changes the relationship between them, as the black person looks at the white person with a sense of inferiority and submission.[14]

It is important here to highlight the psychological and social dynamics that surface as a result of colonialism, given that the inferiority complex that stems from the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is an element which is internalized by any black individual. Hence, the colonizer involuntarily internalizes the stereotypes and the views held by the colonizer.[15]

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[10] Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, "Fanon, the body schema, and white solipsism", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 1, (2024), 117.
[11] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 32.
[12] *Ibid*, 35.
[13] *Ibid*, 36.
[14] Romdenh-Romluc, "Fanon, the body schema", 120.
[15] John P. Pittman, "Double Consciousness", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/#:~:text=Double%2Dconsciousness%20is%20a%20concept,in%20a%20white%2Ddominated%20society (last access: July 26th 2024).

Fanon highlights societies, within the colonial contexts, systematically assign value to the individual based on his/her ethnicity. As a matter of fact, white people are associated with purity and superiority, whereas black people are normally associated with a sense of inferiority and sin, as observed by Fanon in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*:

> A magnificent blond child-how much peace there is in that phrase, how much joy, and above all how much hope! There is no comparison with a magnificent black child: literally, such a thing is unwonted. […] In Europe, that is to say, in every civilized and civilizing country, the Negro[16] is the symbol of sin. The archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro.[17]

The process of internalizing an inferiority complex causes the colonized person to develop a 'double consciousness', that is a psychological effect where the black individuals perceive themselves through the negative white people's lenses, yet at the same time they are aware of their marginalized status in society.[18]

The process through which people of color redefine and diminish themselves to the white norm is known as the 'epidermalization of inferiority'. The term 'epidermalization' can find several examples in different contexts, for instance one of the most emblematic ones can be found in Mayotte Capécia's work *Je suis martiniquaise*, in which Fanon finds his example of epidermalization of inferiority perfectly explained in the sexual context. As a matter of fact, in this book she perceives her black body as a limit for her 'white potentials', therefore implying that blackness reflects inferiority and whiteness is a noble concept to which everyone should aspire to.[19] Her desire of belonging to the white community culminates in the search for a white partner who can

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[16] I will be employing this term exclusively within the framework of reported speech.
[17] Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 189.
[18] Pittman, "Double Consciousness".
[19] Seunghyun Song, "Bridging Epidermalization of Black Inferiority and the Racial Epidermal Schema: Internalizing Oppression to the Level of Possibilities", *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 4, no. 1, (2017), 51.

reassure her of her 'whiteness', making her feel an essential part of a culture that only tries to subjugate her because of her skin color. Yet, by trying to seek confirmation from her white partner, she ends up aggravating the epidermalization of inferiority and therefore proves Fanon's theory that black people behave in particular ways reinforcing colonial ideas and making them feel inferior.[20] In this case, Mayotte's endeavor for vindication becomes a tangible proof of her status of inferiority since she struggles to reach a state of independence and freedom. Therefore, she only ends up pursuing for a denial of her black heritage, causing her to exclusively adhere to white standards. Mayotte's attempts to align herself more closely with the white cause will not benefit her in any way, not socially nor racially nor economically; rather, they will only confer superiority to the white cause.[21] Let's read how Frantz Fanon exemplifies the sense of inferiority internalized by the colonized individual:

> The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. […] The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people.[22]

Fanon intends that a black person possesses certain characteristics that dwell inside him in a natural and instinctual way. He acts based on his 'muscular prowess'[23] and 'aggressiveness'[24], therefore his natural behavior involves physicality, so he feels the need to express and release his instinctual violence, and at first, he manifests it against the other colonized individuals. The fact that these feelings are involved in the realm of dreams means that the black individual is trying to break free and express them in a subconscious way.

The issue of 'epidermalization of inferiority' can be solved only once

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[20] *Ibid*, 52.
[21] *Ibid*, 52.
[22] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 52.
[23] *Ibid*, 52.
[24] *Ibid*, 52.

the colonized subject understands his own position and actively takes part to the process of decolonization.[25] Once the colonized individual rejects his own internalized perception of inferiority, he can finally reach freedom, both psychologically and politically, as Fanon exemplifies by stating:

> Thus the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native skin. […] For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. I am no longer on tenterhooks in his presence.[26]

Therefore, accepting one's own roots is the only option for the colonized person to get rid of all the prejudices and preconceptions that were systematically spread during the colonial era. Only through a self-examination, the individual can deconstruct the narratives of inferiority conveyed by the colonizers in order to impose their dominance.

In 1986, Frantz Fanon writes about the black men's problems in a predominantly white society. More accurately, he explains how the color of one's body affects every situation in which one finds themselves. Therefore, the perception that a black person has of himself is problematic under many aspects. Fanon contends that the relationship between the body and the external world presumes a series of unintentional acts that a person executes implicitly, since the human being is unconsciously aware of temporal and spatial rules:

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. […] I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit

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[25] *Ibid*, 45.
[26] *Ibid*, 45.

knowledge.[27]

Nonetheless, the black body is inevitably subjected to a change in the body scheme as a consequence of the color of its skin. A clear example of how the regular body scheme can be contaminated so that it becomes a racial scheme can be analyzed when Fanon describes a situation in which the black individual is discriminated on a daily basis. As Fanon notes:

> "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. […] Then assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. […] I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.[28]

Thus, the body schema of a black person is affected by an epidermal schema. Therefore, the racial factor will make him feel guilty not only for him as a single entity, but he will be responsible for a broader circle, namely the entire black community. The feelings of shame and guilt are direct consequences of the 'epidermalization of inferiority' phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the experience of the black body has always been and will continue to be an object for discussion, even if it is not required by the context:

> Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.[29]

Religion also covers an important role when it comes to the body in the colonial context. Given that the HIV pandemic has sparked a lot of discussion

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[27] Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*,110-111.
[28] *Ibid*, 112.
[29] *Ibid*, 116.

about the conflict between religion and well-being in recent years, it is important to recognize how this issue has brought up religious reflections and has led to a new approach between body and faith. In this case, Protestantism highly shaped the idea of body within the colonial context. For instance, South African religious traditions supported the idea that the body is an entity that is separate from the mind. The author David Chidester states that through his encounters with colonial individuals, not only did indigenous people lack religion, but they also lacked the capacity for logical thinking.[30] Apart from religion, there has always been a tendency of sexualizing the female black body, as it is shown in the case of Saartjie Baartman, in a case publicly known as the 'Hottentot Venus'. She is the ideal depiction of why the black body was associated with sexual promiscuity and abnormal behavior in the 19th century.[31] This young woman became a victim of the British colonial power and was taken to England in 1810 as a victim of British colonial power, where she was used as an example of female sensual savagery and racial inferiority. In fact, her biological anomaly observed in her unusual genitalia and buttocks attracted scientific curiosity, becoming a topic of discussion among the British community. This clearly resulted in the Khoisan woman being publicly humiliated and degraded, demonstrating the racist and patriarchal mindset that Europe had toward Africa in the 19th century.[32]

Another remarkable example of condemnation of the exploited body in the colonial culture is the novel *Maru* by the South African writer Bessie Head. This novel is built on the story of Margaret Cadmore, a woman who manages to change her social status thanks to her ability of painting and figuring. Her character was confined after several aspects, first of all because she was a woman, then because she was an orphan, but the main reason is because she was a *Marsarwa*, a derogatory term for *Bushman*, which indicates a South

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[30] Federico Settler, Mari Haugaa Engh, "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Public Discourse in South Africa", *Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa Special Edition*, no. 14, (2015), 127.
[31] *Ibid*, 130.
[32] *Ibid*, 131.

African person.[33] The theme of the body starts to be relevant once Margaret starts to paint her own images, since she focused on the painting of the women of her community while doing ordinary activities. From a colonial point of view, the expression of emotions like awe, horror, and fascination associated with the 'primitive' and 'uncivilized', is conveyed through tangible and concrete images, in which the colonizers can embody the hideous attributes of the wild or Other. The dichotomy colonizer-colonized in the (post)colonial discourse has always been represented in these terms:

> To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, opposed to the colonizer (white man, West, center of intellection, of control), the Other is cast as corporeal, carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloging, description or possession.[34]

There is a key factor in analyzing the modality in which the body is explored and tackled within the colonial context. As a matter of fact, there is a correlation between the body and the unexplored territories in the imperial scene, and they have several characteristics in common, such as being seductive, wild, accessible for possession, and so on.[35] Many writers, like Mungo Park and Richard Burton, in the accounts of their travels, showed a sexualized and objectified interest in both the female and the male bodies, as they demonstrate a fascination for the 'venereal' and 'reproductive powers' of the women, and the genitalia and sexual skills of African men. Another explorer who gave his view of native cultures is James Cook, who explored New Zealand and engaged with the Aboriginal population. The fact that he noted all the cultural peculiarities, labeling them as 'strangeness' due to distinctive traits like their tattoos or their supposed cannibalism, effectively demonstrates his attempt to approach a completely different society. This is perfectly exemplified by his

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[33] Elleke Boehmer, "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 26, no. 3, (1993), 268.
[34] Boehmer, "Transfiguring", 269.
[35] *Ibid*, 270.

accounts in his diary:

> (…) they have marks impressed by a method unknown to us, of a very extraordinary kind: they are furrows of about a line deep, and a line broad, such as appear upon the bark of a tree which has been cut through, after a year's growth: the edges of these furrows are afterwards indented by the same method, and being perfectly black, they make a most frightful appearance.[36]

Once again, the body in the colonial context - more specifically in the context of indigenous people - is perceived as uncivilized and is associated with weirdness. Hence, this description conveys an idea following a typical Eurocentric vision. As a matter of fact, the Eurocentric vision is based on the pre-established superiority of the white individual, so much so that by implicitly accepting the racial presumptions of the relationship, the colonized subject takes on an active role in increasing the gap between the colonizer and the colonized. For this reason, many characters of the novels set in the colonial time appear to reflect the concept that silence is inherently connected to negation, such as the figure of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*. He perfectly embodies the concept of a character that does not have a voice and is subjected to his master, Robinson, who directly imposes the Western culture, language, and religion on him.[37]

An important aspect to consider when discussing the theme of the body in a colonial context is that discrimination based on physical appearance did not merely silence the colonized individual. It extended further, leading to the violation and wounding of their bodies. One of the most striking examples is the episode of violence that culminated in the installation of detention camps in Kenya on behalf of the British Empire, which took place from October 1952 to January 1960.[38] One of the most memorable occurrences is surely the 'Mau

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[36] John Barrow, *Cook's Voyages of Discovery* (London: A.C. Black, 1925), 104-105.
[37] Boehmer, "Transfiguring", 272.
[38] Aoife Duffy, "Kenya: the shameful truth about British colonial abuse and how it was covered up", The Conversation, December 8th 2023, https://theconversation.com/kenya-the-shameful-truth-about-british-colonial-abuse-and-how-it-was-covered-up-218608 (last access: July 24th 2024).

Mau Uprising', which saw the rebellion of thousands of Kenyans against the colonial administration. The colonizers responded with a massacre that resulted in several deaths, which eventually started the path to independence for Kenya. The origin of colonialism in Kenya dates back to the late 19th century, when the British began to move to those territories in order to exploit the fertile lands.[39] The Empire was faced with resistance movements from Kenyan ethnic groups, so they proceeded with an operation of suppression of these populations, such as the *Kikuyu*, the *Maasai*, and the *Kamba*.[40] If some of them showed cooperation with the colonialists, others, like the Kikuyu and Kamba people, only showed resistance. For this reason, executions and reprisals were carried out to hunt these two tribes. After a period of prolonged repressions, the movement known as 'Mau Mau' emerged, with the intention of opposing the British government's horrendous mistreatment of indigenous people. Actually, their aim was that to restrict their rights through policies of repression.[41] The British response against the Mau Mau movement was brutal. In fact, if a village member was found to be supporting the movement, the entire village was deemed to be an accomplice.[42] Therefore, thousands of Kikuyu were forced to abandon their homes and belongings and sent to designated areas. Despite this, their tragic destiny was to live in the harshest possible conditions in concentration camps:

> Abuse and torture was commonplace in these camps, as British guards used beatings, sexual abuse and executions to extract information from prisoners and to force them to renounce their allegiance to the anti-colonial cause.[43]

Many Kikuyu people were returned to their communities by the end of 1954, even though they had been turned into fenced areas and had experienced famine and illness. During this period, the tragic number of Mau Mau killed was

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[39] Omar Badsha, "The Mau Mau Uprising", South Africa History Online, May 18th 2018, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/mau-mau-uprising (last access: July 24th 2024).
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*

around 11.500, whereas the white colonizers affected by the uprising was just 32.[44]
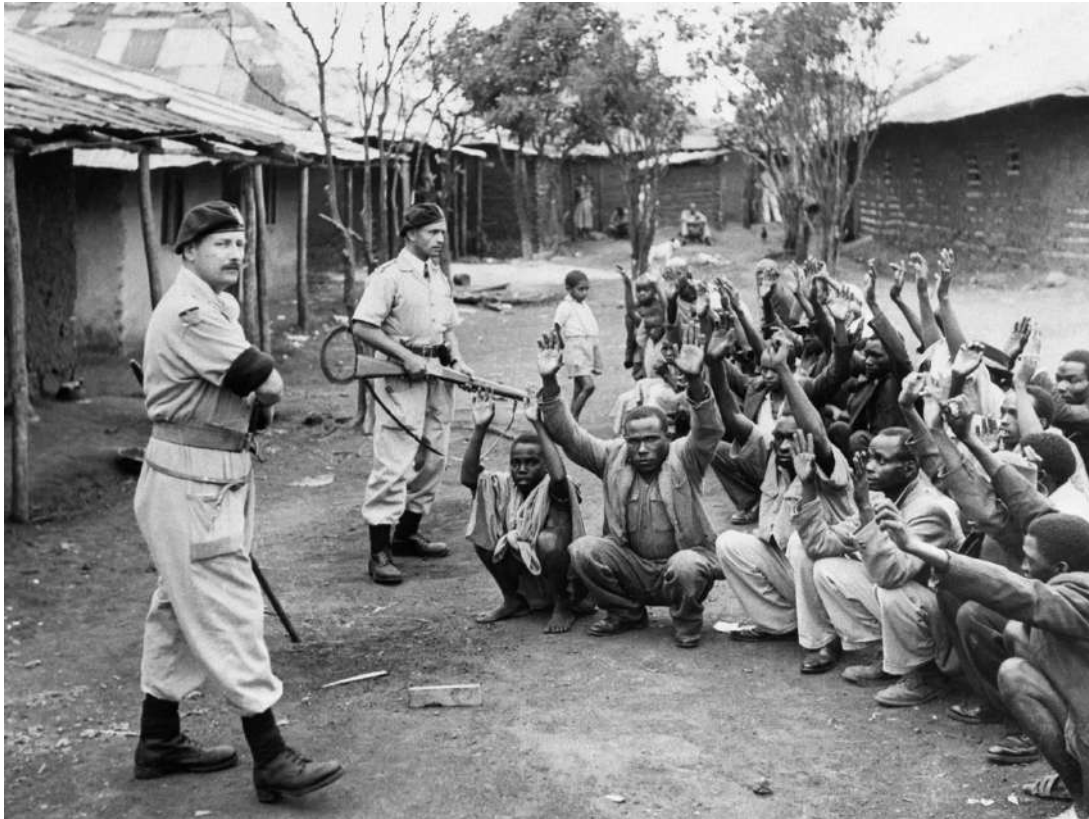

Figure 1. Psychological and physical torture in British concentration camps in Kenya.

Nonetheless, after these tragic events, Kenya's journey toward independence from the Empire sped up thanks to the nationalist movement that spread both in Kenya and across East Africa. Due to these uprising movements, the British had to face a financial struggle in order to keep their colonial policies standing. Simultaneously, this time had an enormous impact on Kenya's independence and led to a mobilization in political, economic, and agrarian terms.[45] Until the present day, the British imperialist government has tried to conceal this tragic chapter of history, although King Charles' public statements acknowledged the appalling conditions to which the Kenyans were subjected.[46] The Kenyan

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[44] *Ibid.*
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] Duffy, "Kenya: the shameful truth", (last access: July 24th 2024). https://theconversation.com/kenya-the-shameful-truth-about-british-colonial-abuse-and-how-it-was-covered-up-218608

genocide represents only one of the many examples of how modern critics acknowledge the atrocities that the British Empire has committed towards indigenous cultures.

1.2 The Anatomical Monstrosity: Examining the 'Creature' in *Frankenstein*

> […] By the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.[47]

First and foremost, this section is going to analyze how the concept of the body is represented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by focusing specifically on the figure of the Creature, which represents the element that most closely parallels the colonized individual. A remarkable element in the story of *Frankenstein* is that the author manages to break the rules with the period she belonged to, Romanticism. In fact, this literary and cultural period expected authors to discuss about emotional and subjective feelings. The most emblematic production that this period saw is the postulation of the 'sublime', a term which indicated the feeling of amazement and awe given by the meeting between the *inner* feelings and the natural world with its landscapes. Although she was supposed to talk about these themes in her literary production, she distances herself from her contemporaries. In fact, Mary Shelley, with her masterpiece *Frankenstein*, represents ugliness in its purest form through the creation of the Creature. Ugliness, in this sense, differs from the grotesque, since the latter does not evoke a comic effect, it is simply perceived as the opposite of the beautiful.[48] From the description of the creation of the Creature, there are a few

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[47] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2014), 46.
[48] Denise Gigante, "Facing the Ugly: The Case of 'Frankenstein'", *ELH* 67, no. 2 (2000), 565.

elements that highlight the ugliness that Shelley wanted to convey to the reader, such as the 'dull yellow eye'[49], or 'his hair was of a lustrous black'[50] and 'his teeth of a pearly whiteness'.[51] These are all elements that convey sensations like terror, repulsiveness, and dread through a sense of extreme real description of the Creature, which is only possible for Victor through several years of studying subjects like physics, anatomy, and natural philosophy. The ugliness of the Creature only represented a problem the moment it came to life, so its ugliness only mattered once it became an actual being who could actively participate in social life, as it is evident by all the incidents that occurred once he felt rejected by society because of its outward appearance.[52] However, another term that better suits this context is 'uncanny', which must be distinguished by the term 'ugly', given that:

> The subject of the "uncanny" … undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. Yet we may expect that it implies some intrinsic quality which justifies the use of a special name. One is curious to know what this peculiar quality is which allows us to distinguish as "uncanny" certain things within the boundaries of what is "fearful".[53]

According to Freud, these two terms obviously belong to the same semantic field, namely that of the 'fearful', but whereas the uncanny is a subjective feeling and can be personal, the ugliness of the Creature is a shared feeling because it represents a return to the reader's most repressed feelings, hence it is a universal experience since it triggers the most remote fears within ourselves, which are typical of the human experience, so that every character that gets in contact with the Creature has feelings of dread, repulsion, and loathing.

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[49] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 46.
[50] *Ibid*, 46.
[51] *Ibid*, 46.
[52] Denise Gigante, "Facing the Ugly: The Case of 'Frankenstein'", *ELH* 67, no. 2 (2000), 565.
[53] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 19.

Edmund Burke offered a clear definition of his conception of 'ugly' in three parts:[54]

- First of all, the ugly is whatever lacks the qualities of the beautiful. In fact, Victor Frankenstein better represents an artist rather than a scientist given that he collects different parts of various bodies and puts them together rather than trying to reanimate an entire body.

- The second part of his definition of the ugly states that something objectively 'ugly' is not necessarily opposite to proportion and shape, thus something can be both ugly and with proportions. The perfect example that encapsulates this concept is represented by the Creature *himself*[55], which although does not reflect the standards of what is considered 'beautiful', still holds the proportions through which it resembles a human being. One must not confuse what is 'ugly' from what is 'deformed', given that the latter can, in fact, be considered the opposite of beauty, since it does not align with the characteristics of what is the 'common form'. Notwithstanding, the Creature, by seeing his reflection in the water, notices how his deformity is the main reason for which he is shunned and constantly judged by people around him. Even though his creator is horrified by him, the Creature does not present features of what can be defined 'ugly', in fact, he just overcomes the regular features of a regular person, such as climbing, running, and so on, but these traits should not be conflated with ugliness.

- The third and final section is about the relationship between the ugly and the sublime. Although the sublime has always been associated with the beautiful, majestic, and the picturesque elements, it can be said how ugliness finds a relationship with the sublime as well. The sublime object can actually produce pain, which will turn into pleasure once it

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[54] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), 133.
[55] From now on, I actively intend to refer to the Creature as a human being. In this regard, I will capitalize his name.

gets into contact with a strong terror or excitement, as stated by Edmund Burke:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be and they are delightful, as we every day experience.[56]

Furthermore, the sensation of excitement that origins the sublime is given by a ruthless chase around the world in order to kill the monster with beautiful landscapes as background, which faithfully reflect the Burkean concept of the sublime.[57]

The topic of the ugly in the context of the creation of the Creature must be perceived in collaboration with the practical way in which Victor gave life to it, and therefore to all the studies and the theories that revolved around the birth of the Creature. Mary Shelley was subjected by the prevailing tendencies and beliefs of her era, like in her attempt to conquer death and, in doing so, attaining a god-like power by reanimating a dead corpse, especially after the Industrial Revolution that had just occurred. Moreover, there was a science that particularly inspired her in the creation of one of the most memorable novels in the Gothic genre, 'galvanism'.[58] There are several essential names when discussing this science, starting from Luigi Galvani, the name from which the term 'galvanism' derives, his own nephew Giovanni Aldini, and Andrew Ure, a renowned chemist and physician who highly contributed to the discoveries in this specific field of research. Luigi Galvani discovered that by inducing electrical sparks to the bodies of dead frogs he could make their bodies twitch, therefore he advanced the possibility of giving life to dead bodies.[59]

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[56] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 46.
[57] Gigante, "Facing the Ugly", 574.
[58] Erin Blakemore, "How Twitching Frog Legs Helped Inspire 'Frankenstein'", Smithsonian, December 4th 2015, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-twitching-frog-legs-helped-inspire-frankenstein-180957457/ (last access: July 7th 2024).
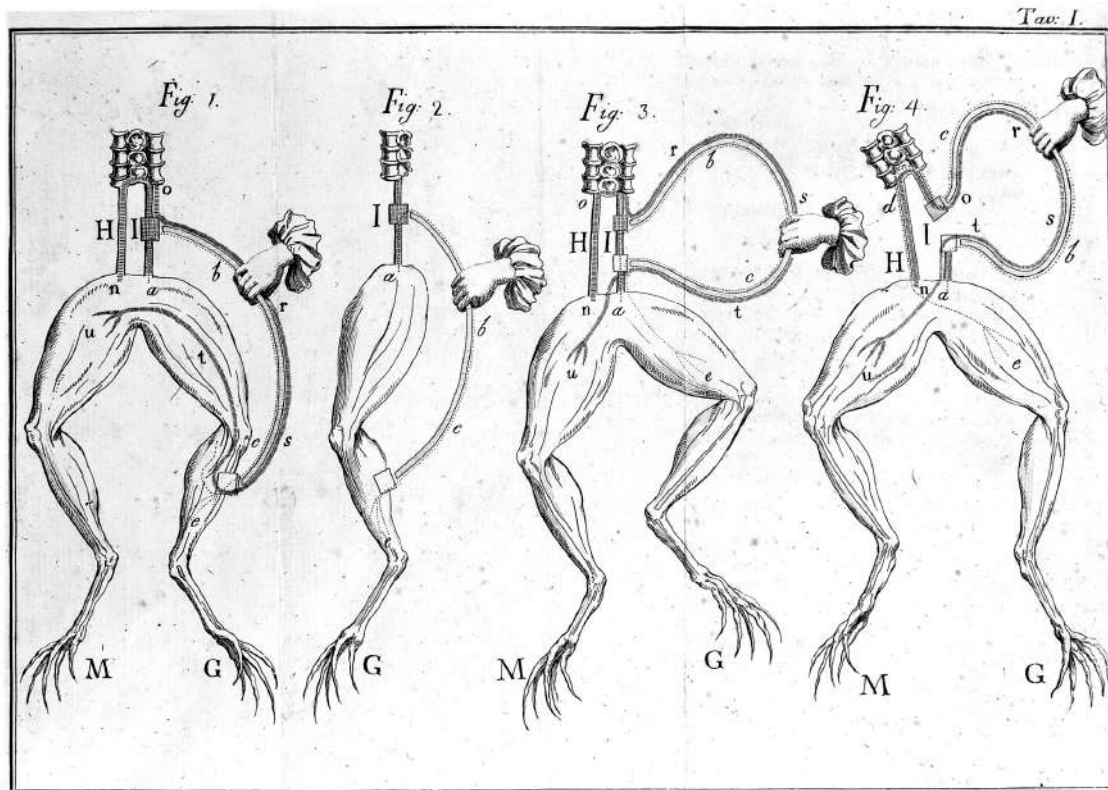[59] *Ibid*.

Figure 2. Luigi Galvani. Sciatic Nerv, 1793, in Memorie sulla elettricità animale. Bologna: Per le stampe dei Sassi, 1797.

Giovanni Aldini gave his contribution to this experiment by trying to induce electricity to the tongue of an ox, ending up producing an expulsion of the feces of the animal given by the excessive voltage used.[60]

Scientists discarded the idea of doing tests on dead animals, hence they decided to shift their attention to human corpses, building on Andrew Ure's experiments.[61] In fact, he personally attended the execution of a convicted individual called Matthew Clydesdale in order to apply the Galvanic theories to bring him back to life. Although the outcome was evidently unsatisfactory, it advanced the idea for more research in the area.[62]

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[60] Lauren Young, "The Real Electric Frankenstein Experiments of the 1800s", Atlas Obscura, October 31st, 2016, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-real-electric-frankenstein-experiments-of-the-1800s (last access: July 7th 2024).
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] *Ibid*.

Figure 3. Henry R. Robinson, A galvanized corpse, 1836, lithograph.

Galvanism is incredibly essential to Mary Shelley, for it is a theme that is also addressed in the novel when Victor comes across the works of philosophers and scientists like Cornelius Agrippa, Albert Magnus, and Paracelsus. In fact, he chooses to reject all the scientific disciplines he had ever investigated and consider galvanism as a viable approach to achieve in his objective to revive an inanimate corpse.[63] It is clear from the passage below how Victor starts researching this new discipline:

> Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and, excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me […] I at once gave up my former occupations, set down natural history and

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[63] Alessandro Cabiati, "Introduction to Frankenstein." History of English Culture (class lecture at Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, Italy, May 9th, 2024).

all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation, and entertained the greatest disdain for a would-be science which could never even step within the threshold of real knowledge.[64]

It is important to acknowledge the significant impact that poet John Milton played on the story of *Frankenstein*. This novel represents the basis for the growth and education of the Creature, it teaches him important lessons about the world around him, such as the difference between good and evil in the human world. Moreover, not only did he learn how to approach human beings in order to try to overcome his loneliness, but he also observed and learnt how human beings communicate and interact with one another.[65] More specifically, the Creature shares several traits with two different characters, Adam and Satan. The will to reach the divine capability of creation represents only one of the few references to mythology and religion. Many characteristics suggest a connection between the narrative and the religious components. The most apparent one concerns the direct interaction between Victor and God, as well as the Creature and Adam. Since the doctor and God have many similarities, including the creation of life, it is possible that the doctor's name comes from Milton's definition of God in his book, 'the victor'.[66]

In this context, the body holds a significant role since it represents a failed endeavor by the doctor, who unsuccessfully tries to create a human body from scratch. Thus, he ends up being utterly terrified at the sight of his own creation. The analogy between the Creature and Adam is further explained by how both these characters represent a pair of doomed, cursed, and sinful bodies: on the one hand Adam represents the fall from grace of humanity, given that he brings negative features into the human world, such as guilt, sin, suffering, and death. These are sentiments that are shared by the Creature in the novel, considering that he is accountable for all the negative actions that take place in the story. As

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[64] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 33.
[65] Alessandro Cabiati, "Introduction to Frankenstein." History of English Culture (class lecture at Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, Italy, May 9th, 2024).
[66] *Ibid*.

a matter of fact, Victor despises his creation because he is the reason for which he experienced the death of many important figures in his life, such as his younger brother William, his family's servant Justine Moritz, his companion Henry Clerval, and Elizabeth during their wedding night. On a different note, the Creature and Satan are deeply connected both thematically and psychologically speaking, given that they both feel a sense of rebellion and revenge against their creators, a sense of abandonment and isolation which establish them as iconic characters in their own way.

> But Paradise Lost excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own.[67]

On the one hand, Satan is characterized by a sense of vengeance against the divine authority after his tragic fall, while the Creature in *Frankenstein* is forced to commit horrific acts after being rejected by humanity for his outward unattractiveness. Therefore, he also finds himself to have a vengeful behavior towards his creator. Their outer features are reflected in a negative behavior on the inside, defining them with feelings of revenge and hatred toward the rest of the world. For this exact reason, they find themselves becoming the antagonists of their respective stories.[68]

Regarding the discussion on the body, Shelley extends her analysis by focusing on the female figure. In order to put an end to the terrible deaths that were tormenting him, Victor chooses to comply with the Creature's demand to create a female companion. To achieve this objective, he sets off for the Orkney Isles, where he can distance himself from the outside world and concentrate on his purpose. However, the creation of another Creature did not last long, since

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[67] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 106.
[68] Alessandro Cabiati, "Introduction to Frankenstein." History of English Culture (class lecture at Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, Italy, May 16th, 2024).

Victor started to doubt himself once he had almost completed his quest and proceeded to destroy the unfinished body in front of the Creature. This episode perfectly depicts an issue that characterizes the novel, more particularly a gender issue. That is to say, it is clear that the female presence within the novel is weaker than the male one in terms of importance and relevance, as it is demonstrated by the female characters such as Elizabeth Lavenza, who is brutally murdered by the monster on the night of her wedding, and Justine Moritz, who was wrongly accused of committing a murder.[69] The case of the female monster, on the other hand, represents a failed attempt to give space and voice to a feminine character, ending up being an object of discussion between two male characters, namely Victor and the Creature, who freely exercised dominion over her. According to Erin Hawley, this dominant behavior renders the human body, or more specifically the female human body, "a workable and disposable *thing*". This further proves that the creation and the destruction of the female creature is merely a negotiation between two male characters, also considering that the novel is entirely narrated by a male-centered point of view. Besides, since this character is not allowed to speak, she is not even given a name in the first place and, in addition to that, she is not either considered worthy of having a body. For the same reason, she embodies a silenced character by a fully male perspective. Furthermore, as the passage below illustrates, Victor's obsession with creating the female monster brought up a new biased perspective within the realm of gender studies.[70] In particular, the doctor feared that by creating a female monster, he would have contributed to the creation an even more malevolent and evil figure, hence he assumed that the creature, who would eventually become a woman, would have had a more complex nature because of her femininity: "I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in

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[69] Erin Hawley, "The Bride and Her Afterlife: Female Frankenstein Monsters on Page and Screen", *Literature/Film Quarterly* 43, no. 3, (2015), 219.
[70] *Ibid*, 220.

murder and wretchedness".[71] However, the heavy presence of the male perspective in the novel represents a chance for Mary Shelley to give a feminist interpretation to the story. In fact, it must be acknowledged how the writing of this novel also reflects several personal issues, and one of the most striking ones is the matter of motherhood, which is a subtle but current theme within the story.[72]

Shelley has always been familiar with the sentiment of abandonment from the very beginning of her life, considering that her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died from giving birth, and in addition to that, she was quite familiar with miscarriages herself. All these tragic events inevitably changed her life and her conception of death, with *Frankenstein* representing the aftermath of all these experiences. This can be easily seen in the relationship between Victor and the Creature he gave life to, since the former shows a sense of fracture in the father-son relationship, causing sentiments of struggle and affliction in the monster, who feels utterly rejected both by his father figure and later by society. The body, in this case, represents a key element in this discourse, since the usual connection that bonds two genetically connected figures is lacking, both in her personal life and in the novel, so there are clear connections between Shelley and the character of Frankenstein. In fact, Shelley shares the most important feature with the scientist, namely the fact that they both share a need for a child figure.[73] However, while Victor is merely seeking validation that his research has been fruitful and led to a concrete achievement, Shelley is searching for a real child. Hence, the body has an essential function given that all these tragic events caused her a postpartum depression.[74] Therefore, it cannot be denied how the mental well-being of an individual considerably affects their physical functioning. However, it is important to acknowledge how this dysfunctional relationship mostly affects the early child

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[71] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 135-136.

[72] Devon Hodges, "Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2, no. 2 (1983), 155.

[73] Campbell Ashby, "Personal Problems = Great Literature: Shelley's Motherhood Issues Reflected In Frankenstein", *Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities* 2, no. 22 (2019), 60.

[74] *Ibid*, 61.

development.[75] As a matter of fact, the theme of denial has been studied by a number of experts, among which Sigmund Freud, who, alongside his daughter Anna, stated that denial is a process in which a person faces something that is too traumatic to bear, and therefore decides to reject it.[76]

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[75] Kristen Beesley, "When Denial Turns Deadly: A Psychoanalytic Perspective", Psychology Today, August 24th, 2021, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/202108/when-denial-turns-deadly-psychoanalytic-perspective (last access: July 10th 2024).
[76] *Ibid.*

1.3 Bodies in Transition: A Comparative Account of Bodily Representations Between *Frankenstein* and Postcolonialism

Building on the points outlined in the previous chapters, the investigation of the body in postcolonial discourse finds some remarkable parallels with the body of the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. On the one hand, the body in the postcolonial context represents a site of violence, domination, and exploitation, while it additionally serves as a place of cultural, political, and social inscription. The colonial power used political, economic, and physical approaches to impose its will on the colonized people's bodies. In addition, the colonial narrative propagates a dehumanizing view of the colonized people's body, addressing it as exotic rather than human. On the other hand, the body in Mary Shelley's *magnum opus* mirrors these themes in the character of the Creature, who embodies all the above-mentioned characteristics. In fact, he reflects the feelings and the anxieties of the marginalized people, who are rejected and excluded by society since they are portrayed as fearsome and far from the usual concept of human.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley denounces the imperial motif which is carried out by two specific characters, namely Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein. In fact, these two characters can serve as an example since they perfectly embody the colonizer's aim of dominion.[77] On the one hand, Robert Walton pursuits his dream of exploring new territories, which is one of the main objectives of the colonizer, whose dream is that of colonizing new lands and imposing his culture, religion, and language. On the other hand, Frankenstein mirrors these same elements as he exerts a sense of manipulation of both nature and the human body. As a matter of fact, his purpose might be interpreted as a type of exploitation, comparable to how colonizers exploited people and their lands for personal purposes.[78] The first encounter between these two characters

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[77] Emily Burkhart, "Lessons from Monster(s): Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of *Frankenstein*: The 1818 Text", *English 300* 18, (2020), 62.
[78] *Ibid*, 62.

perfectly explains this concept, given that Shelley states: "He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but a European".[79] Indeed, this perspective strengthens a postcolonial reading of the novel. The very act of realization of the Creature reflects those characteristics that constitute the body in the postcolonial environment:

> It is imperative to note the Creature's depression is the result of a process by which he learns of his inferiority from Victor and the De Lacey family, not something implicit in his character. […] Hating himself, the Creature deeply desires assimilation into dominant European culture.[80]

It must be addressed how the feelings of depression and exclusion from society felt by the Creature originated from his direct interaction with his creator, Victor, and the De Lacey family. As a matter of fact, he firstly observed the family from a distance, precisely from a hovel that was positioned next to their cottage, analyzing in detail how a normal family acted in an everyday context. Through this experience, he learned many features of the human condition, such as the social interactions, the language, and human emotions. Because he feared they could become afraid of him if he revealed himself, he began to help them anonymously, as a way of demonstrating his benign nature.[81] However, the Creature mistakenly thought that the human nature would accept him and reward him with affection. In fact, he was violently rejected as soon as Felix and Agatha saw his physical features, so he developed feelings of anger, isolation and self-hatred. Once again, the theme of the body and physical appearance becomes crucial since it determines the reason for which the Creature becomes a villain. Indeed, just like the colonized subject in the colonial context, the Creature has internalized his inferiority. If the Creature at first experienced feelings like curiosity, desire for acceptance, and desire for companionship, after this specific event, he developed a feeling of hatred

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[79] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 19.
[80] Burkhart, "Lessons from Monster(s)", 63.
[81] *Ibid*, 63.

towards his creator as well.[82] Victor, on a side note, employs a colonial behavior. This can be observed when he interferes with the destruction of the female counterpart of the Creature, which is a character that will never see the light of day. The exploitation of the body in the colonial context is furtherly proven by the condition of the woman's body.[83] The episode of the demolition of the female counterpart of the Creature reflects the behavior of the European colonizer, since Western colonizers asserted their superiority by sterilizing Native American women, therefore enacting a genocide.[84] Hence, Victor denies the Creature any possibility for personhood, trying to take total control over him and asserting, once again, the typical godlike power of the colonizer.

Another example that shows how *Frankenstein* reflects a time where the Empire was largely spreading its dominion throughout the world can be observed in Safie's character.[85] In fact, Shelley describes her in terms that emphasized how she had a non-European heritage:

> The lady was dressed in a dark suit, and covered with a thick black veil. Agatha asked a question, to which the stranger only replied by pronouncing, in a sweet accent, the name of Felix. […] "Felix came up hastily to the lady, who, when she saw him, threw up her veil, and I beheld a countenance of angelic beauty and expression. Her hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated; her features of a regular proportion, and her complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink.[86]

Throughout the small interval in which we can read about the character of Safie, Shelley provides a comparison between the Eastern and the Western world. On the one hand, Safie and the Arab world are described as central elements of the Eastern context, whereas the Western reality is characterized by the enlightened European features, to which Safie is exposed as her character experiences the process of 'lactification', that is, a constant contact with the European culture,

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[82] *Ibid*, 63.
[83] *Ibid*, 63.
[84] *Ibid*, 63.
[85] *Ibid*, 63.
[86] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 95.

language, and history.[87] Furthermore, her character shares similarities with the Creature, given that they both have features like ignorance towards the reality that surrounds her. This happens because the Arab world is conceived as backwards and ignorant, just like the Creature is perceived by society. Moreover, the only modality through which Safie can find a way of redeeming herself from her Eastern origins is through her 'white savior', Felix, who is the only character that can save her from the 'oppressive' Oriental traditions and culture.[88]

In conclusion, *Frankenstein* shares several similarities with the postcolonial context when addressing the theme of the body. Theorists like Frantz Fanon widely analyzed the condition of the body in the colonial scenario, addressing the problems of marginalization and monstrosity of the indigenous body, which translate into feelings of otherness, struggles for acceptance, and identity crises in the colonized subjects. To some extent, these same themes can be found in *Frankenstein*, which explores them through evident parallels in the character of the Creature. In fact, both bodies strive to reclaim their uniqueness and self-identity inside a world in which they see themselves dehumanized and rejected by their own kind.

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[87] Burkhart, "Lessons from Monster(s)", 64.
[88] *Ibid*, 64.

CHAPTER TWO

An Exiled Creature: Alienation Across *Frankenstein* and Postcolonial Literature

2.1 Cultural Dislocation and the Alienated Self in Postcolonial Discourse

The phenomenon of alienation is deeply ingrained and manifests itself in various contexts within social interactions. This sense also manifests in the postcolonial context, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter. The feeling of alienation leads the person affected by it to experience the world as indifferent towards him.[89] Hence, the relationships with oneself, other people, and social structures are compromised. From this experience, the alienated individual feels like he does not belong to the world, or rather they believe they have no control over it, and hence lack the ability to change it. More precisely, the colonized subjects feel a sense of dislocation under a psychological and cultural point of view, which can be translated into a sense of estrangement towards one's identity and culture.[90]

The experience of alienation is not a recent phenomenon, rather, it has been a widespread condition endured for several centuries. In fact, alienation evolved throughout history, since it is a feeling that changed overtime according to the period in which it has been experienced. As Amin observes, we can list three different varieties of alienation:[91]

- The first is Marxist, and it focuses on the alienation that occurs when a worker separates himself from both the product of his labor and the act itself, making him more comparable to a machine than a human being.[92]

- The second one is existentialist. It regards nature and it puts the human existence at the center of all experiences. According to this type of

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[89] Sherifa Hisham Amin, "Dimensions of Alienation and the Postcolonial Context: Hegel, Marx, and Fanon" PhD diss., (University of Cairo, 2019), 4.
[90] *Ibid*, 20.
[91] *Ibid*, 20.
[92] *Ibid*, 21.

alienation, the human being is alienated from his individual and authentic self.[93]

- The third type is the colonial alienation. It concerns the condition that the colonized subject has to undergo. More specifically, it is about how colonial masters impose their ideas of progress, enlightenment, and development on the colonized subjects, who are seen as individuals that need to be saved from their backwardness and uncivilized traits. Among the three types of alienation, this type of alienation is the most multi-layered because it encompasses alienation experienced on a linguistic, cultural, and historical level. As a matter of fact, the language of colonized people neglected any role in the colonial governmental, educational, and financial system.[94]

Within the colonial scenario, every premise of humanity does not apply to the relationship between colonizer and colonized, hence the white settler does not consider the colonized individual as a human being. In fact, the latter is considered closer to an animal or an object that the colonizer can exploit for labor, as Césaire observes:

> Colonization, I repeat dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.[95]

This dehumanizing behavior does not manifest merely on a physical level, but it mainly involves the psychological and moral aspects. In fact, it enhances the

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[93] *Ibid*, 21.
[94] *Ibid*, 22.
[95] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 41.

feeling of alienation in the colonized individual.[96] Moreover, the colonizer does not even seek recognition from the colonized subject. Instead, the master seeks for labor, erasing every trace of humanity in him. This only generates an inferiority complex in the colonized person, who tries to mimic his master by trying to become white. The alienated subjects struggle to find themselves both in their traditional culture and the culture of their oppressors. Hence, they struggle to conform to their home culture after realizing that they cannot find equality in the society of their oppressors because they have acquired racist structures and prejudices that typically link black people to primitivism and wickedness.[97]

On the contrary, Frantz Fanon examines how the colonized person attempts, unsuccessfully, to get respect from colonial power since they are not taken into account or treated equally with white colonists. More specifically, Fanon takes as example how not only they compare themselves with their colonizers, but how they repeatedly turn against each other:[98]

> The Negro is comparison. There is the first truth. He is comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises. […] The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, less respectable than I. Every position of one's own, every effort at security, is based on relations of dependence, with the diminution of the other. It is the wreckage of what surrounds me that provides the foundation for my virility.[99]

This leads them to create a division within the colonized community itself, trying to adopt colonizer's behavior. Thus, rather than feeling united, they start feeling hostile, hateful, and envious against one another. Therefore, they reinforce the colony's sense of division by criticizing those who refuse to comply with the standards of the colonized individuals. As a result, the act of

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[96] Amin, "Dimensions of Alienation and the Postcolonial Context: Hegel, Marx, and Fanon", 52.
[97] *Ibid*, 53.
[98] Hussein A. Buhlan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, (New York and London: Plenum Press, 2004), 47.
[99] Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, 211.

seeking validation from his masters intensifies the black person's feeling of alienation and displacement, as he/she tries to adhere to specific standards that do not validate him/her. In fact, it actually diminishes and devalues his person.[100]

Fanon goes on to argue that the colonized subject's yearning for security and recognition is an unconscious psychological feature. To be more precise, he takes Martinican people as example, as they perfectly embody the kind of people who do not really desire to engage or communicate with their peers, but rather their behavior only reflects a need for self-validation.[101] Fanon asserts:

> The Martinicans are greedy for security. They want to compel the acceptance of their fiction. They want to be recognized in their quest for manhood. They want to make an appearance. […] Everything that an Antillean does is done for The Other. Not because The Other is the ultimate objective of his action in the sense of communication between people that Adler describes, but, more primitively, because it is The Other who corroborates him in his search for self- validation.[102]

The very attempt of wanting to "make an appearance" by the Other reflects a distorted image of self that is the result of the colonizer's influence upon the colonized subject, as the black person's sense of identity is built upon a fractured and inauthentic self, which is the root cause of his devaluation as an individual.[103]

It must be acknowledged that the colonial discourse involves a relationship between the colonizer and the colonized where 'mimicry' is the rule. According to it, the colonized subject tries to imitate the colonizer's cultural habits, values, and institutions, ending up with a result that does not reflect accurately the colonized people's characteristics.[104] More precisely, colonial mimicry aims to create a 'recognizable Other', but still maintaining an

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[100] Buhlan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, 48.
[101] *Ibid*, 49.
[102] Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, 212-213.
[103] Buhlan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, 49.
[104] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *The MIT Press* 28, (1984), 125.

aura of recognizability of one's own traits. In fact, in order for the mimicry to be effective, it must manifest its excess and highlight its differences with the colonizer.[105] The concepts of alienation and mimicry in the postcolonial context are deeply intertwined. On the one hand, mimicry represents an attempt to abandon one's own culture and habits in order to reflect themselves into a totally new culture, adopting as many aspects as possible in order to detach oneself from their original culture. On the other hand, alienation is the social and psychological detachment from one's own culture caused by the imposition of a new one, whose goal is that to shape a new identity defined by a distinct language, culture, and habits. Therefore, they both involve a sense of detachment in their own way. This imitation can never fully replicate the colonizer's traits, but instead it creates a blurred copy of the colonizer that aims to subvert their oppressor's authority. So much so that, according to Bhabha, the colonized becomes "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite[106]". The concept of ambivalence in this context regards a double relationship between the two parties, in which on the one hand the colonial authority is affirmed, whereas on the other hand it is undermined. Hence, the ambivalence is given by the fact that it represents a strategy that involves both conformity and subversion.[107] The discourse of mimicry inevitably involves an undertone of mockery, given that the colonized individual's mimicry of his colonizer's behavior, culture, and habits inherently reflects a parody of these characteristics. They will never represent a perfect replication of them, in fact this imperfect imitation highlights the gap between them. These parodic features might be observed in the adoption of the colonizer's language or manner of clothing. The colonized subject demonstrates the ineffectiveness of trying to control and impose a different way of life on them by exaggerating these qualities, turning them into a parody of their enemy.[108]

One of the most striking examples of mimicry and ambivalence applied

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[105] *Ibid*, 125.
[106] *Ibid*, 126.
[107] *Ibid*, 126.
[108] *Ibid*, 127.

to literature is represented by Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in which the character of Nwoye perfectly embodies the concepts of mimicry and alienation. His character is constantly influenced by his father, Okonkwo, a man who embodies the traditional Igbo warrior beliefs, which Nwoye finds extremely oppressive. Okonkwo wants his son to have a more masculine attitude even if this goes against his feelings, as it is expressed by his inability to be angry and emotionally hard:[109]

> So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land-masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell.[110]

Hence, he tries to mimic, and therefore acts, like he thinks a man should do, so he begins criticizing women and how they are unable to accomplish specific tasks. By acting this way, he finally receives the recognition he was looking for from his father, but ends up having contradictory feelings because of his behavior. As a matter of fact, his efforts to mimic his father's idea of a 'real' man reveals to be a harder task than what he thought.[111] Consequently, he begins to gradually distance himself from his father and the native culture that has always been a part of him in order to embrace the new religion, Christianity, a new faith that the British missionaries were propagating at the time. Hence, the mimicry here can be seen when he adopts the colonizer's religion, since he learns all the hymns, teachings, and all the religious practices. On the one hand, his conversion to Christianity represents a perfect way of mimicking the missionaries, whereas on the other hand he expresses a sense of alienation towards his family and his indigenous roots by rejecting all the values he grew up with.[112]

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[109] Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, "Chinua Achebe Writing Culture: Representations of Gender and Tradition in 'Things Fall Apart'", *Research in African Literatures* 30, no.2, (1999), 150.
[110] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 45.
[111] Osei-Nyame, "Chinua Achebe Writing Culture", 150.
[112] *Ibid*, 151.

The notion of alienation is undoubtedly connected with the concept of 'hybridity'. This term contains numerous nuances: biological, political, and cultural. Nonetheless, this term can be easily applied to the postcolonial period. This term has historical roots; in fact, it can be used to refer to the conquests of Alexander the Great in ancient Rome. After the conquests, the king encouraged marriages between different cultures in order to expand his reign and strengthen it. The matter of mixing different races has been at the center of attention for many centuries, and it remains an issue for debate in modern times, particularly in the postcolonial context.[113] In modern times, the term 'hybridity' refers to the new cultural forms that emerge from the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. Therefore, the traditional boundaries are erased, creating hybrid identities.[114] The relationship between hybridity and alienation is evident in the fact that hybridity frequently leads to an identity crisis in the colonized subject. As a result, he demonstrates a sense of estrangement from his own language, customs, and culture, which is strongly connected to the alienation he feels. The concept of hybridity might be said to defy the thin boundary that separates colonizers and colonized, oppressors and oppressed.

Under a linguistic point of view, hybridization takes place when two voices simultaneously emerge, as it is explained by the formalist Bakhtin:

> It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.[115]

He furtherly explains that this phenomenon has two forms: one is unconscious, and the other is conscious. The first one, also known as 'organic hybridization', occurs when there is a natural and spontaneous mingling of cultures without a

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[113] Amar Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.
[114] *Ibid*, 4.
[115] Mikhail M. Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 358.

specific intention.[116] Thus, it involves everyday contacts between cultures, therefore it evolves organically over time. The second one is known as 'intentional hybridization'. Here, the blending of different individuals or groups of individuals has the aim to create new cultures and identities, therefore it is consciously employed by the speakers.[117]

Additionally, the mingling of different cultures is not univocal, given that in the same way that the colonized people force their language and culture upon the colonizers, whereas the colonized people also impart elements of their own culture to the colonizers. Hybridization can also represent a challenge for the colonizer because it can be productive in some ways, given that it entails a contact between different cultures, which constantly influence each other.[118] At the same time, hybridization can be a reason why the colonial authority questions itself about the superiority of their culture, re-establishing the power dynamics between them and the people they have oppressed. Bhabha observes:

> Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.[119]

Hybrid cultures end up developing a sense of fear in the colonizer, who thought that the colonized people would accept the 'Word of God' passively, without taking into consideration the non-European background of the colonies. As a matter of fact, the colonial force encountered resistance when attempting to impose its culture upon colonized people, who responded with conflict to their

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[116] Sophie Raine, "What is Hybridity in Postcolonial Theory?", Perlego, May 8th 2024, https://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-hybridity-in-postcolonial-theory/
(last access: August 5th 2024).
[117] *Ibid*.
[118] *Ibid*.
[119] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 112.

violent manners.[120] Nevertheless, there is a discussion around the term 'hybridity' given that, according to Robert Young the use of this term has racist connotations as it was used in the past to indicate the offspring of different races. Therefore, some critics assert that the term 'hybridity' not only reinforces the racist structures, but also emphasizes the sense of otherness within the postcolonial context.[121]

When addressing the problem of alienation, the discourse of anti-colonial violence must be mentioned. The sense of alienation experienced during colonialism is a real psychological trauma that stems from the emotions of inferiority and separation from one's true self and their community. Fanon widely discusses this theme in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he asserts that a possible solution to this sense of alienation is the employment of an anti-colonial violence. This type of violence is primarily symbolic, rather than just physical.[122] In fact, according to Fanon, anti-colonial violence can lead the colonized to overcome his internalized inferiority since it represents for the colonized an act of taking back his own individuality, respect and dignity:

> At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. […] Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification.[123]

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[120] Raine, "What is Hybridity?".
[121] *Ibid*.
[122] Oladipo Fashina, "Frantz Fanon and the Ethical Justification of Anti-Colonial Violence", *Social Theory and Practice* 15, no. 2 (1989), 185.
[123] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 94.

2.2 Estrangement and Loneliness in *Frankenstein*

Alienation is a multifaceted concept since it touches the complexity of the human condition. In fact, it manifests in a variety of forms. This sense of separation and estrangement takes different connotations according to the nature of the detachment. In Shelley's novel, alienation is directly correlated to the feeling of alienation. In fact, alienation can lead individuals to detach themselves from society, or to be rejected by it, and this enhances their feeling of isolation more and more. In the case of *Frankenstein*, alienation takes different shapes. Both Victor and the Creature explore different types of alienation, as the Creature, on the one hand, experiences a profound alienation both from his own creator and from the entire society, who collectively perceive him as a monster for his physical appearance.[124] The Creature experiences a cycle according to which his alienation becomes the leading cause of alienation and vice versa.[125]

As for Victor, he experiences a self-imposed isolation provoked by his pursuit for scientific knowledge, ending up breaking every contact with his loved ones and society in general. Moreover, his alienation is furtherly caused by the horror and guilt that he experiences at the sight of his creation. His character's isolation refers to a physical and emotional withdrawal from society, a kind of isolation that, according to Seeman: "This usage is most common in descriptions of the intellectual role, where writers refer to the detachment of the intellectual from popular cultural standards – one who […] has become estranged from his society and the culture it carries".[126]

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[124] Alienation and otherness are very recurring themes in postcolonial literature, even though they have a long history in the literatures of various periods and countries. For a comprehensive understanding of the themes of alienation and estrangement across literary history, it is essential to examine examples from earlier literary figures. In fact, Shelley's Creature in Frankenstein is directly connected to both more contemporary characters, such as Friday from *Robinson Crusoe*, to even more classic ones like Caliban from *The Tempest*. The trope of the alienated figure reaches back to even more ancient times with the Wild-Man from the Medieval tradition, who embodies the notion of the primitive and the savage.

[125] Eleanor Salotto, "'Frankenstein' and Dis(re)membered Identity", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 24, no. 3, (1994), 192.

[126] Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation", *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (December 1959): 788-789.

The feeling of alienation experienced by the Creature is shared by his creator as well. As a matter of fact, the very first time he saw his creation coming to life, he finds himself in front of a discontinuous figure from which he wanted to distance himself as much as possible, both physically and figuratively, since he was accountable for what he saw in front of him. The Creature is a fragmented and dismembered figure which will never reach a sense of unity.[127] This is one of the main reasons for which, as soon as the Creature sees his own reflection in the mirror, his alienation grows exponentially instead of finding a way to unity: "How was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror".[128]
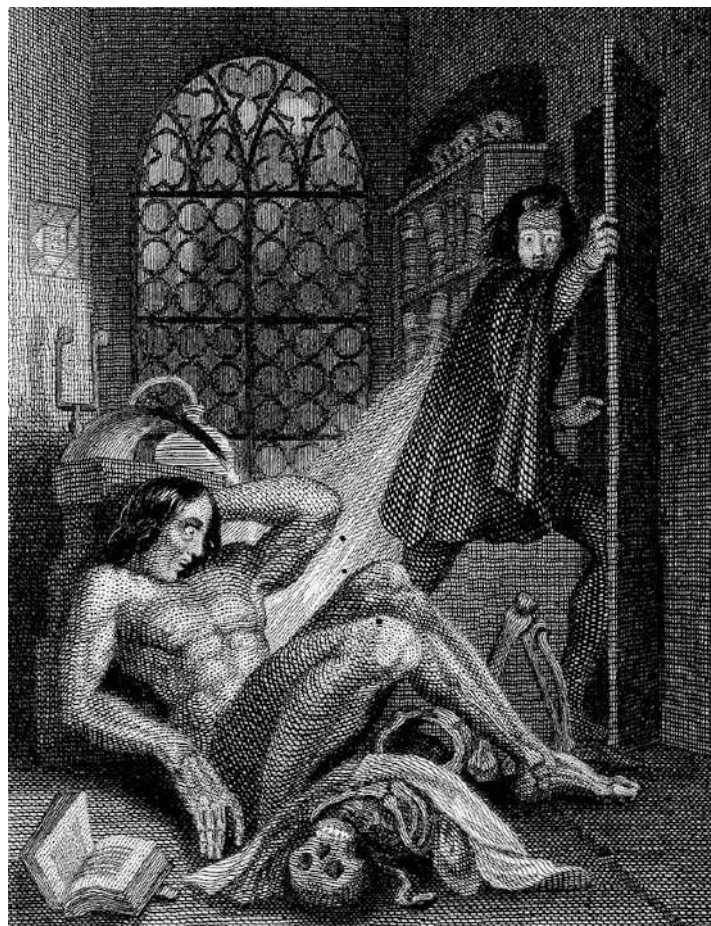

Figure 4. Theodor von Holst, Victor Frankenstein becoming disgusted at his Creation, 1831. Steel engraving, published by Colburn and Bentley, London.

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[127] Salotto, "Dis(re)membered Identity", 192.
[128] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 93.

The alienation felt by the doctor is a feeling that he passes to his creation, even if the Creature does not share any genetic trait with him.[129] This can be seen in the words of the Creature following his experiences with the readings of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther*, and Plutarch's *Lives*: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them".[130] These same questions not only help him figure out his own identity and purpose, but they also reflect the questions Victor has always been asking himself about the origins of life. Other than that, this line perfectly summarizes the feeling of alienation under every aspect, given that the Creature finds himself alienated from his origins, his actual state of existence, and his purpose in life.[131]

Hence, the question of origins reveals itself to be one of the main themes related to the topic of alienation, since understanding one's origins can represent a means through which one can find their own identity and self-understanding. This can lead a person to eradicate their sense of alienation. In the case of the Creature in *Frankenstein*, the very first time he experienced alienation is, in fact, due to the lack of established origins, given that he came into the world through unconventional ways.[132] To be more precise, the Creature's creation occurs over several moments, rather than simply one, as it is customary. Undoubtedly, the iconic birth of the Creature is described by Shelley through several Gothic features. In fact, it is the one that takes place on a stormy night in Frankenstein's laboratory in a dim light following months spent apart from his loved ones and society in general, devoting his time to the study of natural philosophy in order to create a new form of life. Yet, the moment of the birth of the Creature will take place in other parts of the novel. As a matter of fact, a significant moment that involves the birth of the Creature

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[129] Salotto, "Dis(re)membered Identity", 194.
[130] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 105.
[131] Salotto, "Dis(re)membered Identity", 195.
[132] *Ibid*, 195.

takes place right after his actual creation, when Victor has a gruesome dream:[133]

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created.[134]

The dream in question depicts a conflation of identities along with an absence of boundaries that regard a multitude of characters, namely Frankenstein, his mother, Elizabeth, and the Creature. As the dream ends, the figure of Victor's mother is substituted by the Creature, hence the reader is faced with another version of the Creature's birth.[135]

The theme of alienation is a central motif in Shelley's novel, both for Frankenstein and his Creature. As for the latter, he is constantly rejected and alienated from society merely for his appearance. Due to his grotesque appearance, society perceives him with disgust and hatred. Despite his good intentions, the inhabitants of the community, whose minds operate according to the social norms and rules, instantly presume he is dangerous and harbors evil intentions.[136] The Creature's attempt to integrate into society is met with immediate rejection; as a result, he is compelled to go on a voyage of humanization, according to which he seeks to acquire knowledge and the use of language in order to fit in the society that once rejected him. Once the Creature has developed mentally and culturally after reading the books he finds in the hut of the De Lacey's family, he finally understands that the society he

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[133] *Ibid*, 195.
[134] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 47.
[135] Salotto, "Dis(re)membered Identity", 197.
[136] Proshanta Sarkar, "Rise and Fall of the Monster: A Study of Inequality and Social Madness in Frankenstein", *New Literaria* 1, no. 1, (August-September 2020), 115.

wants to be part of will never actually accept him for his physical appearance.[137]
It was precisely during his stay in the De Lacey family's hut that he began to
wonder about the ways in which his nature differed from that of humans:

> And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew
> that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued
> with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature
> as man. […] I cannot describe to you the agony that these reflections inflicted upon
> me.[138]

From this episode, the Creature will experience a deep feeling of alienation that
will drive him into violence and desperation. The Creature's journey to find his
real identity is pointless, given that he is not even given a name in the first
place, unlike any normal individual within society. In addition to that, his body
will never reflect the body of a human being, since his body is made up from
parts of different bodies that belonged to deceased humans and animals.[139]

It is important to emphasize that Victor does not view his creation as
being equal to humans. As a matter of fact, he uses terms that are outside the
human semantic field while referring to the Creature, such as 'filthy
daemon'[140], 'wretch'[141], 'insect'[142]. Moreover, his gigantic stature furtherly
highlights the fact that he is far from belonging to the human world.
Nonetheless, the first approach of the Creature towards the realm of food sees
him favoring a vegetarian diet:[143] "My food is not that of man; I do not destroy
the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient
nourishment".[144] His demeanor, which distances him from cannibalism, further
demonstrates his innocence and purity, which are typical of early human life.

The Creature's innate goodness is demonstrated by his interactions with

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[137] *Ibid*, 115.
[138] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 98-99.
[139] Sarkar, "Rise and Fall of the Monster", 116.
[140] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 62.
[141] *Ibid*, 136.
[142] *Ibid*, 81.
[143] Sarkar, "Rise and Fall of the Monster", 116.
[144] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 120.

different humans throughout the novel. Indeed, when he encounters a young girl by the river, his benign disposition tells him to save the little girl from the state of danger in which she found herself. Although he prevented her from drowning, he is met with hostility by the girl's companion, who, scared by his appearance, immediately shoots him. Another proof of the Creature's purity is shown by the fact that he provided for the De Lacey's family and helped anonymously, as a pure act of goodness towards strangers. Hence, these acts perfectly reflect a behavior that belongs to a newborn child, which is put into a society that constantly despises and rejects him merely because of his outward features.[145] From these episodes, the Creature gradually begins to develop a deep sense of alienation, which is a response to the constant rejection and isolation he is faced with. The novel demonstrates how the Creature is a being who constantly searches for love and companionship, yet he slowly transforms into a being driven by revenge as a consequence of the society he is surrounded of. Therefore, the transition from innocence to evil can be interpreted as a natural growth of a human being, who goes through the stage of childhood, characterized by purity and goodness, and enters adulthood, by progressively losing his/her inner goodness and meets feelings of evil, corruption, and immorality. As a matter of fact, the Creature starts injuring people once he reaches the adult state, taking full responsibility of his actions and for the possible consequences.[146]

The Creature's experience of alienation can easily be narrated by drawing parallels with the idea of 'Orientalism' conceived by Edward Said. According to the notorious postcolonial critic, Orientalism is defined as:

> A style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'. Thus a very large mass of writers […] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political

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[145] Sarkar, "Rise and Fall of the Monster", 116.
[146] *Ibid*, 118.

accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind', destiny, and so on.[147]

Thus, the representation of the Eastern world (particularly Asia and the Middle East) is completely biased and modified under a Western point of view. In fact, the Eastern cultures are perceived as backwards, exotic, and therefore treated as inferior cultures. This theory promotes colonialism and imperialism by sustaining the superiority of Western culture over Eastern civilization. Starting from this idea, the concept of the 'other' as an individual who belongs to another culture, or speaks a different language and so on, finds similarities in Mary Shelley's novel. In fact, there are two characters who reflect the idea of the 'other', namely the Creature and Safie, also known as 'the Arabian'. As for the first one, the Creature receives the status of 'the other' as soon as he was born, precisely by his own creator, given that he possessed both human and 'alien' features. Nonetheless, the emphasis is on the Creature's skin and eyes, the main points that are typically considered while attempting to determine a race.[148] As a matter of fact, the physical description of the Creature presents remarkable differences with that of Elizabeth, who, on the other hand, is described with the 'brightest living gold'[149] hair and 'cloudless'[150] blue eyes. The Creature is described as having several characteristics in common with Middle Eastern and Asian people, such as yellow or brown skin, as these groups are typically characterized in Western society.[151]

The first ten chapters of the novel are narrated according to the perception of his creator. Therefore, this creates a bias towards the Creature, given that the reader is forced to believe the version provided by Victor himself, taking his words as necessarily true. This shares an analogy with the concept of Orientalism, since the only description of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures is provided by the British society, which restricts their voices and does not take

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[147] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2-3.
[148] Terri Pinyerd, "The Other: Orientalism in Frankenstein", *Hohonu, English 305* 14, (2016), 55.
[149] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 27.
[150] *Ibid*, 28.
[151] Pinyerd, "Orientalism in Frankenstein", 55.

their opinions into account.[152] Another example of the unreliability of the story, which is also typical of the imperialist system, can be found at the very beginning of the story. In fact, the story is narrated from Robert Walton's point of view. The reader is told the story of Frankenstein only through the letters addressed to Walton's sister but, when Victor joins the crew, another version of his story is narrated, which now also involves the Creature. Therefore, Victor's story is presented as fact, and the reader is compelled to accept it without considering the possibility that something has been made up. This specific narrative is an example of how British people came to know the 'Oriental' world and culture.[153]

Safie is a character that is firstly introduced as 'the Arabian'.[154] Despite this, the Creature immediately distinguishes her as different from the other characters in the hut, such as Felix and Agatha: "Her voice was musical but unlike that of either of my friends".[155] Throughout the whole story, Safie does not cover a fundamental role. In fact, her story is narrated through other characters. Moreover, Sofie's character is objectified, given that she is considered a prize for Felix's efforts in helping her father while he was imprisoned, rather than a character with her own story to narrate. As a matter of fact, she can be considered a silenced character, since she never engages in conversations and only appears through other characters' stories.[156] Nonetheless, her objectification is to some extent a strategy she uses in her favor, given that she plans to stay in a country where women have more freedom, as Shelley states: "The prospect of marrying a Christian and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society was enchanting to her".[157]

The experience of alienation is strictly connected to the concept of 'unhomeliness'. This term was introduced by Homi Bhabha, and it indicates

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[152] *Ibid*, 55.
[153] *Ibid*, 55.
[154] *Ibid*, 55.
[155] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 95.
[156] Pinyerd, "Orientalism in Frankenstein", 55.
[157] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 101.

the existential and psychological displacement felt by the individual in the colonial context, who experiences a feeling of estrangement towards the environment he/she is put in. 'Unhomeliness' suggests a sense of a deep dislocation from a place, where the feeling of familiar becomes unfamiliar.[158] Therefore, there is an interference with every sense of belonging to a place, a feeling in which one does not feel 'at home'. In the realm of literature, it is typically experienced by the characters who faced rejection by their society, or a cultural displacement, causing them to struggle finding a sense of identity.[159] Homi Bhabha describes this term as: "the jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, displacement of time and person, its defilement of culture and territory, refuses the ambition of any total theory of colonial oppression".[160] This concept can be easily discussed when analyzing this novel. The Creature is made up by mingling different body parts, making him a result of both human and non-human features.[161] According to the definition of unhomeliness, the Creature perfectly embodies the characteristics of this term, since he experiences life as an outsider under every aspect, both in terms of image and social interactions. Unhomeliness can also be seen by the figure of Victor, more precisely in his act of creation of the Creature, an act that represents a disruption with the natural order of things, creating a being that fully embodies the sense of alienation.[162] The feeling of unhomeliness is perfectly summarized by the Creature himself, as he states:

> "I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around, and I have no relation or friend upon earth. "These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me, and know little of me. I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever."[163]

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[158] Iesar Ahmad, Muhammad Younas, Muhammad Tayyab, "Identifying Unhomeliness and Mimicry: A Postcolonial Analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*", *Journal for Academic Reaserch for Humanities* 4, no. 2 (June 2024), 43.
[159] *Ibid*, 43.
[160] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 41.
[161] Ahmad, "Identifying Unhomeliness and Mimicry", 43.
[162] *Ibid*, 46.
[163] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 109.

The Creature's need for acceptance and his innate sense of dislocation from the place he is in perfectly mirrors the loneliness of postcolonial subjects. In fact, the similarities between the Creature's experiences and those of the marginalized communities in the postcolonial context are strikingly similar. As a matter of fact, the colonizers aimed to disrupt the colonized people's cultural and social identities by employing a physical and psychological displacement of the indigenous populations.[164] In the case of *Frankenstein*, the Creature often questions his place in the world. Another remarkable link between the concept of unhomeliness and *Frankenstein* is represented by Victor himself. More specifically, through his appropriation of body parts from multiple sources, which replicates the colonial practice of looting as many resources as possible from the colonized territories.[165] As a consequence, the 'grotesque amalgamation'[166] of body parts serves both to convey a sense of dread and, more importantly, represents the fragmentation of indigenous civilizations during the imperial period. Furthermore, the Creature embodies the perfect example of a character that constantly struggles with a lack of wholeness, which directly reminds of the violence used during the imperialistic campaign.[167]

The necessity for a female counterpart in the story also represents a potential way to relieve the Creature of his sense of alienation and loneliness. The yearning for companionship represents a feature that makes the Creature lean towards the human realm, since it is a primal and unconscious emotion that every human being experiences as a means to overcome the sense of solitude and isolation.[168] The request for a mate perfectly depicts the Creature's disturbed soul and desperate attempt to find a connection with another being, as it is clear by the Creature's words: "We may not part until you have promised to comply with my requisition. I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny

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[164] Ahmad, "Identifying Unhomeliness and Mimicry", 46.
[165] *Ibid*, 46.
[166] *Ibid*, 47.
[167] *Ibid*, 47.
[168] Erin Hawley, "The Bride and Her Afterlife", 220.

herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create".[169]

Yet, the desire of a female companion led the Creature to propose an agreement to his creator that involved an escape. In fact, the Creature decided to abandon Europe and the society that he had never been a part of and reach another continent, as long as his desire for a mate would be fulfilled in order to put an end to his desperate state of loneliness and alienation:

It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. […] Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request! […] If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America.[170]

This request deeply touches Victor's soul, but at the same time he sees this as an opportunity to put an end to the numerous murders he had caused until that point. Therefore, he decides to agree to his request, and retires to the Orkney Isles to begin his process of creation of a new being. Nonetheless, his pursuit of scientific knowledge became an obsession towards the creation of life, a feeling he had already experienced while creating the first Creature. Once again, Shelley creates another female figure who is silenced, given that the only time in which the female Creature is mentioned, is when she describes how more horrifying the newborn would have been, solely for the fact that it was a female:[171] "I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness".[172]

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[169] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 118.
[170] *Ibid*, 119-120.
[171] Erin Hawley, "The Bride and Her Afterlife", 218.
[172] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 135-136.

Figure 5. Bride of Frankenstein, directed by James Whale (Universal Pictures, 1935).

For this reason, this task led Victor not only to alienate himself from any relationship with his loved ones, but more importantly to neglect every contact with his fiancée, Elizabeth, to whom he was destined from a very young age. As he works, he starts to have doubts about the morality of his work, and as soon as he notices the male Creature leering at him from the window, he commits one of the most violent acts throughout the novel. In fact, he decides to demolish the incomplete body, destroying the Creature's only means of escaping his estrangement and alienation, and enhancing his feelings of hatred towards both his creator and the entire humanity.[173]

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[173] Erin Hawley, "The Bride and Her Afterlife", 219.

2.3 Disconnected by Language: The Creature's Alienation in *Frankenstein*

The role of language is fundamental in interpersonal relationships since it is the most effective way for individuals to interact with one another. Hence, the question of language is intrinsically connected to power, given that one can communicate with another individual only if they speak the same language. The linguistic matter has always fascinated human beings. In fact, it is a subject that has been discussed about for thousands of years, considering that some texts about the inability to communicate have always been existing, including the story of the tower of Babel.[174] As we know, the word 'Babel' itself means 'confusion'. This episode perfectly explains how language is a fundamental characteristic that unites human beings, and how it is necessary for a society to function. In that case, the lack of communication of the Babylonians led to a complete alienation of the individual, following the scattering of the populations around the entire world.

In the colonial context, the discourse of language becomes crucial because it involves the colonizer's power and the imposition of his language. The imposition of a new language takes place because the colonizer aims to assert control over the colonized, providing them a sense of dislocation and alienation starting from a linguistic point of view, but involving different other areas of interest, such as the cultural and religious ones. This inevitably puts at risk the linguistic identity of the indigenous populations, whose native language is denigrated and erased.[175] Since the colonized individual is unavoidably influenced by the new language, they will experience a further sense of alienation, which will cause them to develop an inferiority complex towards the colonizer. This will lead the colonized individual to reject their own language, but never fully adopting the colonizer's. Language defines a culture and is responsible for the share of it, therefore it also must pass on the culture and the

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[174] Dorota Chabrajska, "Alienation from Language?", *From the Editors* 34, no. 2 (2021), 13.
[175] Ananya Ravishankar, "Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language", *The Trinity Papers*, (2020), 1.

history of its people. As Ravishankar states:

> By systematically and aggressively burying a language, also buried with it is every
> historical event, every story, every struggle, and every person who existed through
> it. It has the capacity to define oneself, to either make one visible or invisible. […]
> To take away one's language is to take away their means of making themselves
> visible and perceiving themselves.[176]

Language carries all the experiences of a group of people who share a sense of unity and belonging, which stems from having the same background, made up of all the experiences and cultural traditions that shape their identity and values. The colonizer invaded this environment, intruding on every aspect of space and culture.[177]

Language inevitably carries some inherent connotations which Sartre defines as 'language habits'. According to them, specific cultures shape their perspective of the world which is always changing. In some cases, this also carries racial prejudices, since words can imply certain values. That is to say, these words aim to convey the cultural and racial biases of the colonizers.[178] As a matter of fact, the colonized individual who assimilates this concept will eventually adopt their colonizers' point of view and start hating their blackness.[179] Thus, from a linguistic standpoint, language becomes an effective means by which people create their perceptions about the world, and in a colonial setting, it functions as a weapon for maintaining racial inequalities. Eventually, adopting the colonizer's language causes the colonizer to reject their own cultural identity, resulting in a more severe kind of alienation.

In the case of Frankenstein, the role of language is central to the development of the characters and their interactions, especially in the case of the Creature, who is a character for which communication with other people is

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[176] Ravishankar, "Linguistic Imperialism", 1.
[177] *Ibid*, 2.
[178] For a more comprehensive exploration of the role of language as a tool of cultural domination, read *Linguistic Imperialism* by Robert Phillipson and *Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.
[179] Ravishankar, "Linguistic Imperialism", 2.

of extremely importance. The Creature's role of language is crucial since it represents the only way for him to establish connections with human beings, given that his physical appearance constantly hinders him from forming relationships with other people.[180] The Creature's outward ugliness and monstrosity does not reflect his inner disposition. In fact, his ability to articulate his thoughts and emotions are extremely human and pure, which makes the reader change his/her opinion about him, as He is, in fact, not evil or monstruous at all. As a matter of fact, his path towards evil and wickedness takes place gradually. Only once he is faced with the natural evil of humanity which can be witnessed by the rejection he receives from society.[181] In this context, language is both a bridge and a barrier. On the one hand, it is a bridge because it represents the only means through which the Creature can connect with people, on the other (hand) it is a barrier because it enhances his sense of isolation, given that his words cannot overcome the prejudices to which he is subjected.

It must be acknowledged how the Creature, despite being the product of different bodies and more generally a strange experiment, possesses the ability to use language.[182] His speaking skills stem from a long period of observation of the De Lacey's family, from which he slowly started to analyze every sound they made from a distance. After this, the Creature started to mimic the sounds of the cottagers: "I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it".[183] By degrees, he started associating these sounds with objects, emotions, and so forth. A remarkable event that helped the Creature learn the language is the arrival of Safie, who shares the Creature's same circumstances. In fact, they are both characters who have nothing to do with

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[180] Peter Brooks, "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in Frankenstein", *New Literary History* 9, no. 3, (1978), 593.
[181] *Ibid*, 593.
[182] *Ibid*, 594.
[183] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 91-92.

the language spoken by the people surrounding them, so they find themselves alienated from every conversation and context. In this context, the Creature is like a secondary pupil that is not included because of his appearance. However, the most important way in which the Creature learned how to speak is through the reading of some classics, namely Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther*, and Plutarch's *Lives*. These pieces of literature not only improved his language skills, but most importantly, they shaped the Creature's understanding of human nature and morals, other than how emotions and human relationships work.[184] The eloquence developed by the Creature is perfectly illustrated by this passage in the text:

> 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. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.[185]

A striking characteristic of the Creature is that he uses a linguistic register that does not reflect his appearance. In fact, Shelley would rather write a character whose sophisticated vocabulary is obviously the result of hours spent reading classics, rather than using grotesque noises and gestures to communicate, a trait that would have matched his external features.[186] To some extent, the Creature is aware of his weakness, so he emphasizes the use of language as a means of hiding his external ugliness, which he finds revolting and alienating. In fact, he only plans to exit the hut he is confined in and show himself only once he has mastered his language skills: "Although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure".[187] Thanks to the medium of language, the Creature manages to create a connection with Victor, who for

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[184] Peter Brooks, "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts", 592.
[185] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 82.
[186] Peter Brooks, "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts", 592.
[187] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 93.

the first time feels empathy towards his creation: "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes felt a wish to console him".[188]

In conclusion, the importance of language and reading allow the Creature's discovery of self since their mastery enabled him to learn the secrets of his creation. This self-discovery journey also represents for the Creature a way to cover up the gap between his origins and the human beings.[189] However, he will never get to comprehend the real nature of the human being, considering that the Creature's benign nature clashes with the human behavior, which involves horrid events such as wars and bloodshed:[190]

> Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? […] For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing.[191]

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[188] *Ibid*, 120.
[189] Ghassan Fadhil Radhi, "Language as a Means of Emancipation in Shelley's Frankenstein", *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research* 4, no. 9, (2020), 45.
[190] *Ibid*, 46.
[191] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 98.

CHAPTER THREE

Domination and Rebellion: The Master-Slave Dialectic in Shelley and Postcolonial Theory

3.1 Dominance and Resistance: The Master-Slave Paradigm in Postcolonial Theory

There is a very complex and deep-rooted relationship between colonizer and colonized, as it is a reflection of the larger power structures that involve the power and control elements at the basis of that relation. In fact, at the very core of it, there is an imbalance of power that eventually results in the dehumanization of the colonized subject. In this chapter, I am going to investigate the master-slave relationship that stems from an imperialistic view of the world. As a matter of fact, the colonizer denies the colonized individual the basic human rights and dignity. For this reason, people will perceive the connection between the two parties as one of master and slave. This violence is manifested not only on a physical level, but it extends to the psychological realm given that the colonizer aims to impose his values, identity, and beliefs onto the slave, resulting in an erasure of cultural identity.

This relationship only represents a microcosm when it is compared to the imperialist enterprise, portraying on a smaller scale the events that are replicated on a larger scale during colonial control. That is, episodes of institutionalized racism, violence, and exploitation of the colonized people happen constantly. Within this relationship, the master exercises dominance over him, treating him like a piece of property deprived of humanity, autonomy, or rights.[192] These dynamics only represent the beginning of what would be perpetrated outside the colonial context, given that these are concepts that extended to the modern world. In fact, these deep-rooted racial hierarchies and social injustices persist outside the colonial context and found a basis in the

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[192] Mariana Teixeira, "Master-Slave Dialectics (in the Colonies)", *Krisis – Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 38, no. 2, (2018), 108.

distorted societies across the world. As a matter of fact, these colonial relationships shaped the dynamics of the modern era, both literally and symbolically characterized by a feeling of alienation and oppression of the colonized subject that continue to persist/resonate in postcolonial texts.[193]

Within the postcolonial context, the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon analyzed the master-slave relationship under the perspective previously provided by thinkers such as Hegel and Marx. Hence, in order to understand how the master-slave relationship works it must be acknowledged how these two philosophers conceived the master-slave relationship. Indeed, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, reaching the status of an independent self-consciousness requires the other person's desire. This desire can be fulfilled through three main points: firstly, in order to be recognized as a human, one must prioritize his/her human desire over all animal desires. Secondly, this implies that one must be ready to sacrifice his/her life in order to value their humanity.[194] The third and last requirement involves a conflictual relationship between consciousnesses, in which one needs to completely eradicate and exclude everything else in order to declare its self-certainty. Hence, the elimination of the other's consciousness also requires putting the consciousness's life at risk. This process only accepts two solutions:

> This struggle to the death can lead either to the complete annihilation of one consciousness (or both), whereby the process of mutual recognition will never be complete, or to one consciousness surrendering to the other in the face of fear of imminent death, thus becoming the slave (Knecht).[195]

Following this context, the other becomes the master since he showed no fear of dying. However, the master needs the slave not only for his mere satisfaction, but in order to affirm himself as an autonomous being. For this reason, the master is only theoretically independent. On the other hand, the slave acquires

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[193] *Ibid*, 108.
[194] Biook Behnam, Farhad Azimi, and Alireza Baghban Kanani, "Slave-master Relationship and Post-colonial Translation and Teaching", *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 8, no. 3, (2017), 566.
[195] Teixeira, "Master-Slave Dialectics", 108.

an awareness of himself as an independent self-consciousness.

Karl Marx did not address this problem directly in his works, but it is certain that he influenced the works of philosophers like Sartre, who consequently inspired Fanon's theories. According to Marx, the idea of master-slave relationship can also be applied to the worker and the slave in the capitalist society. More precisely, the proletarian can overcome the class domination once he realizes that he is the real subject of production.[196] Differently from Hegel, this approach requires the proletariat to act upon this realization leading the ruling class to acknowledge him/her as an independent creature, ideally leading to an emancipated society. Fanon takes this way of thinking as a basis and states that it must be slightly changed in order to adapt to the colonial discourse, bringing new elements to the question: "This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem".[197] As a matter of fact, the master-slave model is faithfully reflected in the white settler-black slave dynamics, even though it shows some differences. The first difference stands in the fact that the black man does not require this struggle, therefore he can achieve the recognition he desires through the enslavement to his colonizer: "When there are no longer slaves, there are no longer masters. The Negro is a slave who has been allowed to assume the attitude of a master. The white man is a master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table."[198] A further significant distinction lies in Hegel's analysis, where the slave, once he starts to see the fruits of his labor and realizes his own worth, he turns away from his master.[199] This process allows him to find a sense of self-worth and identity that makes him independent from his master. However, in Fanon's case, the black man, instead of turning toward the object for self-realization, he turns toward his master in a desperate attempt of seeking the recognition and validation as a human being.[200] As a matter of fact,

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[196] *Ibid*, 108.
[197] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 40.
[198] Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, 219.
[199] Behnam, Azimi, and Kanani, "Master-Slave Dialectics", 109.
[200] *Ibid*, 109.

the black man only perceives himself through the eyes of his master, given that he internalizes the racist ideology imposed by his colonizer. The black individual gets lost in a world where the colonizer's framework is associated with everything that is good and pure. In Fanon's own words:

> The Negro selects himself as an object capable of carrying the burden of original sin. The white man chooses the black man for this function, and the black man who is white also chooses the black man. The black Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself.[201]

In the colonial context, the colonized individual becomes a victim of the system he is in. In fact, the set of ideologies established in the colonial context reduces the human being (the colonized), to a mere object rather than a human being provided with intelligence and a consciousness of his/her own. This process of objectification contributes to the functioning of the economic and social structures that shape the colonial environment. Nonetheless, it is a result of the colonized people being assigned the role of slave, since the enslaved individuals are not regarded as human beings with rights and dignity, but rather as commodities to be owned, sold, and exploited.

Consequently, the process of objectification becomes heavily influenced by societal factors, and it is often related to episodes that involve denying groups of people their human rights, such as genocide and mass killings.[202] Comprehending the psychological characteristics of the colonized can be helpful in resolving the difficult subject of self-objectification that emerges within this colonial setting and that represents an obstacle for the social change. These two phenomena can be analyzed either as two distinct factors or be considered as the result of one other. Whereas objectification is a phenomenon that a dominant group does toward a group of people they consider inferior to them, self-objectification is something that members of a group do to

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[201] Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks*, 192.
[202] Eileen L. Zurbriggen, "Objectification, Self-Objectification, and Societal Change", *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 1, no. 1, (2013), 189.

themselves after having their brain plagiarized into thinking like their oppressors.[203] The origins of the idea of objectification date back to Charles H. Cooley and his discussion about the looking-glass self. The sociologist stated that our sense of self is merely a product of social construction, that is, it is a mirror of how other people perceive us. More accurately, this process implies that people, put in a social context, form a sense of self-based on how they believe they are perceived by their surroundings. Hence, the social interactions here are used as a kind of 'mirror'.[204] Cooley's theory presupposes that even though developing a sense of self might seem a lonely and personal process, it actually involves the society in its entirety. This explains how society and the individual are strictly connected, and not two separate entities. Around the same time, the sociologist Du Bois invented the term 'double consciousness', a feeling experienced by the colonized individual who does not get to know his 'true self-consciousness'. These scholars' contribution led the foundations for the future theories that came out, as they considered that the construction of the self-involved the perspective of other individuals.[205]

Regarding the idea of objectification, several theories have been proposed that examine it from a different perspective. As a matter of fact, the concept of objectification received a particular attention from many feminist scholars. The objectification from a sexual standpoint is one of the several mechanisms through which the colonial power exerts its control over the colonized population.[206] Since colonized women were objectified, hence dehumanized, they were reduced to nothing more than possessions to be used and exploited. Since the colonizers considered the colonized people as inferior and exotic objects, they also felt entitled to hypersexualize them, in order to maintain the social and racial divisions between the two factions.[207] In 1788,

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[203] *Ibid*, 190.
[204] Nicolò Bicego, "The Theory of Self-Image: The Concept of the Looking-Glass Self", The Collector, April 1st 2024, https://www.thecollector.com/self-image-looking-glass-self-concept/ (last access: September 8th 2024).
[205] Zurbriggen, "Objectification", 190.
[206] *Ibid*, 190.
[207] Caren M. Holmes, "The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women", *Black & Gold* 2, no. 2, (2016), 1.

Thomas Jefferson states that the black woman is naturally hyper-sexualized since they are culturally depicted as having an impressive sexual capacity. Unfortunately, these false allegations promoted the sexual exploitation and the creation of a rape culture within the American slavery context since they were considered as intellectually and morally inferior to white men.[208] These theories were further validated by social Darwinism, which claimed that black women's sexual inferiority stemmed from an innate evolutionary defectiveness. Furthermore, female slaves were subject to invasive inspections of their reproductive features when they were sold. This furtherly shows how these people were constantly dehumanized not only as economic and reproductive commodities, but also following a sexual approach. Moreover, when cases of sexual relations between black women and white men were brought to courts, it was black women to be considered (the) seducers of white men, hence to be subjected to harsher punishments.[209] For this reason, these theories reinforced black women's objectification and subjugation. This practice furtherly enhanced the unfair hierarchical structures and the oppressive systems, which eventually underscores the master-slave dynamics within the colonies.

Philosophers also intervened in the discussion of the term 'objectification'. Among them, LeMoncheck gave her contribution by stating that the objectification of a woman involves a transformation from a person who is fully human and, accordingly, deserving of human rights, to someone seen as lacking the dignity of a human being, hence belonging to a lower status.[210] Besides LeMoncheck, other philosophers, like Nussbaum, provided an accurate analysis of the term 'objectification'. She addresses the question by hypothesizing seven ways in which a person can be 'treated as a thing':

- *Instrumentality*, which describes the practice of using someone as a tool and solely relating to them in order to accomplish one's interests. This reduction of a person to a means disregards their personal needs, desires,

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[208] *Ibid*, 2-3.
[209] *Ibid*, 3.
[210] Zurbriggen, "Objectification", 195.

and rights, effectively objectifying them and stripping them of their agency.[211]

- *Denial of autonomy* involves the treatment of an individual as someone who is fundamentally incapable of exercising self-determination. The person's sense of self and autonomy are severely undermined when they are denied of the ability to behave according to their own values and preferences.[212]

- The idea of *inertness*, similarly to the one mentioned above, comes into play when someone is thought to be incapable of taking independent action or making decisions, so they are treated accordingly.[213]

- *Fungibility*, when someone sees another individual as just another interchangeable part of a system, reducing them to a generic object without any special meaning for them.[214]

- *Violability*, which refers to a situation in which an individual's personal boundaries are not only ignored, but considered legitimate to cross and break.[215]

- *Ownership* refers to the literal possibility of owning someone, hence considering them as a commodity that can easily be bought and sold. This perspective damages people's self-worth and also supports oppressive and unequal systems.[216]

- *Denial of subjectivity*, refers to the practice of invalidating an individual's personal feelings, experiences, and inner life, effectively treating them as if they hold no intrinsic value or significance. As a result, the individual is rendered invisible, and their fundamental worth as a human being is undermined, reinforcing a larger pattern of marginalization and dehumanization.[217]

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[211] *Ibid*, 191.
[212] *Ibid*, 191.
[213] *Ibid*, 191.
[214] *Ibid*, 191.
[215] *Ibid*, 191.
[216] *Ibid*, 191.
[217] *Ibid*, 191.

In the following years, several psychologists and sociologists expanded this idea, theorizing new ideas connected to objectification. In fact, in 2009, Leyens developed the theory of 'infra-humanization', according to which some people of groups of people are considered human, whereas others are seen as less human, or better as non-human animals. What is concerned in this context is the theme of secondary emotions, which are those emotions who differentiate the humans from non-human animals. That is to say, the typical emotions felt by both these categories are the so called 'primary' emotions, such as sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and so on.[218] On the other hand, the so called 'secondary' emotions refer to pride, admiration, and remorse, who are not shared by both humans and non-human animals. As a matter of fact, what makes the non-human animals unworthy of the title of 'humans' is the lack of these secondary emotions, which makes them to some extent inferior. This concept is intrinsically connected to the notion of dehumanization, which is a characteristic that is typical of the colonial experience. In this case, according to Haslam, the individual that is denied their human nature is considered not only as an inferior version of a human being, but as an alien. Therefore, the concepts of dehumanization, objectification, and alienation are interconnected, and all of them are deeply rooted in the colonial environment.[219]

Within the context of the colonies, the master-slave relationship stems from an imbalance in relation of power between the colonizer and the colonized, wherein the colonizer holds the authority and accordingly exerts control over the indigenous populations. The practice of 'forced assimilation' was based on forcing the colonized people to adopt the language, religion, traits, and habits of the colonial power. Forced assimilation results in the absorption of groups of colonized people into the dominant culture of the colonizers, leading to the gradual loss of their individual identities and their native cultural traditions.[220] This practice was widely employed during

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[218] *Ibid*,192.
[219] *Ibid*, 192.
[220] Elizabeth Prine Pauls, "Assimilation", Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/assimilation-society (last access: September 10th 2024).

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colonialism and has persisted in its aftermath, as it continues to manifest in contemporary instances of racism. Hence, forced assimilation still haunts us as a society, for instance through policies that suppress cultural religious expression. This phenomenon perfectly echoes the colonial mindset, which aimed to erase one's culture by trying to impose a different one.[221] During the process of assimilation, colonized people undergo a process named 'culture shedding', which Berry in 1997 describes as the moment in which individuals or groups of people relinquish some aspects of their original cultural identity. As a matter of fact, they shed one's native language, customs, and other cultural practices that were once integral to the identity of the colonized people.[222]

Figure 6. Forced Assimilation. Denver Museum of Nature & Science Catalog.

Of course, cultural shedding is just a consequence of the dynamics established beforehand by the master-slave relationship, as they both share the processes

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[221] Iffath U. B. Syed, "Forced Assimilation is an unhealthy policy intervention: the case of the hijab ban in France and Quebec, Canada", *The International Journal of Human Rights* 17, no. 3, (2013), 429.
[222] Christian L. Van Tonder and Werner Soontiens, "Migrant Acculturation and the Workplace", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 143, (2014), 1041.

of control, domination that are typical between the colonizer and the colonized. A clear example of how cultural shedding provokes a violation of the colonized individuals' cultural and religious ideologies can be seen in contemporary policies in countries such as France and Canada.[223] As a matter of fact, the headscarf ban from public schools in France represents an infringement of Muslim people's religious and cultural freedoms. Besides, it creates an association between Islam and fundamentalism, therefore enhancing Islamophobia among citizens:[224]

> By imposing a ban, Muslim women's choice to wear a hijab has been taken away, thereby restricting self-autonomy. A consequence of this policy is that it may restrict prayers, mindfulness and spirituality, undermining the overall health culture of Muslims.[225]

The master-slave relationship has manifested differently according to different places and countries. In fact, some countries in Africa experienced this dynamic in a way that was profoundly different compared to the American countries affected by colonialism. These differences can be attributed to the unique historical, cultural, and economic circumstances. Indeed, the master-slave relationship in Africa was primarily about the exploitation of specific territories in order to get resources from the indigenous people's lands. This concept is more known as 'extractive colonialism'. On the other hand, America experienced a different type of colonialism, more commonly defined as 'settler colonialism', through which European powers aimed to conquer new lands and replacing indigenous populations with European settlers.[226]

The Haitian revolution represents a perfect example of how the colonial dynamics, and more specifically the master-slave relationship, came to an end after the rebellion of the colonized individuals. Haitian people were subjected

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[223] Syed, "Forced Assimilation is an unhealthy policy intervention", 430.
[224] *Ibid*, 430.
[225] *Ibid*, 430-431.
[226] Lorenzo Veracini, "Settler Colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa: A Protracted History," *Middle East Report* 302, (2022), 3.

to a state of extreme violence, exploitation, and dehumanization. Furthermore, they managed to overthrow the master-slave dynamics that were perpetuated by the French colonists, successfully reclaiming their humanity after a long period of enslavement. This event was a unique case in American history, since it is a revolution that led to a total transformation of colonial's social, political, and economic life.[227]

FRANCE MILITAIRE.

Incendie de la Plaine du Cap . Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs.

Figure 7. Martinet, Aaron, "Burning of the Plaine du Cap. Massacre of whites by the blacks.", painting, 1833, France, On August 22 1791, slaves revolted against their white masters, set fire to plantations and torched cities, in France militaire: historie des armées françaises de terre et de mer de 1792 à 1833, Volume 1, Abel Hugo, page 255, Paris: Chez Delloye, 1835.

This transformation created the second independent country in America, since before its independence, Haiti was better known as Saint Domingue, a famous French colony. The revolution lasted many years, precisely from 1791 to 1804.

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[227] Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution", *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1, (2000), 105.

In fact, in the previous years, St. Domingue became one of the most profitable colonies throughout all America thanks to its coffee and sugar industries.[228] This could be realized through the enslavement of a large number of African American people, that starkly increased after the economic growth, so much so that they represented the majority of the population. The events in the motherland, France, which had just two years earlier witnessed the biggest revolution - the French Revolution - had a significant impact on these revolts. Indeed, this event marked a turning point in history, not only in Europe since it had consequences all over the world. This gave birth to a period of new understanding of the individual, based on ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, influencing the oppressed people in the colonies across the globe to believe they could establish democratic governance in their own independent nation. Inspired by these events, numerous revolutionary movements emerged, led by the former slave Toussaint Loverture, who managed to repel both the French and the English military forces.[229]

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[228] *Ibid*, 104.
[229] *Ibid*, 106.

3.2 Creator and Creation: Authority and Rebellion in *Frankenstein*

The discourse of slavery is closer than one could think to the novel of *Frankenstein*. The period in which the novel was written coincides with an important wave of British antislavery movement. As a matter of fact, both Mary Shelley and her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, showed interest toward the British transatlantic slave trade, expressing their support to the abolitionist movement.[230] It can be said that Shelley's entire life was profoundly impacted by the works of her parents. They distanced themselves from the prejudices going around at the time, according to which a person's race had a significant impact on both their education and capacity for reason. Mary Wollstonecraft, through her works, pointed out some similarities between slavery and the status of women at the time, as is evident from the abuses that these groups experience. In fact, the violation of domestic affection was experienced both by women who had to see their children ripped from them and by black women, who were subjected to sexual violence from their white masters.[231] Wollstonecraft's engagement in women's rights and the abolitionist discourse can be seen in her famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she uses the term 'slavery' to indicate the 'convenient slavery' to which the woman was subjected by the end of the 18th century. As a matter of fact, she employs this term to compare the condition of the woman to the enslavement of African people by the American colonies.[232]

Nonetheless, there are different nuances of racial stereotypes within *Frankenstein* when it comes to the inner features of the characters.[233] The very first racial discrimination within the novel is pointed out by Robert Walton at the very beginning of the novel, where, at the first sight of the Creature, he

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[230] Maisha Wester, "Et Tu, Victor? Interrogating the Master's Responsibility to-and Betrayal of-the Slave in Frankenstein", *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83, no. 4, (2020), 732.
[231] *Ibid*, 732.
[232] *Ibid*, 733.
[233] Hemangi Bhagwat & Tanya D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry: A Postcolonial Analysis of the Subjectivity of Frankenstein and his Monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein", *New Literaria* 1, no. 2, (2020), 50.

describes the latter as "a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island"[234], underlining the colonial mentality by highlighting the differences with the average European person. Victor's mother, Caroline Beaufort, is another character that exemplifies the colonial mindset.[235] Caroline decided to adopt Elizabeth Lavenza merely for her aesthetic features, namely because she was "fairer than a garden rose among dark-leaved brambles".[236] More accurately, she chose Elizabeth out of all the hungry children in the Italian cottage just because she was "a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features"[237] while "the four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants".[238]

The master-slave dialectic envisioned by Hegel that was analyzed in the previous chapter is reflected in *Frankenstein* in an interesting way. In fact, the Creature desires to be recognized by the characters that can be considered as his masters, namely Victor and the De Laceys. Hegel states that both the master and the slave strive to gain recognition by one another.[239] However, the absence of this recognition, both of them will combat until they will perceive themselves as independent from each other. The Creature's rejection from society can be attributed to the fact that his masters do not consider him as an equal member of society.[240] This disapproval will eventually lead him to turn against his masters, and he does so by murdering Victor's relatives and his close friend, that is Henry Clerval, Elizabeth, and William, and by burning the De Laceys' family house. The Creature is not the only character who embodies the clash between two consciousnesses, as stated by Hegel.[241] In fact, Victor also claims that he will rebel against the Creature by chasing him until one of them dies:

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[234] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 19.
[235] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 50.
[236] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 28.
[237] *Ibid*, 28.
[238] *Ibid*, 27.
[239] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 53.
[240] *Ibid*, 53.
[241] *Ibid*, 53.

By the sacred earth on which I kneel, by the shades that wander near me, by the deep and eternal grief that I feel, I swear; and by thee, O Night, and the spirits that preside over thee, to pursue the daemon, who caused this misery, until he or I shall perish in mortal conflict. For this purpose I will preserve my life: to execute this dear revenge will I again behold the sun, and tread the green herbage of earth, which otherwise should vanish from my eyes forever.[242]

At the same time, the doctor develops a dependency complex on the Creature, since he satisfies his physical needs. On the other hand, the Creature embodies the consciousness by achieving his independence through a direct contact with the material world, hence reflecting Hegel's dialectic.[243] Despite the different degrees of dependency, these two characters are related. In fact, if Victor manages to control the Creature by maintaining a relationship that will last until his death, the Creature fails to keep this bond, since he did not force him into developing a psychological dependence. Nonetheless, Hegel's dialectic has been stretched by Fanon in order to adapt to the colonial issue.[244] As a matter of fact, the colonized subject detaches from the object of his creation and tries to seek recognition by shifting the focus towards his master. The Creature eventually enslaves himself as a result from the internalized prejudices acquired by the relationship with his master. The never-ending battle between the two consciousnesses narrated by Hegel is reflected in the novel through the battle between master and slave.[245] On a surface level, Victor perfectly embodies the figure of the master not only because he is the one who holds all the power in his relationship with the Creature, but also because he embodies all the colonizer's characteristics.[246] This can be seen in a passage placed at the end of *Frankenstein*. It accurately depicts the colonial mindset held by Victor; here Victor speaks to the captain Walton and his crew, urging them to continue their expedition to the North Pole regardless their doubts and

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[242] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 166.
[243] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 53.
[244] *Ibid*, 53.
[245] *Ibid*, 54.
[246] *Ibid*, 50.

fears, as these feelings are conceived as shameful and dishonorable:

> You were hereafter to be hailed as the benefactors of your species; your names adored, as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour, and the benefit of mankind. And now, behold, with the first imagination of danger, or, if you will, the first mighty and terrific trial of your courage, you shrink away, and are content to be handed down as men who had not strength enough to endure cold and peril […] Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes who have fought and conquered, and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe.[247]

Despite that, a group of critics claims that Victor represents the true victim in this master-slave relationship. In fact, throughout the story, Despite being the last character (in the book) to be connected to slavery, given his wealth and education, Victor comes to understand that he is a slave to his creation.[248] According to Rosemary Jackson, the very act of creating a new form of life serves as a way for Victor to project all his deepest and darkest obsessions, such as his scientific ambition. The very fact that Victor projects himself and his interests in the Creature makes it apparent that, instead of controlling the Creature, these darker aspects take on a life of their own, fully reversing the power dynamics.[249] Therefore, Victor comes to realize that his creation, that was initially meant to be a reflection of his power, now dominates him. In fact, the Creature represents Victor's lost selves, as he is the embodiment of all the fragments that define him as a person, even the most suppressed and rejected ones.[250] Therefore, these little pieces are his racist prejudices that the Creature manage to make apparent. For this reason, Victor finds it difficult to accomplish his mission of killing the Creature, as it would be like murdering a piece of himself in the process. That is why the Creature's body exceeds the average human size, as the prejudices threatened Victor to a

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[247] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 177.
[248] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 50.
[249] *Ibid*, 54.
[250] *Ibid*, 51.

point where he was unable to confront this part of himself.[251] Later in the novel, the reversed roles in the relationship between Frankenstein and the Creature are made clear by the latter. More specifically, this happens when Victor destroys the female counterpart in front of the Creature, causing his utter anger and despair. Hence, the Creature asserts his dominance over his creator, taking complete power by obtaining the role of master:[252]

> Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; -obey![253]

Figure 8. Frankenstein, directed by James Whale (Universal Pictures, 1931).

Following the Hegelian theory of the battle of the consciousnesses, this passage highlights how both the master and the slave seek recognition through

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[251] *Ibid*, 51.
[252] *Ibid*, 52.
[253] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 137.

the other. The Creature becomes aware of his self-consciousness by having a direct contact with the material world, experiencing rejection and, consequently, isolation.[254] In this way, the Creature asserts his superiority over Victor by addressing him as 'slave'. At the same time, Frankenstein develops a dependency complex on the Creature in order to get his recognition and satisfying his physical needs. More accurately, Victor seeks the Creature's recognition in order to validate his scientific pursuits and to restore his shattered self-control and self-worth. However, in this search for validation, Victor intertwines with the Creature's existence, leaving him powerless and desperate for closure.[255]

On the other hand, the Creature is incapable of even imagining leading an independent life because he is completely devoted to his master. In fact, he finds himself lost once Frankenstein dies, given that the Creature's only aim in life becomes killing the root of his suffering, his master. Hence, once Victor dies, the Creature reveals his deepest remorse and decides to end his life, therefore fulfilling his master's desire, once more proving how he is subject to his master.[256] The Creature's death, however, is not explicitly depicted in the novel, even though the reader can infer it by the Creature's own statement:

> I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.[257]

The physical features of the Creature bear striking similarities to African slaves. Shelley describes the Creature's face using terms such as 'straight black

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[254] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 53.
[255] *Ibid*, 53.
[256] *Ibid*, 53-54.
[257] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 184.

lips'[258], 'hair of a lustrous black'[259], with 'watery eyes'[260] and a 'yellow skin'[261]. Brian Edwards describes the Eboes, a Nigerian ethnic group, as having a 'sickly yellow complexion' and eyes 'suffused with bile'[262]. These similarities show how the physical traits portraited both the Creature and the enslaved Africans as monstrous and subhuman, reinforcing their exclusion from the conventional views of human beings. Therefore, this narrative illustrates how physical descriptions were central to constructing narratives of inferiority, enhancing the colonial and racial beliefs.[263] Moreover, the large proportions of the Creature evoke a common racial stereotype, namely an earlier sexual maturity. As a matter of fact, the misconception according to which the 'unusually large genitalia' of black men and women caused them the development of a precocious sexual activity, as Malchow observes: "The threat that white women might be brutalized by over-sexed black men of great strength and size became a cliché of racist writing".[264]

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[258] *Ibid*, 46.
[259] *Ibid*, 46.
[260] *Ibid*, 46.
[261] *Ibid*, 46.
[262] Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies. Vol. 1*, (London: John Stockdale, 1793), 69.
[263] Bhagwat and D'souza, "Master-Slave Dialectic and Mimicry", 103.
[264] H. L. Malchow, "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Past & Present* 139, (1993), 112.

CHAPTER FOUR

Voices of the Subaltern: Feminism and Otherness in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*

In this final chapter, I will explore the dynamics of colonialism by specifically examining how they are reflected and represented in Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Poor Things*. Two prominent postcolonial scholars provide a critical framework for understanding the film, as their theories are inherently relevant to its themes. The first one is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose work analyzes the colonial condition from a feminist point of view. The second is Edward Said, who addresses the theme of identity and otherness.

One of the most influential works in postcolonial studies is certainly Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', an essay which addresses the condition of the 'subaltern', which refers to individuals who experience marginalization across various aspects: social, political, geographical.[265] Besides, she strongly criticizes Western intellectuals such as Foucault, Gramsci, and Deleuze, who unintentionally contribute to silencing some 'subaltern' categories, thereby reinforcing the colonies' power structures. Therefore, she argues that even if these scholars have had good intentions, they ultimately have silenced a group of people (the subalterns) preventing them from speaking for themselves. Moreover, she addresses the topic of epistemic violence within the colonial context, according to which colonizers systematically exclude the colonized people's knowledge.[266] Therefore, marginalized groups undergo a misrepresentation and a distortion of their own culture, erasing their personal cultural traits. As these intellectuals continue to discuss about the marginalized classes, Spivak draws attention to the category that is more profoundly erased within the postcolonial context: subaltern women. According to Spivak, the

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[265] Amardeep Singh, ""Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer", Postcolonial/Global literature and film, *Modernism, African American literature, and the Digital Humanities*, March 14th 2023, http://www.electrostani.com/2023/03/can-subaltern-speak-in-plain-english.html (last access: September 12th 2024).
[266] *Ibid*.

power structure effectively silences the voice of the subaltern woman by limiting her ability to speak in the Western environment.[267] Spivak borrows the term 'subaltern' by Antonio Gramsci, who originally used it to refer to lower-ranking officers in the British Army, applying it to the colonial context.

Spivak's work in this field highly influenced the Subaltern Studies group, which was composed by a series of major scholars under the leadership of Ranajit Guha. Her research on subaltern's condition and on how she is marginalized within her context aligns with the themes treated by the Subaltern Studies group, which focused on the experiences of oppressed groups in South Asia.[268] Both sides agreed that gender represented a major issue with respect to the colonial context. As a matter of fact, Spivak observes:

> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.[269]

In this passage, Spivak makes clear how women undergo a double process of marginalization: firstly, as colonized subjects, and secondly, as women in a patriarchal society. She denounces the fact that the male figure will always have a dominant role when it comes to colonial historiography, whereas women will remain marginalized. Hence, if the subaltern man is erased and silenced from history, the woman's condition will be even more obscured, if not invisible.[270]

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[267] *Ibid*.

[268] Serhan Afacan, "Power and Autonomy: Subaltern Studies and the History of the Subaltern Groups", Tarihyazımı 2, no. 1, (2020), 5.

[269] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. by Carly Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 287.*

[270] Singh, ""Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer", http://www.electrostani.com/2023/03/can-subaltern-speak-in-plain-english.html (last access: September 14th 2024).

Spivak proceeds by providing an overview of European feminist theory, aligning her thought with what we can consider now to be intersectional feminism. In fact, she begins her fourth section of her essay by stating: "Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways".[271] Subsequently, she centers the discussion on a practice called *Sati*, whose complete name is *Satipratha*, a Hindu religious practice that was highly criticized by the British colonial administration, who found this practice savage and barbaric. This meant that the widows were either forced or voluntarily chose to sacrifice themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres.[272] The British administration tried to ban this practice through legislation, but it was resisted by some influential Hindu men, as it was seen as an excessive involvement in their religious traditions. This serves as an example of how the British Empire sought to portray Western intervention on Eastern matters, as reflected by Spivak's claim: "White men are saving brown women from brown men".[273] This discourse reflects the theme of colonial justification, according to which Western powers considered that a 'civilizing mission' toward the colonized people was a necessary action. Once again, this reflects a mentality that depicts non-Western people as oppressed individuals, thereby justifying their oppressive and exploitative practices as a benevolent act. Besides, this sentence reflects the widespread narrative that Western men have a moral obligation to save women in marginalized societies from these backward practices, depicting them as enlightened and educated.[274]

Spivak concludes her essay with a pessimistic view of the subaltern, as she observes:

"The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman'

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[271] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 294.
[272] Singh, ""Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer", http://www.electrostani.com/2023/03/can-subaltern-speak-in-plain-english.html (last access: September 12th 2024).
[273] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 296.
[274] Singh, ""Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer", http://www.electrostani.com/2023/03/can-subaltern-speak-in-plain-english.html (last access: September 14th 2024).

as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.".[275]

This quotation perfectly summarizes how social inequalities prevent the subaltern from being fully heard, with a heritage of representation where dominant scholars speak on behalf of the subalterns, particularly women. The very last sentence is Spivak's critique towards Western feminist intellectuals, who wrongly believe they can represent the subaltern's voice, failing exactly because they cannot accurately speak on behalf of groups to which they do not belong.[276]

Another notable scholar in this discourse is Edward Said, as he reflects upon issues of identity, power, and 'otherness', issues that are central to the film's narrative. Said's contribution to postcolonial studies has been remarkable for several reasons. His work focuses on the clear distinction between the civilized and the savage by pointing out how the colonial power exerts its power on colonized individuals. His way of thinking led to the treatment of the theme of the 'Other' in a completely innovative way. In fact, Said criticizes the way Western society constructed a figure of the 'Orient' and the 'Other' in order to establish its superiority.[277] Said describes how the Orient is conceived under a Westernized point of view by stating: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences".[278] Therefore, the Orient is defined as a place that is not real, a place constructed by the West to satisfy its own political and cultural needs by creating its rules. Furthermore, he claims that the representation of the 'Orient' preserved and expanded European dominance all over the colonies that belonged to this

[275] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 308.
[276] Singh, ""Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Plain English: an Explainer", http://www.electrostani.com/2023/03/can-subaltern-speak-in-plain-english.html (last access: September 14th 2024).
[277] Ambesange V. Praveen, "Postcolonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak", *Research Journal of Recent Sciences* 5, no. 8, (2016), 47.
[278] Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

continent.[279]

In order to understand the links between the concept of Orientalism and Bella Baxter in the movie *Poor Things*, we must clarify how Said structured his work. As a matter of fact, *Orientalism* is separated into three major parts: the first part is centered on the question of representation, carefully analyzing the way in which the Western society systematically built the concept of the Orient to uphold its own values. The second part concentrates on the writings of several writers belonging to the 19th century, so establishing a system of rules that allowed to rule the Orient. The third and last part of the book examines the concept of 'Modern Orientalism'. More specifically, Said focuses on how the legacy of Orientalism continues to clear how the Western society perceives the East, for instance how the English and the French Orientalism have gradually been adopted by America nowadays.[280] One should examine whether Orientalism exists as a consequence of colonialism, or if it actually existed beforehand and, therefore, contributed to lay the foundations of this system. It is undeniable that the West highly contributed to spread an idea of the East as backward and inferior, not only by using academic disciplines such as anthropology, history, linguistics, and so forth, but also by using the Darwinian thesis on natural selection, alongside several other theories. These contributed to spread the idea that the Eastern societies need a kind of Western control, as they are fundamentally superior.[281] As noted by Said:

> Orientalism has been subjected to imperialism, positivism, utopianism, historicism, Darwinism, racism, Freudianism, Marxism, Spenglerism. But Orientalism, like many of the natural and social sciences, has had "paradigms" of research, its own learned societies, its own Establishment.[282]

It can be said that the study of the Orient has always been from an Occidental

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[279] Nasrullah Mambrol, "Analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism", Literary Theory and Criticism, November 20th 2020, https://literariness.org/2020/11/10/analysis-of-edward-saids-orientalism/ (last access: September 17th 2024).

[280] *Ibid*.

[281] *Ibid*.

[282] Said, *Orientalism*, 43.

point of view. On the other hand, Said acknowledges the influence that Orientalism as a theory indirectly influenced colonialism itself.[283] Regarding this theme, Said claims:

> Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it. authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.[284]

This quotation expresses the idea according to which Orientalism is not detached from the narrative of colonialism, but it actively contributes to spread a distorted view of the East, upholding the dominance and exploitation of these territories by Western powers.

The themes of inferiority, backwardness, and exoticism analyzed in Said's *Orientalism* are strictly connected to the concept of 'otherness'. As a matter of fact, the 'Other' is a recurring theme in the context of Orientalism, as it represents an identity that is completely detached from the rest of the society, but not by choice.[285] Said exemplifies this concept by saying:

> The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.[286]

So, it seems to be clear that the marginalization of the Eastern individual takes place as it does not comply to the norms imposed by the society. In the context of Orientalism, this theme takes into account Western civilization. In fact, it

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[283] Mambrol, "Analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism", https://literariness.org/2020/11/10/analysis-of-edward-saids-orientalism/ (last access: September 18th 2024).
[284] Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
[285] Mambrol, "Analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism", https://literariness.org/2020/11/10/analysis-of-edward-saids-orientalism/ (last access: September 18th 2024).
[286] Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

manages to solidify its supremacy by upholding the colonial mindset by marginalizing and subjugating the Other.[287]

The theories and thoughts of these two scholars find some evident parallels with Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*, which is a modern reinterpretation of the story of *Frankenstein*. Here, the director thoroughly analyzes themes such as feminism and female empowerment, dynamics of power and control, scientific research and its boundaries, and the theme of the Other. To draw parallels with Spivak's feminist perspective on postcolonial theory, it is essential to analyze, in depth, the figure of the main character, Bella Baxter, as she represents the counterpart of the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Her brain develops by following the stages of an average infant, showing a genuine wonder for everything that happens around her, and responding to every external stimulus in an impulsive and naïve way. Consequently, her emotions and manners are completely instinctual, creating a sense of comedy that stems from the contrast between her appearance and her infantile actions.

Figure 9. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

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[287] Mambrol, "Analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism", https://literariness.org/2020/11/10/analysis-of-edward-saids-orientalism/ (last access: September 18th 2024).

However, this phase is crucial for the audience, as it juxtaposes with her accelerated growth, in which she gains self-awareness and independence. During this process, she challenges every societal norm by discovering the world in a manner free from the usual established norms. This allows her to approach everything with a sense of innocence and childlike fascination.

Furthermore, this character thoroughly exemplifies the female figure confined within a patriarchal system, a condition furtherly emphasized by the presence of all men gravitating around her. As a matter of fact, they all embody a patriarchal stereotype, given that they all aim to possess Bella.[288]

From the very start of the movie, Bella is under Godwin Baxter's control, the man responsible for bringing her back to life. She addresses him as 'God', which not only shortens the name 'Godwin', but also reflects Bella's perception of her creator, as he assumes a god-like role in reviving her. Godwin exerts control over her all throughout her development, trying to keep her in the household as much as possible, preventing her from experiencing the world outside and, therefore, and from having a direct contact with society.

Figure 10. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

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[288] Greg MacArthur, "8 Reasons Why Poor Things Is A Feminist Masterpiece", Screen Rant, December 23rd 2023, https://screenrant.com/poor-things-feminist-masterpiece-reasons/ (last access: September 22nd 2024).

This leads the audience to perceive the main character as backward and inferior, possibly even 'exotic', but more significantly, she appears to be 'othered' by the society she belongs to. This view of the protagonist parallels the theories developed by Edward Said in his work *Orientalism*, in which, as I already analyzed in this chapter, he denounces how Eastern people are portrayed by the Western society. In the same way, Bella is treated as a possession and a curiosity, which leads to a profound neglect of her humanity. She is seen as an extension of the male desire/s, hence this reinforces the idea of 'other', but at the same time she enhances this element by not complying to societal norms, rendering her an 'alien' in the contemporary society, particularly because she is a woman.

In addition, in an all-male conversation with his assistant, Max McCandles, Godwin reveals that he has never viewed Bella from a sexual perspective for two main reasons. First, he is a eunuch, which means he would require an enormous amount of electricity instilled in his body in order to feel something. Second, his 'paternal feelings' prevent him from doing so. However, these explanations automatically disregard any involvement of the affected person, Bella, as she is a woman and she is therefore excluded from this narrative. Furthermore, Godwin takes care of teaching her the language, so we witness her gradually developing linguistic skills, as she essentially has the mind of an infant. Bella and the Creature share a similar approach to learning how to communicate, since both begin with simple words and improve their language it by observing and imitating those around them.

Another character who exerts his patriarchal authority is Max McCandles. He is the most naïve and romantic among them, since he initially shows a gentle and caring disposition towards her. So much so that, as soon as Bella discovers the sexual pleasure, he refuses every attempt of sexual intercourse with her, claiming he wants to wait for their marriage because he does not want to take advantage of her. Despite his tender demeanor, he still embodies those patriarchal values, as demonstrated by his desire to 'wait for marriage', which was a pact made by two male figures who did not consider

Bella's autonomy or her right to determine her own fate.

A further example of exhibition of patriarchy is represented by Duncan Wedderburn, a wealthy benefactor whose only aim is that of using women as sexual objects.[289] This can be seen from the moment in which he appears on screen, given that he immediately signs a contract that establishes Bella as his personal property. Moreover, in the first scene that sees them alone, he does not hesitate to touch her without her consent, taking advantage of the fact that she had just started exploring her body. Throughout the movie, Duncan's interactions with Bella highlight his controlling and manipulative nature, as he frequently dictates her action and decisions.

Figure 11. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

The signing of the contract accurately mirrors the master-slave relationship typical of the colonial period. If Duncan embodies the master figure, exerting his authority and dominance, Bella, on the other hand, is reduced to a mere commodity, being deprived of any form of autonomy and humanity.

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[289] MacArthur, "8 Reasons Why Poor Things Is A Feminist Masterpiece", https://screenrant.com/poor-things-feminist-masterpiece-reasons/ (last access: September 23rd 2024).

Thanks to this contract, Bella Baxter begins a journey of self-discovery, personal growth, and female empowerment. Her path can be seen as a process of liberation from the patriarchal society and the control imposed upon her. During this process, she learns what it means to be an individual within society, questioning her own identity and emotions, as well as those of others, while dealing with the innate good and evil that define the human experience. In a particular scene on the boat to Alexandria, she meets Martha von Kurtzrock, a key character for the inherent development of Bella. Martha symbolizes the triumph of the mind over the sexual pleasure, the supremacy of reason over the instinctual part of human nature, more specifically of the woman.[290] With her endless supply of books, which confer her a distinct intellect and independence, Martha acts as a beacon for the women who are subjugated by the patriarchal conventions.

Figure 12. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

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[290] Debiparna Chakraborty, "Martha von Kurtzrock: the key to understanding the unabashed feminism of 'Poor Things'", Far Out, April 5th 2024, https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/martha-von-kurtzrock-feminism-poor-things/ (last access: September 23rd 2024).

As a matter of fact, she also suggests Bella to read Goethe, making a splendid analogy with Shelley's novel, in which the Creature reads Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther*, which deepens his state of loneliness and his desire to connect with the external world. In the same scene, Bella and Harry Astley, a cynical and skeptical figure who accompanies Martha, start an interesting debate on the usefulness of philosophy. From this conversation, Bella emphasizes the significance of progress, self-improvement, and personal advancement, whereas Harry reveals his cynical nature by asserting that, in fact, improvement merely reflects humanity's cruel nature, which begins at the very birth of the human being and persist throughout one's entire life. Harry's opinion will be reflected later on in the film, when Bella witnesses for the first time the stark difference in lifestyles between wealthy people (the category which she belongs), and the poor and dying people in the impoverished areas of Alexandria. This episode is pivotal for Bella, as it is makes her realize how rotten and corrupted society actually is, values that strikingly contrast with her inherent goodness.

Figure 13. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

Moreover, this scene also reflects Said's critique to the Western society, as the city of Alexandria can be conceived as microcosm of the colonial dynamics. This illustrates how the residents of Alexandria symbolize both the West, represented by the wealthy individuals, and the East, embodied by the impoverished and suffering ones. Thus, Bella represents a Western woman who encounters the concept of the 'Other' for the first time. This experience evokes in her a deep sense of empathy, allowing her to question herself about the true nature of humanity.

Poor Things can be interpreted as a metaphor for many issues in the postcolonial approach to questions of power, providing various parallels to Spivak's ideas. The most obvious one is certainly the role of the 'subaltern', which perfectly mirrors the condition of Bella Baxter from the beginning of the film. As a matter of fact, she is constantly silenced and controlled by the male figures around her. As a result, on the one hand her autonomy is undermined, on the other hand her voice is silenced in order to allow men to make decisions about her life and destiny. Therefore, speaking in Spivak's terms, Bella is marginalized and silenced by the dominant power structure, which in this case is represented by her masters, Godwin and Duncan. Besides, Bella, finding herself in a situation where she is subjugated by those male figures, ultimately contributes to reinforcing this system. This parallels Spivak's critique of Western intellectuals, who, in attempting to represent the colonized, ends up perpetuating colonial dominance, erasing, more and more, the colonized voice. Nevertheless, the figure of Bella Baxter eventually distances herself from the pessimistic fate idealized by Spivak. In fact, if the postcolonial scholar ends her essay stating that 'the subaltern cannot speak', Bella eventually rejects the authority exerted by her masters, together with societal expectations surrounding marriage, sexual morality, and female submission. As a result, she successfully reclaims her voice and identity as a free woman, as for her decision to become a doctor, occupying a role typically dominated by the male figure at the time.

The ultimate feminist act is illustrated in the final part of the movie,

where Bella, upon her return to London, must deal with the past of the woman whose identity she replaced, Victoria Blessington. In fact, before the surgery operated by Godwin, she was a totally different person. She was a married woman who was trapped in a deeply patriarchal and secluded marriage where she was subjugated and enslaved, while her husband, General Alfred Blessington, assumed the role of her master. Alfred used to treat his wife like his personal possession, dominating her both physically and emotionally. This leads Victoria to take her own life by jumping off the bridge as an extreme act of liberation that ultimately results in the creation of Bella Baxter. Given that Alfred wants to go on exerting his dominance over the woman, Bella ends up getting trapped in the same oppressive marriage, in which she is constantly threatened and concerned for her safety and autonomy. Nevertheless, she manages to assert her independence by leaving her marriage, reclaiming her authority and rejecting the patriarchal values.

Figure 14. Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2023).

In conclusion, differently from the subaltern's fate in Spivak's theory, Bella eventually speaks for herself, and gains recognition from the society that once victimized her. She discovers her freedom and identity through education

and knowledge, allowing her to challenge societal norms regarding marriage, sexuality, and gender roles, ultimately pursuing her father's career as a doctor.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the themes discussed in this dissertation – for example the body, alienation, the master-slave relationship, and the power dynamics within the colonial context, remain relevant in today's world. Despite these ideas are historically rooted in literary works of the past like *Frankenstein*, they remain relevant for any contemporary society, as the same dynamics are still highly discussed in contemporary debates. In fact, episodes of systematic racism, economic inequality, Westernization, refugee crises, are all themes that are daily discussed by both politicians and citizens worldwide. These struggles represent a problem that has its roots in the power dynamics and inequalities established during the early periods of colonialism around the world. Since these issues are deeply rooted in our societies and have never been adequately resolved, episodes of domination and colonialism are still persistent in modern societies through various forms of oppression, such as ethnic cleansing, genocides, and economic exploitation. Literature and other forms of art are fundamental acts and useful tools through which social struggles can be discussed. As a matter of fact, numerous writers and artists challenge the colonial structures by displaying themes of displacement, racism, and so on, aiming to reach an increasingly larger audience. Therefore, the fight against colonialism is not over yet, given that these topics examined in literature and other visual arts contribute significantly to the diffusion and subsequent critique of corrupted systems, ultimately advocating for justice.

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