

Language as a Means of Emancipation in Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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ABSTRACT: Language is a means of communication in the first place, but there are also some other roles of language like shaping the speaker's character and identity which depend mainly on using language in order to be recognized. The creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* uses language brilliantly to redeem himself from slavery and establish his own identity. In *Frankenstein*, what differentiates the creature from other monsters is his competent use of language and capability to acquire it fast. Therefore, language paves the way for the creature to access knowledge. The creature was deprived from accessing any kind of knowledge by Victor Frankenstein because knowledge means power. Hence, the focus of this paper is on the function of language as a means of emancipation. Moreover, the study inspects the effects of learning and using the language on the creature's side to land on the most prolific touches mainly the questions of slavery and the encountering with the other.

Key Words: *Frankenstein*, Knowledge, Language, Slavery, The Creature.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many studies investigating different aspects of narrative in *Frankenstein* which are varied from textual analysis through thematic treatments into metaphorical uses of language in the text. Only few of these studies have been conducted to shed the light on the text as an articulation of slavery. One of the most important studies is Spivak's famous article "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in 1985. Her argument was on "worlding" which has been instated in this novel, and her approach was deconstructive with feminist touches that she regarded Victor's laboratory as "an artificial womb" [1]. H. L. Malchow in 1993 proposed his descriptive study about the racism in 19th century in which he studied racial discrimination and slavery in this novel. Similarly, Allan Lloyd Smith discussed racial discourse in his article in 2004. Nevertheless, all these studies fragmentally touched the use of language. Hence, this study attempts to read *Frankenstein* as an articulation of slavery in which the language functions as a means of emancipation, mainly for the creature.

II. The Role of Language as a Means of Emancipation

Generally, Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be read as a critique on the notion of encountering 'other'. In fact, the word 'other' refers to "anyone who is separate from one's self" [2]. The other, from a colonial point of view, is characterized as being 'primitive'. Encountering involves communication and the best means of communication (in the human world) is language. Thus, the language here plays a vital role in defining the positions of two parties.

For the notion of slavery, Frantz Fanon postulates that "the colonized, underdeveloped man is a political creature in the most global sense of the term" [3]. In the mainstream of the English civilization, the questions of morality and political dilemmas of slavery become visible since they were recognized as 'internal' parts of the formation of English civilization. The idea of "the primitive and the civilized" comes to be the central part to the discussion of ethnicity which became an indicator in the realms of "Englishness, Christianity, and other ethnic and racialised attributes [that] would finally give way to the dislocating dazzle of whiteness" [4].

Slavery in a historical context, had been examined by many scholars. For example D. S. Neff suggests that the rising of the Anglo-Indian inhabitants in Britain produced disgust and hate for the dark-skinned inhabitants and this is clearly mirrored in *Frankenstein* [5]. In fact, Mary Shelley had witnessed "the great wave of British antislavery protests" as a prequel of abolishment of the slave trade in 1807 followed by emancipation of slaves in 1833. Mary was aware of and sympathetic with the question of slavery and she refused to use sugar since it was brought from the West Indian farms [6]. Abolishment of slavery was the dominant discourse of the period in which Mary was born. Besides, the debates over the issue were documented by William Godwin, her

father, for the *New Annual Register* in late 1780s. Godwin "denied that differences of race and gender had any significant effect on an individual's ability to reason or to be educated" [7].

Accordingly, there are many references to the question of slavery in the novel. Despite the metaphorical use of the word 'slavery' in the text, but its implication is clear. The fictitious world gives Shelley an opportunity to speak unreservedly, for example; "if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved" [8]. And a man without wealth is considered "a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few" [9]. However, the creature's point of view is different; "I dared to shake off my chains ... but the iron had eaten into my flesh" [10]. Near the end of the novel, the creature was mediating that "the prospect of that day when, enfranchised from my miserable slavery" [11]. Besides, when Victor finished creating the creature, he described him with expressions that fit slave more than normal people:

"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 a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, ... his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips" [12].

In fact, such features are indications of people who were enslaved at that time. In other words, succinct use of such terms was to describe features of the colonized people of Asia, Africa, and India as being "savages" [13]. The "yellow skin" is referring to the Asian people, the hair as "a lustrous black" is denoting to Indian people; while the white teeth with "black lips" is an explicit hint for African people. Accordingly, description of the creature overlaps with the colonized people who were enslaved in the 18th and 19th centuries and were recognized as being monstrous and inferior. Frantz Fanon perceives that European magnificence is factually "a scandal for it was built on the backs of slaves, it fed on the blood of slaves, and owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world. Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians, and Asians" [14].

In the socio-political context, the English borders at that time were under threats due to the increasing revolts in the British colonies and their calling for independence especially the Jamaican revolution in 1813. This is comparable to the monster's threatening of Victor [15]. The monster rebelled against the society by burning the cottage of the De Lacey is similar to the horrific deeds of the slave rebellion mentioned in Edward's diary expressed in terms of "death and desolation" and Shelley created purposefully a "Negro monster" who is capable of "threatening the Other" [16]. Moreover, the black people were under the white control and deprived from their families to prevent them from breeding. Similarly, Victor refused to assemble a female mate for the creature due to his fear from breeding of a new race that may threaten the white: "a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth" [17]. Castration is Victor's priority and it was the predominate idea of the historical period which Shelley used brilliantly in her novel [18]. As Homi Bhabha suggests it "goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation" [19].

Therefore, Mary Shelley launches the discussion over the question of giving voice to the minorities in the society. Decentralized or marginalized people are alien, strange, and inferior [20]. Being treated as other, the creature tries to be visible, and recognition is still the main problem that the creature faces. Spivak argues that Shelley separates the other by working on "the Caliban/Ariel distinction" [21] and the creature is not identical in terms of being beneficiary or sympathetic like Safie, although he when "heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with Safie over the helpless fate of its original inhabitants" [22]. Hence, isolation and alienation are palpable feelings due to the unsympathetic society in which the creature was brought in and it is reflected in the creature's way of using language as a means to convince his creator, Victor, to do his responsibilities when he met him on a mountain:

"Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy monster, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us.... 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" [23].

The result was not under the creature's control because he realizes an unfortunate fact that he is different. He is not treated fair akin to many other slaves in Britain which mirrored the ugly truth of colonization. Accordingly, the creature feels rejected and out-cast: "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on" [24]. Consequently, the creature proposes a keen analogy comparing himself to Adam, but the most important point is that Adam has a compassionate Creator while the creature does not. Therefore, he emulates himself to Satan:

"Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his

Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition" [25].

Another brutality of slavery that was affecting the slaves' lives strongly is prevention of obtaining knowledge. The colonizers always prevent the colonized subjects from accessing knowledge to remain superior, and knowledge for sure means power. Many of the Western Indian slaves were deprived of accessing any kind of knowledge due to the fear from organizing a rebellion against White. As a matter of fact, the question of educating the slaves was the main debate between humanitarians and other politicians at that time. Religious teaching was suggested to cultivate Africans since they were 'Blank Slates' and "the withholding of instruction was a highly symbolic entrenchment of the master-slave relationship" [26]. Consequently, these slaves were attempting to acquire knowledge through secret education with the help of some sympathetic mistresses or in covert religious gatherings. Similarly, the creature has no name and was denied from accessing knowledge by his master. Hence, he was enforced to search for a means to acquire knowledge. The best tool for the creature was mastering the language first, although in secret which will grant him access to wide scope of knowledge. Language plays a vital role in creature's development. It is the tool by which the creature can discover the secrets behind his creation as well as to fight the Other, Victor. Beyond doubt, by mastering the language, the creature became capable of understanding human desires and freed himself from Victor's control. Therefore, learning the language acts as a means of emancipation for the creature.

The creature's attention to language was agitated mainly by the cottagers who were conversing while the creature was listening: "these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds" [27]. The creature finds that there is a strong bond between language and human psyche; "I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness...This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become aquatinted with it" [28]. It is a perfect tool by which he can understand human culture without the need to be present physically [29]. The creature finds comfort in language because it allows him to travel freely in the world of human being without being rejected, as he thinks. The most important book that the creature has read was Milton's *Paradise Lost* which gives him the power of eloquence and a prevailing insight about the secrets of human creation. Moreover, this source developed the creature's mental powers to be capable of sympathy and thinking [30].

Due to his strange creation, the creature keeps posing ontological questions that concern the initiation of being and existence: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" [31]. The only way to find answers for his question is to master the language which will be his tool to reach the source of his creation, which is Victor's diary. Helped by his unexpected mental capability, the creature learned to speak and read very quickly [32]. As a hint of his thirst for knowledge, the creature describes himself as "I might more speedily master the language; and I may boast that I improved more rapidly than the Arabian, who understood very little, and conversed in broken accents, whilst I comprehended and could imitate almost every word that was spoken" [33]. Like Adam, he "discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse" [34]. Unlike his appearance, the creature displayed an eloquence and command of language that appeared throughout his speeches. Language plays a vital role in shaping the creature's character. By mastering the language, the creature was trying to link his existence to humanity by generating empathy as well as acquiring knowledge.

After mastering the language, the creature learnt the secrets of his creation via reading Victor's journal. Victor, alongside with the readers, consider the creature barbaric and savage, while his language shows the opposite. The creature is clever and sensitive in possessing human feelings such as sympathy and love. This is clear in the creature's adapting the cottager's way of living. With the course of time, he attempts to change his manners and behavior like refraining himself from stealing the cottager's food and depending only on the "berries, nuts, and roots" [35]. Language has the power to generate compassion when the creature talked to the blind man in the De Lacey family. After talking for a while, the creature explained to the blind man that he is suffering from being socially rejected. The blind man sympathized with the creature, "I am blind and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere ... but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature" [36]. This result was due to the creature's eloquence and the mastering of language that affected the blind man's decision. Moreover, the blind man named him as "human creature" due to his perfect use of language [37].

The language became desired goal for the creature and he decided to master the language first before any attempt to show himself to the other cottagers. He hoped that his mastering of the language may cover his horrific appearance: "which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure" [38]. Thus, the language functions as a link to the 'chain of existence', human being, and the Other which the creature tries to be recognized by. Although the language functioned well with the blind man, the other members of the De Lacey family could not pass the barrier of deformity of the creature. These members reacted differently: Agatha was shocked and fainted, while Safie escaped quickly. The communication failed and this agitated the creature to revolt against the Other by setting fire in their cottage which was once regarded as a

home for the creature. Brooks argues that this incident "implies that use of language has failed to gain his entry into the 'chain of existence and events.' It has served rather to the knowledge of his unique and accursed origin" [39].

The creature and his creator "take solace in language" [40] since both are trying to escape the inner turmoil. The creator writes a private journal to record the facts of his work in creating a new specie. On the part of the creature, he uses the language as a means to know the facts behind his existence and to bridge the gap between him and the humans. Brooks argues that the creature tries to link his existence to humanity, but he fails to understand humanity "at its completion, the Monster's narrative implies that the use of language has failed to gain entry into the 'chain of existence and events' ... it has served rather to the knowledge of his unique and accursed origin" [41]. However, it is not necessary to fully comprehend the chain of existence and language helps the creature to understand human behavior to the extent he was shocked to read some facts about wars and bloodshed, "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" [42]. Therefore, the creature's character is developed by reading human history which causes shock and wonder, "Man ... how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!" [43].

The creature relates his isolation to language. Thus, he asked Victor to assemble a female creature as a companion and communicator to "become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded" [44]. For the creature, language becomes the main medium that can grant recognition and "the medium of his truth, which is want of relation" [45]. It is "only through those linked signs whose rules he has mastered can the Monster hope to enter 'the chain of existence and events,' to signify" [46]. It works also as vehicle to fulfill his desires by using it impressively. Thus, Victor was obliged to admit such relation: "His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations; and did I not as his maker owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?" [47]. The unique and eloquent use of language by the creature rises uncertainty about Victor's position. The creature was about to convince Victor that he would not threaten people's lives by living away from them. But Victor refuses it, therefore calamity is the result.

The creature was appropriating the human language to reach his aims. In fact, the appropriation expresses the absorbing of the cultural domain, namely the language of the colonizer. The acquired language may be uttered with broken accent, but this expresses differences in cultures and traditions although Brooks believes that the creature "has no cultural context either. He remains, so to speak, post-natural and pre-cultural" [48]. The influence of appropriation of colonizer's language is important to be noticed because the colonized communities may be able to intervene in the dominant society to explain their real cultural and traditions. The colonized subjects may use language as the newly gained instrument to resist the colonizer with his own "tools" [49]. In fact, it is like Caliban and Prospero in *The Tempest*. Spivak perceives that "this Caliban's education in (universal secular) humanity takes place through the monster's eavesdropping on the instruction of an Ariel-Safie, the Christianized Arabian" [50].

The only thing that the creature desired is to be heard to release the agony of his isolation. However, Victor reacted cruelly to this request by commanding the creature to disappear from his sight. In effect, there is a crucial difference between the senses of sight and hearing. The sight depends largely on the appearance of the person while the hearing depends mainly on the use of the language as echo of the speaker's mind. Therefore, the creature's conversation with the blind man was successful since it was auditory not visual. The creature's responds to Victor saying, "I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion" [51]. Due to the creature's eloquence, Victor was convinced near the end of the novel. Victor was effected by the creature's persuasive use of language, as if he was spelled, "his words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes felt a wish to console him, but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened" [52]. Although Victor has denied the creature's existence throughout the novel, the creature's uses of language was capable of changing the creator's opinion or at least to look at him differently. Meeting his creation, Victor realizes that the creature possesses a power of persuasion which stems from his way of using the language. Victor also realizes the association between the language and the sympathy which stands in opposition to the horrifying appearance of the creature. [53].

Still being categorized as 'other', the creature has realized his position and therefore he tried hard to gain "knowledge in a model of coming-to-consciousness and disproof of assumed innate incapacity that is a regular element of the slave narrative" [54]. His realization comes with pains of being out casted and this was confirmed when the De Lacey family refused to speak with him. Thus, the creature has developed schizophrenic emotions which happen to anyone who is socially withdrawn due to his or her hallucinations and delusions. Accordingly, he mediates that "of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property" [55]. He, by adopting and adapting the human milieu, was trying to obtain a recognition from the Other who violently shunt him off, but adapting was not enough in the creature's case.

III. Conclusion

The creature symbolizes those who were enslaved and deprived from their simple human needs by the colonizers. The slaves were even deprived from breeding like the creature whom Victor refused to assemble a female monster for. Besides, the slaves were deprived from accessing knowledge, and learning the colonizer's language, since knowledge is the best means of obtaining power which was mirrored clearly in Victor's practices with the creature. By mastering the language, the creature becomes capable of accessing the secrets behind his creation via reading Victor's diary. Hence, the creature realized the harsh fact that he is different. Thus, he was shunned and the outcome was a severe retribution. Therefore, Victor's Hubris was rewarded with Nemesis.

Language affects the creature's character and gives him the power to navigate human world. In fact, it develops his mental power of reasoning that he poses significant questions about existence and the nature of man. The creature was insisting on learning the language since it is an essential tool to understand the world in which he was located. Moreover, Victor and the creature are seeking console in language; Victor through writing his diary and the creature through reading literature. Therefore, language works as a means of relief, comfort, and even as a tool of accessing knowledge on the part of the creature. In effect, language gives the creature the character that many other monsters lack. Nevertheless, the creature succeeded in his endeavor of liberating himself from his creator, but he failed to merge with the chain of existence. Therefore, the sense of isolation and neglecting were the main results. Although he processed language and capability of reasoning, his creator and society refused to accept him as a new specie in the chain of existence. Therefore, the third space cannot be located between the cottagers and the creature. Without doubt, this incident rises the questions of race and social discrimination in the novel. In *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhabha says that "nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation or narration might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west" [56]. Hence, Britain is the nation and *Frankenstein* was the narration, although the creature was "not-quite/not-white".

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