

An Analysis of Ecofeminism in *Frankenstein*

Jiaming Cheng^{1,a}

¹*School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, 518000, China*
^a117030010@link.cuhk.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus which was published in 1818 is the best-known work of Mary Shelley, the wife of Percy Shelley. Mary is one of the most significant female writers during the period of English Romanticism from the late of eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. As an influential Gothic novel, *Frankenstein* aroused widespread attention around the whole world. It is still considered as the model of Gothic novel and the first true science fiction nowadays. Since this novel embodies a lot of ecofeminist values which appeal to the harmonious relationships between human beings and the nature, as well as men and women, in order to build a more sustainable society, this paper attempts to analyze *Frankenstein* from the perspective of ecofeminism.

Keywords: *Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, Ecofeminism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus which was published in 1818, is regarded as the best-known work of English author Mary Shelley. It is considered as the first true science fiction, and a model Gothic novel until nowadays. Mary Shelley, wife of Percy Shelley, is one of the influential English Romantic poets. She is also a famous female writer during the period of English Romanticism. The novel's title "Frankenstein" is named after the protagonist Frankenstein. He is a scientist who showed great enthusiasm and interest to natural philosophy at a very young age. However, as grew up, he was extremely addicted to knowledge and science, and even desperate to create a new species like God. Finally, he created a new living body who was regarded as a horrible monster by him. Merely due to the monster's extremely ugly face, Frankenstein abandoned it ruthlessly. And the main plot is about how the monster conducted a revenge on Frankenstein.

Frankenstein drew extensive attention in literature filed as soon as its publication. A lot of critics at home or abroad have already analyzed it from various perspectives. At home, there are critics dissect this novel from perspectives of its female narrative perspective, intentions and attitudes of the author Mary Shelley, its theme and Gothic features, and its first person narrative method. Also, scholars abroad have analyzed it from different angles, such as character studies, feminist literary theory, examining of relationship between

creativity and responsibility in the sciences and beyond, and issues about the problem of modern science.

This paper applies the theory of ecofeminism to analyze this novel. Ecofeminism was first proposed in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French author and feminist. It aims at expounding the close connection between feminist movement and ecology movement, appealing for women to launch an ecological revolution for saving the world. It is widely acknowledged that Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term "ecofeminism" in her book *Féminisme ou la Mort* which was published in 1974. she clearly pointed out that it is men's domination of nature and women that caused ecological crisis and gender inequality. She advocates combining the emancipation of women with environmental protection in order to achieve both female and natural liberation. An equal and harmonious relationship between human and nature, as well as men and women should be rebuilt through breaking the men-centered cultural tradition and discourse mode. According to the main characteristics presented in different periods of ecofeminism's development process, it can be roughly divided into three stages. The first stage of nurturing is around from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962, which aroused widespread ecological movements in America even in the whole western world. During this period, western feminist movement enjoyed its second rise. These two kinds of movements motivate feminists to explore relationship between ecological crisis and discrimination against female. The second stage began around 1980s, during

which theoretical construction and practice was mature and developed. During the third stage in the middle of 1990s, many ecofeminists classified and named a lot of different kinds of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism developed from the first world to the third world. In addition, its influence also was extended to the field of literary criticism, which inspired the birth of ecofeminism's literary works, such as "Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminism Politics" written by Janet Biehl 1991, and "Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing" by Rosemary Radford Ruether in 1992.

We can see that a lot of critics have analyzed this novel from various perspectives. However, the perspective of ecofeminism is relatively less analyzed. Therefore, this paper intends to explore some new insights into *Frankenstein* by applying the theory of ecofeminism. This paper consists of three main parts: introduction, analytical part, and conclusion. The introduction briefly describes existing literary review at home and abroad, as well as necessary background information of applied theory "ecofeminism". The analytical part can be further divided into three sections: the embodiment of men's domination of nature and women in *Frankenstein*, the monster's revenge against of this dualistic domination, and Mary's forward-looking awareness of ecological diversity. The conclusion restates Mary's ecological awareness and ecofeminist values reflected in this novel.

2. THE EMBODIMENT OF MEN'S DOMINATION OF NATURE AND WOMEN

2.1. Men's domination of nature

During the nineteenth century, science and technology had developed at an astonishing rate under the support of scientific theories and technological knowledge, relying on which humans made countless creations and inventions. On the one hand, science and technology played a crucial role in satisfying human needs, improving people's living standard and making significant contribution to the development of human society. However, on the other hand, human's ambitions and desires of dominating the world were being expanded at the same time. During the process of attempting to conquer the world, nature had been sacrificed when human society was developing rapidly, thus a lot of serious ecological disasters came along.

2.1.1. Alienation from nature

Frankenstein showed abnormal signs of indulging in the exploration of natural science at youth. After encountering several books which influenced him most, the idea that natural science has the power to conquer, change, and create everything rooted in his mind deeply at the first time. This was the first step for him to fall into

the abyss of endless desire of seeking the secret of natural world, he described himself as "always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature. In spite of the intense labour and wonderful discoveries of modern philosophers, I always came from my studies discontented and unsatisfied." [5, p35]. Since then he was madly trapped in the extreme state of exploring the mysteries of natural and completely alienated the real world. During the period of creating his own creature, he confessed that "it was a most beautiful season...but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature." [5, p55]. He thought arrogantly that he could defy and manipulate nature by commanding more knowledge of natural science. However, his final ending proves the absurdity of anthropocentrism. Living in the complete fear of the devil's revenge, as well as the attempt to fight against it made Frankenstein more physically and mentally alienated from nature, which caused more spiritual trauma to himself.

Frankenstein's alienation of nature can be seen further by the contrast with Henry when facing the amazing natural scenery. During Frankenstein's visit to Scotland with his best friend Henry Clerval, Henry indulged himself fully in the beauty of nature, "he was alive to every new scene, joyful when he saw the beauties of the setting sun..." [5, p187]. Therefore, his mental state was extremely peaceful. On the contrary, because of the irreparable sins that he violated natural laws to create a living body, Frankenstein could not enjoy and appreciate such a beautiful natural scenery even for a second, "I passed through many beautiful and majestic scenes, but my eyes were fixed and unobserving. I could only think of the bourne of my travels and the work which was to occupy me whilst they endured." [5, p187]. His alienation of nature also can be viewed as nature's punishment on him, for he had no way to get any comfort from nature, during which his own physical and mental state further deteriorated, "The blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart which nothing could remove." [5, p101]. This was the inevitable punishment that he could not get rid of, because he absurdly desired to dominate nature and chose alienated nature.

2.1.2. Scientific manipulation

Frankenstein, the protagonist of the novel, is a typical representative who lost himself in the rapid development of science and technology, and attempted to be the master of the world by digging out the secret of creating new life. The novel describes that at his early age, he had already been obsessed with exploring nature blindly. At the age of 14, he witnessed that a big tree was destroyed instantly in a terrible night with thunder and lightning, which did not warn him the merciless and unpredictable destructiveness of nature. On the contrary, this aroused greatly his desire to fully grasp the knowledge of natural

science, "I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight." [5, p37]. Driven by the arrogant idea of becoming the "creator" of the world, he abused the power of science and technology to create a "new" life, which called by Frankenstein as "devil". And the birth of the devil is the most obvious embodiment of his terrible and crazy desire of dominating the world. The purpose of his exploration and creation of new species is evil. He attempted to become the creator of mankind like the God, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." [5, p54]. He tried to figure out the scientific principle of human body, and further eliminated the natural phenomenon of human death. Instead of aiming to make contribution to the enterprise of human scientific research, he merely desired to gain endless reputation of being a great scientist who finds out the secret of human body and creates new life.

He abused nature and oppressed resources arbitrarily. In this situation, nature was being the object of severe servitude of Frankenstein apparently. After the initial discovery of the mystery of human body, he began to intervene the rule of nature wildly and madly, even tried to create a world without death, "What glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death..." [5, p36]. Finally, after several years of experimentation, he created a devil mentioned above with various organs of dead bodies. With the long-standing evolution of nature, the birth of the new life is the result of sexual reproduction between males and females. Frankenstein's behaviour obviously violated the reproductive laws of nature, which is a manifestation of extreme anthropocentrism in which human beings abuse science and technology in order to dominate nature. Unlike a normal person, the life he created is directly presented as the state of an adult without experiencing the continuous growth of fertilised ovum, infancy, and childhood, which is another evidence of Frankenstein's crazy violation of natural law. All of his vain attempts is destined for his tragic ending. He believed that the life he created must be centred on him, completely obey him, and serve him. However, he, the master, did not consider the future of the creation at all.

2.2. Men's domination of women

In the eighteenth century, women still lived in a patriarchal society under man's domination. Living in the social hierarchy in which men dominated discourse, women were often alienated as silent others. Women's self-awareness was being eroded and gradually lost autonomy. Immediately following, an extraordinarily unbalanced social ecological structure emerged, in which men and women were extremely unequal. "Angel in the house" was regarded as the standard female image in that male-dominated society. Women were thought to be born

to bear their own duties as "housewives" who were family-centred, serving their family at the cost of sacrificing their pursuit of living their own lives. During this period, women were materialised to a large extent and reduced to men's accessories and victims.

2.2.1. Devaluation of family status of women

The three main female characters in the novel, Frankenstein's mother Caroline Beaufort, his fiancée Elizabeth Lavenza, and housemaid Justine Moritz, are all typical standard "angels" in the house at that time, who are beautiful and docile. They devoted themselves fully to their families, showing unconditional consideration for men. In the society that patriarchy is paramount, men represent power, strength, and rationality, while women are viewed as symbolization of beauty, subordination, and sensitiveness, sometimes even evil desire. Under men's mental oppression, women lose their self-consciousness of pursuing their own lives. They take it for granted gradually that they are born to live for men and family which was claimed by men. From the narrative of these three female characters, we can see the world for them is full of endless dedication and sacrifice without personal desire and pursuit.

Caroline spent most her time taking care of her seriously ill father when her father was still alive. After marriage she also devoted herself to play the role of "angel in the house", living her life centred on his husband, children, and the whole family. When she died, she asked Elizabeth to bear the duty of caring the whole family, "Elizabeth, my love, you must supply my place to my younger children." [5, p40]. Thus, after her death, the role of "family angel" was handed over to Elizabeth. Like Caroline, she was a perfect woman defined by men. She took the responsibility of taking care of Frankenstein's family, and it seems that the mission of her life was to serve the whole family. Everyone liked her but no one truly cared about her inner feelings.

This male-centred approach to judging female's material life and emotional state embodies in the three female characters in the novel, which also affects women in real life and makes them view the "angels in the house" as standard female example. In fact, this is exactly the product of men's oppression of women. The result of living in the man-dominated society was that women acknowledged that they were inferior subconsciously, and they were men's accessories completely relying on them. Frankenstein made use of this approach to construct male authority. The ultimate goal is to drive women to the edge of social discourse until they completely lose their autonomy in real world.

2.2.2. Exploitation of women's rights

Firstly, women were deprived of voice in the novel, which also reveals their real situation in daily life.

Throughout the whole novel, the narrative of female characters does not constitute similar proportion as male characters. Except for the letters of Elizabeth, the description of female figures mostly comes from male's mouth. The author's choice of the male-oriented narrative perspective indeed mirrors the status quo of the patriarchal society with male supremacy at that time. The death of Justine embodies the tragic fate of women who was reduced to an insignificant silent "other" in the male-dominated world. Due to the deprivation of voice, she could not justify her innocence in the court and became a miserable scapegoat for the monster. She is merely one of the countless innocent female victims in real world. With the deprivation of women's discourse power, their status is also degraded. Being similar to nature, they exist just as tools for men.

Secondly, it is the deprivation of women's autonomous right. At that time, in western civilization, women with independent consciousness were as scary as monsters. They were regarded as born to be shackled in the family. The meaning of their whole life was to handle all household chores and take care of the family without any complaints. The life of Frankenstein's mother Caroline was all centred on her family, no matter before or after her marriage. Caroline even gave her adopted child Chile Elizabeth to her son Frankenstein as a "gift". Frankenstein regarded Elizabeth as his own possession, "since till death she was to be mine only." [5, p30]. Elizabeth even more lost her awareness to live her own life. Since she promised to Caroline that she would take over the responsibility to take care of the whole family, she centered all her life on Frankenstein and other family members. When Frankenstein was addicted to digging out the knowledge of natural science even ignoring external world, she did not complain at all, even if she heard nothing from Frankenstein for many years. She did not dare to disturb him, "Do not let this letter disturb you; do not answer tomorrow, or the next day, or even until you come, if it will give you pain." [5, p231]. She was so used to putting Frankenstein at the top priority that she completely suppressed her own instinctive thoughts and emotions. Even when she suspected that Frankenstein may be transfer his affections to another woman, she begged him to tell her and she could be sacrificed. The behaviours of Caroline and Elizabeth both reveal women's materialisation at that time. It can be said that most women's self-consciousness of mastering and living their own life did not exist at all. They always put men's thoughts in the first place and had no awareness to fight for their own life. It also reflects the social situation that women were reduced to men's appendage even without any awareness.

3. A REVENGE AGAINST MEN'S DOMINATION OF NATURE AND WOMEN

The image of "devil" in the novel is a manifestation of human's attempts to dominate both nature and women. The birth of it was the product of Frankenstein's violation of the reproductive law of nature and deprivation of women's reproductive right. It was created by Frankenstein out of his evil desire, but it was abandoned immediately just because its ugly appearance. The monster begged Frankenstein piteously to create a female partner for him, but Frankenstein broke his promise eventually and tore up the unfinished female's life unmercifully. Therefore, the monster fell into deep despair and was revenged on Frankenstein by killing all his beloved ones successively. The monster's revolt against Frankenstein can be interpreted as embodiments of revenge against men's domination of nature and women.

The monster had suffered extreme disgust and fear from its creator as soon as his birth. His ugly appearance was unacceptable even to his master, who therefore abandoned him mercilessly. Wherever he went, he would inevitably cause great panic and deep disgust in human society, merely due to his ugly appearance. Staying in helpless and heartbreaking situation of being unable to receive any acceptance and approval from his master, he could do nothing but to manage to make a living on his own. He was once desperate to be accepted by human one day through his kindness and perseverance. Therefore, he hid himself as possible as he can so that he could cause less panic in human society. He also tried his best to have a command of human language in order to get higher chance to be accepted by human. However, all devotion was proved to be vain. People still dislodged him ruthlessly as soon as seeing his face. After realizing this cruel fact, the lonely monster was completely despairing to human. Finally, he merely begged his master to create a female companion for him, which was all his hope to survive. Therefore, after encountering Frankenstein's breaking of their promise, he totally lost control of his mind and regarded his revenge on Frankenstein as the only purpose of his life. He killed all the people that Frankenstein cared about most, including his younger brother William, his best friend Clerval, the housemaid Justine, and the last one, his beloved fiancée Elizabeth on his wedding night. However, Frankenstein had no courage of telling even a tiny thing to anyone about the existence of this monster that he created, and could do nothing but bore the pain of losing those people one by one. He lived in the unbearable pain and panic all the time since the birth of the devil, "I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness." [5, p224].

The birth of the monster is a huge tragedy, no matter for the nature, the human society, or even for itself. Its own tragedy embodies the tragic situations of nature and women under the dualistic oppression. On the one hand,

the monster symbolizes the nature oppressed by mankind under the anthropocentrism. Its birth is a result of Frankenstein's evil attempt to dominate nature by virtue of science and technology. It is a non-natural product of Frankenstein's violation of natural laws and authority. Its revolts also imply that if arrogant human beings have no control of their ambition and continue to exploit nature unlimitedly, one day they will suffer nature's revenge and counterattack inevitably. For instance, human is wantonly exploiting limited natural resources in order to satisfy their own desire and development, regardless of the laws of nature. The final result is that nature often responds to human's persecution with various forms of natural disasters, such as the formation of acid rain, the melting of glaciers, the continuous fall of sea level, and the more abnormal global temperature. All of these serious disasters are threatening human's living environment severely. On the other hand, the monster also symbolizes women who are dominated by men in the patriarchal society. As an artificial product, it is regarded as being in the lowest social status due to its ugly appearance. No matter what it did, it could not be accepted by human beings. Having no ability to understand human's language, it had no living skills at all. But unlike silent women, the monster did not allow itself to be ignored and sacrificed. It actively studied human's language, therefore it initially grasped the communicative tool to get closer to human's world. It was no loner just a silent otherness. When its kindness could not help it to gain any acceptance from human beings who expelled and hurt him ruthlessly, it decided to be revenge on its master Frankenstein, rather than suffering all of these in silence. In the end, Frankenstein realized that: "I am the assassin of those most innocent victims; they died by my machination." [5, p229].

4. THE EMBODIMENT OF MARY'S AWARENESS OF ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

In the nineteenth century, under the support of blooming development of scientific theories, science and technology had made unprecedented progress. However, many scientists were blindly and arrogantly confident in the power of technology and obsessed with the use of scientific knowledge to dominate nature. The author Mary showcases a lot of forward-looking awareness of ecofeminist values. Her novel reveals her criticism of the deformed social status quo which is full of dualism. She also thinks highly of the significant value of nature and women, and further calls for the harmonious coexistence between human and nature, as well as men and women, with the purpose of promoting the sustainable development of the entire society.

4.1. The affirmation of nature's value

Frankenstein had fallen into the abyss of extreme obsession with natural science at a very young age. He was addicted to obtaining the secret of human body through the exploration of natural science. During the whole process, his body and spirit were being consumed since the crazy desire of creating a new species rooted in his mind, he felt that "I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade than an artist occupied by his favorite employment." [5, p57]. He payed all his attention to his experiment at the cost of almost losing every contact with his social life and alienating from nature. However, the birth of his creation was indeed the beginning of his terrible nightmare. The tragic ending of Frankenstein resulted from his anthropocentric behaviour reflects the author's worries and warnings about the social situation at that time. Mary has a forward-looking prediction that if human blindly continues to exploit nature for further development, the future for them will be the same as Frankenstein's tragedy.

There are a lot of descriptions of beautiful and magnificent natural scenery in the novel, which is Mary's affirmation of the positive value of nature. Her appreciation and praise of nature also embodies in the character Elizabeth, who sincerely loves and respects nature. Absorbing the positive power of nature, she is so kind and owns peaceful mental state. Furthermore, Mary recalls the beauty of English pastoral life in which people and nature live in harmony. She also implies her appealing that we human beings should realize the value of nature, protect and cherish nature as possible as we can. Only by co-existing with nature in harmony can we live in a sustainable society.

4.2. The affirmation of women's value

Mary deliberately depicts female characters through male characters' mouth, and these "family angels" who have similar unfortunate endings imply Mary's criticism of the patriarchal society at that time. The character "Safie" reveals Mary's yearning for women's autonomy of their own life, rather than always being appendage of men. Compared with other female characters, Safie is more independent and courageous. She tried to get away from his father's control and struggled to come to Germany to find her fiancé, during which she overcame a lot of hardships and obstacles. Finally she had a reunion with her fiancé after a long separation, but in the society at that time, it is still extremely difficult for her to change her fate and live her own life after her father realizing the truth. But through shaping this character, Mary expresses her affirmation of women's value, and conveys the idea that women should have the awareness and courage to pursue their own life and right like men. The tragedy of Frankenstein warns us that we should recognize the

importance of equality between men and women. They belong to the community with a shared future, rather than being in the relationship of oppression and subordination. This requires us to break the existing male-centred patriarchal hierarchy and values, and rebuild a new harmonious social relationship between two genders. Only in this way can human society get a long-term sustainable development.

5. CONCLUSION

Frankenstein, as the masterpiece of the influential female author Mary Shelley, is regarded as the first science fiction. Mary Shelley reveals her deep worries about the relationship between scientific development and human's life in the period of Industrial Revolution, and gave warnings that science can cause disastrous consequences if human abuse it without baseline. *Frankenstein* can be interpreted from various perspectives due to its multiple themes. From the the angle of ecofeminism, this novel profoundly embodies the relationship between ecological crisis and gender inequality. From this perspective, ecological crisis has consistency and close relationship with gender inequality, which are caused by anthropocentrism and androcentrism respectively. By analyzing the embodiment of man's domination of both nature and women in this novel from the protagonist Frankenstein's behaviours, Mary Shelley expresses her reflection and criticism of human's domination of nature and man's oppression on men through the monster's revenge. By virtue of her forward-looking insights of the development's science of technology, she intends to warn us that if human continues to be addicted to scientific exploration at the cost of sacrificing nature, and men can not realize the importance of building equal relationship between two genders. Even we human beings will be punished, and even be destroyed by ourselves. Only when we rebuild a harmonious relationship between human and nature, as well as men and women, can our society gain a sustainable development.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ai X M. Science and Frankenstein – Reread of *Frankenstein*, a classic novel of women [J]. Foreign Literature Studies, 1998, 1.
- [2] Cao S K. *Frankenstein: A Allegory of Ecological Ethic*[J]. Foreign Language Education, 2010, 31(5): 51-54.
- [3] He G. An Analysis of Frankenstein From the Perspective of Ecofeminism[D]. Harbin Normal University, 2013.
- [4] Hu Z H. The History of Western Eco-criticism. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2015: 339-372.
- [5] Shelley M W. Frankenstein. <https://www.planetebook.com/free-ebooks/frankenstein.pdf>.
- [6] Wang Y Z. An Ecological Interpretation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein[J]. Henan Institute of Education, Zhengzhou 450046, China. 2010.
- [7] Wei J. A Discussion on Mary Shelley's Eco-feminist Awareness in *Frankenstein*[J]. Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education, 2017, 33(9):18-20.
- [8] Wei J. Redemption Road of Nature and Women – An Eco-feminist reading of Frankenstein[J]. Journal of Nanchang College of Education, 2015.
- [9] W J. & L T. Reflection on Women: An Analysis of the in Frankenstein[J]. Journal of Hunan Institute of Engineering, 2007, 17(3):38-41.
- [10] Xu X. A Study of the Ecological Thoughts in Frankenstein[D]. Nanchang Kangkong University, Nanchang, China, 2016.
- [11] Yin J Y. An Analysis of Ecological Ethics in *Frankenstein*[J]. Journal of Xi'an Foreign Languages University, 2009, 17(1):81-83.
- [12] Zhang D F. An Analysis of Mary Shelley's Ecofeminist Awareness in Frankenstein[J]. Journal of Hubei University of Economics, 2015, 12(12): 115-117.
- [13] Zheng Z. Ecofeminism in Frankenstein[J]. Journal of Changzhou University (Social Science Edition), 2012, 12(3):67-69.