THE IDEA OF GENDER IN SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

Introduction:

One of the major issues that Mary Shelley handles in *Frankenstein* is the stereotypical gender roles that men and women followed during the Victorian period. It dissects a patriarchal culture that separated sexes and pressured women into dependence on men. Women are presented as angels of full of kindness, compassion, moral guidance and figures of self-sacrifice. The writer characterizes women as passive, submissive and of secondary status compared to her male counterpart.

The late eighteenth century British society was a patriarchal society in which the roles of gender were strictly defined. Regarding the status of women it can be said that they were represented as an object for dissection and analysis, and as a collective 'problem' for solution, which demonstrates the way social structures and institutions tried to impose a single version of ideal femininity in the period, much at odds with women's own sense of their experience. In British culture, women were idolized, protected and oppressed. The qualities of female innocence, purity and passivity that were routinely celebrated in written and visual culture and continuously reinforced through religious teaching, medical and psychological theories and the law, also 'justified' the exclusion of women from the institutions of power that shaped their futures.

Gender Issues:

Apart from the themes of science, revenge, isolation one of the major themes which Mary Shelley handles is that of gender roles. Through the novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley presents us the stereotypical roles that men and women were assigned in the Victorian era. The gendered division of labor is clearly visible in the novel Frankenstein. The male characters have been assigned the public sphere roles of public servant (Alphonse Frankenstein), scientist (Victor), merchant (Clerval and his father) and explorer (Walton), whereas on the other hand women characters were strictly assigned domestic roles of housewives, mothers (Elizabeth Lavenza, Margaret Saville, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein). This inequality on the basis of gender in the Victorian period led to the subjugation of the female gender that was totally deprived the right to display their knowledge and skills in the public sphere. The three women characters in Frankenstein namely Elizabeth, Justine and Caroline experience horrific events like brutal murder and degradation of female roles. Elizabeth Lavenza, the wife of Victor is brutally murdered by the monster. She is an epitome of an ideal Victorian wife displaying the qualities of submissive, tender, calm and poised 'angel in the house'. Shelley's incorporation of suffering and death of her female characters portrays that in the 1800's it was acceptable. The women in the novel are treated as property and have no right and freedom of their own. In the novel Frankenstein, Victor considers Elizabeth as his private possession. After meeting Elizabeth, Victor says "since till death she was to be mine only." Victor's mother objectifies Elizabeth as a

mere gift which she would present it to his loving son Victor: "I have a pretty present for my Victor-tomorrow he shall have it." The women are forced to be submissive, a trait that illustrates their submission towards men. Anne K. Mellor in *A Feminist Critique of Science* believes that the female characters in Frankenstein are portrayed as sympathetic, guiltless victims, separated from their male counterparts by their lack of participation in their professional and scientific fields. Kate Ellis in *Monster in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family* claims that most of the female characters are to be seen as ineffective, passive, and ultimately a detriment to all the characters in the novel, divided from the men due to their domestic roles in a traditional family setting. The novel takes place in a patriarchal society where man is powerful figure and women is obedient to his command.

Though during the eighteenth and nineteenth century society was making progress in the field of science but still the societal mindset was deeply orthodox and patriarchal. The situation of women remained the same irrespective of their social status to which they belonged. In the novel we are introduced to female characters belonging to the aristocratic society (Elizabeth Lavenza, Margaret Saville, Caroline Frankenstein) and the working-class(Justine Moritz), but the one thing common among them all is that they are considered incompetent to perform intellectual jobs or carryout tasks other than household duties.

John Stuart Mill in his most famous work *The Subjection of Women* mentions the gender divide prevalent in the 18th and 19th century as follows:

"*All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the Belief that their ideal of characters is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is there, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.*"

Female characters are described in minimum details, which indirectly highlight the importance of the male characters. All the female characters in the novel devote their time and energy to the men in their life fulfilling their manly dreams, aspirations, desires and provide satisfaction. The result which the female characters receive from their male counterparts after showing their devotion is death.

The contrast between the male and female characters is very obvious in the novel. The male characters are described in great detail. The male characters have their individual opinions and voices, as the novel itself is narrated by three different male narrators. The men in the novel have the freedom to travel and explore the world whereas the female characters are restricted from it and their world revolves only within the four walls of the house.