The Other: Orientalism in *Frankenstein*

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The idea of the “other” is one that has intrigued man since the dawn of time; whether it be the opposite sex, a different culture, or simply a neighbor across the street, the contrast between what is “us” and what is different poses questions about existence, identity, and the structure of everyday life. Orientalism is a concept that relies entirely on the idea of the “other”, aimed toward Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian people in particular, and it is through the use of this concept that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* portrays its antagonists (“What is Orientalism?”). This paper will analyze the idea of the “other” and the integration of Orientalism within *Frankenstein*, particularly in regards to characters such as Frankenstein’s monster and Safie, “the Arabian”.

*Frankenstein* begins from the perspective of Captain Walton. Through the letters addressed to his sister, the reader is told the story of how Victor Frankenstein was discovered by members of the ship’s crew. Frankenstein’s retelling of his story—and the monster’s story— is biased, and the reader cannot be sure whether certain aspects of the story are true, or if any of it took place at all. This framing narrative is an example of how the British people received news of the “Oriental” world, and formed their perspectives on the people within those cultures.

In a more narrow focus, Frankenstein’s own views of the world shape the way his story—and the stories within—are told, especially when it comes to his creation. Immediately upon his “birth”, Frankenstein’s monster is established as “other” by his own creator. Through Frankenstein’s description of this creation, it is established that while he possesses human features, he is still something other than human:

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, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrieveled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 42)

If compared to the body of Frankenstein himself, the monster is considered deformed; while certain aspects of the monster’s appearance are described as being individually pleasant, the focus is on the monster’s skin and eyes, two features which are most prominently used to define race. People of Middle Eastern or Asian descent are often described as having “brown” or “yellow” skin, as if these particular shades are variations of a default. Shelley’s use of color within her novel further exemplifies this colorism: Elizabeth is described as having hair of “the brightest living gold” and “cloudless” blue eyes—features that reflect an implied purity—whereas the monster’s black hair and “watery” eyes contrast Elizabeth’s as dark, undesirable traits (Shelley 20). By defining the monster’s coloring as “other”, Frankenstein is able to consider the monster as part of its own race, separate from Frankenstein and all other human beings simply by virtue of appearance, and is therefore making a generalization of an entire race. This, to him, justifies his disgust with his creation and allows him to relay any responsibility he has as its creator.

The first ten chapters of *Frankenstein* are told through the perspective of the creator. This establishes a bias against the monster as the reader can only judge as Frankenstein himself has judged. This can be interpreted as an analogy for the concept of Orientalism. British society created an image of Middle Eastern, East Asian, and South Asian cultures, twisting their people into almost satirical entities, while the cultures themselves had little to no say in the matter (“What is Orientalism?”). By the time the other side of the story was told, it was too late; the picture had been painted and the canvas could not be cleared.

This bias and integration of Orientalism is also present upon the introduction of Safie, who, until several pages into Chapter 13, is only referred to as “the Arabian”. What is interesting is that even the monster, who himself suffers from “othering”, immediately distinguishes Safie as different from the other cottagers, Felix and Agatha: “Her voice was musical but unlike that of either of my friends” (Shelley 101). Safie is greatly objectified by both Felix and the monster. She is considered to be a prize for Felix’s work in assisting her father during his imprisonment: “…the captive possessed a treasure which would fully reward his toil and hazard” (Shelley 108). This objectification is prevalent throughout the monster’s story; Safie never participates in dialogue and only exists through the descriptions of others as a trophy. Her description as having eyes that were “dark, but gentle” imply an underlying danger within her, as if she has been tamed in some way (Shelley 101).

However, Orientalism is not a one way street. Although Safie is objectified and muted, she is eager to pursue a marriage with Felix and this particular lifestyle in order to remain in a country that allows more freedom to women than her own: “…to Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia and being immured within the walls of a harem...The prospect of marrying a Christian and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society was enchanting” (Shelley 109). Through Safie’s eagerness to give in to her own objectification, and her implied willingness...
to subject to cultural stereotypes in order to encourage Felix's infatuation with her, the complex concept of Orientalism is exemplified.

Through the use of the formed and deformed body, color, and aspects of culture, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an allegory on the dangers of “othering” and objectification. The use of both dynamic and static characters as examples of this danger provides a well-rounded view of various aspects of Orientalism, and allows readers to question things for themselves. It is through this lens that we must ask ourselves: who is the real monster?

**Works Cited**
