

**THE ELUCIDATION OF THE TRAUMA OF UGLINESS AND
MONSTROSITY: A DEMYSTIFIED APPROACH TO MARY SHELLEY'S
FRANKENSTEIN**

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Abstract:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

(John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”)

This aesthetic expression of John Keats as the cessation of his celebrated poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” substantiates the concept of beauty as a sublime discourse. The binary opposition is one of the central concepts of structuralism, and the dichotomy between beauty and ugliness is one of the most popular binary oppositions. The archetype of beauty is manifested through God. As an antipode, a demon, or a monster betokens the archetype of ugliness and horror. Beauty and ugliness are primordial images, yet we do not have any authentic and exact definitions of them. So, beauty still remains a myth and mystery.

However, our society has created its illusionary concept of beauty to reflect the image of ugliness. In Western ideology, beauty primarily denotes the physical charm of white skin, resembling divinity. On the contrary, ugliness implies the lack of physical attractiveness of non-white skin, and it is a semblance of a demonic quality. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the scientist Victor Frankenstein created a living being by amalgamating and fusing body parts of dead human beings, yet the scientist himself designated the creation a monster instead of a human because the man he created had no physical charm. Society, too, identified the nonbiologically created male as a monster for his physical appearance. No one prioritized his heart and soul. This unjust and inhuman treatment threw the nonbiological man into a world of despair and trauma by making him feel like an alien. Illuminating the interconnectedness of ugliness, monstrosity, and trauma, this paper aims to provide a demystified approach to *Frankenstein* by gainsaying its conventional interpretation through the discourse of trauma theory.

Keywords - Beauty, Ugliness, Monstrosity, Alienation, and Trauma.

Introduction

Roland Barthes eulogizes text with his remarkable comment, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" in his trailblazing essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). Every text is dispersed as a sui generis quintessence with every single reading. That is why a text never gets old, and any classic wins the test of time and becomes a timeless entity. Undoubtedly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a classic. It is mainly famous as a gothic novel, and the story behind its composition is enthralling. In 1816, P. B. Shelley, Mary Shelley, Byron, and John Polidori were spending their vacation in Geneva at Byron's Villa, and then Byron proposed that there would be a competition among them regarding who could write the best ghost story. That is how *Frankenstein* was composed. Mary Shelley adopted the idea of contemporary scientists such as Volta, Galvani, and Humphry Davy, who were researching the possibility of regenerating life in corpses by applying the power of electricity. This scientific investigation is the nucleus of the novel. Hence, the novel is also considered the first science fiction in English literature. For creating life outside the womb of a woman, the novel can be interpreted from the perspective of ecocritical concerns by raising the issue that uncontrolled scientific invention violates nature. Again, the critical interpretation also examines who the real monster was in the novel. Truly, *Frankenstein* is a mesmerizing text with multiple scopes of interpretation and reinterpretation. In every age, this immortal creation appears in new apparel with the origination of new literary criticism and theory. The traditional interpretation identifies the nonbiologically created man as a monster and a villain who caused the catastrophic termination of the scientist Victor Frankenstein and his family. If we scrutinize the novel through the lens of trauma theory, we will have a completely new design embroidered with motley threads of beauty, ugliness, and monstrosity.

BEAUTY VERSUS UGLINESS

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness;"

(John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance, Book 1*)

In the opening lines of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (1818), John Keats illustrates beauty as the source of eternal happiness. However, the concept of beauty is a chiaroscuro due to the unavailability of any unequivocal definition of it. Beauty is an abstract concept that is found to be appropriate for dissemination in poetic imagination. Only a creative and sensitive soul can perceive and recognize the abstractness of beauty. Indeed, beauty is that way or capacity of mind through which we can feel the inherent goodness, sweetness, and purity of everything. A soul enriched with ethical and human values is the epitome of a real beautiful person, but we mostly fail to discern it because of our social stereotypes. The conventional idea of beauty only validates the entrenched codes of physical charm and does

not talk about the abstractness of beauty. The Western ideology of beauty is purely based on the physical allure of white skin and blue eyes. That is why the Western dogma projects all non-white people as ugly. However, we need to ingrain the truth that real beauty lies in the heart and soul of a person, not in his physical appearance.

Following the archetypal pattern, we tend to connect a beautiful person with God; as an example, we can remember the Petrarchan or traditional sonnets, where the sonneteers used to compare their beloveds to Goddesses because of their physical charm. Conversely, by connecting an ugly person with an evil monster, we dehumanize him. In this way, we isolate a so-called ugly person from the mainstream of life. In society, when a person cannot reach the parameter of beauty, then the person is identified as ugly. A so-called ugly person is not only avoided by people but also he is hated by them. It is easy to identify someone as ugly, but it is hard to understand the suffering of that person. Being constantly humiliated, any physically unattractive person loses confidence in his life, and gradually, he goes under the control of trauma. Hence, ugliness, monstrosity, and trauma share a triadic and symmetrical interdependence.

An Encapsulation Of Trauma Theory

The word 'trauma' denotes "a wound or external body injury," but when we use the word in the context of human psychology, then, its connotation expresses a different sense than its denotative meaning, referring to a psychological bruise. In simple words, trauma is a special psychological state of mind resulting from any bad experience of the past. Trauma is a silent suffering that secretly kills our mental health every day. Many forces work behind a traumatized person, including physical torture, sexual violence, emotional exploitation, humiliation, oppression, discrimination, insult, stress, and anxiety. Apart from these, the loss of a close person and a favorite thing can also lead people to the gloomy world of trauma. Though the cause of trauma has different roots, the ultimate fruit of trauma is profound emotional loss. In the case of developing trauma, by arousing a sense of fear and insecurity in the victim, the experience and memory of the incident play a more essential role than the real incident. As explained by Cathy Caruth, trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past," but it is only found in "the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth).

Though trauma is a psychological aspect of human life, it directly affects physical health by causing neurological disorders and many diseases. Trauma is the fons et origo of unnatural and unusual behaviors in people, but trauma is not madness. Moreover, trauma can instigate a person to commit a crime, and even in an extreme state of trauma, people can commit suicide. It haunts a person like a ghost with an invisible existence throughout his life if it is not dissolved with medical treatment. Thus, trauma encloses the natural and healthy stream of human life. Therefore, trauma ought to be traced and cured to save human life. Before the 19th century, trauma did not find its place in the topography of medical science. The emergence of psychoanalysis at the end of the 19th century is a path-breaking invention of the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, which enlightens trauma as a new branch of medical science. The two books of Freud that lay the foundations of the concept of trauma

as a neurological disorder are *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), which was co-authored with Josef Breuer, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

The inception of trauma studies in the realm of literary theory in the middle of the year 1990 opens a newly furnished casement of textual analysis in the abode of literature, aiming to give a text a fresh dimension through which readers will have a better panoramic view of text with a seasoned interpretation. Trauma theory was popularized in the limelight when Kali Tal and Cathy Caruth published their following books: *World of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996). Apart from these two, other trauma theorists are Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, E. Ann Kaplan, Brooks Bouson, Michael Rothberg, Laurie Vickroy, and so on. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth). Being stored in the unconscious part of the human mind, trauma finds its exposure through dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, stream of consciousness, subconscious memories, and flashbacks.

Trauma theory tries to delve into the depths of any literary text or any art form to explore the inherent trauma, traumatic experience, and causes of trauma. It also investigates how trauma affects human emotions and the human psyche, how trauma shapes human life, and how the traumatic experience finds its aesthetic expression in literature and other artistic creations. In the view of trauma studies, trauma can be categorized into two types – individual trauma (the dangerous car accident of a person) and shared collective trauma (the trauma of African slaves, the trauma of the African black people, the trauma of Jews of Holocaust, the trauma of migration and refugee crisis due to 1947 Indian partition, genocide of Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh, and so on). Notably, the trauma theorist Brooks Bouson discovers and explains the collective trauma of the racial discrimination of the African American community in the context of Toni Morrison’s novels in his book *Quiet As It’s Kept* (2000). Hence, testimony and narratives play an important role in trauma theory. Cathy Caruth believes that language cannot reflect the psychological equilibrium of a traumatic person. Most of the time, people fail to express and make us understand their trauma due to the impropriety of linguistic signs.

Trauma studies take the initiative to spread the awareness that trauma is an important discourse in human life, and we need to handle it with serious care and concern for the well-being of our mental health. Trauma theory is an empathetic methodology to understand the noiseless crying, bloodless wounds, and endless suffering of persons who are trapped in the labyrinth of a traumatic world. In order to save people by taking them out of the dark and painful world of trauma, trauma theory seeks to find a suitable way through which trauma can be expressed and explored successfully. For the purpose of emancipating all traumatic people and making a happy world, trauma studies exceed the boundaries of academia and approach the whole of mankind. Addressing the challenges of trauma, trauma theory

incarnates as a messiah to assure our salvation from trauma. Hence, in the 21st century, trauma theory is blooming as a fresh flower in the beautiful garden of literary theory and spreading its enchanted fragrance to purify our mental health.

Ugliness And Monstrosity: A Demystification Of *Frankenstein* In The Light Of Trauma Theory

In the camouflage of a Gothic romance, *Frankenstein* mirrors the hypocritical and inhuman physiognomy of human society, which converted a good human being into an evil monster. While studying at the University of Ingolstadt, the scientist Victor Frankenstein's boundless passion for scientific invention inspired him to create human beings, violating the natural law of birth. He amalgamated various parts of human dead bodies in an effort to make a proper male human structure. Then, he infused life into that human body through his exclusive scientific process. Thus, Frankenstein becomes a mother by bringing a new life to this earth, but he completely fails as a mother. Frankenstein wanted to create a beautiful male, but when he found his creation physically unattractive, he left him forever at his birth, making him an orphan – "Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely the work of muscles and arteries beneath; ...only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, ... his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips" (Mary Shelley 107). Frankenstein was a scientist. So, if he had reworked his creation, he could have given his creation a better physical appearance, but he did not try anything. Frankenstein disavowed his parenting. Therefore, the nonbiological man rightly accused him, saying, "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" (Mary Shelley 135). Frankenstein vindicated his irresponsibility on the basis of ugliness and horror – "Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch" (Mary Shelley 107), but it proves his double standard; because he claimed - "In my education, my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors" (Mary Shelley 103).

Frankenstein created the nonbiological man physically grown, but psychologically, his mind was a tabula rasa. So, like a child, he felt astonished to see the world after his birth. Being a human, he was deprived of living a perfect human life only because of the insensitive, inhuman, unkind, and selfish treatment of his creator, and so he asked Frankenstein – " 'But where were my friends and relations ? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses;' " (Mary Shelley 149). Therefore, since his birth, he had suffered extremely to survive. When for the first time he meets Frankenstein, then he depicts his sufferings to him in the hope of receiving empathy and compassion from his creator – "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" (Mary Shelley 137). Unfortunately, as a creator, Frankenstein was only concerned about his scientific creativity, completely ignoring the creature. Before creating a new life, he ought to have thought about the consequences of his scientific experiment, but as a scientist, he did not follow the research ethics. He only thought about his fame. He wanted to boast as a scientist by contravening the natural principle of birth and death, which is euphorically

expressed through his ambition – “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.” (Mary Shelley 105). As a father, he never tried to explore the heart and soul of his son. He identified his son as a monster following the archetypal pattern of ugliness and monstrosity. Consequently, due to his stereotypical thoughts and prejudices, Frankenstein could never behold the unmatched beauty of his son. The nonbiological man tried to make Frankenstein realize the pain of an orphan with the words of his heart – “Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me.” (Mary Shelley 135), but nothing could turn Frankenstein’s obduracy into his kindness. Thus, he suffered such a terrible life that out of frustration he expressed his resentment to his creator - “ ‘Hateful day when I received life !’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?’ ”(Mary Shelley 154). Hence, it is clear that the insensitive and unkind treatment of Frankenstein injected the poison of despair and depression in him. The insult, hatred, torment, and suffering he received from the human world, especially from Frankenstein, gradually pushed him into the darkest world of trauma.

Surprisingly, the nonbiological man was a real human being, possessing a great heart and soul. He was a fantastic and beautiful person. He had no devilish quality and no sign of monstrosity. He was such a sensitive soul that he never exploited nature to fulfill his purpose. Though he was created unnaturally, his feeling for nature defeated the whole human race – “ ‘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’ ” (Mary Shelley 165). The nonbiological man gathered a seasoned knowledge after reading three masterpieces of literature, including *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch’s Lives*, and *Sorrows of Werter*. Echoing the father-child bonding, he always addressed his creator compassionately with respect and honor – “ I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king’ ”(Mary Shelley 135).

The so-called monster was cruelly tormented by people around him. When he went to a village then, “ ‘The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country, and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel,’ ” (Mary Shelley 139). However, in return, he never showed any hatred for any human, and he never craved vengeance for his haters. Instead, he expressed his love, kindness, care, and empathy for human beings whom he met. He used to steal food from the cottage of his neighbor, De Lacey, to survive, but when he learned about their poverty, he stopped stealing food. Moreover, the so-called monster was so kind and benevolent that when he could understand the hard work of Felix, the son of De Lacey, then to less Felix’s toil, he cut woods for him – “ ‘ I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire; and, during the night, I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the

consumptions of several days.’ ” (Mary Shelley 142). He assumed that if his 'beloved cottagers,' the family of old man De Lacey, met him for the first time, they would hate him out of fear because of his look. Nevertheless, he showed his empathy for the family and sanctified their hatred with his sensitivity - “ ‘They are kind – they are the most excellent creatures in the world; but, unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me...a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster.’ ” (Mary Shelley 157). To experience the familial love among the family members of the cottage, he wished to have the blessing of companionship in his life. He always wanted to achieve the kinship, love, and company of the cottagers as he said, “ ‘I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love.’ ” (Mary Shelley 145). However, his imagination shattered, and the illusion vanished; when he encountered the reality – “Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground, and struck me violently with a stick. I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained.” (Mary Shelley 158). Though he was constantly humiliated by human beings, notwithstanding, he never left his kindness; such was his tolerance and generosity. When the cottagers left that place, in despair he also left his hovel; and took a further journey. While on his journey, he found a little girl drowning in a stream. He rescued the girl in a hurry from the danger and saved her life, but what he received as the reward of his benevolence from the rustic, was completely unexpected – “On seeing me, he darted towards me, and, tearing the girl from my arms, hastened towards the deeper parts of the wood. I followed speedily, I hardly knew why; but when the man saw me draw near, he aimed a gun, which he carried, at my body, and fired. I sunk to the ground, and my injurer, with increased swiftness, escaped into the wood.” (Mary Shelley 162).

Thus, the unending hatred and continuous torture of human beings, and the injustice and heartlessness of his creator helped him massively in forming the traumatic experience. He was made to feel like an alien in the human world. The feelings of loneliness and alienation intensified his trauma to the utmost level. He exhibited his bleeding heart, which no one could see, to the blind De Lacy through his articulation – “ ‘I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around, and I have no relation or friend upon earth. ... I am an outcast in the world for ever.’ ” (Mary Shelley 157). Despite his bitter and horrible experiences with human beings, when coincidentally he met Frankenstein’s youngest brother, William, he went to the child to adore him and make him his friend, considering that a child’s heart is free from the prejudice of the ‘horror of deformity’. So, he expected that the child would not hate him, but soon his expectation turned into disillusionment when the little boy replied to him – “ ‘Let me go’, he cried; ‘monster! ugly wretch!’ ... ‘Hideous monster! let me go; My papa is a Syndic – he is M. Frankenstein – he would punish you. You dare not keep me.’ ” (Mary Shelley 163). The name of Frankenstein kindled the fire of anger and traumatic experience in him. This extreme trauma provoked him to kill the child, implicating

Justine, William's innocent governess, as the real murderer. Later, he confessed to Frankenstein how his miserable life turned his goodness into villainy – “ ‘I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.’ ” (Mary Shelley 135). Hence, it is clear as daylight how the interrelation of ugliness, monstrosity, and trauma shaped his life. Under a spell of trauma, he was feeling a sense of schizophrenia - “ ‘My person hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? 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.’ ” (Mary Shelley 153).

To cure his mental agony, he requested Frankenstein – “ ‘ You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being.’ ” (Mary Shelley 164), and with whom he wanted to go to the ‘vast wilds of South America’ by leaving the human civilization. Frankenstein created a nonbiological female, but he destroyed her before giving life, thinking that the male and female monsters could procreate a race of monsters in the future, which would put the existence of human beings in danger. The destruction of the female counterpart infuriated the so-called monster, and his trauma instigated him to take revenge against his creator. To quench his thirst for retribution, he killed Frankenstein's friend Henry Clerval, and Frankenstein's wife Elizabeth one by one. After this, accentuating the trauma of losing the closest persons, Frankenstein's father, Alphonse Frankenstein died in grief. Thus, the nonbiological man turned Frankenstein alone like him, in this big world.

Finally, Frankenstein decided to kill the so-called monster. Therefore, he chased him to the north. When Frankenstein was following him, he secretly provided food for Frankenstein, to protect him from hunger. However, before killing the nonbiological man, due to the toil of his journey, Frankenstein died on the ship of Walton. Indeed, Frankenstein wrote his destruction in his own hands when by violating the way of nature his hands worked secretly to create a life from the dead. At the death of Frankenstein, the nonbiological man was feeling a profound pain, which a child feels after the demise of his parents. He was completely broken in grief – “ ‘Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being ? what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst. Alas! he is cold; he may not answer me.’ ” (Mary Shelley 213). He also died internally with a sense of guilt, regret, and remorse – “ ‘But it is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless;” (Mary Shelley 215). The nonbiological man confessed his crime to Walton, and his confession revealed the fact that his traumatic life forced him to do the crime:

Once my fancy was soothed with dreams of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now vice had degraded me beneath the meanest animal. No crime, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine. (Mary Shelley 215)

Finally, the so-called monster decided to burn himself by creating his funeral pyre. His revenge was done with the death of his creator. So, bidding goodbye to the human world, the nonbiological man is eternally ‘lost in darkness and distance’. If Frankenstein had tried to feel the suffering of the nonbiological man, then he would never have turned into a traumatic serial killer. The so-called monster was never a real monster, but he was a victim of man’s uncontrolled ambition.

Conclusion

As we know extreme trauma creates such a psychological disorder in the human mind that could even trigger a person to commit a crime, and the exact thing happened with the so-called monster who was seriously suffering from the severe traumatic experiences of his ugliness. Hence, applying trauma theory, we have explored a fresh and newfangled portrait of the novel *Frankenstein*, with some unhackneyed insights. These new insights give us the lesson that we should never judge any person based on his physical appearance; so that no one becomes a victim of trauma being identified as an ugly monster only for his physical unattractiveness. We should be kind, empathetic, respectful, understanding, and sensitive to each individual. Resonating the concepts of trauma theory, through the life of the nonbiological man, *Frankenstein* explores the correlation of ugliness-monstrosity-trauma; and also extrapolates the effect of trauma in human life. The real ugliness is the cruelty and insensitivity of the heart. So, now it is the time to decolonize our minds by renouncing the stereotypical concept of beauty.

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