

The Creature as a Decolonizing Subject in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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I. The Creature as a Colonial Subject

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a classic Gothic novel bridging between the late 18th century Romanticism and the early 19th century post-Enlightenment spirit. Discourses around this piece have been made in innumerable fields from Feminist, Marxist, to scientific approach and so on. However, I believe the postcolonial approach can let us understand this novel with the greatest significance in today's world where racism is still systemically and mentally rooted.

Truly, *Frankenstein* is the archetype of postcolonial novel. Among the two 'post-'s as 'after' and 'beyond,' this novel represents the latter meaning of 'beyond.' This thesis will prove how the book itself is the postcolonial text by casting Frankenstein's creature, who goes 'beyond' his colonial identity, and becomes a 'post' colonial subject. I will call this shift of going 'beyond' as 'decolonization' with more emphasis on the action.

Before giving a close look to the terminology, I would like to suggest evidences for the postcolonial approach based upon the previous studies. To prove that the creature is no doubt a colonial subject, I will borrow both historical and textual context by reviewing those studies. H. L. Malchow and J. C. Ball are outstanding here. Both prove that *Frankenstein* is the product of the nineteenth-century imperial Britain under the background of anti-slavery movement. Along with the historical supports, they

further provide textual evidences for the necessity of reading the creature as a colonial subject.

Ball declares *Frankenstein* as "the modern legacy of West Indian slavery and colonialism" (31). He proves this by pointing out the date Shelley composed this novel was under the "European rule over 'darker' races," between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of slaves in 1833 (emphasis original Ball 33).

Malchow complements it with more detailed historical event of "parliamentary struggle in England" to abolish the slave trade, which was a significant contemporary issue at the time (94). He also mentions her parents- William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft- was on the side of anti-slavery, and exhibited their ideas on the issue in their writings (95). For these reasons, as he says, Shelley's monster was made upon "a reflection of the contemporary race debate" (Malchow 100).

Besides the historical backdrop, textual evidences of how to describe the creature tell his racial identity. His appearance matters most of all, as counterproven by the White man De Lacey's hospitality due to his blindness. The collection of body images, such as "his yellow skin," "lustrous black [hair]," and "his teeth of pearly whiteness" in contrast with "straight black lips," is the typical representation of the non-white (Shelley 50). Robert Walton's observation of the creature only reiterates his racial otherness. He is "gigantic in stature," having "ragged hair" and one vast hand "in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy" (225).

Not only appearance, but the representation of physical attributes also serves the classical racial prejudices. The creature is “more agile” and able to bear “coarser diet” and “heat and cold” (119). As Malchow indicates, such descriptions of agility and endurance of temperature are the standard description of “ape-like ability” (104), which reflects the “popular racial discourse, by the early nineteenth century” (103). Therefore, Frankenstein’s creature is proven to be the racialized colonial subject.

The possibility of decolonization departs here. Being a colonial subject is the premise for ‘de-’colonization. Decolonization – in the mental or psychological level – is the action of losing the identity as the colonized and attaining new self-identity. In other words, decolonization accompanies two phases of colonized and decolonized consciousness by allowing the shift between two.

Frantz Fanon deals with this concept in a deeper level in his books, *Black Skin*, *White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*. As a psychiatrist, he examines the psychology of the colonized people, which is characterized by ‘self-hatred’ and ‘wish to be white.’ He conceptualizes these two traits into the term ‘colonized consciousness.’ Then he asks for ‘decolonization’ from the colonized consciousness, arguing “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” Hence, he demands for violence as the only tool of decolonizing the colonized consciousness.

Frankenstein's creature is a decolonizing subject. By adopting the theoretical framework by Fanon, this thesis will focus on the creature's consciousness, and show the two phases of how it is colonized and decolonizes itself within the text. In the first phase, his consciousness is colonized by the colonizer, believing himself as 'savage,' and desiring to be 'human.' These two features of colonized consciousness will be discussed in the first following part under the name Fanon conceptualized as 'self-hatred' and 'wish to be white.' This colonized mind as a 'sub-human,' however, cannot help but contradict with the fundamental sense of 'human' being. This contradiction creates rage and following violence that allows the creation of new humanity. This will be covered in the second part in a way to explore the true meaning of decolonization.

About the racial identity of the creature, I would like to clarify once again before gaining insights from Fanon. While Fanon mainly focuses on *Negro* as the colonized people, I am using the term 'colonial subject' not limited to any certain race or ethnicity, but in a broader sense of racialized Other who are marginalized under the colonial hegemony.

In recent studies, Malchow and Ball provide profound textual evidences for their postcolonial readings. Malchow focuses on how Shelley is faithful to portraying contemporary racial discourses on her work, while Ball focuses more on the general critique on colonialism, also with an attempt of relating to the Fanon's works. However, both readings have limitation that they focus mainly on the colonial relation

between Frankenstein and the creature by victimizing the latter. In this essay, therefore, I will read the text with more focus on the creature's agency in the perspective of decolonization. I am expecting that this will allow greater interpretative choices and significance to the text in the postcolonial approach.

II. The Creature's Colonized Consciousness

A. Self-Hatred

The creature is nameless, but he is called by many different words in a same fixed category, such as "abhorred fiend," "ugly wretch," "hideous monster," or "miserable daemon" (Shelley 97, 142, 143, 205). This is also how he calls himself. When Victor first encounters his creature and says "Begone, vile insect!" the creature responds to him, "I expected this reception," since "all men hate the wretched" (97). As it shows, the creature perceives himself as the wretched.

His perception on himself represents his self-hatred. He speaks to Walton, "You hate me; but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself" (229). This self-hatred is the key of how the colonized consciousness works. Colonized consciousness is the internalized oppression imposed by the colonizer, thus to make the colonized believe themselves as inferior. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "it is the racist who creates his inferior" (Fanon¹ 93).

The colonized are *inferior*, for they are less-than-human. Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton, as the parallel twins, share the great obsession with the concept of "mankind." As much as, or even more than the word repetition for referring to the creature, certain words of "mankind," "human," or "man" are used. Walton opens the book by lettering to his sister about his ambition for "a land never before imprinted by the foot of *man*," and the following "benefit which [he] shall confer on all *mankind*" (6). At the end of the book, Frankenstein, who believes "the superior beauty of *man*" (170), vigorously speaks to the sailors "Oh! Be *men*" for "the benefit of *mankind*" (221). This narcissistic confidence in *man* lies on the colonialist ideology of *humanism*, which is to define the notion of man as European *man*.

R. Stam and L. Spence points out that "the Renaissance humanism gave birth to the 'right of man'" for those who are "the 'winners' of history" (emphasis original 4-5). They also argue that Europe constructed the Other – its self-image by projecting its own deficiency – as the 'savage' or the 'cannibal' that "defined as lack" (4). Under this process of 'otherizing,' the creature is made inferior, in Fanon's words. He, as a non-white but was thrown into this world of *mankind*, has no other imagination of man, but is forced to believe that white man is the standard of *mankind*. Hence, with the adopted White gaze, he sees himself as "not even of the same nature as *man*," but a *sub-human* (Shelley 119).

This racial hierarchy solidifies upon the cultural hierarchy. The cultural tool operating in *Frankenstein* is literature. The creature bursts out his agony from the "increase of knowledge" which only reinforces his self-perception as "a wretched outcast" (131). The creature reads *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*, and learns "to admire their virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind," having a desire to be part of "where so many admirable qualities [are] called forth and displayed" (127). It clearly shows how literature works as an implantation tool of domineering value system. S. C. Merryfield writes in her article about the colonial function of literature that reproduces the binary image of colonizer/colonized in a relation with that of superior/inferior state. As the white becomes the standard of humanity, now the culture of whiteness becomes the standard of culture as "admirable qualities," which conveys the strict hierarchy of race. This racial superiority as an absolute truth in the Eurocentric knowledge starts to, in Fanon's theory, colonizes the people's mind that deeply internalizes their *inferiority* also as the *truth*.

As noticed, all these discourses around the 'standard' humanity, or 'universal' knowledge of colonialism are based upon the moral dualism. The colonized are not only inferior as the lack of civilization, but *morally inferior* as the lack of morality. Under the dualistic code between human, superior, and divine and savage, inferior, and devilish, the creature's *inhumanity* is intensified with the image of "quintessence of evil" (Fanon² 41). In the overlapped *blackness* of skin color and moral dimension, the

creature's inhumanity completes its meaning of *black-hearted*. Frankenstein makes a moral judgement on the creature, "his soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiend-like malice" (215).

The creature is born as "the symbol of Evil and Ugliness" (Fanon 180). His monstrosity is given before his murder, and even before his being. On the day of his being created, his creator Frankenstein mentions about "the *demoniacal* corpse" whose hand "seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, rushed downstairs" (51). This word use of 'detain' and 'escape' visualizes the typical image of a criminal chasing and a victim fleeing situation. His labelling on his creature continues with the expectedly same words of "the wretch" and "the miserable monster" (51). Regardless of his doing, his moral inferiority and all the evil characteristics are thereby "inherent in the race – in the 'blood' – of the native"(emphasis original JanMohamed 67). He is already a criminal before his crime, and murderer before his murder, as crime is expected from him as his inherent evilness.

By accepting this "Negro phobia," in Fanon's term, the creature laments on his identity, "I was in reality the monster" (Shelley 113). He lets his body fixed, and "dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes" (Fanon 116). This perception on his own body as monstrous object shows the alienation on bodily consciousness, which is the main feature of colonized consciousness, especially self-hatred. Thus, as his mind is colonized by the colonialist's ideology, he is alienated from his body. He perceives his

body as “miserable deformity,” “my odious and loathsome person,” and “hideousness of my person” (Shelley 113, 130, 132). Now, his body is no longer in accord with his consciousness, but exists as “solely a negating activity” (Fanon 110). This bodily negation connects to the negation of self-identity. The unnamed creature – except the name “monster” – doubts his self-identity with a myriad of questions, “who was I? what was I? whence did I come?” (Shelley 128). However, as the questions remains unsolved, his mind is alienated from the self, thus deeply internalized with self-hatred.

B. Wish to be White

As self-alienation accompanies self-hatred, self-hatred must accompany *envy*. Fanon examines this shift in his consciousness level and describes as follows, “I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object...I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man” (112-113). The creature, who is alienated from the self, renders himself as an object of nonhuman, and wants to be a *man*. He confesses that “when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of *envy* rose within me” (Shelley 129).

Envy makes people desire those who they feel envious of, and desire to be like them. The underlying mechanism here is also the same. It is the ideology that makes the colonized to believe White men as the universal *human*, and themselves as inferior. Then, those who become inferior desperately desire to be human like their *master*, who

is already positioned as superior in master-slave or human-subhuman hierarchy in their colonized consciousness. Therefore, the creature's "admiration of *their* virtues" gets greater, and "the greater became [his] desire to claim *their* protection and kindness" (130-131).

His longing to be white develops into the obsession to the white. "With more attention towards the cottagers," he idolizes them as "amiable and lovely creatures" and "angelic countenances" (131). He is obsessed with them for "a white approval," borrowing Fanon's term, to be like white (Fanon 51). He is desperate for the acceptance by De Lacey family, the admittance to the white world. He "eagerly long[s] to discover [him]self to the cottagers" (112), with his attention "solely directed towards [his] plan of introducing [him]self" to his "protectors" (132). As Fanon indicates, "he is a beggar. He looks for appeasement, for permission in the white man's eyes" (76). He shows when his obsession with a white approval reaches its peak, confessing that "be[ing] known and loved by the[m]" was "the utmost limit of my ambition" (131). He, as a non-white, so as a sub-human, desperately wants to be acknowledged that he is a human by the white man – the only man who can *approve* his humanity (Fanon 98).

Hence, to be white, to be human, he needs white. He confesses what De Lacey family means to him: "the only link that hold[s] me to the world" (Shelley 138). For him, the white is the only way out to enter the world of whiteness (Fanon 51). For him, the white is his only salvation from his "accursed origin" – his race (130). This dependency

on white and begging for their recognition are manifested in the creature's obsession to the language of De Laceys. He "ardently desire[s] to become acquainted with it" after going through lots of hardships and applications (111), and "boast that [he] improved more rapidly" than the Turkish (118). Fanon explains his ardent desire for the colonizer's language by the nature of language: "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other (17)." The colonized need the other, and need the language of the other, "for The Other alone can give him worth" (Fanon 154).

This is the crafty mechanism of language as the colonial tool. Since the language colonizes people by making them to believe that they are inferior, the colonized want to learn the colonial language to get away from their inferiority. As Fanon says, "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (38). Thus, the colonized whose world and culture are constructed by the language of white, they want to be white, and "will be the whiter" only by mastering the language (Fanon 38). Thus, the creature, whose relation to the world is made on colonialism, admires the De Laceys, those who possess the world of whiteness. He "look[s] upon them as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of [his] future destiny," and faces "ardour to the acquiring the art of language" (114). However, he is not the only one. Our another racial other, Safie is also "endeavoring to learn *their* language" (116), while *they* never feel the need to learn any language other than *their own*, which they believe can be the substitute for all.

This admiration for white, accompanied by the desire to be like them, can be also read in discourses around the sexuality of racial Other. A. L. Smith captures a scene of the creature's seizing the portrait of Frankenstein's mother and placing it in the Justine's pocket. He interprets this under the theme of black men's desire for white women. When the creature looks at the portrait, he "gaze[s] with delight on her dark eyes and her lovely lips," and says, "it softened and attracted me" (143). He then changes his gaze to "a woman sleeping on some straw," and speaks to her, "awake, fairest, thy lover is near – he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes" (143-4). Smith focuses on the representation of black men as performer of "rape fantasies" (217). I agree with his reading, but I would like to put more emphasis on the issue of desire to be white in tandem with Fanon's theory.

The creature desires the white world, white culture, and white women. His envious eyes towards the whiteness lead him to the admiration of white women. This is also closely related to the issue of white approval, which is the colonized consciousness depending on the Other for the acknowledgment of their existence as white. Fanon points out the mechanism of this sexual desire: "who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she *proves* that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man" (63). Thus, his sexual desire for "white flesh" is connected to his desire "to elevate himself to the white man's level" (81). As De Lacey family is the only salvation for him

to enter the whiteness, here again, his salvation depends on the beauty of white so that he can drive the blackness out from him.

This desire for climbing up the ladder of color hierarchy also appears in Safie's mind, which shares the same mechanism but in a conversed way of sex. She "sicken[s] at" Asia, and feels "abhorrent" to herself being the Oriental (123, 125). Her "prospect of marrying a Christian" white man is not different with the creature's desire to dilute his black blood through the whiteness (123). This is because the women of color have "only one possibility and one concern: to turn white" (Fanon 54). Since she wants to disidentify herself from her race and is already successfully integrated into the white world with the help of her husband, she differentiates herself from the man of color. As G. C. Spivak touches upon, when she first encounters the creature, she runs away, for she "cannot reciprocate his attachment" (258).

III. The Creature as a Decolonizing Subject

A. Contradiction with the Sense of Human Being

When the creature's mentality is thoroughly colonized by self-hatred and dependency on white, he goes through the process of decolonization. The moment when he is the most dehumanized, he realizes that he is human. He is rejected from De Lacey family, experiencing animal-like treatment by Felix that was "struck violently with a stick," and he cries out for "the spark of [his] existence" (Shelley 135-6). As Jean-

Paul Sartre claims in his famous preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonized transform into human *because of* those who attempt to make them into animals (emphasis original 17). The creature refuses the animal condition, and becomes human, "for he knows that he is not an animal" (Fanon 43). This is the moment he realizes that he can never become *human* if it is the term the white exclusively enjoy. Thus, it is the moment he realizes "his humanity" (43).

This great paradox is inherent in his existence as a human being. The creature has two minds self-contradicting within himself: his colonized mind keeps asking to believe himself as less than human, however, it contradicts with his humanity deep seated in his *being*. From the moment the creature has his consciousness, he is always aware of his "being" (Shelley 101). He interacts with the world with his "various senses" through his "nerves," and he feels "fatigue," "hunger and thirst," and "sensation of cold" (101). All these matter with his sense of being, however, his solitude – despite his desperate efforts and attempts – is the best proof of his humanity. Since human is the existence that cannot live without the social connection, his desire to be social being makes readers to question 'who is more human' between the creator and the creature. Hence, this existential recognition in his human condition, to borrow James Baldwin's expression, allows "[his] dungeon shook and [his] chains fell off" (Baldwin 10).

The existentialist Sartre also warns about this nature of human condition that when it is claimed and denied at the same time, "the contradiction is explosive" (Fanon 20). The contradiction fills the creature's mind with "the feelings of revenge and hatred" (Shelley 138). For the violation of his human nature instinctively gives him frustration, humiliation, and the sense of "injustice" (142), the direction of hatred now changes from his inhumanity to white men's *inhumanity*. Rage moves its destructive energy from his interior to the exterior – his "unfeeling, heartless creator" who *created* him as inferior (139). This transition allows him to have the requisite for decolonization, violence.

Fanon shows his clear position on violence. For him, violence is not merely an expressed form of rage, but a tool of "man recreating himself" (Fanon 21). Regarding how he conceptualizes decolonization as "replacing of a certain *species* of men by another *species* of men," violence is irresistible that only makes decolonization possible (emphasis original 35). Thus, the creature "declare[s] ever-lasting war against *the species*" (emphasis added Shelley 136). However, Fanon expects that violence has a pre-stage of being expressed as "the emotional outlets [in a form] of dance and possession" (58). Shelley's creature shows this exact stage by "lighting the dry branch of a tree and dancing with fury," with his eyes "fixed on the western horizon," also "with a loud scream" (139). This practice of violence gives a symbolic image of native people's rituals, relating to the rebellious sense of opposition to what has forbidden to them.

Finally, he carries out his monstrosity, which is already stigmatized with his *black-hearted* morality, and shows that he can do the same *crime* to those who have done it onto him. His exclaiming of “I *too* can create desolation; my enemy is not invulnerable” accuses of where the violence originally comes from (143). As Sartre well points out, his violence is a “mirror” that reflects the colonizer’s violence and throws back upon them (17).

Thus, with the violence mirroring its origin, the creature refuses what he has believed as *humanity*, which is the ‘standard’ and ‘universal’ under the colonial binary. He rather debunks the colonizer’s inhumanity, which is the uglier face than his. He speaks with the voice of the racial Other, “if the multitude of *mankind* knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. Shall I not then hate them who abhor me?” (98-9). He accuses of “injustice” of man that makes him “to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (228), or sarcastically, “Oh, praise the eternal *justice* of man!” (emphasis added 99). According to Fanon, this is the very reaction happening in the period of decolonization: mocking, insulting, and vomiting up the white men’s values (43).

B. Violence as the Creation of New Humanity

Yet, decolonization shall not end with blaming the previous inhumanity, but it goes toward the creation of “new humanity” (Fanon 36). Through this possibility of new humanity, he frees himself from his colonized consciousness. He no longer needs white or wants to be white, for he no longer believes his inferiority. Then, the master-slave relationship is no longer sustainable. The creature speaks to his white creator, “*slave*, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. You are my creator, but I am your *master* – obey!” (172). In the last stage of decolonization, there must come subversion.

The creature, now becoming a new human, claims his superiority to those who once created his inferiority. He vindicates his moral superiority: “my agony was still *superior* to thine” (230). He says that “I abhorred myself” (227), but this is not because he is not a white, but because he is “polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse” (229). He also acknowledges his animal-like condition, not in a way of colonized mentality, but in a way of self-judgement on his own “crime [that] has degraded [him] beneath the meanest animal” (228). His agency on his crime reaches its climax by declaring his self-execution, “[no] any man’s death is needed to consummate the series of my being; but it requires my own” (229). Although Shelley leaves it open for reader’s imagination, his declaration on self-execution is enough to prove his great agony for his crime, which contrasts with his oppressors who seemingly never have the sense of guilt on their own. Thus, he proves his *new* humanity.

The possibility of new humanity also reveals in his demands for his companion “of the same *species*,” which he demands it “as a right” (144-5). Here, I would like to offer an interesting interpretation with the insights from Fanon. Fanon believes that the day of decolonization, “individualism is the first to disappear” (Fanon 47). He sees individualism as the colonial tool of preventing the collective power of the colonized. According to this view, the creature’s demand for his companion is his appeal for the necessity of solidarity. He urges for “love [that] will destroy the cause of [his] crimes” (148). The possibility of new humanity lies here, in his ardent demand for love that can fight against colonialism.

Where the colonized recreates their new humanity, colonialism can no longer stand. As the colonized realizes their inferiority is illusion, the colonialism itself falls into illusion. Now, Victor Frankenstein – the representative of the colonial Europe – becomes “the *shadow* of a human being” (Shelley 189). He is confessing that he finds himself “in a *dungeon*,” with “*chains* and darkness” (205), calling himself “so miserable a wretch” (218). His creation of monster, only by making Other a *monster* while covering his own monstrosity (Fanon 26), now becomes his Self as a prison oppressing himself. This total failure of creation of monster successfully counterproves the creature’s recreation of himself as a decolonizing subject.

IV. To Decolonization of *All*

"Hear my tale," the creature entreats readers (99). When the readers are once invited to his voice, the voice of racial other, they will first meet a colonial subject, but later will see his struggle of recreating himself with new humanity. This process of decolonization is done with violence. However, this struggle is against dehumanization of human, and thus for decolonization of all existence.

Fanon is asking for decolonizing subjects to go 'beyond' the level of subversion. He asks us not to be "a new Europe" that shall repeat hatred, slavery, and inhumanity, but to "start a new history of Man" (315). This is never possible under the binary of colonialism that keeps creating monsters, which are neither the colonized nor the colonizer, but *both*. Becoming each other's Other, both become the victim of colonialism. Hence, only by decolonizing the colonialism itself, all can enter new humanism in a true meaning of *human emancipation*.

Therefore, *Frankenstein* is a postcolonial novel. It decolonizes colonialism by revealing its mechanism of self-hatred and envy, and the inevitable consequence of violence. Then, it suggests what can be 'beyond' that. It suggests a new history and new world where all Human can be free from being Other, but to be each other's human.

The creature in Shelley's novel is still inviting us to his voice to see the monsters in our mind and our society, but most of all, to see the existence of real monster: colonialism. Now, it is time to read this novel as a *postcolonial* novel.

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