

Indian Journal of Gender Studies

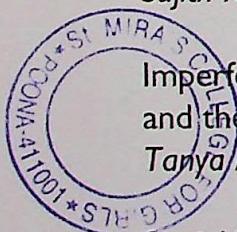
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Special Issue: Narratives of Bodily Functions

Guest Editor: Kamini Prakash

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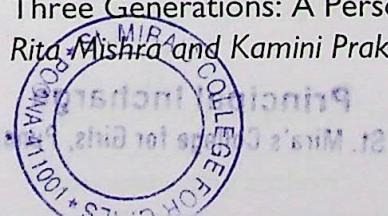
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Snober Sataravala¹

Introduction

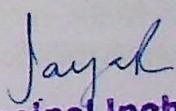
Science and technology, the catch phrase that becomes one of the world's slogans from the 19th century onwards, is rooted in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The defining feature of this age is its decision to choose to embrace the rational and scientific. However, despite being an inheritor of the attitude of Enlightenment, Mary Shelley (1797–1851) is prophetic as in her novel *Frankenstein*,¹ she questions the celebration of science, knowledge and reason by revealing its dire consequences.

Not even the slightest inkling of doubt existed with respect to the hazards of technology in the works of any of those reputed thinkers of modernity, be it Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and many others. Some would argue that such an expectation would be unfair, as the world had neither experienced advanced technology nor scientific discovery. Perhaps it is only fair to say realisation has always been in retrospect when it comes to evaluating carcinogenic potential—literally or metaphorically—as is the case today with respect to issues of privacy and social media. Historically,

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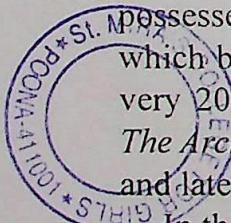

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dissent is only heard of as recently as in the post-world war period when the world witnessed first-hand the devastating potential of technology. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984), all in their own particular way questioned this valorising of science and technology only as late as in the 20th century.

However, Mary Shelley's remarkable book *Frankenstein* addresses many issues far ahead of its time and is visionary, as anticipating its harmful potential, it challenges this blind worship of technology and science. Primarily, the book with its man-made monster, the product of a rational scientific mind, that goes forth deliberately and premeditatedly to wreak havoc and mayhem is a clarion call against the dangers of technology. Although published in 1818, at the very inception of modernity, it has the courage to see things against the prevailing intellectual climate of that time. Consequently, this article simply wishes to highlight Shelley's foresight at identifying evil juxtaposed with thinkers who failed to do so. In fact, her book *Frankenstein* lays the foundation for the archetypal mad scientist who evolves into an evil one as varied as Dr Jekyll (Stevenson, 1886) by R. L. Stevenson, Philip Pullman's Mrs Coulter (Pullman, 1995) or the 20th-century cartoon show *Phineas and Ferb* featuring Dr Heinz Doofenshmirtz (2007). The key issues at stake, apart from science and technology and yet related to it, are power and education. The equation of knowledge with forbidden fruit that results in sin and mortality is as old as *The Book of Genesis*.

Kant in 'Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784) emphasises two important paradigms: knowledge and equality. According to him, knowledge gives equality and equal opportunity to acquire knowledge is available for all, one just has to work hard and seize it. However, for Shelley, knowledge gives Frankenstein, the scientist, power to create and kill. Knowledge also brings about awareness of inequality in the monster and no matter how hard he tries, he is never treated as equal with humans. He learns from humans love and desire but he also learns from them rejection and denial, rage and revenge. He is a man-made machine with intelligence but due to a lack of empathy, he possesses a flawed morality. Thus, knowledge for Shelley gives power which brings about discrimination or an epistemic violence² which is a very 20th-century concept discussed by Michel Foucault in his books *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2012) and *Discipline and Punish* (1991) and later on by other culture studies groups.

In the very first lines of the preface itself, Mary states, 'The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin, and some



of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence' (Shelley & Butler, 1994, p. 3), thus establishing the influence and potential of science. The monster is initially pure, celebrating nature, the song of the birds. It is his difference and the way he is treated that makes him evil. Even though it may sound trite due to excessive repetition, it must be repeated once more as the corollary to what Beauvoir says—one is made and not born evil (Beauvoir, 1989). Thus, more evil than the monster is the creator who abandons and does not take responsibility for his creation.

The first chapter is in the form of a letter from an explorer, a pioneer who is a scientist and discoverer at heart, who wishes to confer 'inestimable benefit' on all mankind by charting out a path to the pole using the magnetic compass needle. The tension immediately evolves out of the conflict between science and human relations which seems to be mutually exclusive. The reader is introduced to Victor Frankenstein teetering between life and death in 'Letter IV'. His advice to Robert Walton, the explorer, is, 'You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been' (*ibid.*, p. 17) colouring it with religious undertones. After all, the serpent did tempt Adam and Eve with the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Once again, the tension between human relations and science reasserts its presence when Frankenstein, whilst narrating his life's story, reveals he chose science over his best friend Henry Clerval and his beloved Elizabeth Lavenza. His study of Cornelius Agrippa leads him to search for the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. The first mention of evil in the novel, ironically, is a natural one. When Frankenstein loses his mother to scarlet fever and death, he says

I need not describe the feelings of those whose dearest ties are rent by that most irreparable evil [death].... These are the reflections of the first days; but when the lapse of time proves the reality of the evil, then the actual bitterness of the grief commences. (*ibid.*, p. 27)

This foreshadows the many unnatural deaths that will follow and serves to magnify his misconception, for the true evil is that unnatural cause which takes life wilfully.

When Frankenstein journeys to Ingolstadt to complete his education, he is informed that all his earlier studies of natural philosophy are redundant. However, he is unable to motivate himself to explore modern natural philosophy because, 'It was very different when the masters of Science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand:

but now the scene was changed' (ibid., p. 29). This is the source of evil—the masking of one's intentions with what is desirable, precluding its covert potential for self-serving mayhem which begins with a desire to feed the ego and a human being's deluded notion of self-importance. Humans who are made in the image of God become godlike when they create. In the process, every other creature may die but the powerful creators must live at any cost.

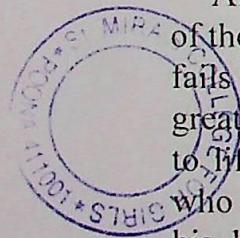
However, this changes after he attends a motivating lecture by M. Waldman who says

The ancient teachers of this science promised impossibilities, and performed nothing. The modern master promises very little; they know metals cannot be transmuted, and the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only to dabble in dirt...have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows. (ibid., p. 31)

These words seem to reverberate with the sounds of modern warfare, where human beings are built to order and destroyed at whim.

Frankenstein's belief that 'To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death' (ibid., p. 33) leads him to spend time in charnel houses and graveyards observing the 'corruption of death' and how the 'worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain' (ibid., p. 34). In those dark vaults, he experiences a blinding revelation. Whilst narrating this story to Walton, he will not reveal its secret for he realises when a human tries to play God, it results in '...your destruction and infallible misery' (ibid., p. 35). Thus, he begins the process of creation of the body of a human being but fails to consider its mind. His ego believes that 'A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me' (ibid., p. 36). Throughout history, people in power have used this argument to justify their creation by surreptitiously funding terrorist groups hoping they will serve their purpose only to discover their monsters have a mind of their own and have spun out of control.

All Frankenstein's labours come to fruition when the dull yellow eye of the creature opens and he responds like most creators of monsters; he fails to claim responsibility and runs away until the damage done is too great to restore. The trail of corpses that will follow the corpse animated to life begins with his youngest brother William, then Justine Moritz who is falsely implicated for William's murder and sentenced to death, his best friend Henry Clerval, and his beloved Elizabeth Lavenza. Interestingly, Frankenstein's mental torment is aggravated by the sciences



and alleviated by studying the orientalists, discussed by Joseph W. Lew (1991). It is through the study of languages and other cultures that 'life appears to consist in a warm sun and a garden of roses—in the smiles and frowns of a fair enemy...' (ibid., p. 50). It is a little less than midway through the book that we hear daemon's voice, his feelings, experiences and desires. Victor Frankenstein will confront him as the former climbs to the top of Montanvert, an Alpine glacier on the northern slopes of Mont Blanc which marks the border between France and Italy. It is interesting that all he desires is love and companionship, however being deceived and denied, he turns into a killing machine. When Frankenstein threatens to kill him, he retorts, 'You purpose propose? to kill me. How dare you sport such with life?' (ibid., p. 77) and then 'You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man!' (ibid., p. 78).

The story within the story commences as daemon recounts his development from the first night of cold and fear in the forest to being stoned by the villagers, till he takes residence in the hut adjoining the cottage of Felix, Agatha and their blind father DeLacey. Therein begins a symbiotic relationship where daemon helps the family with physical labour and acquires food and education without ever making visual contact. Spivak has commented on the problematic depiction of Safie in her essay 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (Spivak, 1985). In the process of reading and learning what Felix teaches Safie, daemon, the voyeur, ruminates:

Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike. (ibid., p. 95)

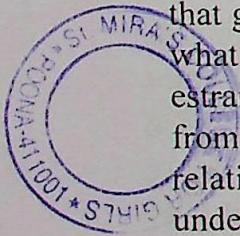
Once again it is literature not science which is a source of comfort and teaches daemon abhorrence of vice. However, rejection by the DeLaceys, followed by the rustic shooting him whilst in the woods after saving the young girl, builds up to the climactic strangulation of young William because the boy bravely asserts he is Frankenstein.³ The purpose behind daemon narrating his life story is to put forth the ultimatum, which is he must be provided with a she-daemon to share his life or else Victor must face his wrath. There is scope for multiplication not just in progeny but in the potential for mayhem. Frankenstein says, 'May not even this be a feint that will increase your triumph by offering a wider scope for your revenge?' (ibid., p. 121).

After a tumultuous chase through an icy wilderness to exterminate the fiend, Victor's final dying advice to Walton captures Mary Shelley's visionary worldview, 'Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparent innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries' (*ibid.*, p. 186). Ironically, the fiend's words of farewell are, 'Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest, but in death?' (*ibid.*, p. 190) and where shall that death be found but in a conflagration. Thus, ambition disguised in the form of innocent science can only eventually lead to death and annihilation. On the other hand, many would argue that without science and technology this article would not exist, would not be read but perhaps because of the former there will eventually be no one to read the latter. That is Mary Shelley's worldview.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno, 1944), for Adorno and Horkheimer, knowledge and technology comes to mean domination of the world. At no point does Frankenstein introspect or question his decision regarding his creation; however, Mary Shelley does so in her sympathetic depiction of the monster. She portrays his anguish, pain and longing for acceptance with great sensitivity. The duo, Adorno and Horkheimer, quote Francis Bacon to stress that only accidental knowledge, as opposed to what is obtained through systematic enquiry, is exempt from the influences of wealth and power which is how daemon acquires his knowledge of love and family. It is as an accidental voyeur that he learns these values from the DeLaceys.

In Shelley's world, the dominator-dominated, creator/created binaries are exclusive. Knowledge is patriarchal, where 'knowledge which is power knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to lordly masters' and it serves the purpose of bourgeois economy, where 'Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labour of others, capital' (*ibid.*, p. 2). All the characters in Shelley's novel belong to the bourgeois class and all share the same attitude of revulsion towards the monster.

The Enlightenment attempts to replace God with man which is what Frankenstein attempts to play at. Man becomes the agent, the creator, that gives commands and the subject that decides what will happen and what counts. This increase in power is purchased at a price which is estrangement. Thus, even though man has more power, he is estranged from the very things he is trying to understand. This is central to the relationship between Frankenstein and his fiend—they are unable to understand each other. In the process they both become evil, one overtly whilst the other more deceptively and hence dangerously so.



Shelley is aware that if only one strata of people benefit whilst the other is excluded, there will be an eruption of terrible violence. Thus, the singular monster is metonymic for a mass of oppressed people with one face. Mary Shelley wrote to a friend in 1823, 'It seems to me that in what I have hitherto written I have done nothing but prophecy'. In the light of current problems with terrorism, the Snowden⁴ (1983) controversy or WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's (1971) incarceration⁵ indeed much of her concerns with science have come to pass. Technology creates the monster watching us through the webbed window or remote-control drones, learning our every move, our likes and dislikes and uses it against us. On the other hand, if technology is used against or to expose the master, then the user must be hunted and destroyed. Both Snowden and Assange are such monsters who wish to exploit technology and challenge the master and now must hide or run. *Frankenstein* can be read as a metaphor for the violence rocking the world, the rise of terrorism, the displacement, loss and the birth of the refugee—the most vulnerable and neglected member of society.

Critics have glossed over the magnitude of the impact of long discussions that Mary Shelley shared with her husband, the poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley and their doctor friend William Lawrence and Lord George Gordon Byron's doctor John William Polidori. Mary was also influenced by her father's training in the Enlightenment tradition and for her, modern science is masculine and 'serves to fuel the fires of human conflict rather than quench them' (Easlea, 1983). If women give birth to children, ironically, the men in the novel give birth to violence which is their inheritance. Walton inherits from the dying Frankenstein his feud with the monster perhaps ensuring that the cycle of violence continues.

Conclusion

Frankenstein opens with one of the colonising pioneers of the Enlightenment—Robert Walton—who with great sympathy and deep admiration listens to the confessions of the raving scientist as he struggles with consciousness and his conscience as he lures his creation, daemon, to both their deaths. In turn, Walton will record this story and pass it on to his sister in England through a series of letters. Ironically, Frankenstein confesses that all the fiend was really longing for was love and companionship but the reason for not creating a mate for the fiend lies in the fear that it will result in mass production of an ostensibly hideous species and hence must be annihilated. At one level, this is an

overt rejection of the Other on the part of the scientist but at another level it is also a critique of technology by Shelley.

This article argues that the narrative reads as a metaphor for the dangers of technology which manufactures androids be it phones or monsters equipped with intelligence but lacking empathy. It also anticipates through the voyeuristic monster the consequences of digital surveillance and invasion of the private and public sphere, manipulation of its data, making not just nations but individuals vulnerable and exposed to the eye behind the machine. Perhaps Shelley's vision does not specifically anticipate WikiLeaks but she definitely cautions against culpable creations.

Notes

1. The standard version is the 1831 version; however, this article refers to the 1818 one.
2. *Episteme* meaning knowledge. Epistemic violence is a term often used by Foucault in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge* and later used by Spivak as well.
3. Ironically, later on, the name Frankenstein, which was that of the scientist, is confused and ascribed mistakenly to the monster in popular adaptations.
4. Edward Snowden, former US Intelligence Community Officer and whistleblower disclosed, in *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* on 6 June 2013, the US National Security Agency (NSA) and its international intelligence partners' mass surveillance programmes and the consequent dangers to democracy. This data was obtained on 22nd July 2018 from the webpage *Courage Snowden home comments*.
5. Julian Assange has been incarcerated since November 2010 at the Ecuador Embassy in London to avoid deportation to face rape charges. He claims these charges have been fabricated as he leaked top secret US defence documents. The WikiLeaks home page on 22 July 2018 continued to contain along with the Spy files of Russia, the Angelfire project of the CIA dated 3 August 2017 described as a 'persistent framework used to infect Microsoft Windows System' and the CIA hacking tools of Vault 7 which were uploaded on 7 March 2017.

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