

# THE SIGNIFICANCE, FOR READERS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, OF THE CHARACTER OF SAFIE IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

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## Abstract

This paper presents a critical look at one of the characters in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Safie, through the lenses of a female African scholar in the twenty-first century. A close look at the narrative structure leads to the gradual peeling off of the first two layers, to the core of the narration. The paper looks keenly at a minor character in this core, in the light of feminist literary criticism and against the concept of globalisation. The analysis of the character of Safie, carried out in full consciousness of the fact that *Frankenstein* was written two hundred years ago, involves a look at the words used to describe her; comparison between her and other characters, particularly other female characters; as well as a general overview of her circumstances and how she reacts in response to them.

**Keywords:** literature, English, Gothic, Romanticism, feminism, Frankenstein

# EL SIGNIFICADO DEL PERSONAJE DE SAFI EN *FRANKESTEIN*, DE MARY SHELLEY, PARA LOS LECTORES DEL SIGLO XX

## Resumen

Este artículo estudia críticamente a Safie, uno de los personajes de *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley, desde la perspectiva de una investigadora africana. Un examen atento de la estructura narrativa de la novela permite despojarla de sus dos capas exteriores, para alcanzar el núcleo de la narración. Este trabajo examina un personaje secundario de este núcleo a la

luz de la crítica literaria feminista y en contra del concepto de globalización. El análisis del personaje de Safie, realizado con plena conciencia del hecho de que *Frankenstein* fue escrito hace doscientos años, exige el examen de los términos usados para describirla; la comparación entre ella y otros personajes, especialmente otros personajes femeninos; así como una contextualización de sus circunstancias y de cómo Safie reacciona ante ellas.

**Palabras clave:** literatura, inglesa, Gótico, romanticismo, feminismo, Frankenstein

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Against the background of eighteenth century England, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an intricately woven, far-fetched tale of unlikely characters undertaking strange engagements in exotic places in a rainbow of languages. Shelley was only nineteen years old when she wrote *Frankenstein*, and it remains a landmark in English Literature for several reasons. In this fantastic tale, Safie is but a minor character in one of numerous sub-plots.

To begin with, *Frankenstein* has the distinction of fitting snugly into two literary traditions. It is at once a gothic horror and a romance. It was conceived as a ghost story, "one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror . . ." (Shelley 1994: 7). To this end it is full of detailed descriptions of strange dark places like Victor's laboratory at Ingolstadt or the deadly frozen seas (206); violent events such as the thunderstorms of Geneva (39) or murders committed by the monster. In the case of William, his first victim, the monster goes so far as to admit ". . . my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph" (137). Even though it is a horror story, the date of publication (1816) places *Frankenstein* firmly within the romantic movement which was marked by "the expression of individual genius rather than established rules" and whose literature was "as varied as the characters and moods of the different writers" (Long 2006: 305).

Another unique feature of *Frankenstein* is the narrative style which incorporates three different narrators in a first-person narrative that is divided into five parts. Each part is a distinct narration with its own first-person narrator, in the sequence one, two, three, two and then one again (1,2,3,2,1). The story of narrator number three is given in direct speech by narrator number 2. The story of narrator number two is then recorded by narrator number 1. Reading the book is like unwrapping a gift that has several layers of packaging. This is also known as Chinese box narration (Fairbairn-Dixon 1999: 69). The first and main narrator is Robert Walton,

initially engaged in the peaceable and relatively harmless activity of writing letters to his sister as he travels away from home, to keep her updated about his whereabouts and well-being. Robert's first letter is dated 11<sup>th</sup> December, and his letters make up the first narration (pp. 13-29), and function as a prologue to the main story.

The main story is the life story of Victor Frankenstein. Victor picks up the narration in Chapter 1 (30), inside Robert's Letter 4, after the entry dated 19<sup>th</sup> August. The dying Victor narrates his story to Robert, who becomes so involved in it that he writes it down verbatim for his sister, making Victor a first-person narrator. The first part of Victor's story takes up the first ten chapters (30-97). The third and middle part, starting at chapter 11 (98), is also narrated by Victor in the words of his creation. In seven chapters, through Victor, the creature tells of his experiences after his initial separation from Victor, to the point where their lives converge again (139). The other two narrations are by way of closing brackets (narrator 1 (narrator 2 (narrator 3) narrator 2) narrator 1). The fourth narration is therefore done by Victor, continuing his story once the creature has filled up the details in its life that Victor did not know. Victor's second narration runs up to the first part of chapter 24 (202). Towards the end of the story, a few pages into chapter 24, Robert Walton takes up the narration once more. The date entry is 26<sup>th</sup> August, and it is a continuation of Robert's Letter 4 to his sister. It has taken Victor six days to tell his story to Robert. Robert's final entries summarise the story and become some kind of epilogue to tie up the tale and bring it to a logical conclusion. Within these five narrations are inserted poems and letters from other characters.

The narrative style is no stranger than the narrators themselves. The backgrounds and attributes of the three narrators are remarkably different but each narrator has a singularly peculiar occupation. The first and main narrator, Robert Walton, is an Englishman. Born into a family of modest means, the death of his parents leaves Robert in the care of a wealthy uncle, in whose library he finds solace in numerous travel adventure books. Robert's early years are spent in "ease and luxury" (15). The death of a cousin makes him wealthy enough to indulge in his dream of undertaking a voyage of discovery to the North Pole. At the age of twenty-eight, this novice self-taught sailor decides to captain his own ship to the land of his childhood fancies where "snow and frost are banished . . . a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe" (13). Robert is a sociable person who regrets the absence of friends

as soon as he starts out (17). This paves the way for his affection for the stranger he picks up on the frozen seas (24-26).

The stranger turns out to be the second narrator, Victor Frankenstein, a citizen of Switzerland. Victor's father comes from a long line of statesmen. Victor's parents are wealthy enough to travel the continent frequently. He was born in Naples, and they continued travelling with him. For the first five years Victor is the only child. He is idolised and smothered in love (32-34). As he grows up he becomes a loner of violent temper and vehement passions who is possessed of an eager desire to learn (36). Alone in strange surroundings, when he goes to attend university at Ingolstadt, this desire to learn degenerates into an obsession, with dire consequences.

Enter the third narrator, the strangest of all three narrators. He has no name and is not even human. He is the product of Victor's obsession with the principal of life, painstakingly assembled in Victor's university living quarters at Ingolstadt. Once the spark of life is infused into him, however, the creature is so monstrous and hideous that the sight of him precipitates Victor's nervous breakdown (55-56). Due to the conditions surrounding his existence, the creature is alone and lonely. He comes into existence with an eight-foot structure that is superior to that of human beings. In spite of it, he is totally unprepared for the challenges of fending for himself in an unfamiliar and hostile environment (98).

Against the backdrop of these colourful characters, the character of Safie provides a refreshing interlude. The entrance of Safie (112) diverts the story from the intensity of horror to delightful romance. The reader's imagination, which has been pushed into over-drive by the fantastic tale, slows down. The story takes on the leisurely pace of down-to-earth romance, complete with the mundane details of everyday living.

In the novel *Frankenstein*, Safie is the daughter of a Turkish Arab and an enslaved European woman (119). Safie is born and raised in Turkey. When she first appears in the story as narrated by the monster (112-3) Felix refers to her as "his sweet Arabian." Her mother, however, had been "a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks" (119). Safie is, therefore, her mother's daughter by sensibility. From Safie's account, her mother "instructed her [] in the tenets of her religion and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Muhammad" (119). Outwardly Safie wears the "thick black veil" (112) that is worn by Muslim women. Secretly she subscribes to the Christian faith and cherishes the dream of living in liberal Europe one day. She is:

. . . sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia and being immured within the walls of a harem, allowed only to occupy herself with infantile amusements, ill-suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation of virtue. The prospect of marrying a Christian and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society was enchanting to her (120).

The primary role of minor characters is to advance the plot (Fairbairn-Dixon 1999: 78). Safie plays an important role in advancing the plot in *Frankenstein*. Her background is different from that of most of the other characters. She comes from a different culture and speaks a different language. She must learn from scratch the language, values and cultural norms of her hosts. Because of the initial linguistic handicap, everything has to be explained to Safie very slowly. As she learns, so does Victor's creature. Her circumstances create the perfect set-up for the creature to learn all these things while hiding from human civilization (114-115). It is also through Safie's association with the De Lacey family, and Felix in particular, that Victor's creature learns to appreciate family, friendship and love. In the absence of a character such as Safie, it is unlikely that Victor's creature would have developed intellectually and emotionally to the point of having conversations with people, who shunned it on appearance (55, 101, 130, 136). It would not have had the language to negotiate with Victor for its welfare, "What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate: I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive" (141).

Readers and critics of *Frankenstein* tend to focus on the main plot, the terrifying consequences of playing God, and quickly pass over Safie, sometimes without even giving her a name. Fairbairn-Dixon goes so far as to draw a parallel between Safie and Victor's creature, to the extent that Safie is an "outsider" who is nevertheless accepted and this gives the monster some hope that he too can be accepted (41). Beyond that, however, he makes no further mention of Safie, even when he draws up character portraits, Safie is lumped with others under the phrase "minor characters" (71-9). In her 1991 article, "'They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale': Safie's Letters as the Feminist Core of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*", Zonana reads great theoretical significance into Safie's absent letters, but pays little attention to Safie as a character. For her part, Ruth Bushi passes over Safie without pause, "the arrival of the Arabian marks one possible conclusion to the monster's story" (3). Kim Woodbridge has drawn a

parallel between the quest for knowledge on the part of the three narrators and the writer's own scholarly pursuits and her interest in her own biological origins (2). And yet, Woodbridge makes no reference to Safie, the character who makes it possible for the monster to acquire language. It seems that for most critics, Safie's role is too insignificant to warrant mention.

In addition to advancing the plot, however, the character of Safie serves to remind readers that the world is larger than Christian Europe, a fact that readers in the twenty-first century are only too aware of. Even though her features are different from those of Elizabeth, Safie is beautiful. Elizabeth has hair that is "the brightest living gold ... setting a crown of distinction on her head". Her eyes are a "cloudless blue". She is, all in all, "a being heaven-sent, bearing a celestial stamp in all her features" (33). Safie, on the other hand, has hair which is "shining raven black and curiously braided". Her eyes are "dark, but gentle, although animated". All in all, hers is a countenance of "angelic beauty and expression" (112). Indeed, Safie is so beautiful that Felix falls in love with her. When he first meets Safie, Felix is a handsome, well-placed gentleman in Paris. He can have his pick of any girl in Europe but he chooses Safie. By extension readers are drawn to the fact that cultures (other than European) also have valuable and desirable products.

Having said that, however, the character of Safie does serve to reinforce certain prejudices. For example, Safie's father, the only Arab Muslim in the whole novel, is presented as a villain. It seems that he was imprisoned unjustly.

He was a Turkish merchant and had inhabited Paris for many years, when, for some reason which I could not learn, he became obnoxious to the government. He was seized and cast into prison the very day that Safie arrived from Constantinople to join him. He was tried and condemned to death. The injustice of his sentence was very flagrant; all Paris was indignant; and it was judged that his religion and his wealth rather than the crime alleged against him had been the cause of his condemnation (118).

Felix, out of a sense of justice and Christian charity, tries to help Safie's father (118-119). In so doing, Felix risks his family's honour, wealth and status. Consequently, the De Lacey family loses everything. Felix's actions "deprived them of their fortune and condemned them to a perpetual exile from their native country" (121). Safie's father repays Felix's sacrifice with deceit and eventual betrayal. When he discovers that Felix is attracted to his daughter, he encourages the association between the two simply for the

selfish reason of ensuring that Felix does not get tired of helping him even though “in his heart he had formed far other plans” (120). As soon as he is free and safe, he tries to cut off all communication between the young lovers. When he finds out about the fate of the De Lacey family he adds insult to injury by sending them a pittance by way of a farewell gift “on discovering that his deliverer was thus reduced to poverty and ruin, [the treacherous Turk] became a traitor to good feeling and honour ... insultingly sending Felix a pittance of money to aid him, as he said, in some plan of future maintenance” (121). Safie’s father has no positive character traits. Since he is the only Arab Muslim, readers are led into believing that all Muslim men are selfish, deceitful and barbaric in the extreme: villains by nature.

Furthermore, a character like Safie, more than Caroline, Elizabeth or Agatha, makes the discrimination of women in the eighteenth-century Europe glaringly obvious. Caroline, Elizabeth and Agatha may be discriminated against, but that discrimination is subtle and cushioned by respect and appreciation within the family. In the case of Safie, there is no loving and protective family. Her mother is the only caring family member, and even before her death she is enslaved and not in a position to do much for Safie (119-120). Safie’s father sees his daughter as a possession to be used when needed but otherwise to be kept in storage, enslaved like her mother. He is so callous that it never occurs to him that his daughter may have feelings, opinions and dreams about her future. For Safie, the society is so oppressive that the only way to truly exist is to break away and run off to marry Felix.

Seen from a different perspective, the character of Safie provides the perfect instrument of exposing the hypocrisies of eighteenth century Europe, without antagonising the readers. By introducing the character of Safie into the novel, Shelley has made concessions to the conservative society of the time. This female character who rebels against her society and her father cannot be a European, much less a noble, well brought-up woman of high social standing. Zonana (1991) points out two different critics who, focusing on Safie’s letters, have noted this rebellious streak: Rubenstein considers it an “incarnation” of Mary Wollstonecraft; while Mellor considers the writer (Safie) to be a representation of the “notorious eighteenth-century feminist”. Another reason why Safie’s rebelliousness is so acceptable is that her cause flatters the establishment: she is running away from Muslim society to take shelter in Christian society. The

implication is that Christian Europe, for all its shortcomings, is better than Muslim Turkey.

On the other hand, Shelley has, through the character of Safie, found a way to circumnavigate the literary minefields of eighteenth-century Europe and present a strong and impressive female character. Without casting aspersions on the society of the time or appearing to upset the established patriarchal social order, the writer presents us with a fiercely independent, strong-willed female character: a woman who can think on her feet, prepare a long-term strategic plan and seize her opportunity to execute it with military precision. It is this character, an outsider to European society, who is, in Zonana's words "an exemplar of a woman claiming her rights as a rational being" (Zonana 1991). In Safie, readers get a glimpse into the strength of a woman. She is cunning enough to play along with her father as long as necessary. She is steadfast in her affections. After falling in love with Felix she remains true to him against all odds. She understands her society well enough never to openly defy her father. Nevertheless, she does not forget the teachings of her Christian mother. Safie's long term goal is to get away from her oppressive country, not to suffer the same fate as her enslaved mother. She waits patiently, but quickly seizes opportunities as they arise. Safie is not only beautiful, kind and loving, but also brave, tough and intelligent.

Given the foregoing, the character of Safie in the novel *Frankenstein* attests to the creative genius of the writer. In the first instance, it advances the plot. It also makes it possible for the writer to deal with difficult themes, some of which are becoming increasingly relevant in the twenty-first century. Writing in English in 1818, Shelley's audience was limited to the affluent in England and Western Europe. In the twenty-first century, however, readers of *Frankenstein* are spread around the world: the audience is no longer limited to England, the English-speaking world, or Christian Europe. It even includes Muslims and non-Muslims living in Turkey, as well as Muslims in other parts of the world. In Safie, the writer has succeeded in providing these diverse readers with a positive image of "the other"; a woman who is active, loving and lovable, brave, and intelligent; an "outsider" who brings love and joy to, and improves the quality of life for, characters who belong to the dominant culture.

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