

## HUMAN RESILIENCE IN SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MOVIE CONTAGION

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to critically examine Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, a novel set in the 18th Century, England and the movie 'Contagion' screened in 2011, to analyze how human resilience reaches unprecedented heights during any crisis be it psychological, or physical. The given pieces of literature provide us with a clear view of modern day challenges, realities of biological wars encountered by 21st century people. This paper reviews the impact of human's over-ambitious nature in its widest context and how resilience and strength vary in degree depending upon the risk and danger included. This has also contributed to the notion that resilience is a process and in order to characterize, it becomes necessary to identify and measure the risk involved in it. Shelley's Frankenstein is concerned with individual resilience (reflection of Victor's rejection of his creation) whereas Contagion is more about resilience as a feature of the whole communities. The research paper would try to establish that both the literary text and the movie clearly capture the different forms of trauma faced by the characters during a pandemic condition Los Angeles. Furthermore the paper also throws light on how characters develop resilience and step towards curtailing the traumatic experiences they are made to face.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Trauma, Pandemic, Creation, Cope.

This research paper is an attempt to explore how humans' over-ambitious nature is traumatized by hubris while throwing light on the major characters of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and a movie Contagion, in regard to the three major concerns of Romantic writers i.e., Man versus God, Man versus Nature and Man versus Man (himself). It achieves this by providing brief background information about Victorian and Modern society's psyche with the relation of the Lacanian psychoanalytic literary critical concept of Desire and Alienation. Also, the consideration will be on the character of Victor Frankenstein in context of Freudian Theory of Oedipus complex, with the effects of before and after traumatic events.

Mary Shelley wrote the literary work *Frankenstein* pointing out her dream, she had prior writing it. This shows a compilation of traits of late Romantic era and early Victorian era by majorly focusing on Calvinism theory of Predestination and Free will. Shelley uses this as the means which helped her in achieving mere insights into the 'hideous' workings of psychical forces that further relate to the instinctual areas of human madness for achieving more, incestuous love, aberrant sexuality and nightmarish horror.<sup>1</sup> (cp-3) Whereas the movie *Contagion*, written by Mr. Scott Z. Burns that was screened in 2011 based on a rapid spread of a virus. In a way, this also portrays the concept of Science versus Nature, which is to be seen as a strategy by the universe to minimize human effects which contribute to the ecological disturbances.

The following also shows resilience as a process rather than as a set of traits, outcomes, and risk along with a focus that will allow the emergence of constituent elements of resilience from the research based on two literary texts.

The research paper proposes to start with the beginnings of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as it's a powerful novel that paints a very horrified picture of a human's trial of stealing the ability to rejuvenate life from God. Another point worth noting is the complete title of the novel i.e., *Frankenstein or The modern Prometheus*, who according to the Greek mythology is the creator of humanity as he stole Fire from the God Zeus and brought on the earth to give it to the human race for the sake of them. But on another part *Frankenstein* was just opposite to Prometheus, he oversteps his boundaries to enjoy the ultimate power of the mysterious world. Even, the novel starts with the very famous lines taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book X, (743-745) are as follows:

“Did I request thee, maker, from my clay to mold me man, did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?” (Milton, 734-745)

This statement of Adam, when he was abandoned by his own creator clearly shows encroachment by questioning God, about the decision of making a human. He claimed, God himself was feeling isolated, that's why to fulfill his own desires he ended up making a man, with a purpose to always rule over. Similarly, when Monster read the text, he found himself in a pursuit of Adam as well as Satan. Monster never asked for a life, and even if he was given to him by his creator, he should have been responsible for his nurturing. But being a father to him, he was abandoned just because of his unnatural appearance.

This can also be observed through the lenses of the Oedipus complex, a Freudian psychoanalytic literary critical concept. This refers to “the whole Complex of both loving and hostile feeling experienced by a child towards its parents in the process of achieving uncultured maturity. The Oedipus complex manifests itself as an intense rivalry, including the horrifying wish for his or her death, with the parent of the same sex for the love of the parent of the opposite sex.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, God being a father and creator of both Adam and Eve, already aware about the fact that it was Eve behind provoking Adam for breaking up the rules. Even after it, God punished Adam, who always just wanted to be involved in good deeds. In addition to it, Victor Frankenstein spent his days and nights to get a complete successful result in his experiment. But when he saw the end result as a male giant figure, by his first glance Victor backed down with his desire and repudiated him. Which he elaborated as, "I saw the dull yellow eye of the monster open, it breathed hard and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs."(Shelley,38)

Frequently, critics use to say that the gothic arose as a reaction against unnatural desires of exposing mysterious powers which are beyond cosmos. Apart from it, this is to note that it was written at the time when Benjamin Franklin, himself was involved in many of his electricity-based experiments. Similarly, Shelley took this fact as the ultimate thing happened in Dr. Frankenstein's experiment i.e., the electric current projected life in Daemon. Therefore, Victor Frankenstein is filled with shame, guilt and torn up by remorse even after getting success in his efforts of giving life to a creature. Here, he aspired to usurp the roles of a creator and a producer that is the God and the mother. As a result, he became frightened with his act and realized he gave life to a monster; also, somewhere was aware about the fact that now the world is going to be traumatized by his presence.

As it is obvious that Victor is a name derived from the word Victory. And throughout the novel he has been seen as justifying his wrong deeds, even after the terrible and horrifying results he got as an outcome. He never let Daemon win in his argument of injustice he faced since his birth. Victor stated the few following lines:

"It was the secret of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world." (Shelley,cp.2)

Critics have observed, Victor Frankenstein tries to elucidate his initiative to engage in ghastly but engrossing tasks while scrutinizing the hard knowledge about the secrets of life. His ambitions may be heroic, but the dreadful thoughts of going beyond science and exposing mysterious powers suggest 'secret toil'. Also, the obsession to take over the role of a creator or God, ultimately ended up with alienation from his loved ones as well as the world.

This is not just about a case of Victor Frankenstein in Shelley's work, in reality human beings are also in a competition to chase their desire and to focus on individual growth. Though, the universe makes us realize time to time about human deeds that are crossing their boundaries and creating ecological imbalances by causing natural disasters or sometimes manmade horrifying events pandemics and turning into endemics, genocides, wars, holocausts etc. made it clear everything is perishable. In addition to it, the movie Contagion which is

inspired from SARS outbreak in 2002-04 and the flu Pandemic in 2009, clearly portrays how a biological weapon or an outbreak can control the whole activities of the world. The movie starts with people extremely involved in enjoying the materialistic world and consuming bush meat just for the sake of their taste. And with this human being exposed to a novel virus as the pig that was served in supper was infected with zoonotic disease.

As a precaution, characters in the movie are asked to self-isolate and to focus on social cum physical distancing. Whereas in the novel, Frankenstein chose himself to be alienated from the world and also made his creation too forcibly isolated. In this regard Daemon also questioned Victor's knowledge and experiment with the below following statement:

“Remember, that I am thy monster, i ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the Fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.” (Shelley, cp.9)

As the daemon stated, if he had thought to teach and take care of him as an infant, he could have turned out to be a positive creature. But it was Victor's mistake, firstly to abundant and then left him to survive in isolation. Daemon said evil wasn't actually on the part of him, but it's all on human's behalf, who in their ambitious nature focus to fulfill their lust and desire without considering its consequences. Similarly, Victor just wanted to be a father of his creation, but majorly he is focused to enjoy the status, respect and to be praised for giving life to a dead one. On other hand, he didn't want to take responsibility and not to be blamed for whatever were his outcomes.

It is common critical knowledge that in Frankenstein, Shelley specifically focused on making it a scientific advance story rather than to be a religious one. But simultaneously constructing a plot with parable that's why she followed a style of counter striking arguments through major characters.

Self-aware with the fact of his own guilt and mistake Victor stated that:“When I reflected on his crimes and malice, my hatred and revenge burst all bounds of moderation.” (Shelley, 69)

As this paper already explained that because of a man's over ambition the whole human kind suffered. It was only Victor's desire to be acknowledged as a creator but as a negative outcome, he abandoned his own creation and left to suffer and face rejections throughout his life. Daemon claimed that he was like an infant kid with a brain like blank slate. He could have learned to love and care if been nurtured with it. But he experienced the rejections, hatred and evil side of humans, also alienation and abandonment gave birth to an emotional trauma inside him. These extraordinary stressful events shattered his sense of security and unfortunately, he turned him into a furious creature as well as a threat to others life. He confessed to his creator how sometimes he accidentally murdered few innocents and few in rage. Rather than feeling guilty for Daemons' struggles caused by only Victor's injustice to him, he focused on the evil

acts that burst all of his aggression, hatred and notion of revenge. But Daemon in response to it clears that, it was human kind who taught him to be an evil. Whenever he wanted someone to listen him or understand him, every time he found to be alienated by other human beings and this made him to suffer from a traumatic disorder. He stated the following lines: -

“For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and government; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with the disgust and loathing.” (Shelley, 92)

Daemon expressed how his alienation from the world evoked the desire to be his own master and examine human acts. Also claimed, he found it to be so difficult to overcome when he saw first human murder for a desire of looting. He in his defense said, there is evil in every human being just it needs to get a situation to awake that evil spirit and that's the reason why you have laws and government to control them. So in this way Daemon criticized society by adding the fact that thus the reason which turned a supernatural being into a fallen angel. Also, one of the main reasons of his abandonment was his outer appearance that clearly shows human beings are incapable of seeing the inner beauty.

Similarly, in the context of Contagion we'll find that the movie portrays the different perspectives of socio-care on behalf of individual and society. Furthermore, with the idea of human resilience as an issue in relation to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. As socio care has more selective approaches and varies from person to person and accordingly to the duties assigned to them. We can see a character playing the role of a journalist in the movie who instead of helping people with updated vlogs made them panic and increased their exposure to the virus, just for his lust and desire to become popular. Also, individual beings having more concerned for blood relations. Whereas, the other people assigned with the duties of Doctor, police services, sanitization services, social works etc. we notice a rise to more patriotic feelings towards to save the nation. So, in a way human can also be a savior and a destroyer for human kind, this whole concept of good and evil is based on how one controls his/her temptation.

“There was none among the myriads of men who existed who would pity or assist me; and should I feel kindness towards my enemies? No: from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery.” (Shelley, 106)

The Monster argues that he wasn't even given his name which is considered to be one's first identity. He being referred as the Daemon, Monster, the fiend, the creature and the wretch throughout the novel. He stands for his murderous acts and also declared war against the entire human race and mainly criticizing to Dr. Frankenstein who alienated himself after his forbidden knowledge. So, as a revenge for every betrayal and sufferings the daemon started to murder

closed cum loved ones of Frankenstein to put him in forcibly alienated state and making him realize about his sufferings.

At the end of the novel, Victor made a statement i.e.,

“Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.” (Shelley, 175)

Basically, after being a victim of hubris, Victor reached to a point of realization of his ambition. He found himself completely exhausted and helpless along with the destruction that had been made by his faulty creation. When he noticed he is near about to die, he assumed that he was mainly driven by an egotistical desire for personal glory. Also, that he is going to be remembered for his failure lies not in the creation of the monster but for the intention by which he created it.

Similarly, the movie focuses on the concept of social distancing and isolation, which directly indicates that humans should stop following their greed for more and involving themselves into self-pleasing materialistic world. In one of the scenarios of Contagion, a character playing the fictional role of Dr. Erin Mears statement:

“Stop touching your face Dave, don't talk to anyone. don't touch anyone. keep sanitizing your hand and maintain social distancing”<sup>3</sup> (Contagion)

This shows the alertness she wants to focus on. which is definitely not an easy task because humans usually have a habit of touching everything also to the face and body. Along with this, the importance of sensitization is important to take birth instead of just getting panic. One need to build the resilience power to control emotions, so that they can contribute into a social as well as by personal care.

Scott Z. Burns wrote the content of the movie mainly concerned with the theme of advanced science and technological age versus Nature. Critically if looked upon the scenarios of pandemics and epidemics or endemics or any virus borne disease, readers may find that till now even the advancement of science being somewhere failed to attain the cure of these. Virus borne diseases can just be cured by raising immunity of a human body and can be controlled by taking exact measurements of precautions. The role of universe and power of almighty is been shown as ruling over the science, this gets more cleared with the statement of a fictional character Dr. Ally Hextall i.e., “its figuring us out faster than we're figuring it out”<sup>4</sup>(Contagion). This makes the exact observation the paper already mentioned above, that it doesn't matter how people make progress with the science and facts, there are several times in history as well that human beings have witnessed the power of destruction from an unknown source of energy. Also, when people focused more on advanced science too feel helplessness.

“Furthermore, Dr. Erin Mears said one of the famous statements of the movie that is as follows: “somewhere in the world, the wrong pig met up with the wrong bat” 5 (movie Contagion).

Basically, Dr. Erin’s statement can be interpreted through the idea of predestination and free will. As according to Calvin’s theory, he ascribed “free will to all people in the sense that they act ‘Voluntarily, and not by compulsion”6 (Contagion).

But it’s a paradox of free will as well, as God has the ultimate power of controlling the universe and has already predestined everything in human’s life to which commonly, critics term it as our Fate. Also, this has been scientifically proven that bats are the best carrier of any virus, and unfortunately the virus carrying bat infected the banana and accidentally dropped a piece in a pigsty, where again a coincidence happened that among so many pigs only an infected pig ate it. As a result of this, the pig unknowingly generated a novel virus and became the reason of havoc in mankind.

So, whether it’s on a behalf of the movie Contagion or Pandemic, critics noticed that panic state spread more frequently than the virus can do itself. Alienation, somewhere is seen as an important aspect in terms of saving lives and also quarantine process by the society helped in establishing sensitization along with adopting hygienic habits. And obviously, everybody suffers from a trauma be it psychological or physical. Few may end up it, while bringing positive changes and will start to focus on the moves for the sake of society and few end up with post traumatic stress disorder. So, resilience can’t be considered as an outcome for any situation but as a process of adaptability. Also, “there are different perspectives to examine resilience, there are people who gets directly affected by natural or man-made disastrous events and on other side, the people who just get traumatized with the situation and develop a post-traumatic stress disorder but also able to bounce back or vice versa.”7 (Charney, WSF)

Taking everything into consideration, it’s been marked that every time, one of the major primary cause in all the sufferings and horrors that is being witnessed by human beings is humans’ greed and desire to do more explosion. Simultaneously, the inhuman desire of people’s bush meat hunting is always traced as a primary path for zoonotic disease transmissions. These epidemics can be mitigated by developing strategies to minimize human effects that contribute to the ecological disturbances. Similarly, the concept of human resilience differs with the level of traumatic crisis. People have the inbuilt capability to mold themselves according to the situation. But it can also extend to a post traumatic stress disorder that can result either into a positive change or a negative change.

Research paper puts light on the character of Victor Frankenstein, who has been traumatized with the events like being failed into his experiment for which he isolated himself from his loved ones as well as from the society and even after that he somehow manages to continue with his biggest failure of life. In fact, every time the monster appears in front of him,

his heart was ripped off by the daemon's confession about his crimes or bloodshed. Daemons' actions and words use to fill Victor with full of rage and despair, but also he managed to move on with broken self. Similarly, in the (Soderbergh) movie, the whole Europe and other parts of the world gets affected with the pandemic and a huge loss of human lives as well as on economical grounds can be seen. Many people lost their loved ones and definitely remained in a state of trauma and shock, but time works as a healing element in one's pain and this is what people generally identify as human resilience. According to Christians belief, God use to give punishment for each and every evil deeds simultaneously gives strength to bear it. And, this is how human resilience being tested in terms of effects of crisis.

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