

## Picturing “Female Followers of Mahomet” as “Veiled Maids”: Muslim Women and the Victim/Seductress Binary in *Frankenstein* and “Alastor”

Sauleha Kamal  
University of Cambridge



“Safie” (1900), by William Clarke Wontner<sup>1</sup>

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) contains an episode involving the “lovely Arabian” Safie, an episode often noted for its apparent disconnect from the larger plot of the novel. In the passage in question, a “lady ... dressed in a dark suit” arrives at the De Lacey cottage while the monster watches. This lady, later introduced as Felix De Lacey’s lover Safie, seems out of place in

a text that locates most of its action in the mountains of Geneva. Safie is decidedly un-European: she is otherworldly, shrouded in a “thick black veil” (106) and speaks in “a sweet accent” with a “musical” (106) voice that is explicitly “unlike” (107) that of the other women in *Frankenstein*. A transformation occurs in Safie when she sees Felix and “[throws] up her veil,” revealing “angelic beauty and expression” (107). It is almost as if the entire episode were a fantasy sequence that has no place in the novel. Indeed, what is the role of this otherworldly Oriental woman and why is it that when she throws up her veil, she becomes “angelic”?

Something similar happens in Percy Shelley’s “Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude” (1816), a poem about a solitary poet who wanders the East in search of his ideals. At the very heart of the poet’s exploration of the self, and, ultimately, the portent of his future demise, is his dream about a “veiled maid.” Again, what role does this sexualized Oriental woman play in the text? Why do both Shelleys engage with images of Oriental women who appear to be Muslim or associated with Islam?

This paper will argue that these images are in no way out of place but serve a central role in both texts. They do not suddenly appear in the Romantic period but rather arise out of a pre-existing historical conception of Muslim women found in Western texts and out of the larger cultural assumption that there is a fundamental difference between the East and West (Said 1-3). This imagined difference—that allows for a construction of the East as a place of both seduction and danger—leads to the depiction of Eastern women as either dangerous seductresses or the victims of a dangerous culture. A combination of words and pictures in the nineteenth century produced a very specific image of the East—or the Orient—and its women in Western imaginations. In medieval texts, the Muslim woman would appear as a high-ranking noblewoman who was converted to Christianity through a sexual relationship (that blossomed into love) with a Christian knight (Kahf 6; Hasan 38); in the seventeenth century, she began to be associated with the veil and the harem, and by the eighteenth century, she became the odalisque who occupied the harem (Kahf 4-6), “abject and angry or virginal and victimized but always...oppressed” (Kahf 6). In this incarnation, the quintessential victim oppressed by the tyranny of Muslim society is reduced to an animal existence. This primed her for the nineteenth century when she was, first, recreated as the ideal of femininity (Kahf 8) and sexual attractiveness (Hasan 32) and, then, rescued by the Romantic hero. The Romantic era, in particular, coincided with a moment of increased British expansionism and was marked by a renewed fascination with the Orient. As such, the Shelleys were not unique in their engagement with Eastern images. Indeed, the best-known works of Lord Byron—“Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” and “Don Juan”—are notable for such imagery and Byron’s biography, most prominently his role in the Greek War of Independence, provides

ample evidence of his associations with the East. While Byron's creative reliance on the East may be most memorable, other poets also did the same such as Robert Southey with "Thlabab the Destroyer" or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, most notably in "Kubla Khan." Returning to the Shelleys, it must be mentioned that while Percy Shelley's interest in the Orient, and particularly in India, has been well-documented both in his time and in subsequent criticism, his wife's interest has received less attention. This is where this paper enters the conversation. It examines the intersection of orientalism and a particular imagination of women in Percy Shelley's work through an analysis of a poem that is emblematic, before shedding light on Mary Shelley's own gendered Eastern engagements in her magnum opus. The gendered dimension of the Shelleys' orientalism is not surprising given that the construction of the Orient, in general, and of Muslim women, in particular, as seductive and/or dangerous is nowhere more apparent than in the Romantic period. Then, as Said notes, the Muslim woman in the Western imagination was located in a landscape populated with fantasies about veils, harems and dancing girls (190). These associations have in no small part contributed to the enduring narrative of Muslim women as victimized (Kahf 1), a narrative that still persists today. This image departs from a singular focus on seduction that characterized earlier conceptions—such as the Saracen seductress in medieval times—, instead formulating Muslim women as either seductive or victimized.

Cognizant of this pre-history, this paper argues that the representations of Muslim women in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Percy Shelley's "Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude" reflect what will be referred to here as the victim/seductress binary whereby Muslim women are circumscribed to either the victim or seductress role. The concept of this binary draws on Freud's Madonna/whore complex (Freud 251), Gilbert and Gubar's angel/monster divide (developed in relation to Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason) (361-367) and Edward Said's contention that the West has historically imagined the East as simultaneously seductive and threatening<sup>2</sup> (Said 21-27, 73-75). The Muslim woman, who appears either as an oppressed victim whose oppression reflects the tyranny of her religion and culture, or as a seductress who is defined by her sexual desirability and the danger associated with it, is doubly Other: both in gender and origin.

This paper reads Percy Shelley's images of the Arabian maid and the "veiled woman" in "Alastor" as connected to each other and emblematic of the victim/seductress binary and contrasts them with Mary Shelley's representation of Safie in *Frankenstein*, which is both an extension of these typical images and a subversion of them. The Shelleys may converge on the religio-cultural stereotypes imposed on their characters but they depart on gendered stereotypes, as this paper will go on to discuss. This paper proceeds by first locating the victim/seductress binary in the historical representation of Muslim

women in Western literature and then by exploring the images that align with this binary in both texts. Finally, it explores the role of images of the Orient—or the East—in both texts within “feminist orientalism” (Zonana 594) as well as the imagination of Muslim men as the oppressors of Muslim women to ultimately consider whether *Frankenstein*’s Safie, as a feminist figure, manages to transcend the victim/seductress binary. In this, it contrasts her treatment to that of the stagnant Muslim women of “Alastor” in order to assess the larger implications of the victim/seductress binary.

The first Muslim woman Alastor encounters, the “Arab maiden” who is rejected by the poet, seems to belong to the victim category. The second, the “veiled maid,” is a seductress who causes his ruin. The representation of the Muslim woman in *Frankenstein*, however, seems to be closer to the image of the victim than that of the seductress. Though Safie does appear as sexually attractive, there is nothing dangerous about her attractiveness. She may be connected with danger, as will later become apparent, but she is largely innocuous herself. “Alastor” engages with images of the Muslim woman at two key moments in the poem: the first encounter is with the explicitly Arab, obsequious and silent “Arab maiden” (l.129-139), the second is with the ambiguous “veiled maid” (l.151) of the poet’s dream. This dream maiden, most often read as a counterpoint to the “Arab maiden” of earlier verses (Strickland 151) and a projection of the self (Kirchkoff 120; Jones 109-110), has been the subject of much literary analysis. However, strikingly and curiously, in spite of this focus, very few critics have paid attention to her veil. She is simply a seductive ideal of beauty and intellect whose religious and cultural associations are left uninterrogated. In the preface, Shelley himself characterizes her as “the Being whom he loves” and goes on to state that:

The vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture...the intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense...[in] a single image. (Shelley, iv)

However, if the only function of this dream maiden is to be a “self-object” as Kirchkoff has argued (120) and as Percy Shelley suggests here, then why does she need to appear in the image of a sexually attractive veiled woman with Oriental associations? Furthermore, why should this vision emerge in the East (specifically in Kashmir (l.45))? In order to answer these questions, it is useful to consider the moment in which she appears in the text. She appears almost immediately after the first Muslim woman leaves, when the memory of that rejected “Arab maiden” is still fresh in the readers’ minds:

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,  
Her daily portion, from her father’s tent,

And spread her matting for his couch, and stole  
 From duties and repose to tend his steps,  
 Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe  
 To speak her love, and watched his nightly sleep,  
 Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips  
 Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath  
 Of innocent dreams arose; then, when red morn  
 Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home  
 Wildered, and wan, and panting, she returned. (P. Shelley, l.129-139)

This *victim* Arab maiden is self-sacrificing and generous, bringing her “daily portion” (P. Shelley, l.129) of food to the poet, which she has to procure from her “father’s tent” (l.130) (ostensibly, she is under his authority as well). She is “enamoured” (l.133) with the poet and devoted to him; however, she is unable “to speak her love” (l.134). She is literally unable to “arouse” (Fischman 146) the poet (for he sleeps in her presence, oblivious) *because* she does not speak. Though her one transgression is to steal away for brief moments to be with the poet, she does not move further than this and otherwise remains the perfect image of the silent Oriental victim, the type of docile woman resigned to life in the harem, standing in strict contrast to Western women. She clearly belongs to the “realm of the Arab maiden: female, guarded, inaccessible, and unaccessed” (Fischman 154). Therefore, she cannot be a true companion to the poet and must inevitably be rejected in favor of “the nocturnal vision who represents something of the mystery behind the painted veil” (Strickland 154). Just as the intellectual capacities of the veiled maid are attractive to the poet, the absence of intellectual congruence with this “Arab maiden” is unappealing to him. As James Wilson notes, and as is apparent in the preface to the poem discussed above, Percy Shelley himself insisted that a sexual relationship could not be satisfying if the woman was not “completely liberated from social and intellectual servitude” (Wilson 393). The Arab maiden who is still under the control of her father and her culture cannot be considered completely liberated, and must therefore be rejected.

However, though Wilson sees this rejection as that of “human love” for a “sterile projection of his inherent narcissism” (393), it appears to be more than that. It is useful, here, to recall Sigmund Freud’s conception of what is known as the Madonna-whore complex whereby men can exhibit a tendency to characterize women as either admirable or attractive but not both. Read through the lens of this idea, it follows that Shelley’s poet is attracted not to the good, admirable woman but the dangerous, seductive woman. The poet’s rejection of the Arab maiden is also his rejection of the image of the good Muslim woman—the victimized Muslim woman—for the temptation of the seductive Muslim woman. The good Muslim woman has the classic sacrificing qualities that are characterized as feminine. She sacrifices her food and her sleep for her devotion to the poet, a devotion that

drains her of her own energies so that when she returns to her home upon sunrise she does so “wildered, and wan, and panting” (P. Shelley l. 139). These same good, feminine qualities will also be later echoed in Safie’s “generous nature” (M. Shelley 114) as she tends to her travel companion (114) and brings happiness to the De Laceys (117) in *Frankenstein*. In contrast to both these “good” Muslim women, the dream woman plays the opposite role in draining the poet of his creative energies leaving his brain “vacant” (P. Shelley l. 190).

In her difference from the Arab maiden, the “veiled maid” is characterized as a highly sexualized figure. If the Arab maiden were Freud’s *Madonna*, then, the veiled maid is the *whore*. Where the rejected Arab maiden was unable to speak, the attractive “veiled maid” speaks “in low solemn tones” (P. Shelley l. 152), her voice as musical as would be expected from an enchanting seductress—something that is also later echoed in Safie’s musical singing. The veiled maid is bewitching: her voice contains within it a synesthetic natural imagery, infused as it is with “sounds of streams and breezes” and “shifting hues.” She is seductive—unlike the Arab maiden whose only physical descriptor was “wan”—and associated with images of physical beauty, with her “dark locks” and “beamy, bending eyes.” Furthermore, the moment immediately before she leaves the poet’s mind vacant is noteworthy for its graphic imagery of sex. Adam Kirsch in the *New Yorker* likens this moment to what we would call “a wet dream” today (Kirsch). Indeed, these verses do follow the sequence of orgasm as this moment is full of images of sexual fulfillment with the descriptions of her “parted lips,” “panting bosom,” “short breathless cry,” “irresistible joy” and his “shuddering limbs,” “gasping breath” and “dizzy eyes.” The way Shelley paints the moment of orgasm in great detail here emphasizes an imagination of the veiled maid as a highly sexual being. This representation begs the question: if she is indeed only attractive to the poet for her intellect, as Shelley claims, or a representation of the poet’s self as others have suggested, then what is the need for this level of attention to her sexual life? Indeed, though both Safie and the veiled maid are valued for their intellect and given agency, both women would have undoubtedly produced very different effects were they not also sexualized.

Furthermore, in addition to sexualizing Muslim women—or, perhaps, as part of it—both “Alastor” and *Frankenstein* also associate them with the veil. The veil performs a dual function here, as it is both the symbol of the purported Islamic oppression of women and an aesthetically sensual object in its own right because of how it physically conceals beauty. In “Alastor,” the dream-woman is quite explicitly introduced as “a veiled maid” (P. Shelley l. 151) while Safie’s first appearance in *Frankenstein* finds her “covered with a thick black veil” (Mary Shelley 106). These conceptions conflate the identity of the Muslim woman with the veil that she wears, the veil that is cemented as an object of lust, beauty, mystery and oppression. As

the veil is a fetishized object that conveys all these associations, the emphasis on the veil in both “Alastor” and *Frankenstein* contributes to the victim/seductress conception of the Muslim woman. The veil literally *veils* her as it shrouds her very person in these ideas about difference, seduction, oppression and mystery. These ideas are, of course, tied to the conception of Islam as intrinsically oppressive to women, the veil being considered as the object that epitomizes this oppression (Ahmed 152). Therefore, the veil, here, contributes to an image of the Muslim woman as sexualized, oppressed and othered.

The othering of the Muslim woman is arguably more apparent in Percy Shelley’s “Alastor” than it is in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. “Alastor,” written the year before Mary Shelley started *Frankenstein*, clearly imagines Muslim women as oppressed victims or dangerous seductresses. The seductive Oriental dream-woman of “Alastor”—whom some critics have identified as a succubus (Frosch 85)—is the direct cause of the ruin of the poet. Joseph Lew reads this fact as a criticism of the poet’s search for the “impossible, idealized feminine principle” (Lew 265). There is no substance to her beauty; even her supposedly ideal feminine beauty offers no respite to the poet. As such, Lew believes that the dream-woman avenges “both the denied biological mother and the ignored Arabian” (Lew 265), reflecting Shelley’s anxieties about both femininity and the East; however, Lew does not discuss her role as a seductive Muslim woman. Indeed, the poet’s encounter with her leaves him worse than he was before (P. Shelley l. 188-89). This woman’s beauty has effected a decidedly negative change in the poet’s life. Rather than becoming a muse who fosters his creative energies, as Strickland identifies her (152), she becomes the exact opposite, swallowing his vision and pre-existing creative energies and leaving his brain “vacant.” As a seductive, dangerous (Muslim) woman, she is the counterpoint to the good (Muslim) woman of the earlier verses.

This clearly destructive potential to her seductive quality is initially hidden “beneath the sinuous veil” (P. Shelley l. 176) but is unleashed when she removes her veil and reveals “arms now bare” (l. 177), “dark locks” (l. 178), “beamy bending eyes” and “parted lips” (l. 179). As soon as this exposure occurs, there is a decidedly negative change in the poet whose “strong heart” sinks, “sickened with excess” (l. 181). Indeed, it is even more interesting that in this episode, her veil—the symbol of her Otherness and Muslimness—gets transferred onto the poet with the verse “blackness *veiled* his dizzy eyes” (l. 187). This encounter and the subsequent veiling of the poet spell the destruction of his creativity, as noted above. In Percy Shelley’s imagination of Eastern femininity, therefore, Oriental seduction is directly related to destruction.

In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examined the tendency of nineteenth-century literature to paint female characters as either angels or madwomen and

monsters—a binary that recalls Freud’s earlier Madonna/whore conception. Gilbert and Gubar conclude that both the ‘angel’ and ‘madwoman’ images are reductionist representations that arise out of patriarchal culture. In its binary imagination of women, “Alastor” does not attempt to challenge this angel/monster pattern; however, in Safie’s ambivalence, *Frankenstein* begins to unsettle such reductionist depictions. Notice how the veil performs a very different function when it appears on Safie in *Frankenstein*. Right from her first appearance, Safie’s difference, and her Otherness, characterizes her. She is unlike the women the text has encountered before even in physical appearance, dressed as she is in a “dark suit and covered with a thick black veil” (M. Shelley 106). This association of darkness persists even when she removes her veil; darkness now appearing in her hair, which is “a shining raven black.” When she speaks, her voice is “unlike that of [the monster’s] other friends” (106), the inhabitants of the cottage. Furthermore, she is “the stranger” with a “sweet accent” (106), different in both appearance and in behavior, utterly foreign. However, although her difference is associated with darkness, there is nothing malicious about Safie herself. Indeed, she only carries with her the expectation of malice, danger and darkness owing to her Eastern origin. Hence, she removes her veil to reveal “a countenance of angelic beauty and expression” (106) and eyes that are, notably, “dark, but gentle” (106), not a seductive quality as in “Alastor.” Safie is, thus, a non-threatening, gentle character who merely gives the appearance of darkness when she is actually “wondrously fair” (106) when freed from Eastern associations. These associations are contained, here, in her veil, which she not only removes but *throws* off (“when she saw him, threw up her veil” (106)). Mary Shelley’s choice of language makes the simple act of removing the veil an act of defiance and resistance that echoes her rejection of the Eastern associations that shroud her in difference.

Safie, in contrast to the “veiled maid” of “Alastor,” affects a positive change in her lover. Here, *Frankenstein* departs from “Alastor” in significant ways, at once imitating and inverting its plot (Lew 258). Safie departs from the expected representation of the beautiful Muslim woman—usually coded as a seductress—as there is nothing sinister or destructive about her beauty, at least at first. Indeed, her lover Felix, who has heretofore been melancholy, is “ravished with delight” (M. Shelley 106) at her sight, “his eyes [sparkle], his cheek [flushes] with pleasure” (106), and he becomes “as beautiful as the stranger” (107). Where the more Saracen-like veiled maiden of “Alastor” strips the poet of his creative energies when she transfers her veil to him, Safie shares her beauty with Felix, rendering him “as beautiful [as herself]” and “[infusing] new life into his soul” (109).

Even though Safie is evidently foreign and reminiscent of the dream-woman in “Alastor” in her physical appearance, it is her gentle nature that is repeatedly emphasized in *Frankenstein*. Safie is an

Arabian but she is a “sweet Arabian” (107), foreign but not dangerous; seductive but not destructive. Rather than threatening, Safie’s foreignness renders her demure and gentle so that even when “she [does] not appear to understand” her new family (because she does not speak any French), she nevertheless smiles (107).

What is especially interesting about both the “veiled maid” and Safie, however, is that they are not presented as attractive merely because of their physical beauty but also because they are able to speak. The veiled maid is alluring to the poet for her speech, which deals with “[k]nowledge and truth and virtue” and “lofty hopes of divine liberty” (P. Shelley l.158-9), echoes the noble, intellectual pursuits of the poet. This is consistent with Shelley’s conception of love, which, as previously noted, he believed could only be possible with a woman who was almost an intellectual equal. However, neither the veiled maid, nor the poet’s desire is purely cerebral, for the veiled maid delivers these noble messages to him in low, musical tones and is also described as having “glowing limbs,” bare arms, floating “dark locks,” “beamy bending eyes” and “parted lips.” Why should the poem need a veiled woman with dark locks and beamy bending eyes if her function is purely intellectual?

In *Frankenstein*, Safie is the only woman who is allowed to tell her own story. Considering Safie’s status as a subaltern and oppressed other, it is surprising that she demonstrates the agency required for self-representation and the ability to speak within power structures in which she is not included. Gayatri Spivak, building on her graduate supervisor Paul de Man’s rhetorical reading practice—which he developed primarily through his work on Romantic texts (Dickinson 180)—has suggested that the subaltern is unable to do precisely this (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 28-32). Caught in between power structures and drowned out by representations that are not of her own making, the subaltern, in Spivak’s analysis—in contradiction to Foucault and Deleuze’s conclusions about representation (Swift 100)—is obscured. Here, though, Safie, a would-be subaltern, is *speaking*.

Even as Safie’s speech is emphasized, it is also Othered in that she is unable to speak the same language as the other denizens of the cottage. It appears, though, that this difference is almost irrelevant as Safie’s voice with its “rich cadence” (107) supersedes the voice of the familiar, European, Agatha whose singing pales in comparison to the “wondrous strain of the stranger” (108). As an Oriental outsider, Safie is able to access a level of seductiveness that is not available to European women like Agatha. This much is apparent, but what is surprising is that Safie is a very different sort of Oriental woman, for not only is she able to speak and tell her story, but she is also able to take control of her own destiny and scrounge a happy ending for herself in spite of difficult circumstances and in a novel not known for its happy endings. Her story reveals Safie as initially similar to the

victim-Arab-maiden of “Alastor”—generous, obedient, devoted to her father—but, unlike the silent Arab maiden, she is someone who managed to communicate her feelings to her lover (M. Shelley 111). Thus, even while still under her father’s supposed oppression, she is able to exert her own agency and take control of her situation, a quality that later allows her to find her way to Felix and escape oppression. It must be noted that even though Safie is initially presented as a subaltern, she is not to stay in this role—this is apparent in the text’s treatment of her. Therefore, the question arises: is Safie’s speech radical as such? Or does the unstable nature of Safie’s subalternity negate her potential radical quality?

With Safie, it appears Mary Shelley is able to create a *feminist* Oriental woman, combining the influences of both her husband and her mother: Percy Shelley’s interest in the Orient (Lew 255) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminism (Zonana, “They will Prove the Truth of My Tale” 170-84). Indeed, Joseph Lew writes that, structurally, Mary Shelley modeled her novel on “Alastor” and earlier Orientalist fictions, noting that the novel shares many preoccupations with “Alastor” particularly in the denial of the mother, the journey of discovery, the dream maiden and the death of the protagonist (Lew 255). Many threads of this engagement are visible in *Frankenstein*, most prominently perhaps in the character of Victor Frankenstein himself who, like the poet, “[shuns] [his] fellow-creatures” (60) when he is engaged in the process of creation. It is particularly interesting, however, to study *Frankenstein*’s Safie as a response to the Muslim women of “Alastor.” The fact that both Shelleys are interested in the representation of the Muslim woman as veiled, for instance, is not coincidental: Mary Shelley is said to have both participated in her husband’s artistic life and in his “Islamic engagements” (Einboden 147). Though her interest in orientalist tropes may have been triggered by her interactions with her husband and his work, Mary Shelley channels it in entirely different ways because of her connection with the feminist engagements of Mary Wollstonecraft. While certainly characteristic of the orientalism of its historical time period—in the way it represents Safie as mysterious and beautiful, for instance—*Frankenstein* is unique in that it sees its Muslim character as both the oppressed other and the liberated feminist figure. Whereas the other (Western) women are not able to exert their agency—indeed Elizabeth’s testimony fails to save Justine (83) earlier in the text—the (Eastern) Safie succeeds in engineering her own liberation, and thus appears as the only woman in the text who can be identified as a feminist figure.

It is evident why *Frankenstein*’s Oriental engagements have been connected to Percy Shelley for his “Alastor” certainly relies on Oriental imagery throughout its narrative. Nigel Leask identifies “Alastor” as being among the Shelley poems that rely on what Edward Said called the “imaginary geography” (53) of the Orient that allowed

interchangeability of different geographical locations in the East (Leask 71-72). Indeed, images of the Orient blur into one another in “Alastor.” In his travels, Shelley’s wandering poet travels through Arabia, Persia, up the Indus River in South Asia and the Oxus River in Central Asia to end up in Kashmir in the short span of six lines (Shelley 140-146). These remarkably different geographical locations are meshed together as similar images of the Orient. As Zonana notes, such images of the Orient in Romantic texts may appear to be “no more than random, casual allusions” (“The Sultan and the Slave” 602), but their very casualness is interesting because it suggests that the writers are drawing on a “fully developed cultural code implicitly shared with their readers” (602). It is because of the strength of this code that when writers such as Mary Shelley or Wollstonecraft mention the harem, they do not have to say that it is emblematic of the oppression of women in the East as that association is already present in the readers’ minds.

It is unsurprising, then, that *Frankenstein* is preoccupied with images of the Orient even before Safie appears. The novel already has a vast repertoire of images of the East and of Islam. For instance, at the beginning of the text, Walton uses a curious simile to describe one of his friends who is “as silent as a Turk” (32). Additionally, upon discovering the cause of life, Victor Frankenstein refers to a Sinbad story from “A Thousand and One Nights” (M. Shelley, 57) and his friend Henry Clerval even invents tales of “wonderful fancy and passion” in imitation of Persian and Arabic writers (71). The imagination of this novel turns to the East when it has to articulate something fantastical. The way the East, for example, provides the “scope for [Clerval’s] spirit of enterprise” (70) is at first contrasted with Victor’s own scientific interests; Victor only finds “not only instruction but consolation in the work of the orientalists” after he has already created the monster. Joyce Zonana suggests that Victor’s inclination to oriental tales is indicative of his “Mahometan” inclinations (“They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale” 177). As the father figure of the text (Gilbert and Gubar 230-237), it is interesting that Victor Frankenstein should be likened to Mahometans and the Orient.

Indeed, if Muslim women are imagined as oppressed victims and Islamic culture is coded as inherently oppressive in Western imagination, then it follows that Muslim men must be the oppressors, the gatekeepers of oppressive cultural and religious values. We certainly find this in the victim-Muslim-women of both “Alastor” and *Frankenstein*. In “Alastor,” the focus of the verses about the Arab maiden may be on her infatuation with the poet, but her father’s authority over her is clearly implied: the maiden brings the poet food from “her father’s tent” (l.129) and has to steal away from duties (l.131) (that her father has presumably assigned to her) and, finally, has to stealthily hurry back to the tent upon sunrise (l.138-9) (lest her

father notices her absence). Therefore, even when the Muslim father does not appear in the text, he still manages to exert his control over his daughter. Similarly, when *Frankenstein's* Safie lives with her father, she is expected to do exactly as he commands, living under his "tyrannical mandate" (M. Shelley 111) until she resolves to escape his oppression. Additionally, Safie's father becomes connected to a larger narrative of oppression when it is revealed that Safie's Christian mother was married to him after being "seized and made a slave by the Turks" (112). He is also associated with such words as "deceit" (113), "treacherous," "ingratitude" (113) and "tyrannical" (111). Ironically, although he was himself the victim of injustice—he was indicted because of the French government's racist attitudes (111)—, he is unable to control what the text imagines as his Islamic tendencies towards oppression and not become an oppressor. Ultimately, Safie's father is coded as the danger to which the lovely Safie is connected, the oriental danger that becomes the "cause of [the De Laceys'] ruin" (110) just as the veiled maid is the cause of the poet's ruin in "Alastor."

There remains the question of the larger role of such images of the Orient in these texts. This imagerial representation of the East is apparent in the ekphrastic descriptions of both the monster and Safie. In the moment of his creation, the monster can easily be reduced to a series of disjointed images that give the sense that the creature is a motley amalgamation of oriental features rather than a contiguous whole. He is described in terms of his "dull yellow eye," yellow skin, muscles, "pearly white" teeth and "lustrous black, flowing hair" (60). Mary Shelley curiously characterizes these features as "luxuriences," calling to mind Said's criticism of the West's conflation of luxury with the East (Said 157) and asserting the monster's association with Eastern imagery. Together, these luxuriant images produce a highly repulsive construction, a "horrid contrast" so that even Victor Frankenstein expresses surprise at how the collection of features he had "selected as beautiful" could coalesce to produce such a horrid sight.

Safie's description appears as another ekphrastic introduction but one that is starkly different. Where the description of the monster came as a violent onslaught of images invading the text without warning, the description of Safie is preceded by an introduction—ironically, given by the monster himself—that identifies her story as the "more moving part of my story" (M. Shelley 106). When images of Safie surface, they clearly mark her as foreign, just as the monster's description marked him as such, but Safie's description produces a very different effect from the monster's. Whereas his foreignness was repulsive, Safie's is pleasant and even alluring. Her voice is "unlike" (106) all the other women's, for it is "musical"; her hair is "shining raven black" (106); her "eyes...dark, but gentle, although animated"; her "features [,] of a regular proportion" and "her complexion [,] wondrously fair,

each cheek tinged with a lovely pink.” Therefore, the foreign elements that are repulsive and frightening on the male monster are sanitized and rendered innocuous on this woman. Despite her strangeness and the fact that she is not able to speak the language of the De Laceys, Safie’s “presence [still] [diffuses] gladness through the cottage.” Indeed, this positive effect is not only reflected in the “gladness” in the cottage and Felix’s “delight,” but also spills onto the physical landscape so that the “black ground” becomes covered with “herbage...[and] innumerable flowers, sweet to the scent” (108). For a moment, this magic appears to extend to the monster, who is given reason to hope for his own redemption as he learns language and studies literature (108) through eavesdropping on Safie’s education. Things appear to be harmonious, and it seems that this lovely, angelic Arabian may actually possess the power to influence the monster’s life positively.

However, this hope is soon shattered, and with it the appearance of Safie’s definitive *Otherness*. Safie’s Christian maternal history is revealed, and it justifies her transformation and enables her to become part of the Christian world of the De Laceys; the monster does not have such a history and he is, therefore, condemned to always remain a “wretched outcast” (M. Shelley 118). Thus, when the monster reveals himself to the De Laceys, his *unveiling* does not produce the happiness produced by Safie’s own unveiling and only causes “pain and anguish” (M. Shelley 121). The following question arises: Why is Safie redeemed while the monster is not when both of them are Orientalized, foreign figures? The answer to this question lies in Safie’s maternal history, the revelation that destabilizes her oriental identity, and so allows for a transformation—or, as this paper argues, a restoration.

Consider, here, what Joyce Zonana has termed “feminist orientalism,” a practice that allowed the West to define its feminism against the oppression of the East and so both exert its own moral superiority and urge Western culture to purge itself of sexist attitudes that were primarily identified with the East (“The Sultan and the Slave” 594; Lewis 158-9). Indeed, European travellers’ stories about the Middle East popularized images of “despotic sultans” and “desperate slave girls” that then entered liberal feminist discourse (Zonana 594). Images of Muslim women began to appear in the writings of many Western feminist writers of the time including Mary Wollstonecraft who defined her (Western) feminism against the East (Zonana 594). Interestingly, Zonana traces the most explicit origins of feminist orientalism back to Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 publication, “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (Zonana 594-5), in which she criticizes “Mahometans” for their tyrannical oppression of women (Wollstonecraft 83), particularly as far as women in the harem were concerned (112-13). In suggesting that any woman who would accept her oppression and confinement in the harem (Zonana 594) would be one with “little ambition” and “not an immortal soul” (Wollstonecraft

112-13), Wollstonecraft uncritically accepts the false Western idea that Muslims believed women had no souls (Ahmed 525). Indeed, in her criticism of Milton's account of the creation of women in "Paradise Lost," Wollstonecraft even writes, "I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls" (19). In ascribing this line of thought to Muslims, she limits feminism to Western women, who by virtue of having souls and being *unlike* Mahometan women, must fight oppression and gain rights. As both a nineteenth-century writer and Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Shelley inherits these ideas and when *Frankenstein* insists on Safie's soul (M. Shelley 112), the insistence automatically brings Safie's Muslim identity into question.

It is worth noting here that the insistence on the soul in the verses concerning the veiled maid in "Alastor" might appear to contradict the idea that Muslim women were not associated with the soul, but upon closer examination it is the very absence of a soul of her own that allows the veiled maid to become, for the poet, a projection of the self, as critics such as Kirchhoff and Jones have noted. Indeed, the only situation that would make it possible for the poet to project his own soul on to this woman as he does (P. Shelley l. 153), is if he found her an empty vessel, devoid of her own soul.

Mary Shelley, however, in giving Safie a soul of her own almost appears to transcend the victim/seductress binary. Safie has the characteristics of a victimized, good Muslim woman, but she is also a woman with a soul and someone who rises above her victimization. It seems strange, at first glance, that Mary Shelley would explore feminism through a character associated with a part of the world that, in the Western imagination, was known for its oppression of women. Certainly, Safie is the character whom, as Erin Garrett notes, Mary Shelley uses to channel her anxieties as a woman writing in the shadow of a masculine literary canon (Garrett 129) and to explore the feminist tradition she inherited from her mother Mary Wollstonecraft. The absence of female characters with agency is often cited as *Frankenstein's* central weakness; such readings, however, ignore Safie, the woman who is not only able to effect agency but also to tell her own story (Garrett 141). It seems strange that this dream of agency is realized in the "female cultural Other" (Garrett 146), that she is the character who should come to be lauded as either a "literal representation of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist ideals defined in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), or as a "literary echo of *The New Arabian Nights* (translated edition 1814)" (Garrett 146). Perhaps Safie is able to challenge the status quo precisely *because* she is an outsider. As an outsider, she is not bound to the cultural constraints of Western patriarchy; furthermore, as someone who rejects her own culture, she is temporarily able to become 'stateless' and, thus, to escape patriarchy entirely. This act paints Safie as a Muslim 'feminist' character—something quite radical. A closer examination,

however, reveals that Safie's Oriental or Muslim identity is far from fixed.

Indeed, as her narrative continues, Safie begins to undergo a transformation from Eastern to Western. She exchanges her Eastern culture for the Western domesticity of the De Lacey cottage. She is educated in Western learning, reading Volney's "Ruins of Empires" to learn about "slothful Asiatics" (M. Shelley 108)—when she is ironically an "Asiatic" herself— and about Christianity and Western society (108-109). Through this education, Safie begins to become more self than other for the text. She becomes a contiguous part of the cottage and "[diffuses] happiness among its inhabitants" (M. Shelley 117). It might appear that this process is a transformation from foreign/other to domestic/self but her history, revealed in chapter 14, marks this supposed change as more of a restoration than a transformation. It turns out that Safie is not entirely foreign after all. Though her first appearance in the text saw her as unequivocally Oriental and Muslim (Lew 280), the later part of the text reveals details that call her Muslim identity into question. It emerges that Safie's Christian mother, who was forcibly married to her Muslim father, "instructed her daughter 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" (M. Shelley 111). Safie's independence, then, is attributed to her Christian education rather than her apparent Muslim identity. With this revelation, Shelley begins the process of stripping Safie of what Lew terms her "oriental traits" (280).

Ultimately, Shelley sets up Christian enlightenment against the perceived backwardness of Islam. In light of the previously noted nineteenth-century imagination of Muslim women as oppressed victims, it becomes clear that the independent Safie belongs more to the West than she does to the Muslim world from which she originated. Safie is set apart from the "female followers of Muhammad" through the "independence of spirit" she has learned from her Christian mother (M. Shelley 111). She is, therefore, marked as unfit (Lew 280) for the "harem" life with its "puerile amusements" which is the fate of the *true* Muslim women. Her only fitting recourse, therefore, is to realize her Christian potential by marrying Felix and becoming part of the De Lacey family. Through her mother, Safie is Christian, and so she is able to be saved in an interesting complication of what Spivak identified as the trope of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 93). Safie, appearing at first as the brown woman who is 'saved' through a white man's love is revealed as not entirely an Other—a *brown* woman—owing to her Christian heritage. Therefore, what appears to be a case of a white man (Felix) saving an Eastern woman (Safie) from an Eastern man (her father), is revealed to be a different situation altogether when it

becomes apparent that the Eastern woman in question herself belongs more to the West than the East.

Safie, of course, has a soul—something Wollstonecraft and others associated with Western women, not Eastern women—and her soul is the reason why she cannot accept the subordination apparently acceptable to Eastern women. Safie, not being a fully Eastern woman, “[sickens] at the prospect of Asia, and being immured within the walls of a harem, allowed only to occupy herself with infantile amusements” because such things are “ill-suited to the temper of her soul” (112). Her soul desires “grand ideas” and “virtue,” things that are only apparently attainable through marrying a Christian and remaining in the Western world, where, in the imagination of this novel, women are afforded rights (M. Shelley 112).

It appears, then, that though Safie departs from the expected portrayal of Muslim women because of her independence and eventual liberation, this “Muslim” woman exchanges her Muslim identity for a Christian identity as soon as she is liberated. Safie has to rebel against the Islamic world—and her father, who is emblematic of Islamic oppression—and conform to Western gender roles (Kahf 177), as she does in her union with Felix. Indeed, in order to realize her liberation, Safie has to remove her veil to become what Spivak calls “a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self” (Spivak, “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” 253). In this, she not only becomes an Other who consolidates the self, as Spivak argues, but rather she is *restored* to the self since the potential for restoration was within her all along. It appears that Safie is not a liberated Muslim woman at all but a liberated Christian woman who is able to carve out a Christian identity by defining her Christian mother's feminism against her Muslim father's supposedly oppressive Islamic beliefs (Einboden 156). Meanwhile, though Safie, the not-quite Muslim woman is able to liberate herself, the true Muslim women in the imagination of the text still remain “immured within the walls of a harem” (Shelley 112), and, indeed, the text does not concern itself with their situation or possible liberation.

Though *Frankenstein* ultimately restores Muslim women to the victim/seductress binary by un-Muslim-izing the only “Muslim” woman who escapes it, the process itself at least challenges this binary. In comparison, Percy Shelley's “Alastor” does not even challenge it. No such transformation happens in “Alastor”: the rejected “Arab maiden” remains silent, docile and subject to her father's oppression, and the seductive “veiled maiden” only stays in the poem for as long as she is required to seduce the poet and cause his ruin thus fulfilling her mandate as a seductress and leaving him drained of his energies. The Muslim women of “Alastor,” therefore, unlike the “Muslim” woman of *Frankenstein*—or even *Frankenstein*'s Orientalized monster—do not even get the opportunity for redemption. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is more progressive in its treatment of Islam and Muslim women and in its relationship to the victim/seductress binary than Percy Shelley's

“Alastor” and certainly more progressive than other works of that period which were typically at once enamored with and disdainful towards the East. Even if *Frankenstein* ultimately fails to fulfill the promise of rejecting the victim/seductress binary and leaves the actual Muslim women of its imagination immured in harems and ascribed to the victim/seductress role, the challenge itself is noteworthy.

## Notes

1. Source: Thornton, Lynne. *Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting*. ACR, 1985.

2. While Said delves into the feminization of the Orient, and its subsequent associations with seduction, in *Orientalism*, he does not directly approach the issue of gender. Indeed, *Orientalism*'s closest brushes with gendered critique come through Said's engagement with Flaubert's work. Citing the latter's travel writings in which he recalls encountering an Egyptian courtesan, Said notes that the courtesan, meant to represent the East, is docile and sexualized, while Flaubert himself, as an agent of the West, is dominant and able to speak for her. As such, while Said lays the groundwork for gendered critiques of orientalism and orientalist practices, he does not develop it into a discussion of Eastern women and their potential for agency.

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