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Can Safie Speak? Language and Representation of the Oriental Woman in *Frankenstein*(1)

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<1>The Turkish-Arabian Safie in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) has been cast as the representation of freedom and the voice of the author herself. Such reading traces in Safie's story biographical elements from Shelley's life, especially her union with the married Percy Shelley against William Godwin's will, which mirrors Safie's journey to join her fiancé, Felix. This reading recognizes Safie as Shelley's voice because Safie is freer than the rest of the female characters in the novel. She is the only one who crosses geographical, religious, and cultural borders through her journey on horseback and breaks social barriers by choosing to join her Christian lover of foreign birth despite her father's will. Such details recall Mary's joining Percy Shelley, and what became later known as "the League of Incest and Atheism," (Gordon 403) which all caused the rumors about Godwin's bankruptcy and that he sold Mary and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, to Percy Shelley in return for a sum of money he desperately needed.(2)

<2>However, nothing appears to have been written about the possible connection between the fictional Safie and a Turkish Sultana named Safiye Sultan (1550–1619), or the meaning of this character's name in Arabic rather than reading it as a Greco-Roman name. A reading that situates Safie in relation to the real-life Safiye Sultan—and to other representations of this figure such as John Hamilton Reynolds's *Safie: An Eastern Tale* (1814) and Andrew Cherry's *The Travellers; Or, Music's Fascination* (1806)—reveals that Safie, far from being a voice of freedom, is little more than a recapitulation of accumulated travel accounts and stereotypes about

Oriental harems and slaves. Such misrepresentations leave Safie a voiceless and dependent woman and deny her the means to represent her culture.

<3>There are multiple parallels between the story of Safie in *Frankenstein* and Safiye Sultan's background, which can be detected through the monster's account of Safie's arriving in the De Lacey cottage in the following lines:

Safie related that her mother was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of Safie, who married her. The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced. She 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. This lady died, but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who 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 for 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. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 184-85)

<4>These details mirror the historical events of Safiye Sultan's life. Said to be a descendant of Albanian origin, Safiye Sultan, a concubine of the Ottoman sultan Murad III (1546-1595), was taken a slave and spent ten years in the Turkish harem. She was a Roman Catholic who later converted to Islam and became such an important figure in the harem, and so integral to the Sultan's policymaking, that she was given the title "Haseki," which means "the favorite" in Turkish. Safiye ascended to power to be among the most influential female figures who ruled during the period known as "The Sultanate of Women." She gave birth to Sultan Mehmed III, which was why she was given the title "Valide Sultan" or "The Queen Mother." In *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, Leslie Penn Peirce comments on Safiye's threatening ascension to higher positions in the palace, adding, "It was with great difficulty that Murad was persuaded by his mother Nurbanu to take other concubines" (94). Safiye remained the sultan's favorite, and he continued "consulting her on political matters, especially after the death in 1583 of his mother Nurbanu Sultan, on whom he had relied greatly" (94). Safiye established her reputation as a charitable woman who sponsored the construction of schools, water fountains, public kitchens, and mosques.

<5>Like Murad's mother, Safiye "moved out of [her] role as the sultan's favorite, a sexual role, into a postsexual political role: as [mother] of the heir apparent, [she] acted as adviser to [her] husband" (Peirce 95). She also engaged in diplomatic affairs that included supporting the Republic of Venice. Her interest in English affairs at the end of the century "arguably results from [a] combination of her commitment to the Ottoman dynasty as a mother of the (future) sultan and her cosmopolitan outlook as a [former slave] of Christian European provenance" (Andrea 21). Being the Haseki, Safiye enjoyed many privileges and was ranked higher than the sultan's own sisters and aunts, the princesses of the dynasty. Her resources "were vast, her stipend the highest in the realm, and her personal wealth extensive" (Andrea 21). Safiye was the real power behind the Ottoman throne, and was, for some time, in charge of the treasury of the Ottoman Empire. She partly determined the Empire's politics and ruled the Empire for many years.

<6>Many letters show that Safiye was concerned with maintaining good relations with England and that she and Queen Elizabeth I were aware of their similar impact on politics as women. Peirce suggests that "Elizabeth may have valued the existence of this second channel of communication with the Ottomans, whom her government was so assiduously courting" (228). This correspondence occurred at the peak of the political power for royal women in England and the Ottoman Empire. The importance of these letters originates from the fact that "the Ottoman sultan, bound by the protocols of inaccessibility, could not have communicated with another monarch with the directness displayed by the women's letters" (228). Among these letters is one written in November 1593, in which Safiye replies to Queen Elizabeth's first letter. The original is in the British Museum and is described as meticulously written and sprinkled with gold dust, and "unlike Safiye's second and third letters to Elizabeth, this first is professionally written by a trained calligrapher. Safiye introduces herself as the mother of the heir to Murad and promises to use her influence at court to help advance Elizabeth's goals, as one member of royalty to another" (Thomas et al. 120). This exchange of letters reveals Safiye's dignity and authority, and that Elizabeth on her side continued this exchange because she was aware that "a woman such as the Valide Sultan was an important ally" (Thomas et al. 121). Safiye assures Elizabeth in later letters that she will continue supporting the alliance between the two Empires as she says, "I have received your letter. I will take action in accordance with what you have written. I constantly admonish my son to act according to the treaty. May our friendship never dies" (Peirce 228). Among the gifts Queen Elizabeth sent to Safiye Sultan is a jewel of the former's picture set with rubies and diamonds, three pieces of gilt plate, garments of cloth of gold, and a fine case of glass bottles, silver and gilt. Additionally, and as a way of stressing their common femininity and sovereignty, Safiye Sultan addressed one letter to Queen

Elizabeth asking for suggestions in the acquisition of cosmetics and other female luxury items.

<7>Such interest in historical figures like Safiye Sultan, about whom there was much controversy, can be traced in another work by Mary Shelley. Although it is a fictional work, *The Last Man* has been seen by many critics as a heavily biographical novel. Therefore, much of its contents represent the writer's voice as well as biographical information from her life and the lives of her family and literary circle. At one point in *The Last Man*, Lionel Verney, the narrator, says: "I turned author myself. My productions however were sufficiently unpretending; they were confined to the biography of favourite historical characters, especially those whom I believed to have been traduced, or about whom clung obscurity and doubt" (Shelley, *The Last Man* 106). If one reads in these lines an expression of Shelley's interest in historical figures, it becomes clear that Safiye Sultan was indeed among those figures that captured the writer's attention and inspired her to include a fictional portrait of such a well-known woman who also functions much in other English fiction as will be discussed in this essay.

<8>Shelley was clearly focused on the historical resonances of her choice of names for Safie and considered several options. "Safie" was not, in fact, her initial choice. The notebooks available through the Shelley-Godwin Archive show that there were two earlier names used in the first manuscript. The primary names are "Amina" and "Maimouna," both of which are Arabic and Islamic names. Shelley's notes show that Amina is used four times and Maimouna seven times. These names, in a similar fashion to Safie's, are associated with prominent Muslim women who made a significant impact on politics and society. Amina, which means "honest" or "trustworthy," is the name of Prophet Muhammed's mother, and Maimouna, meaning "auspicious," is the Prophet's wife's name. However, although such names could have been suitable for the Oriental female in Shelley's work, a much popular one was a better choice. Being used in many contemporary literary works, "Safie" is used in the first manuscript as the final choice. Although "Safie" is a male name in Arabic, which means "pure," yet, some critics focus only on reading the character "Safie" as a representation of wisdom by associating her name with the Greek "Sophia." Such critics include Ian Balfour, who points out that

the proper names and place names in *Frankenstein* virtually ooze allegorical and/or affective significance via their roots or simply the whole names: Agatha ("good"); Felix ("happy" or "felicitous"); Clerval ("clarity" or "enlightenment"); Justine ("just," related to justice); Safie (close to Sophie, Rousseau's exemplary girl; connected to the Greek Sophia, "wisdom"). (796)

<9>There seems to be a lack of any analysis of Amina, Maimouna, and Safie in light of the Arabic and Muslim background. Even Arab scholars' interpretations of the novel overlook the origins of the names as well as the fact that "Safie" is a masculine name in Arabic, and that the feminine form is "Safiya" or "Safiye," which means "serene" or "favored."⁽³⁾ Amina, Maimouna, and Safie can be traced to multiple sources, among which is *The Arabian Nights*. This source is particularly important with regard to analyzing such a complicated, yet less-studied character like Safie in Romantic works. The collection of tales contains characters named Safie, Amina, and Maimouna and might be the primary source for portraying Safie in multiple Romantic works. In *The Tale of Kamar al-Zaman and the Princess Budur, Moon of Moons*, for instance, there is the following description of a female character named "Maimunah":

The tower in which Kamar al-Zaman was shut dated back to the time of the ancient Romans and had been abandoned for a great many years. At the back of it was a well in which lived a young Ifritah of the seed of Iblis, whose name was Maimunah. She was the daughter of Dimiryat, King of the subterranean Jinn; a Believer, famed throughout all the unknown spaces for her power and her virtue. (*The Nights* 2: 6)

<10>Such an uncanny character could have possibly made the name "Maimunah" more fitting for an exotic female like Shelley's Safie. The name "Amina" is also found in some of the tales, including the story of Harun al Rashid, in which his sister is named "Aminah." Other stories include *The Tale of King Umar al Numan and his Two Remarkable Sons, Sharkan and Du Al Makan*. In this tale, a character named "Saffiah," who is a Greek slave, plays a major role in the events. Indeed, this tale is one of the longest and most detailed among the others. The narrative style of Saffiah's tale is much similar to that of Safie's story, as reported by the monster in *Frankenstein*, who learns about Safie's life through the letters she exchanges with Felix.

<11>Shelley's final changing of the name into Safie could be justified by this historical figure's popularity in other literary works. Yet, the simple change in the spelling of the name results in denying this character her feminine identity. Other Romantic-era works that contained a slave named Safie include a play entitled *The Travellers; Or, Music's Fascination* (1806) by the Irish dramatist Andrew Cherry. The play's events take place in different locations including China, Turkey, Italy, and England. The main characters are Sultan Selim, Sultan Morad, and Safie, all of whom resemble real members of the Ottoman royal families. Act II of the play emphasizes Safie's position as a slave, as illustrated in the following lines:

MORAD. So, so! Madam Safie! you are dressed out, I perceive; —you expect to make a conquest I suppose; —now have you the vanity to imagine you can captivate the Prince of China?

SAFIE. I captivate! —What I! —A slave? —ridiculous!

MORAD. Aye—ridiculous indeed; —when your hand may be disposed of as well as you can reasonably expect by marrying me; —we shall be the happiest couple! —

SAFIE. Couple! —I shouldn't have thought of that—couple indeed; —no, no, my good man, when I marry, I shall look a little higher than the vizier's porter, I promise you; —so good Mr. Extortioner, keep your perquisites and your pretensions for some creature that may move in your own sphere. (Cherry 19)

<12>As these lines show, Safie is doomed not to look higher than her class. She keeps reminding Morad that any chance of their union in marriage is impossible due to class differences. This play is among the works that prove that the story of Safiye Sultan was known to many writers, not only Shelley. It can also be assumed that Cherry's work was among the sources that Shelley read before or while writing *Frankenstein* due to the similarity in both works regarding the focus on harem slaves and the portrayal of Safie.

<13>Another work that similarly portrays Safie and was published around the same time, is John Hamilton Reynolds's *Safie, an Eastern Tale* (1814). Reynolds was a friend of Percy Shelley and John Keats, and he dedicates his work *Safie* to Lord Byron. Reynolds's work is an imitation of Byron's style and manner. The play tells the story of a young harem slave named Safie, who is in love with a Persian man named Assad. The latter is sent away from his harem by a Turk, who then attacks Assad's harem and takes possession of it. As a result, Assad cannot access his harem and is devastated at the loss of his beloved Safie; therefore, he decides to search for her. He arrives by chance at another harem in Turkey and hears sweet melodies and discovers that the singing voice is Safie's. He also finds out that she is singing to another man the old song she used to sing for him.

<14>Stung with this proof of her faithlessness, he immediately attacks the Turkish Haram, and a furious battle commences, in which Assad is wounded and taken prisoner. In the course of the succeeding night, he stabs himself in his dungeon leaving a scroll of pathetic reproach for the unworthy object of his passion. This relique being delivered to Safie, it so affects her that she gradually sinks under the mixture of remorse and sorrow which it occasions. (R. and G. Griffiths 62)

<15>The emphasis on the position of the slave in these works which equally ignore the accounts of women's rise to power at the Turkish court reflects the threatening impact such women had within and outside the Ottoman Empire, which in turn, threatened the male agency over women at the time in the East and West. Therefore, male writers' attempts at reversing the roles of powerful women in their works is a way of asserting the male dominance over females regardless of the male protagonist's ethnicity and preventing the spread of such accounts of influential figures like Safiye in the West. Another reason for the reversal of roles of these powerful women is the fact that the East was feminized through the weak and silent woman to reflect the shift in power between imperial Britain and the Ottoman Empire.

<16>The fictionalization of historical figures like Safiye Sultan is not always the result of an insistence on reversing the roles of powerful female figures from the East and Islamic history. Such representations were sometimes a part of a fashionable orientalist discourse and an ongoing demand for Eastern tales. Leask's view on Romantic Orientalism is crucial here. He asserts

Enzymes, antibodies, inoculations; if the diseases of the Other strike fear into the heart of the metropolitan culture, these therapeutical or assimilative agencies struggle to restore homeostasis, the healthful ease of the Same. Hence the sheer *demand* for orientalism, the proliferation of orientalist styles and narratives in the arts of the Romantic period; the eighteenth-century vogue for Chinoiserie is diversified into a demand for Egyptian, Ottoman, Mughal and Hindu motifs, components of what John Barrel calls "the imagery of an early but well-established imperialist culture." (8)

<17>Bearing in mind this "demand," it becomes clear why Romantic-era works were building heavily on Orientalist themes and Oriental figures. As evidenced in the works mentioned above, one can see the extent to which many Romantic writers were responding to the ongoing fashion of silencing powerful female figures from the East. It is crucial to notice that this fashion was not restricted to female figures but also included male political leaders. Take for instance the case of Mulay Ahmed

al-Mansour of Morocco, who ascended the throne in 1578 and whose diplomatic relations with Elizabeth I are reported in detail in MacLean and Matar's *Britain and the Islamic World*. As MacLean and Matar show, "powerful male Moorish protagonists" (61) featured in many literary works including "*The Battle of Alcazar* (c.1589), *Titus Andronicus* (c.1591-2), *The Merchant of Venice* (c.1596), *Lust's Dominion* (c.1599-1600), *Othello* (c.1602), and *The Fair Maid of the West* (c.1600-3)" (61). Some of these works and performances reversed the role of the Muslim figure as in the instance of Heywood Mullisheq, who "resembles al-Mansour, but refashioned according to English fantasies. At a time when al-Mansour was dictating conditions to Queen Elizabeth, audiences would have been gratified by Heywood's theatrical reversal that showed the Moroccan ruler doting on English Bess and obeying her every wish and whim" (MacLean and Matar 61).

<18>When compared to the other works that feature "Safie," *Frankenstein* appears, at first glance, to tell a much more complex story about Safie. Shelley's Safie is a free woman, a link between the East and West, and a character who parallels the Sultana in bringing the East and West closer by forming an alliance with Felix through their love relationship and the sacrifices she makes in order to unite with him. She runs away with a box of jewels and a sum of money to support Felix's exiled family and attempts to compensate for her father's treachery, which led to the French family's exile. Unlike other women in the novel, Safie appears to be independent and courageous. She chooses to join her fiancé, Felix, despite her Muslim father's will, and enjoys the liberty to which English women aspire. A comparison between her and Justine, for instance, highlights the novel's critique of the English justice system and the treatment of women in English society. In discussing the novel's focus on justice, Colene Bentley describes Justine's trial and execution as exemplifying the work's "miscarriage of justice," (340) highlighting the unjust legal system of the time. Indeed, some scholars read in Justine's wrongful trial a resemblance to real accounts of people of a similar class. Such analyses include Tim Marshall's in "Not Forgotten: Eliza Fenning, 'Frankenstein,' and Victorian Chivalry." He reads in Justine's trial and execution a resemblance of a famous account of a servant named Eliza Fenning, who was wrongly hung in London in 1815 for allegedly attempting to poison the "law-stationer" and his family for whom she worked. "Fenning's trial and execution was sensational because of the popular perception of her innocence. . . All manner of facts [favorable] to Fenning were not made known to the jury and no appeal system in the modern sense existed" (Marshall 98). Marshall adds that the penal narrative of this period helps us see that a trace of Fenning got into *Frankenstein* because recent social history in England put it there. As a result, Justine Moritz, standing accused in the dock, is Eliza Fenning's

fictional clone. Such accounts show the arbitrariness of law that often results in a conviction based on class and gender, among other factors. The guilt that causes Justine to falsely confess to committing a murder recalls Caleb William's confession in Godwin's novel. In fact, scholars detect, in such instances, the impact of social pressure on the poor and underprivileged that lead them to develop a sort of internal conviction of being guilty.(4)

<19>Given Justine's submission to the unjust legal system, Safie is perceived as a freer woman. However, the freedom she enjoys is granted to her at the cost of denying her the voice that speaks her identity and culture. She uses signs and gestures to communicate with the French family, and her main activities are singing and playing musical instruments. She bows and kisses Mr. De Lacey's hands and sits at his feet more than once. "[Felix] assisted her to dismount, and dismissing her guide, conducted her into the cottage. Some conversation took place between him and his father, and the young stranger knelt at the old man's feet and would have kissed his hand, but he raised her and embraced her affectionately" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 174-75). Safie only utters a few words in Arabic, which the cottagers do not understand, and remains slow in learning French at the rate of a few words a day compared to the monster who eavesdrops through a chink in the cottage wall and benefits from Felix's language lessons to Safie. Although he is at the earliest stages of learning, the monster boasts by saying, "[m]y days were spent in close attention, that I might more speedily master the language; and I may boast that I improved more rapidly than the Arabian, who understood very little and conversed in broken accents, whilst I comprehended and could imitate almost every word that was spoken" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 177). Given the number of times the novel stresses language and the importance of learning languages (the word "language" appears over 100 times in the text), denying Safie the ability to express herself in either French or Arabic underscores the limitations of the feminist discourse in the novel. It also reveals the Western writer's insistence on keeping the female other in the dark, as Gayatri Spivak long ago pointed out, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (257). In addition to her inability to articulate spoken words, Safie is also denied the means to express thoughts in written form. She and Felix exchange love letters, the contents of which remain undisclosed to the reader. Instead, the monster takes possession of those letters and narrates their contents, saying that they are proof of the truth of his tale. With regard to language and women, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) is worth considering here. The work is centered on the characters Loan and Cythna and their revolution against the despotic Ottoman rule. That Cythna is the female character who is taken a slave by the Ottomans resonates with parts of Safie's family history. Yet the main

difference between Cythna and Safie is the former's use of language and the latter's silence. While Cythna "specifically addresses those [...] who doubt language's capacity to conjure into being an engaged mass that will produce great change [...] and] 'speaks' as effectively as the slave whose 'song' made the authorities 'relent,'" (Cohen-Vrignaud 90-91) Safie is silent, and is robbed of her own language.

<20>In contrast to all the letters in the novel, including those by Frankenstein, Walton, and Mrs. Saville, which are fully quoted in the text, Safie's letters remain undisclosed and are passed from Safie to Felix, and then the monster seizes them. These letters received scholarly attention from different approaches. Some critics like Joyce Zonana assert that the letters are a part of the feminist discourse employed in Shelley's text. Zonana states that "[t]hrough their silence as text the letters speak an even stronger feminist message of resistance, rebellion, and escape than that encoded in their (reported) content. Mary Shelley thus powerfully deploys her narrative structure in the service of her feminist theme" (181). Jeanne M. Britton, on the other hand, investigates the relevance of these letters to the text and analyzes their function as a narrative technique while they remain undisclosed to the reader. She adds that as authenticating documents, Safie's letters verify the stories the monster tells—that of the cottagers and of his own development. "The letters are first mentioned in the middle of the cottagers" story when the monster tells Frankenstein that "they will prove the truth of my tale," and they reappear to validate Frankenstein's story to Walton, giving the explorer "a greater conviction of the truth of [Frankenstein's] narrative than his asseverations" (Britton 16-17). Even though such readings acknowledge that the letters, unlike the others in the novel, are missing, and although they highlight the possibility of the letters' bearing a strong message about female agency, what is overlooked is the fact that Safie's silence is not only limited within the letters but continues all along the novel. I argue that by having authority over Safie's words, the monster denies Safie her only remaining mode of expression. He claims that there is no time to read from the letters, and for this reason, he quickly summarizes their content. He adds, "I have copies of these letters for I found means, during my residence in the hovel, to procure the implements of writing; and the letters were often in the hands of Felix or Agatha. Before I depart I will give them to you; they will prove the truth of my tale; but at present, as the sun is already far declined, I shall only have time to repeat the substance of them to you" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 184). The similarities between these fictional letters and the correspondence between Elizabeth I and Safiye Sultan suggest a comparison between the two modes of exchange. While the real letters show the diplomatic role Safiye had, the fictional letters leave Safie a silenced woman and only romanticize the exchange of letters between herself and Felix. However, it is worth noting that Shelley attributed to Safie parts of the latter's escape

from the harem, something not unusual for an Oriental female. In this concern, Ballaster asserts that “[t]he figure of the oriental woman in European narrative is, above all else, associated with the practice of plotting, whether for positive or negative ends” (*Fabulous Orientals*, 68).

<21>As the monster’s narrative progresses, other issues unfold. Safie is the only female character who is shown as “unacquainted with the language of the country and utterly ignorant of the customs of the world,” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 189) although Agatha De Lacey, for instance, is also in the same position of needing to learn a foreign language, since she and her family are exiles too. The whole family moves into Germany, and there is a brief reference to Felix having a conversation with two countrymen who converse with him using the language of the country, “which differ[s] from that of [the monster’s] protectors” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 194). Yet, none of the cottagers seem to experience difficulty communicating with the natives, and there is no mention of them as being ‘ignorant’ of the customs or language of this country.

<22>Not only is Safie denied a voice and history, but other fundamental components of her identity are later thrown away. Apart from mentioning her father in her letters, Safie rarely speaks of him on other occasions. She renounces him because he represents the oppressive Islamic world she escapes and because he causes the De Laceys’ ruin. In fact, Safie hardly brings anything else from home except her “treasures” that would help Felix and his family after they become poor and exiled. Although the text asserts that these treasures consist of a sum of money and jewels, they can also be read as the physical beauty that captures Felix’s attention as soon as he lays eyes on Safie when he visits her father in prison. These are the fortunes that lead Felix to think that the Turkish tyrant “possessed a treasure which would fully reward [Felix’s] toil and hazard” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 183). By making Safie offer Felix these possessions, Shelley strips this woman of her status as a financially independent female and reduces her into a mere aesthetic object or a commodity to be exchanged.

<23>Additionally, Safie’s disposal of her past encompasses other steps. As she crosses the De Lacey cottage threshold, she takes off her veil, a gesture that marks the beginning of her cultural appropriation, followed by the language, history, and philosophy lessons she receives from Felix based on major Western works. Among the books which the monster and Safie learn from is Volney’s *The Ruins*. The knowledge contained in this book indoctrinates both Safie and the monster to believe that all Muslims are “Presumptuous and ignorant men,” (Volney 59) the Egyptians “uncultivated and ferocious,” (145) and “[t]he African, degraded from the ranks of

man . . . irrevocably doomed to servitude” (72). These thoughts lead the monster to assert that Asian people are slothful compared to the Romans and Greeks as evidenced in the following lines, “I heard of the slothful Asiatics; of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians; of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans—of their subsequent degeneration—of the decline of that mighty empire; of chivalry, Christianity, and kings” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 178). Such a brief description of one of the earliest lessons Safie and the monster receive discriminates against a whole continent, labeling it according to its religion and “mental activity.” In *The Ruins*, Volney’s views are “canonically hostile to Islam as a religion and as a system of political institutions” (Said 81). This is the author who “eyed the Near Orient as a likely place for the realization of French colonial ambition,” (Said 81) and from whose book Safie learns “the history of the world, and by implication, her place in it” (Kahf 166). Although Safie comes from an Islamic background where the laws of property are detailed and sophisticated, from these books she learns of “the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty, of rank, descent, and noble blood” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 179). Her education then is solely based on the teachings of the two most influential Christian characters in her life, her mother and Felix. In other words, Safie’s freedom in the novel is entirely a product of Western influences and is constructed in opposition to her Eastern heritage and, indeed, by the deliberate repression of that heritage: she has to learn a new language. Thus, the freedom she enjoys as she travels alone is implicitly attributed to her mother.

<24>Although partially educated by her mother according to Christian principles, Safie, a representative of the feminine East, needs to be totally modernized at Felix’s hands in order that she and her world become part of the “universal empire” Saree Makdisi discusses in *Romantic Imperialism*. Both Safie and the monster learn of the comparison between the “slothful Asiatics” on one hand, and the genius of the Grecians and the wonderful virtue of the early Romans. Using Volney’s text, Shelley follows the example in Percy Shelley’s *Address to the Irish People* (1812) in which the author “seeks to ‘enlighten’ his address by recommending ‘Liberty, benevolence, peace and toleration’ to the superstitious but oppressed Irish” (Leask 113). Safie’s elopement is a process described by Makdisi as the “transition from a wretched state of static pre-modernity to the beginning of [...] apprenticeship in modernization, in which [...] social, cultural, and economic practices would be transformed and recoded in the transition not only from past to history, but also from custom to law; from communal, clan, tribal, or despotic forms of property to private property...” (Makdisi 4). Through the monster’s narrative, we see an emphasis on such differences as he learns from Felix’s Western sources about the “division of property” among other things.

<25>There are yet other fundamental Western sources that add up to these lessons including, *Werter*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and *Paradise Lost*. These books, as Gilbert and Gubar long ago pointed out, provide "lessons a female author (or monster) must learn about a male-dominated society" (237). From these books, which are "a sort of Romantic conduct book," (Gilbert and Gubar 237) the monster and Safie learn "gentle and domestic manners" and "lofty sentiments," things that are essential to familiarize a female stranger like Safie with the Western culture. From these books, too, Safie and the monster learn about the masculine complexities of the history they both were denied because of their uncommon birth and background.

<26>As a result, Safie's initiation into Western society serves the goals of colonizing the mind through the culture. By controlling Safie's choice of language, Felix becomes the colonial power that obliterates Safie's identity. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o explains such a process in his focus on languages. He asserts that to control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. He adds,

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. (16)

The first part of this process is achieved through the history and philosophy lessons that replace any remnants of knowledge Safie has from her former life in Turkey, aside from her mother's teachings. The second part is accomplished through the replacement of Arabic with French.

<27>Despite this repression, several critics have noted traces of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas behind Safie's supposed freedom. Wollstonecraft is seen as the source of her daughter's comments on the social oppression of women in England. For instance, Stuart Curran asserts that there are aspects of the novel in which Mary Wollstonecraft's distinct impress can be felt. Those include "the central (literally so) figure of Safie, who has a mind of her own, a determination to succeed, a willingness to travel in a man's world, and, like her mother, a strong aversion to Turkish conceptions of the demeaned role of women" (588). Curran adds that in the second and central volume of the novel, which contains the De Lacey episode, Mary Shelley can be observed adapting and doubling her obligation to Wollstonecraft's vision of the marginalized woman struggling to overcome the terms of a social construction as victim. On the other hand, Anne Mellor reads in the depiction of

Safie a deliberate rebirth of Shelley's "dead literary mother" (402). As much as these analyses shed light on a crucial part in reading the novel, they insist on seeing Safie as an independent woman, disregarding the many instances in which her heritage is oppressed. These claims that see in Safie a reflection of Wollstonecraft actually work to shut down Safie's full heritage, since Wollstonecraft's writings are loaded with orientalist discourses. As many scholars have noted, Shelley's mother relied heavily on the harem as an example of a repressive realm where women are treated far less than men based on the Islamic and Quranic teachings. For instance, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* emphasizes the notion that women in Islam do not have souls and that they are denied an afterlife. Wollstonecraft verbalizes her ideas about the treatment of women by Mahometans when she asserts that women who are reduced to mere animals are only fit for a seraglio, as evidenced in the following lines:

It is acknowledged that [women] spend many of the first years of their lives acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire to get themselves, —the only way women can rise in the world, — by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children can be expected to act: —they dress; they paint and give nicknames to God's creatures. — Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio!
(10)

Wollstonecraft declares in her dedication of the book to M. Talleyrand-Périgord, "I plead not for myself but for my sex" (1). Yet the book is a project that aims at cautioning the West not to be like the East, and uses "Mahometanism," as a basis of the author's thoughts on the Western women's rights. Thus, it is less likely that the Oriental woman in *Frankenstein* was intended to represent the famous feminist. Rather, the imperialist discourse of the novel contradicts Shelley's feminist thought. Shelley's Safie is, as I demonstrated in the previous pages, more of a culmination of the era's preoccupation with Oriental tales that were focused on the Oriental harem and its women and were much affected by *The Arabian Nights* and other accounts.

<28>One account on the Orient and Islam that could have provided a better alternative source for the representation of Safie is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Embassy Letters (1763) which provide a detailed account of Lady Mary's experiences in Istanbul with her husband, Edward Wortley. As Ros Ballaster asserts in *Fables of the East*, "The 'letters' prove to be a cover for a travel treatise which challenges and rewrites those that have gone before, especially Paul Rycaut's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668), Jean Dumont's *A New Voyage to the Levant* (1696), and Aaron Hill's *A Full and Just Account of the Present State of the*

Ottoman Empire (1709)” (192). Among the instances on women’s freedom in Turkey, Montagu describes how the veil provides an opportunity for women walk around without the danger of discovery by their men. Compared to European women, Montagu asserts, Turkish ladies enjoy more freedom.

<29>By looking at Shelley’s and other writers’ portrayals, it becomes evident that Safiye Sultan and her lineage were well-known when these works were published. The insistence in such works on reversing the story of Safiye reveals an interest in showing the Oriental woman as a creature unable to achieve a position in society and have an active role like the real Sultana. Cherry and Reynolds may slightly differ from Shelley in the depiction of “Safie” in that they keep her within the walls of the harem or allow her to change her abode according to males’ wishes, while Shelley’s work tries to move beyond the ‘slave’ woman position for Safie and attempts to show her as a woman who enjoys traveling outside the harem and deciding for her fate. However, what is common in all these works is the insistence on eliminating the name, voice, or freedom associated with this character, the repeated underscoring of the ‘slave’ position while ignoring Safiye Sultan’s ascension to power, and the failure to prove Safie a free woman without sacrificing major components of her background.

<30>Even though it is not a historical novel, *Frankenstein* adds up to the stereotypical portrayal of the Oriental, Arab, and Muslim woman till the present day, as the novel retains the position of a secure, unquestionable literary work in the permanent body of literature, and continues to be taught and read worldwide. In critiquing women’s slavery in the Ottoman Empire, many writers overlook the impact women of the harem had within and outside the Ottoman courts. By domesticating the fictional Safie after she arrives at the De Lacey cottage, Shelley continues the Romantic trope of eroticizing the Oriental woman and portraying her as a dependent creature, waiting to be rescued by the Romantic hero. This leaves Safie with no real identity as she takes off her veil and abandons her language and cultural heritage.

Notes

(1)I am grateful to Professor Quentin Bailey for his guidance and invaluable input to this article, which is an excerpt from my MA thesis that he supervised. The longer work explores the representation of Arab and Muslim women in some romantic-era philosophical and literary texts and focuses on the racist discourses in *Frankenstein* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.(△)

(2) Commenting on these traces of personal experiences, Mary Poovey asserts that “[t]hrough thinly disguised autobiographical characterizations of herself as a docile, domestic heroine, Mary Shelley was able, in these novels, both to court the approval of a middle-class, largely female audience and to achieve the personal satisfaction of expressing a self that was “original” only in its exemplary propriety” (116-17). (△)

(3) Although Arab scholars have read Safie in the context of the political status of the Ottoman Empire in opposition to England as well as the Western representations of harem slaves, nearly none draw a connection between the fictional Safie and the Turkish Queen, including Mohja Kahf, who asserts that Safie’s name is Turkish that has its evocation of Sophie, who is “Rousseau’s model of the ideally educated woman” (165). (△)

(4) As in the example of Michael Scrivener, who asserts that “[t]he culture produces—rather, over-produces— guilt, a psychological disposition which authoritarian political and religious systems, as well as profit-seeking corporations, have exploited with efficiency” (131). (△)

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