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## “THE ROSE SULTANA OF THE NIGHTINGALE”: ORIENTAL IMAGES, CHARACTERS AND SETTING IN BYRON’S *THE GIAOUR*

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**Abstract:** It is surprising that Romanticism, a literary movement generally associated with nature, emotions and imagination, had close connection with imperialism, through its most distinguished cultural characteristic - Orientalism. Most of the major Romantic poets found in the Orient not just a noteworthy point of reference for various cultural or political backgrounds, but an important backdrop in the realization of their literary careers. However, most of the writers of this period had never visited the East. Hence, their attitudes towards it differ from Lord Byron’s, who not only embarked on the Grand Tour, among other countries to Albania, Greece and Turkey, early in his career, but also eternalized the theme of escapism in some of his greatest poetry like *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*. The exotic East offered Byron the basis for the aesthetic achievement in his *Oriental Tales: The Giaour, Lara, The Corsair, The Siege of Corinth* and *The Bride of Abydos*, but also his play *Sardanapalus*. The main interest of this paper, however, is the study of Oriental elements in Byron’s first Oriental tale - *The Giaour*. I have come to realize that Byron emerges as distinct from and rises above his contemporaries in the treatment of the Orient with regard to the broad range, accurate portrayal and his creative empathy. One of the purposes of this paper would be to acknowledge this uncommon responsiveness to the Orient and to enlighten Byron’s use of Oriental allusions. The poem represents an artistic mixture of Eastern and Western elements. This paper will focus on the depiction of the East in images, settings, characters and themes, and explore the way the poet skillfully incorporates a Western hero in an Eastern setting and increases the overall impression by the poem’s various narrators. Byron was the first author who allowed an Oriental character to relay a story from his Islamic point of view. This makes Byron different from his contemporaries; he does not throttle the Oriental voice. The voice of the Muslim narrator emphasizes the Oriental character of the poem as his references and viewpoints bestow a specific Oriental colour. In the depiction of the two main male characters, Byron has skillfully employed the effect of doubling which excludes the position of the Giaour as superior over his Oriental rival. Just as Hassan does not feel any remorse for the death of Leila, so does the Giaour’s regret not stem in the immorality of his deeds or social transgressions. He is endowed with the same weaknesses and vices as Hassan. Artistically threading together, a diversity of Oriental details, such as natural and animal imagery, creatively incorporating picturesque similes and allusions, Byron has managed to fashion a faithful Oriental story.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, images, settings, characters, themes

### INTRODUCTION

One of the first and most influential work on Orientalism was Edward Said’s controversial *Orientalism* (1978) followed by Rana Kabbani’s *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (1986). Both works represent Western writers offering a partial image of the Orient and attributing negative aspects to Orientalism, such as violence, debauchery and irrationality. Said understands Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (1978, p. 3). However, Byron’s works appear to offer a different view of Orientalism, as he has managed to identify with a culture not his own in a way that crosses over religious and cultural boundaries.

Both, the Oriental and Gothic origin of *The Giaour* is directly referred to in Byron’s note where the author also points to its literally Oriental theme and attributes some of his devices to William Beckford’s Gothic novel *Vathek*:

“The circumstance to which the above story relates was not very uncommon in Turkey...I heard it by accident recited by one of the coffee-house storytellers who abound in the Levant, ...For the contents of some of the notes I am indebted partly to D’Herbelot, and partly to that most Eastern, and, as Mr. Weber justly entitles it, ‘sublime tale,’ the ‘Caliph Vathek.’”

(1922, note 43, page 64)

The aim of this paper is to explore the local characteristics of the Oriental symbols and allusions, which have received minor critical attention, the characters and the different perspectives offered by the narrators.

### 1. ORIENTAL COLOURING OF THE CHARACTERS

The figure of Leila, is not physically present in *The Giaour* and is generally depicted through the other characters’ words which are based on natural and animal similitudes. In the 1334 lines of the poem Leila does not articulate a

word and we imagine her character as presented by the other characters: the fisherman's loathsome portrayal and the Giaour idealizing her beauty. Even though she propels the action, placed at the focus of a deadly hostility between the infidel Giaour and Muslim Hassan, Laila is active only in the events that precede the beginning of the story. Being the object and desire for possession of both men, her existence, just as her description, is determined by others.

In the poem Leila is presented as a construct of ideal beauty and her unearthly presence throughout the poem is sustained and generally described in non-human terms. She does not get even "an earthly grave" (line 1124) after her death and her body is deprived of any earthly ceremonies and is designated as "the precious freight" (line 362). The only time she appears is in the Giaour's dream, but as he attempts to "clasp her" towards his body, he feels merely a lifeless figure:

"I clasp - what is it that I clasp?  
No breathing form within my grasp.  
No heart that beats reply to mine,"

(lines 1287-89)

She is deprived of "breathing" and a "beating" heart, and her depiction is generally based on resemblances to "light" and "star". She represents "The Morning-star of Memory!" (line 1130) to the Giaour and "a form of life and light" (line 1127). For him Leila's love inspires an affection compared to light from heaven -

"A spark of that immortal fire  
With angels shar'd - by Alla given.  
To lift from earth our low desire.  
She was my life's unerring light -  
That quench'd - what beam shall break my night?"

(lines 1130-34, lines 1145-46)

It is noticeable that the prominence of the spiritual is emphasized by the allusion to "Alla", the Muslim word for God. Other Oriental images of various features of Leila's idealized beauty can be most clearly seen in the passage that ensues:

"Her eye's dark charm 'twere vain to tell.  
But gaze on that of the Gazelle,  
It will assist thy fancy well.  
As large, as languishingly dark.  
But Soul beam'd forth in every spark  
That darted from beneath the lid.  
Bright as the jewel of Giamschid,  
On her might Muftis gaze, and own  
That through her eye the Immortal shone - "

(lines 473-79, lines 491-92)

"The immortal" glittering of her eyes, also highlights the spiritual aspects of her beauty. Rather than physically associating her to the gazelle, Byron employs the simile to point to her spiritual beauty, the creative power of the comparison. The "Jewel of Giamschid", as another Oriental image, is employed to strike out the abstract dimension of her beauty. The usage of the Oriental term "Mufti", which is a person who enforces Islamic laws, is equally important in creating an authentic perspective. Leila's inner beauty is so intense that it can even make the strict Mufti realize its "Immortal" aspect: "On her fair cheek's unfading hue. /The young pomegranate's blossoms strew/ Their bloom in blushes ever new -/ Her hair in hyacinthine flow" (lines 493-96).

Two common Oriental images in love poetry, the "pomegranate" and "hyacinthine," are also used to describe Leila's beauty. The pomegranate image has been noted by Sir William Jones in a translated Oriental poem: "The pomegranate brings to my mind the blushes of my beloved" (1979, V, p. 422). In his "Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations", Jones also states that pomegranate and hyacinthine are frequently represented in Oriental poetry, usually utilized to portray the beauty of the loved one's cheek and hair respectively (1979, p. 334).

Oriental images are densely employed in the passage when Leila is identified with paradise:

"But Soul beam'd forth in every spark  
Yea, Soul and should our prophet say  
That form was nought but breathing clay.  
By Alla! I would answer nay;

“Though on Al-Sirat’s arch I stood.  
Which totters o’er the fiery flood.  
With Paradise within my view,  
And all his Houris beckoning through.  
Oh! who young Leila’s glance could read  
And keep that portion of his creed  
Which saith, that woman is but dust,  
A soulless toy for tyrant’s lust?”

(lines 477, lines 480-90)

The passage contains Oriental terms typical for the Muslim paradise such as “Alla”, “Houris” and “Al-Sirat’s arch”. Byron’s reference to “Al-Sirat’s arch” (line 483) and the note explaining it once again show his deep knowledge of Oriental culture, themes and ideas,

“Al-Sirat, the bridge of breadth narrower than the thread of a famished spider, and sharper than the edge of a sword, over which the Mussulmans must skate into Paradise, to which it is the only entrance; but this is not the worst, the river beneath being hell itself, into which, as may be expected, the unskilful and tender of foot contrive to tumble with a ‘facilis descensus Avernii’, not very pleasing in prospect to the next passenger. There is a shorter cut downwards for the Jews and Christians.”

(1922, III, p. 109)

The way Byron faithfully depicted Muslim paradise with its “Houris” and the “maids of paradise” embracing Hassan in death has coloured the imagination of Western writers through the ages. As McGann has asserted in his *Fiery Dust*, Leila is not only “deliberately associated with the natural paradise of the landscape,” (1968, p. 156) but the identification is so strong as if Laila equates or denotes Muslim paradise. Byron’s common illustration of Leila with reference to the soul, serves as an argument against the contemporary Western viewpoint that Islam repudiates the soul to women.

However, Laila’s beauty is also presented as a source of fatal consequences. One of the most striking image that the author employs is the elaborate simile of “The insect-queen of eastern spring” (lines 388-421). He also writes about the “Kashmeer” (line 390) butterfly with “hue as bright, and wing as wild” (line 397) to refer to the interconnectedness between beauty and fatality, and most of these images are enwrapped in Oriental spirit and exoticism.

“One encounters striking Oriental material from the opening lines of the poem:

For there - the Rose, o’er crag or vale,  
Sultana of the Nightingale,”

(lines 21 -22)

Byron informs his readers in the explanatory note on these lines: “The attachment of the nightingale to the rose is a well-known Persian fable. If I mistake not, ‘the Bulbul of a thousand tales’ is one of his appellations” (Poetry, III, p. 86). He also uses the word “Bulbul,” which appears to be the Persian word meaning “nightingale”, and point to its connection to the rose denoting it “is a well-known Persian fable” (Note 2, p. 2, line 7). The Oriental association of the Bulbul is connected with love, and Byron efficiently utilizes this Oriental fable in other works besides *The Giaour*, such as *The Bride*, where Zuleika, showing her love for Selim, sends him “a rose” or “a message from the Bulbul” (I, lines 287 -88). Having close relatedness to love, the rose and the nightingale image is adroitly employed in *The Bride*. It generally emphasizes permanence of love but is occasionally likened to “the unresponsive beloved that has nothing to say to the suppliant nightingale” (Rahbar, 1974, p. 7). The idea of the destructive nature of men and particularly the destruction of beauty is increased by portrayal of the perfect love of the rose and the nightingale, which is disturbed by the vicious force of the pirate’s attack on a mariner (lines 21-45), and “And trample, brute-like, o’er each flower” (line 52). This imagery closely reflects the *Giaour*’s effect on Laila, as she is the representation of ideal beauty and love.

Byron also evokes “The Insect-queen of Kashmeer” (lines 389-90) butterfly image, which among other meanings, could be read as a metaphor for Leila’s beauty, but can also be seen as an allegory for “beauty” in general. Byron depicts its seductive nature, because it “Invites the young pursuer near, / And leads him on from flower to flower” (lines 391-92). The quest for beauty, nevertheless, ceases as “A chase of idle hopes and fears, / Begun in folly, closed in tears” (lines 398-99). As the fisherman illustrates, if someone attains the item of beauty or not, whether it is “the insect” or “the maid” (401), it merely leads to “A life of pain, the loss of peace” (line 462). He points to the fact that the fulfillment of the ideal is followed by disillusionment. Likewise, the pursuit of the “fiercely sought”

object tends to lose the “charm, and hue, and beauty” (line 408). Here the vision of beauty that Byron offers is enfolded with the idea that it could be a source of redemption, and at the same time the cause for destruction. Love for idealized beauty, as is the case with the Giaour’s love for Leila, is compared to a child’s attempt to catch the extraordinary butterfly of Kashmir. It is an action provoked by the selfish reason to possess the butterfly, and must end in vain or bring about the destruction of the desired object (lines 388-421).

The Giaour’s fierce temperament is prefigured by animal imagery of a “raven” and an “owl” which increase the sense of danger and fear: “Here loud his raven charger neighed -/ Down glanced that hand, and grasped his blade -/ That sound had burst his waking dream. /As Slumber starts at owl’s scream“ (lines 245-48). His swift movement is compared to a “Jerreed” (line 251), a word which denotes a kind of wooden javelin used in games. Other natural imagery is further used to emphasize the Giaour’s speed and violent aspect. The “Simoom” simile provides the basic of the Giaour’s character: the Simoom as a strong desert wind like the Giaour arouses terror, and brings death and destruction. These similes, in fact, assist in the Giaour’s identification with a force of nature, assigning him a non-human or God-like attribute:

“He came, he went, like the Simoom,  
That harbinger of fate and gloom,  
Beneath whose widely-wasting breath  
The very cypress droops to death – “

(lines 282-85)

“The cold in clime are cold in blood.  
Their love can scarce deserve the name;  
But mine was like the lava flood  
That boils in Aetna’s breast of flame.”

(lines 1099 -1102)

“Dark and unearthly is the scowl  
That glares beneath his dusky cowl -  
And like the bird whose pinions quake -  
But cannot fly the gazing snake -  
Will others quail beneath his look,  
Nor 'scape the glance they scarce can brook.”

(lines 832-33, lines 842-45)

The story of *The Giaour* is based on the love triangle between the Giaour, a non-Muslim and Leila, the wife of the chief Hassan. After Leila is executed by Hassan for her infidelity, the Giaour takes revenge for her death by killing Hassan. While the shared animosity of the Giaour and Hassan is evident in the poem, what is significant is that it originates little from their individual religious beliefs. The Giaour is not presented as a proponent of the tolerant Christianity in conflict with the brutal Islam illustrated in Hassan. Throughout the poem the Giaour is depicted with no sympathy for Christianity. Even during his retreat in the monastery, the Giaour, despite the friar’s disappointment, never joins the “vesper prayer, / Nor e’er before confession chair / Kneels he, nor recks he when arise / Incense or anthem to the skies” (lines 802-05). He avoids the “holy shrine” (line 811) and never takes communion, “Nor tastes the sacred bread and wine” (lines 814-15). Because of his lack of interest in the religious life in the monastery the friar calls him “a stray renegade” (line 812). He openly tells the Friar: “Waste not thine orison – despair/ Is mightier than thy pious prayer;/ I would not. If I might, be blest, / I want no paradise“ (lines 1267-70).

The absence of Christian empathy in *The Giaour* makes it significantly different from literary examples of Orientalism that preceded, such as Shelley’s “Revolt of Islam” and Southey’s “Roderick”, which tended to highlight the supremacy of Christianity over Islam. In his viewpoint, both the Giaour and Hassan act upon hatred. Although the Giaour seems to be driven by a sense of honour in avenging Leila, his treatment of Leila’s infidelity would be the same as Hassan’s. Even though they represent dissimilar cultures and religions, both of them are driven by the same principle of honour that proposes death for an adulterous wife. The Giaour contemplates, “Yet did he but what I had done / Had she been false to more than one” (lines 1062-63).

The Giaour’s endless devotion to Leila seems to be his most appealing characteristic. In creating a relationship between a Christian character and an Eastern woman based on real love, especially the fact that the Easterner is not given a superior position and does not insist on the Oriental female’s conversion, Byron brakes the literary stereotype.



## 2. THE NARRATORS

One of most interesting features of narration in *The Giaour* is its multiple point of view. While the action and emotions are steered and varied by the author's voice, Byron employs four narrators who present their story from a different perspective: the narrator, the fisherman, the Giaour and the friar. For this paper, the Muslim fisherman's perspective is of special interest, as Byron is the first author who allowed an Oriental character to relay a story from his Islamic point of view. This makes Byron different from his contemporaries; he does not throttle the Oriental voice. The Muslim narrator emphasizes the Oriental character of the poem as his viewpoints bestow a specific Oriental colour. Much of the Oriental language in *The Giaour*, such as, "Al-Sirat's arch" (line 483), "the Muftis" (line 491), "Bismillah" (line 568), "avenging Monkir's scythe" (line 748), "Eblis's throne" (line 750) and "Houris eyes," (line 791) originates from Muslim religious lexicon.

The fisherman's open expression of loathing for the Giaour and his entire race (line 191) represents the antagonism between these faiths. Unlike his contemporaries, Byron avoids spreading this idea to state the xenophobia and fanaticism of Islam or the sympathetic character of Christianity. Byron presents the hostility of the fisherman towards the Giaour to be based on the fact that he is an "infidel", but also on the fact that the Giaour has murdered Hassan and broken the Muslim law having an illicit affair with a Muslim woman. For this transgression of the religious principle, the fisherman concludes that the Giaour has deserved to be killed by "Othman's sons" (lines 198-99). His apparent xenophobic views allow him to question the Giaour's presence close to the Muslims' festivities of Ramadan and Bairam. What is most striking about the passage is the passion with which Byron tints the fisherman's inferior understanding to Muslim culture, articulated by his touching description of the crescent foreshadowing the Bairam feast, and the festivities in the illuminated mosques. But it is the portrayal of the Giaour as a stranger that makes a great impression throughout the poem. The Muslim fisherman depicts the Giaour as an outcast, as someone completely detached from humans, "like a demon of the night" (line 202). The fisherman's view of the Giaour is close to the friar's, who sees no positive aspect in the Giaour, although he has stayed in the monastery for "twice three years" (line 798). He is in his view "some stray renegade" (line 812) who "broods within his cell alone" (line 806) and "shuns our holy shrine, / Nor tastes the sacred bread and wine" (lines 814-15). The only positive aspect is his love for Leila, but instead of a purifying effect and making him a nobler person, in the Giaour's case, it alienates him from the world and turns him into an outcast. The Giaour's actions arouse condemnation from both, the fisherman and the friar. The passage that follows depicts the common view of the Giaour:

"Woe to that hour he came or went,  
The curse for Hassan's sin was sent.  
To turn a palace to a tomb;  
He came, he went, like the Simoom,  
Tha harbinger of fate and gloom,  
Beneath whose widely-wasting breath  
The very cypress droops to death" -

(lines 279-85)

Despite their negative attitude towards the Giaour, these lines help to create an image of an arduous, grandiose, and even to some extent an awe-inspiring character. Their criticism serves, in fact, to cast an air of magnitude to the Giaour. This effect is produced by Byron's skillful use of the several narrators of the story.

In comparison to the Giaour, as the "harbinger of fate and gloom", Hassan is depicted as a character endowed with generosity and warm hospitality (lines 340-49). Byron explains these characteristics as commonly Oriental:

"I need hardly observe, that Charity and Hospitality are the first duties enjoined by Mahomet; and to say truth, very generally practised by his disciples. The first praise that can be bestowed on a chief is a panegyric on his bounty; the next, on his valour." (1922, note III, p. 103)

Similarly, the lush atmosphere of Hassan's Oriental palace before it is turned into ruins following his murder, depicts a detailed Oriental scene of the serfs, bowers, stables, fountains and streams. Hassan's demise has brought about the destruction of the luxurious palace. The elegiac description in the passage that follows is enabled with typical Oriental words as "the Bat", "the Owl" occupying the ruined palace and the howling of "the wild-dog", a common sight, in the Orient traditionally bearing association with despair and devastation.

A specific faithfulness to the Oriental setting is also accomplished by mentioning of "Fakir" and "Dervise" (line 339-340) who no longer visit Hassan's ruined place. A similar effect is produced by the lines: "Nor there will weary stranger halt. /To bless the sacred 'bread and salt,'" (lines 342-43) based on the traditional Oriental belief connected to the sacred bread and salt, according to which accepting this food from the host ensures the loyalty of the guests.



In the fisherman's story about Hassan's men implementing his order to kill Leila, is further adorned with faithful Oriental content with the mentioning of the "ataghan," (line 355) a word for a short knife, and with the description of the "Emir" dressed in his "garb of green" (line 357). The description of Leila's death, drowned in a sack, besides its pathos, is endowed by an intense Oriental image of "Genii of the deep". The sources of this phrase could be attributed to Byron's familiarity with the *Arabian Nights*: "I gaz'd, till vanishing from view. /Like lessening pebble it withdrew; /Still less and less, a speck of white" (lines 380-83) "Known but to Genii of the deep" (line 386).

## CONCLUSION

Just as Hassan does not feel any remorse for the death of Leila, so does the Giaour's regret not stem in the immorality of his deeds or social transgressions. He is endowed with the same weaknesses and vices as Hassan. Byron has skillfully employed the effect of doubling which excludes the position of Giaour as superior over his Oriental rival.

Most importantly, the fisherman's account of the story contains no irreverence against his own religion, as it has been the case with Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and other contemporary works, where it was common for the Muslim characters to abandon their religion and denounce its teachings. Byron avoids the common practice of literary Orientalists to present an inaccurate and untrustworthy interpretation of the Orient. He does not devise Muslim figures so as to disrepute Islam. Artistically threading a diversity of Oriental details, such as natural and animal imagery, creatively incorporating picturesque similes and allusions, Byron has managed to fashion a faithful Oriental story. Byron's acquisition of the assortment of elements of a foreign culture is astounding invoking images of "Gouls and Afrits" (line 784) and other Eastern spirits, the "forbidden wine" in Islam, of which "the bowl a Moslem must not drain" (lines 547-48). In addition to the considerable amount of Oriental material, is the wide range of Turkish, Persian and Arabic words, which enrich the Oriental atmosphere. What is most striking in this oriental tale is Byron's great eye for detail, fastidious Oriental precision, and above all, his objective treatment of the Orient.

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