

Orientalism in Lord Byron's "Turkish Tales": The Giaour (1813), The Bride of Abydos (1813), The Corsair (1814) and The Siege of Corinth (1813)

By *Abdur Raheem Kidwai*. Lewiston, USA and Lampeter, UK: Mellen University Press, 1995, 304 pp.

In most of the critical studies of Orientalist and/or colonialist literature, there is an element of humanist closure, marked by the bracketing of the political context of culture and history. At times, this humanist closure is deliberate. For it not only helps in avoiding an analysis of domination, exploitation, denigration, and manipulation, but also it facilitates in reducing the discursive antagonism between "we" and "they," between the "white" and the "dark," between the "Occidentals" and the "Orientals." By distancing oneself from the politics of domination, this typical facet of humanist closure makes it possible to reject Edward Said's suggestion that "colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer"—an insight with a far-reaching discursive implication (*Orientalism*, 1978). One needs to take a critical look at Orientalism not only to delineate an accurate representation of a profound conflict but also to highlight

those elements of syncretism which are suggestive of "a deviation from conventional western concepts of the orient" (p. v). In fact, in chapter 1, titled "Image of the Orient in English Literature: A Historical Survey," it is in this vein that the main contours of literary Orientalism from the beginning up to Byron's day are outlined.

A. R. Kidwai's book, *Orientalism in Lord Byron's "Turkish Tales"* makes a critical study of Orientalism in an insightful and analytical manner. In quite a convincing way the author has brought out a meaningful conjunction between exploitation of Oriental resources and discursive characteristics of Orientalism which has death of an author as its diacritica. Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" can best be understood centrifugally in and through its production and management of the Oriental. But how are the Orientals produced? Through certain discursive practices which brutalize the subjectivity of the colonizing subject. Such Orientalism is very much evident in the writings of Lord Byron and his other two contemporaries Robert Southey and Thomas Moore. They are discussed and compared at length in chapter 6 with a view to bringing out "relative strengths and weaknesses in all three writers' approaches to the orient" (p. 198). "The victory of good over evil" (p. 199) which, according to the author, is an overarching moral ideal behind the composition of most of the epics, is suggestive of an eliding subject—a deliberate wishing away of subjectivity. "Victory of good" is the colonizing subject and, interestingly, this role is allotted to the colonizers by themselves. The author's careful indulgence in the stylistic analyses of representative portions from the poems of these practitioners makes the case in point here—the case for an eliding subject where the victory of good is a code of regulations, a text without an author.

The economy of Manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native, which makes the dominant model of power-and-interest relations, can well be discerned in the writings of Byron, Southey, and Moore. The author has very painstakingly brought out those discursive practices which were moral and ideological and were also operative in tandem with coercive practices. His reference to the political imperatives emanating as a result of the threat from the Ottoman Empire and Turks and his culling of the stylized oppositions in terms of sensuality vs. sensibility, barbaric vs. civilized, and tyrannical vs. benevolent in their writings are suggestive of the fact that both discursive practices and military and political coercion almost went together surfacing of value-loaded categories like "savage," "barbaric," "sensual paradise," "corrupt," "infanticide," "polygamy," "sensual Muslim paradise," etc. commodifies and objectifies the native subject and, as pointed out by the author, these stereotyped objects were recursively exploited as a resource by the Orientalists.

After having traced the Oriental sources in the "Turkish Tales" of Byron and his Oriental diction and Oriental similes, which form the bases of chapter 2, 3, and 4, respectively, the author makes an inquiry into the Oriental characters of Byron in chapter 5. Such an inquiry into the "Mussulman" characters of the "Turkish Tales" is the first of its kind, as the author believes that "no inquiry along these lines has so far been made" (p. 143). In the process of examining the extent to which "Byron's characters conform to the Oriental stereotypes of

English literature and what image of the orient they represent" (p. 143), the author has tread upon a zone whose sensibility becomes a precursor to the establishment of imaginary and symbolic writings.

Depending upon the relationships between the self and the native, the two terms "imaginary" and "symbolic," which have, in fact, been derived from Lacan's study on the development of the psyche, are extensively employed to categorize the orientating principle of the literature, particularly the Orientalist and the colonialist. While the writers of the imaginative literature tend to fetishize a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native, the writers of the symbolic literature are sensitive and more open to the modifying dialectic of the self and the native. On account of their willingness to examine the specific individual and cultural differences between Europeans and natives and their desire to reflect on the efficacy of their values and assumptions in contrast to those of the indigenous cultures, the writers of symbolic texts attempt to find a syncretic solution to the problem of Manichean opposition. Thus, sensitivity and empathy becomes a distinct diacritica of this literature. Although the author may not have been very conscious of these distinct forms, his treatment of Byron, Southey, and Moore and even his passing reference to Coleridge, Shelley, and others fall within a paradigm of such binarity of discourse and creative writing. The three writers emerge as representative of symbolic writing. However, as the author believes, they do differ in their treatment of the self and the Orientals. Sensitivity is not all generic, as one would suppose it to be. Oriental mythology and imagery as a resource have been used by the three writers, but Byron's empathetic disposition was far more than Southey's. To quote the author, in the treatment of Oriental material and oriental history, Byron's "judiciousness, sensitivity, ingenuity and sympathy were far more inseparably integrated as compared to Southey's where it merely floats on the surface" (p. 203).

Thus, the comparison made by the author between the Orientalism of Byron and that of Southey and Moore in chapter 6 becomes meaningful. For it not only makes Byron's Orientalism stand out as the "finest sample" but also invokes a subtle shade of difference within their symbolic writings. What becomes apparent is that despite the familiarity with writings on the Orient and even, at times, exposure to the Qur'an (as in the case of Sale's English translation of the Qur'an in 1734), some of these writers, particularly Southey and partly Moore, showed their syncretic attitudes toward the sensitivities of the East, the Orient. The author of the book under review is quite conscious of the existing insensitivity toward the sensitivities of the Orient, and it is this consciousness which makes the author lament that "Southey does not even attempt to assimilate [Oriental material] or draw any insightful inferences from the mass of reports on Oriental history. He seems content with raw historical facts, showing no predilection . . . for the sense of history" (p. 203). The unfaithful representation of Oriental characters, history, content, and context is not just limited to Southey. There were a number of other writers like Massinger, Dryden, Johnson, and Beckford who, in spite of being representative of symbolic writers, largely differed in the degree of their faithful representation of the Orient, as in *Rasselas* which "makes a pleasant departure from convention" (p. 147). Beckford's *Vathek* further carries the tradition of *Rasselas*. Byron, however, not only shows his tremendous

sensitivities but also epitomizes the syncretism in its fullest. As the author points out “[The] humanistic broadness of mind, absence of the centuries-old ideological attitudes, cross-cultural sympathies and appreciation of a different, rather alien culture and a set of religio-social traditions is exemplified at its best in Byron’s ‘Turkish Tales’” (p. 148). The stylized Manichean allegory in Byron did not revolve around the opposition of truth/good and evil, civilized and barbaric, Christianity’s victory and Islam’s defeat, but it bordered on those “human passions and responses” which allowed “both the warring groups—Christians and Muslims—perish: ‘Thus was Corinth lost and won!’” (p. 191).

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