

Representations of the Oriental Woman in Lord Byron’s “Turkish Tales”

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the representations of the oriental woman in the Western narrative on orient. The Western representations of oriental woman are products of specific moments and developments in culture. For their own rhetorical and political purposes, the Western writers employ a discourse representing an Eastern woman, whose Otherness is always subject to qualification and change. The concern of this study is to reveal how this narrative is revolved around certain concept that the oriental woman is victimized. Byron’s conception of the oriental woman is shaped by these Orientalist ideas. In “Turkish Tales,” Byron uses the figure of the Oriental woman and the harem system. What we find in these tales is oriental women who are both domestic and disobedient, and who try to resist their bounded existence; the harem. Byron often portrays the harem as a confined domestic space against which women may reasonably rebel. But their acts of rebellion almost always end in failure.

Introduction

Since the eighteenth century, a special narrative representing the oriental woman has become a central part of Western discourse on orient. This narrative is revolved around certain concept that the oriental woman is victimized. The concern here is the Western representations of the Oriental woman, and particularly in Byron's "Turkish Tale." In this paper, the focus is on the character of the disobedient women in those tales. What we find in these tales is oriental women who are both domestic and disobedient, and who try to resist their bounded existence; the harem. We argue that, in these tales, Byron often portrays the harem as a confined domestic space against which women may reasonably rebel. But their acts of rebellion almost always end in failure.

The Western representations of oriental woman are products of specific moments and developments in culture. This narrative, Mohja Kahf argues, has a genealogy and logic of its own, emerging from developments in Western representations of gender, of the self, and of the foreign or Other" (2). The context of representation has been discussed by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he shows how the West conceptualizes the Orient, in other words, the way in which representation is used by the western consciousness in relation to Other. In *Orientalism*, Said holds that Orientalism represents the way in which a system of knowing the "Other" becomes a tool of social authority and domination. Orientalism reflects how the Western "approach" toward the Orient is based on the distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, and what helps intensify and authorize this distinction is the long history and development of the Western knowledge regarding the Orientalist discourse (42).

The Oriental discourse presents itself in relation to the Orient which is constructed in binary opposition. In other words, the Orient is defined in relation to the West's self-image. As a means of defining the Self, the "Other" serves to articulate the Self by way of negation. Without direct experience of the Orient, the Orientalist has to rely on representations for the "truth" about the peoples and cultures of places unfamiliar with. Said asserts that Western conceptions of Eastern reality are shaped by Orientalist ideas.

The representation of the Orient in the Western Orientalist discourse depends on the "exteriority," Said argues, "the Orientalist ... describes the Orient, renders it mysterious plain for and to the West. ... What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (*Orientalism* 20-21). So, what is widely produced by the Orientalist discourse is not "truth" but representations. According to Said, through the Western ways of representation, East becomes perceivable there in a discourse about it. Foucault's concept of discourse is a firmly restricted area of "social knowledge". According to Foucault, "the world is not simply "there" to be talked about, rather it is discourse itself within which the world comes into being" (qtd. in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 14). What we have in Orientalist discourse is the concept of "Other," which provides grounds for stereotyping and misunderstanding.

For their own rhetorical and political purposes, the Western writers employ a discourse representing an Eastern woman, whose Otherness is always subject to qualification and change. The increase of histories, plays, and travels in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contribute greatly to the development of the oriental tale in the eighteenth century which has a great influence on the writers of the Romantic period. The Romantic writers gain knowledge, especially about the Turks, from the work produced throughout the seventeenth century.

The oriental tale becomes an aspect of Romanticism, as Martha Conant Pike affirms; “In the eighteenth century a special reason for the popularity of these tales lay in the fact that they offered to the reactionary spirit, always characteristic of romanticism, romantic themes and treatment, and voiced the romantic mood” (247). And what we see prevalent in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the uses of the figure of the Oriental woman and the harem system.

“Turkish Tales”

In “The Turkish Tales,” Byron exploits the metaphors associated with the harem. Billie Melman illustrates this point, arguing that “From the earliest encounter between the Christians and Muslims, the harem as the locus of an exotic and abnormal sexuality fascinated the westerners” (qtd. in Kahf 6). I present how Byron’s “Turkish Tales” portray the veiled woman as one who rebels against the conventions of the harem, and disobeys its rules. Byron’s heroines’ rebellion against the harem system leads the readers to question about the moral status of such disobedience. Byron creates heroine who reveals a rejection to prefer social convenience over personal needs: “Her repudiation of her arranged marriage means that the Byronic heroine – far from symbolizing the continued fertility of the ruling dynasty – articulates a cry for individual freedom . . .” (Caroline Franklin 33).

The veil remains one of the uncanny things that arouses both fear and curiosity of the Western travellers who want to penetrate it to see the face hidden behind it. Meyda Yegenoglu refers to the veil as “one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantastically achieved” (39). But the veil does not necessarily “hide” something that becomes visible once it is removed. This is evident in Mary Montagu’s description of the unusual public gaze of a naked female face. Montagu, in her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, describes a naked bleeding body of a beautiful woman dropped near her house in Constantinople: “She was not yet quite cold, and so surprisingly beautiful, that there were few men in Pera that did not go look upon her; but it was impossible for anybody to know her, no woman’s face being known” (169).

Montagu here presents the sight of a publically unveiled body, which becomes the object of male gaze. What is demonstrated here is that neither the veiled woman nor her naked face is a simple indicative; although the face is unveiled, it discloses nothing because “no woman’s face [is] known.”

A new space seems to be haunted by the oriental figure whose action is central, but whose life is fragile. The powerful position of an apparently powerless person is a paradox that Byron employs in his “Turkish Tales.” Byron infuses his apparently powerless heroine with political meaning; her physical body is always a ground upon which men battle for political power, and play out their personal action. At the centre of these tales is a romantic hero, a noble, and a Muslim villain, cruel and tyrannical, competing over an oriental woman who is a “fetish object” for these two men.

In fact, Kahf argues; “In Byronic language there is a conflation of Eastern woman and Eastern landscape” (154), and the ““spirit” of the hero is possessive, knowing, “piercing” gaze which operates on land and woman” (154).

The first of these tales, “The Giaour,” is a story about a vanishing harem woman, Leila, who is punished by death for adultery (her affair with the Giaour, which means infidel). Unlike the dead female described by Montague in Constantinople, the body of Byron’s Leila is not present. Leila’s drowned body is carried through the fragmented narrative of “The Giaour,” passed from narrator to narrator . . . beginning with Byron, who in his advertisement, explains that “the story, when entire, contained the adventures of a female slave, who was thrown in the Mussulman manner, into the sea for infidelity, and avenged by a young Venetian, her lover, . . .”.

It is Leila’s act of disobedience to the authority of Hassan that hastens all the actions of the poem, and yet we have never seen her act. Byron uses the poem’s fragment form to allow the reader to fill in Leila’s role as heroine. From the very beginning, Byron engages the reader’s imagination, in Romantic style, to create Leila’s story. Byron allows Leila to be a persistent force throughout the text. In essence, the fragments urge the reader to fill in the formal gaps to construct the narrative drafted in the Advertisement. The link between the Giaour and Leila is not made until the fisherman has described the drowning of Leila. Her significance is viewed entirely from the point of her death (Franklin 39), and from the poem’s narrators. The dropping of the slave girl’s body into the sea is disclosed in a flashback of a conversation between Emir Hassan and the fisherman.

In addition to trace the hints and reflections of Leila’s action, we can also search out its consequences, for the act of disobedience that we are drawn to demonstrate fluctuates in other aspects of the poem. Byron substitutes a deliberately obscure account of Leila’s drowning for one that would reflect the horror; he only lets us see a passive bag sink into the ocean:

I gaz’d, till vanishing from view,
Like lessening pebble it withdraw;
Still less, a speck of white,
That gemm’d the tide, then mocked the sight; (380-83)

Instead of her body, it is the idea of Leila, the fugitive feature of her Self that is the centre of the poem. In fact, The total story about Leila's relationship with the Giaour and her murder is reported through rumors; "strange rumors in our city" (447) are circulated about Leila's disappearance from the harem, in the guise "of a Georgian page" (456); the tale of Hassan's "Nubians" (465) gives details about her master's reaction to her elopement on the night of disappearance. Besides, another rumor, which is set antithetically to the Nubian's story, informs us that in the same night:

The Giaour upon his jet-black steed
Was seen, but seen alone to speed
With body spur along the shore,
Nor maid nor page behind him bore. (469-72)

This fragment ends with the confusing questioning of why the Giaour is running away alone. In fact, the source of information raises doubts about whether Leila has really eloped with her lover. Though the Giaour declares that "her treachery was truth to me" (1067) referring to Leila's adultery against Hassan in the name of her love for him, a confession, which confirms her infidelity, it is difficult to answer the above question, for Leila is never allowed a voice of her own, nor is her real motive for escaping the harem shown in the text.

As an odalisque, Leila is expected to be an object of desire, but in this poem, she is also an implied agent of power and movement. In brief, Leila's personal act of disobedience and rebellion is crucial; it brings on all the action and violence between the two men, the Giaour and Hassan. The narrative's battle between these two men shows the fatal consequences of their love for the heroine. Both of them are mesmerized by her beauty, and want to possess her. According to McGann, Leila is "the fundamental source of both life and death", arguing that "Both Hassan and the Giaour live only for her love, but it is their love for her which makes them both murderers and which, in the end, results in their deaths" (158). Although Leila is Hassan's favorite woman, we don't totally agree with McGann that Hassan lives "only for her love", and his reaction to Leila's betrayal is something that even the Giaour approves of at the end when he says that he would have killed her if she had been "false" to him. Their attempts to dominate her bring about her death.

In fact, the poem implies an account of female's disobedience that is at odds with the creed of the harem as expressed by the Eastern custom. Like the contemporary readers of the Turkish Tales, the writers of Turkish histories or even Byron cannot know the woman in the harem either. Instead, they must create and accept their own ambiguous imaginative construction based on the evidence of what they see and imagine through their own moral consciousness.

Each of the disruptive elements of the poem's style and content works to emphasize the ambiguous nature of Leila's characterization. And this might lead to the controversial argument among the critics. Leila's physical absence in the poem has led some critics to proclaim her a passive victim. Caroline Franklin in her book; *Byron's Heroines*, presents an analysis of the female character in this poem and Byron's other tales, giving an account of the traditional view of women expressed in those tales. She states that "Byron's earliest heroines . . . are characterized chiefly by their passivity, sensibility, and tragic deaths. . . ." (38). She argues that "Leila's

identification with the beauty of nature both sanctifies her and yet intensifies the traditional association of woman with sinful sexuality which drives men to destructive violence” (44). Franklin’s point of view is accurate concerning the traditional view of women, but not Leila, for she is not entirely passive. Leila’s successful escape from the harem bath in which the pursuing Hassan “vainly search’d” for her asserts that she is not a “passive victim”; on the contrary, she is a bold person of resolution. Fully aware of the consequences, she courageously and willingly chooses to follow her convictions. This means that Leila is not the powerless, hapless victim that Franklin describes.

Marilyn Butler sees Leila’s act of rebellion as a conflict between individual and his/her society. She renders “The Giaour” as: “. . . a love story, one of those classic late Enlightenment triangles of the *Werther* type that oppose the free and intuitive behavior of illicit lovers to the religious propriety of the legal husband . . .” (89). Leila’s love for the Giaour is at odds with her defined and assigned social role, which is centered on the harem, and by escaping from the harem she challenges not only her social conventions, but also the religious conventions, as suggested by the following lines: “the faithless slave that broke her bower,/ And --- worse than faithless --- for a Giaour!” (535-6). McGann argues that Leila is not a Turk, but a Circassian “who has been sent to Hassan as a slave” (165). In this case, her escaping from the confines of the harem could be argued as an attempt to escape her captivity; she might want to assert her individuality, her right to open spaces, which are the exclusive domain of men, and most importantly, assert her right to choose, favoring the Giaour over Hassan. But her escape is punished with her imprisonment in an even more restricted space; she is shut inside a sack, and condemned to die in silence.

For a deeper perception and understanding of the crucial nature of the disobedient actions of Byron’s heroines, I don’t agree with critics who have considered them as merely incidental agents of the poems. One central act of disobedience is crucial, even if the heroine is later drowned. This is not to say, however, that the role of the female is not debatable, or that Byron’s own attitude toward her is clear. On the contrary, it is absolutely the mixture of his ambivalent attitudes towards Turkish manners with his complex attitude towards women that infuses the tales with their quality of exploration and innovation.

“The Bride of Abydos” deals with a simple yet central and fatal act of disobedience by the heroine, Zuleika, against her father Giaffir. In terms of our discussion of heroine’s act of disobedience, Zuleika’s act of disobedience represents a challenge to the domestic norms and moral principles of Turkish patriarchy. Even though Zuleika is veiled, and lives within the boundaries of the harem, she obviously articulates a Western disfavour for parental authority.

The father Giaffir is referred to throughout the poem as being “tyrant,” “haughty,” and “despot,” whose past time is “the game of mimic slaughter” (I:247). The politically arranged marriage with the Sultan is imposed on Zuleika by Giaffir’s patriarchal authority. The language used by him when he summons his daughter to announce his future plan for her reflects his absolute authority over Zuleika who is “last of [his] race” (II:623):

Hence, lead my daughter from her tower—
Her fate is fixed this very hour . . .
By me alone be duty taught. (I:40-2)

Kahf refers to the Oriental female as a creature “completely killed to subjectivity” (153); “. . . ere her lip, or even her eye, / Essayed to speak, or look reply” (II: 497-98). She is fixed into the pure form of an object:

Zuleika, mute and motionless,
Stood like the statue of distress,
When, her last hope forevergone,
The mother harden'd into stone;
All in the maid that eye could see
Was but a younger Niobe. (II: 491-96)

However, in spite of Kahf's assertion of the Oriental woman's subjectivity, Zuleika is not totally a submissive person, her disobedience is reflected in the way she reacts to the arranged marriage for her. Zuleika decides to risk the anger of her father by opposing this marriage: “His wrath would not revoke my word” (II: 416). She promises to marry the Sultan only with the approval of her brother, Selim (who appears, at the end, to be her cousin), not her father's:

This kinsmen Bey of Carasman
Perhaps may prove some foe of thine.
If so, I swear by Mecca's shrine,--
.....
Without thy free consent, command,
The Sultan should not have my hand! (I: 310-16)

These lines reflect Zuleika's reaction towards the essential issues of disobedience and consent. In these lines, Zuleika mediates upon her future life with the Sultan, foreseeing

his unreasonable despotism. By shifting the power of marriage negotiation from father to brother, Zuleika challenges the important notion of daughterly obedience. She threatens and undermines a religious, social, and political tradition of marriage when she decides to choose her representative in marriage. She powerfully determines

not to consent to the authority of her father and her future husband. She is about to defy the custom of authority on which Giaffir relies. Giaffir is sure that he has successfully taught his daughter “obedience”, he says: “'Twas mine to teach obedience still-- / the way to love, thy lord may show (I:217-18). In fact, Giaffir's reliance on Zuleika's obedience is mentioned by Franklin: “Giaffir's love for Zuleika is based on her obedience” (51).

Caroline Franklin contextualizes Byron's tales in their Regency setting: “Because Regency verse tales identify a return to chivalry as sexual propriety and sentimental loyalty to the patriarchal leaders of society, Byron countered by reinstating courtly

love as forbidden passion in the context of brutal Turkish Patriarchy” (53). In fact, what is emphasized in this poem is not Zuleika as a romantic heroine, but as an agent whose longing for self-determination has a political dimension. Zuleika’s act of disobedience could have effective political consequences for Giaffir and also for herself, because marriage is the institution, which provides the best means for a woman to have her own kind of public authority in Ottoman Turkey or Regency England. Zuleika’s refusal to marry a powerful man that her father has chosen is not respectable to her position in her society.

Though Zuleika acknowledges her politically weak position, she is courageous in her attempt to expose her feelings explicitly: “Deep were my anguish, thus compelled / To wed with one I ne’er beheld” (I: 435-36). So, Byron here also shows the way woman attempts to break out of the system that governs her, yet is unable to recognize her political power because she is still

subject to the male authority. Byron makes use both of the gendered space of the harem as well as the feminized East to stage this power play. Kahf refers to the “typical landscape of the romantic harem drama” as the “feminized Orient,” which is “fetishized and inviting possession” (152). In fact, there is an ambivalent attitude towards the

harem, which is not clearly defined in this poem. In one hand, it is portrayed as a prison in its “air of gloom,” from which Zuleika hopes to escape into her sibling relationship with Selim. On the other hand, it is portrayed as a kind of shell and refuge that protects Zuleika from the outside world. When we see of Zuleika in her “chamber,” it seems to be a quiet, secluded, and surrounded by fine fabrics, “bloom flowers,” a Koran, a lute, and “Her mother’s sainted amulet” (II:69). Therefore, the harem tower is both a quiet civilized retreat from the world of politics and violence, but also a prison. This reflects the strangeness and blurriness of borders associated with the harem.

Most of the critics emphasize in their analysis of the poem on the incestuous relationship between Zuleika and Selim. It is true that Zuleika’s initial shift of power from father to brother is misread by Selim, yet she has never responded to Selim’s sexual advances. Even after she has learnt that they are cousins and her father killed Selim’s father, she still thinks only of their “familial relationship.” But she could not achieve what she dreamt of; Zuleika dies of grief at the moment Selim’s life is over:

That grief – though deep – though fatal – was the first!
Thrice happy! ne’er to feel nor fear the force
Of absence, shame, pride, hate, revenge, remorse! (II: 642-44).

Zuleika, just like Leila, speaks only to hasten her death. In fact, there is a death/life conflict that encompasses the lives of Byron’s heroines. This conflict arouses fear, admiration, and shock from their readers.

The last tale we choose to discuss is “The Corsair,” in which the female character, and similar to “The Giaour,” stands between two male figures, and becomes in a way the centre of the poem.

In fact, there is a double triangle in “The Corsair”. On one level there is Seyd - Conrad- Gulnare triangle. Her disobedience and rebellion against Seyd’s rule determines the course of action of the story. What this poem does differently from “The Giaour” is to give the female character a voice, allowing the readers to hear her conversations. The reader first encounters Gulnare, the “dark-eyed lady,” as a distressed maiden rescued by Conrad from the burning harem. Though she is “Harem queen,” she is “still the slave of Seyd”. Then, she becomes the rescuing fighter.

In this poem, the odalisque Gulnare assumes the initiative both in private and public spheres; she is responsible for saving Conrad’s life, killing the Pasha Seyd, and agitating a rebellion among the guards. Gulnare is moved by Conrad in her first meeting with him. She is taken by his gentleness when he saves the women in the dome. His behaviour leads Gulnare to a better understanding of her position, which consequently leads to her disobedience, and to save the life of Conrad whom she now loves, though he tells her that he loves another woman, Medora. This point leads us to the other triangle which is Conrad-Gulnare-Medora. These two women exemplify the conflict between feminine domesticity and the world of action which Conrad hates and which leads him to love Medora more. Medora represents a conventional femininity, a domestic woman who enjoys and accepts her domestic setting. She lives like a caged “bird of beauty” (I:346) in her island tower. Gulnare, however, “rejects both Eastern patriarchal oppression of women and the Western notion of wifely domesticity” (Franklin 67). She represents the rebellious woman who flees the domestic scene by a violent rebellion. Gulnare says, comparing herself to Medora:

Thou lov’st another – and I love in vain;
Though fond as mine her bosom, from more fair,
I rush through peril which she would not dare.
If that thy heart to hears were truly dear,
Were I thine own, thou wert not lonely here:
An outlaw’s spouse – and leave her lord to roam!
What hath such gentle dame to do with home? (III:296-303)

Although Conrad has been captured because he has saved the odalisques from the burning harem, he is abashed when Gulnare expresses her desire to rescue him and free herself through violent disobedience to the pasha. But unfortunately her breaking out of the confined domestic sphere does not allow her any personal, political, or sexual freedoms. The following lines reflect the confusion Conrad experiences when he learns that Gulnare has murdered Seyd:

They meet -- upon her brow, unknown, forgot,
Her hurrying hand had left -- ’t was but a spot --
Its hue was all he saw, and scarce withstood--
Oh! Slight but certain pledge of crime -- ’tis blood!

Conrad experiences an ambivalent reaction to the mysterious confrontation of the naked female face of Gulnare. The unveiled, blood-stained face of Gulnare becomes cynical to Conrad. Kahf comments on this saying that:

Gulnare's spot of blood clouds her feminine translucence, momentarily gives her the dimensionality and complexity lacking in Romantic females . . . Gulnare is a troubling spot of complexity and opacity amid the central Romantic Representations of Oriental woman. The ubiquitous harem slave and rescued harem damsel overpower her (174).

Though Gulnare expresses the justification for her action; that is to free herself from Seyd's oppression, Conrad disapproves her violent disobedience. In their last meeting, Conrad tries to dissuade her from her intention to free him or to kill Seyd:

Who spares a woman's seeks not slumber's life
Thine saved I gladly, Lady not for this--
Let me not deem that mercy shown amiss.
Now fare thee well -- more peace be with thy breast!
Night wears a pace, my last of earthly rest (III: 365-69)

Gulnare's self-assertion, disobedience, and her fierce acts reflect that she is an influential woman. Her defiance has a political sequence. Her agitation of the guards into revolt leads eventually to the destruction of Seyd's rule. Nevertheless, the "multiplicity" of her character is confusing for Conrad. Being a murderer as well as a victim of domestic oppression disturb Conrad as how to react and respond to her. In fact, Conrad's reaction shows how the veil arouses ambiguous reactions from the Westerners. Moreover, the reversal agency correlated with the veil is more confusing for the Western subjects. Yegenoglu illustrates that the veiled woman changes the conventional positions of object and subject of the gaze:

her body completely invisible to the European observer except for her eyes, the veiled woman can see without being seen. The apparently calm rationalist discipline of the European subject goes awry in the fantasies of penetration as well as in the tropological excess of the veil. (43)

Even though Gulnare has become a murderer, Byron blows away Medora, and washes away the blood stains of Gulnare and allows her to live. When she drops her veil on the shore, Conrad sees that "The worst of crimes had left her woman still!" (III: 522). She appears "humble and meek," and a fully-articulated woman under the gaze of Conrad. Franklin argues that Byron wants to draw the reader's attention to the Gulnare's transformation, she "now seemed changed and – humble faint and meek" (III:531). "Only when she demonstrates her subordinate role can Conrad accept her kiss in a gratitude for his rescue" (Franklin 85). But this solution arouses a kind of uneasiness on the side of the readers. For rewarding an act of violence even if it is to achieve freedom still represents a danger to the unity of any domestic spheres even that of the harem. And after that kiss, she is out of the scene. She is neither absent nor present.

In brief, as we have seen from the three tales that the great challenge to appreciating the active role of the Turkish heroines may be the failure of their disobedience to effect change in their lives. We can see that the odalisques do make difficult choices, and thus must live (or die) with the consequences. The heroines are destroyed, drowned, or literally written out of the poem, leaving the readers struggling to interpret the moral value of such struggles and failures.

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