Chapter IV

Landor, Southey and ‘Orientaliana’

William Blake’s involvement with the Orient was rather oblique in keeping with the oblique and mystical nature of his poetry. Contrary to this, Southey’s output on the Orient and his involvement with the Oriental and imperial themes and issues are exceeded by no other Romantic poet, and only Byron comes close to him. Southey had deep interest in Islam and the Middle East as well as in India and Hinduism, and other Oriental religions like Zoroastrianism. He had an encyclopaedic range of reading on the East and he kept a track of his readings as is evidenced by the large section in his *Commonplace Book*, entitled “Orientaliana” and by the extensive notes he appended to his poems on the East. Southey’s oeuvre on the Orient is very large, as was his archive of knowledge on the East, and it includes massive volumes like *Thalaba, the Destroyer* (1801), *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808), *Imitation from the Persian* (composed in 1828), *Ode on the Battle of Algiers* (composed in 1818), *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (1814), *Muhammed* (composed in 1799) and *The Kalendar* (composed in 1798-99). Except *The Curse of Kehama*, all the other poems mentioned above are related to the Middle East. The discussion on Southey will, therefore, be divided in two sections, the first section will be on Southey’s engagement with the Middle East and Islam and the second section will be on Southey, Hinduism and India. The first section will begin with a discussion of Walter Savage Landor’s *Gebir* which exercised its influence on Southey when he composed *Thalaba*. *Gebir* is also the first long narrative poem that set the tone for the Oriental verse romances which became very popular during the Romantic period. The second section in this chapter will exclusively focus
on *The Curse of Kehama* and the nature of Southey’s involvement with the Oriental scholarship, India and Hinduism.

Lord Byron writing to Thomas Moore on the subject of using the East as the source of poetic inspiration condemned Southey’s Oriental epics as ‘unsalables’ (*BLJ* III 101). However, the most unsalable of the verse narratives based on the Orient was Landor’s *Gebir*, which sold only a few copies.¹ Robert Southey was one of the few admirers of this romance and his *Thalaba, the Destroyer* was largely influenced by *Gebir*.² Southey might have exercised a counter influence on *Gebir* by making Landor add notes to the poem in the manner of *Thalaba* in its 1803 edition. Consequently, Southey’s *Thalaba* has been considered as the pioneering example of the annotated verse tales of the Romantic period, having its precedence in Beckford’s Oriental prose romance *Vathek* and its poetic counterpart *Gebir*. *Vathek* exercised a potent influence both on Landor and Southey, so did many other Oriental tales. What is most common among these three tales is their attempt to tap the new sources of creativity made available by the Oriental Renaissance. Beckford was one of the first writers to exploit this new source and was followed by Landor, Southey and the other Romantic poets.

Long before Byron asked Moore to look ‘Eastward,’ William Jones in his “An Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations” pointed out the loss of inspiration in European poetry. He also spoke on the necessity to tap the new source of inspiration in the Asiatic poetry: “I cannot but think that our European poetry has subsisted too long on the perpetual repetition of the same images, and incessant allusions to the same fables.” He went on to suggest that if the poetry of the Asiatic nations is translated and disseminated in Europe “we should be furnished with a new set of images and similitudes; and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might
imitate” (Pachori 144). The purpose of such writings by Jones, according to Garland Cannon, was to “effect a revolution in European literature” (Oriental Jones 27).

W. S. Landor was one of the first among the Romantics to have followed Jones’s advice and he discovered new ‘fables’ not much known to the common European readers with an accompanying set of novel images as suggested and foreseen by Jones. He published a hoax pamphlet of nine short poems entitled Poems from the Arabic and Persian in 1800, purporting to be based on French translation of an Arabic manuscript but actually originals by Landor himself; a few years later he wrote Count Julian: A Tragedy (1812) that took up the Eastern theme. The earliest work by Landor to focus on the Orient, however, was Gebir, first published in 1798, and revised and republished with annotations and notes in 1803. The poem tells us the story of the Spanish King Gebir’s invasion of Egypt and his destruction in the hands of Delica, the nurse of the Egyptian queen Charoba.

The immediate source of Landor’s Gebir was the prose tale Gebirus appended at the end of Clara Reeve’s Progress of Romance. Miss Reeve states in her preface to this work that her story came from an Arabian manuscript by Murtada ibn al Khafif found in the Mazarin Library translated into French by M. Pierre Vattier. The Arabian manuscript has the title “The History of Ancient Egypt, according to the Traditions of the Arabians.-Written in Arabic, by the Reverend Doctor Miurtadi, the Son of Gapiphus, the Son of Chatemn, the Son of Molseim the Macdesian.” An English translation of it was done by John Davies in 1672, and Reeve might have seen this but her story bears more similarity to the French version (Williams).

Landor, though he was indebted to Reeve, boasted in the Monthly Review that the poem is “nothing more than the version of an Arabic tale” and “every line of appropriate description, and every shade of peculiar manners, were originally and entirely his own” (qtd. in Forster 78). Whatever Landor’s claim might have been, reading the two stories make it
apparent that the tales have much similarity in spite of some differences. Reeve used the French version freely to create a feminist narrative making Charoba a patriot queen trying to save her country from the invader Gebir. Landor creates a tale where the invader as well as the invaded queen becomes victim of magic and witchery of Delica. Moreover, there is no denying the fact that though Landor’s immediate source was Reeve’s tale, he drank deep into the tradition of the romances, pastorals, epics, Oriental tales, travelogues, the Gothic novels and many other forms of writings. *Gebir* appears to be a kind of pastiche combining formal elements from diverse literary genres.

Mohammad Sharafuddin, commenting on the genre of the poem, refers to a note that Landor attached to the Latin version of the poem. Landor wrote: “Our first book is almost wholly in the pastoral genre: nor could it be at all otherwise, having regard for propriety and the manner of the times in which it describes the events taking place; but from that step by step rise greater things up to the end of the poem” (qtd. in Sharafuddin 5). Following this note Sharafuddin discovers the impact of various genres in each of the book: Book I is pastoral in nature; Book II is romance; Book III is epic romance; Book IV has the excitement of epic narrative; Book V emphasizes the demonic aspect of epic narrative; Book VI contains epic prophecy; and Book VII relates Gebir’s tragic destruction. He concludes that the poem shows a movement “irregular in detail but plain in its general curb: develops from pastoral to romance, from romance to epic, from epic to tragedy” (Sharafuddin 5).

The problem with Sharafuddin’s interpretation of the genre of the poem lies in his ignoring the Gothic and the Oriental tale. Influence of the Gothic finds no mention in Sharafuddin and his analysis of the impact of the Oriental tales is not adequate. In *Gebir* Landor combines elements from the Oriental tales and the Gothic novels. The impact of Beckford’s *Vathek* is apparent in many places but nowhere is it more evident than in Book III where Gebir descends into the underworld and meets his ancestors suffering the torments of
hell. The spectacle of suffering of the race of Sidad resembles the description of suffering souls provided by Beckford at the end of his novel. The cause of suffering in hell in both the tales is the earthly ambitions of the sufferers and both the tales seem to echo the Koran. In chapter 89 of Sale’s translation of the Koran there is a reference to a group of people called the Ad, the people of Irem who suffers in the hand of God due to their insolence on earth. The tale is used in the Koran to illustrate the idea that earthly insolence and material desire result in suffering in hell. While in the Koran the people of Ad are called Adites, in Landor’s tale Gebir and his people are referred to as Gadites. Garcia, however, points out that the Gadites (from Gad) and the Adites (from Ad) are the same people (“The Hermetic Tradition” 451-52).³

An important part of the poem is Book V where Delica makes her journey to the ruined city of Masar and meets with her sorceress sister Myrther. Delica and her sister seem to have their forerunners in the demonic women of the Gothic novels like Carathis in Vathek or Matilda in The Monk who in turn look back to the figures of Eastern women like Cleopatra or the Eastern heroines of the Middle English romances. The element of lust is, of course, missing in the character of Delica. Although Delica is portrayed as a vicious woman by Landor, he presents the queen Charoba as innocent and meek. No such difference between Charoba and Delica can be found in the earlier versions of the tale. This distancing of the two women has made Landor’s narrative problematic. To explore the problem we need to turn our attention to the thematic complexities of the poem, because the story has palimpsests of forms and themes.

The story of the Iberian king Gebir’s invasion of Egypt and his subsequent amorous desire for Charoba (which becomes mutual in Landor’s version of the tale) and his failure to get united in love unifying Iberia and Egypt, because of Delica’s intervention, has been often upheld as an anti-imperial epic. This line of interpretation is fuelled by a remark, the author
made in the preface to 1803 edition: “In the moral are exhibited the folly, the injustice and the punishment of Invasion, with the calamities which must ever attend the superfluous colonization of a peopled country” (qtd. in Sharafuddin15). Marilyn Butler, for example, calls it “an anti-colonialist fable” where the would-be colonialist Gebir is killed on his wedding day. Butler reads Iberia as allegorical representation of England (“Orientalism” 411-12).

Mohammad Sharafuddin regards the tale as an example of direct Orientalism, having many conventional Eastern themes and motifs like necromancy, ruins, exotic eroticism, Oriental luxury etc. However, he concludes that it is an anti-imperial tale, an expression of Landor’s early “republican internationalism” (38-39). However, the tale cannot be simply dismissed as an “anti-colonialist fable.” The question is: if Iberia is England then the Egypt of the tale may be any of the British colonies. Butler herself concedes: “Landor’s Egypt populated by shadowy cultists and murderous women, provides a model for Eastern court cultures in romances to follow” (“Orientalism” 412-13). If it is so then Landor’s would be-colony is not only a Volneyean ruin but it is also what the pro-missionary lobby, led by men like Charles Grant, would make of the native religions and society, “priest-ridden, cruel and despotic, and thus asking for Western conquest” (“Orientalism” 411). This representation of the native religion and society needless to say had colonial implications. Charles Grant and his associates used the primitivism and degeneration of Hinduism as means for creating the grounds for the infiltration of Christianity and opening up ways to convert the natives into their ‘enlightened’ faith. Accordingly, Alan Richardson’s postcolonial reading of the tale seems more appropriate in the context. Richardson reads the poem as a celebration of Western (Christian) Europe at the expense of the East. Landor “short-circuits" his own anti-colonial rhetoric "through continuing to rely . . . on colonialist figures of savagery, primitivism and the primacy of the West” (“Epic Ambivalence” 279).
The interpretations of the poem have dominantly concentrated on two journeys: the subterranean journey made by the eponymous hero and the aerial journey made by the hero’s pastoral brother and his nymph wife; but there is a third journey in the poem undertaken by Delica. Delica’s journey has received little critical attention. Gebir’s descent into the abyss is a reflection of the past and Tamar’s aerial survey is a vision of the future, but Delica’s journey on the surface of the earth is concerned with the present, her immediate concern for the sovereignty of her native land.

Book III begins with the description of Gebir’s descent into the underworld. He meets Aaron who tells Gebir the story of Sedad’s race, to which Gebir belongs. The race of Sedad was once powerful on earth, but now in the abysmal hell they regret their earthly exploits: “How gladly would they poverty embrace/ How labour even for their deadliest foe!” (Book III, 43-44). The suffering of the conquerors depicted in this book sends out an anti-imperial message. The meeting of Gebir with the “Tom-Painish” Aroar in the underworld has a number of references to European monarchs like George III, Louis XVI, William III and Charles II and this makes the anti-imperial anti-colonial argument stronger.5

In Book VI Tamar’s nymph-beloved takes him to an aerial journey. It covers much of the world in its survey and a prophecy is made that all the proud tyrants, including Gebir will be destroyed. There are moralizing lines commenting on the vain glories of the world:

With horrid chorus, Pain, Diseases, Death,
Stamp on the slippery pavement of the proud,
And ring their sounding emptiness through earth. (Book VI, 113)

In the third book of the poem the suffering of Gebir’s ancestors and their regret that they ran after the glories of war and victory on earth drives the moral lesson that earthly pomp and glory is the cause of suffering in hell. Similarly, in the sixth book there is a kind of direct preaching against the earthly conquerors of the world, but the nymph also makes a prophecy
for coming of a “mortal man above all mortal praise” (Book VIII, 111) who is projected as
the harbinger of hope for a golden age. Napoleon is seen as redeemer of mankind. According
Garcia, the sixth book is the most subversive because of its “provocative vision about the
coming of an egalitarian social Utopia” (“The Hermetic Tradition” 433). Garcia points to the
fact that the prophecy is placed in the mouth of an Egyptian nymph, who in this poem (and in
the mind of late eighteenth-century readers) is a symbolic figure of hermetic magic and
enthusiastic prophecy. Garcia argues that in the reference to Napoleon and the French
Republic (Corsica being Napoleon’s birthplace) “Napoleon acquires a messianic status as the
redeemer of world history” (“The Hermetic Tradition” 434). Garcia explores the possibility
of reading the poem as belonging to the subversive tradition of anticlerical historiographies
written by radical Protestants and hermetic philosophers in the late seventeenth and
eighteenth century. He argues that “because Gebir is based on a thirteenth-century Arabian
romance that celebrates a hermetic-Islamic account of Mosaic history; Landor’s oriental tale
embodies a radical hermetic critique of Anglican-British imperialism” (“The Hermetic
Tradition” 436).

The third journey of the poem is made by Delica in the fifth book. It begins with one
of the standard scenes of Oriental ruins. Delica’s journey takes her to the ruined city of
Masar. It was once a glorious place—“a fair city, courted then by king,/Mistress of nations,
 thronged by palaces,”—but now is in utter ruin: “Bereft of beauty, bare of ornaments, /Stood
in the wilderness of woe, Masar” (82). The place is characterised as "Treacherous and
fearful" (82.) populated by fierce animals like hyena. “Masarian Dalica”(82) dares to visit
this dangerous place and she meets her sister Myrthyr addresses Delicca as “Woman of outer
darkness, fiend of death,” and accuses her of overhearing the secret words of magic: “From
what inhuman cave, what dire abyss, /Hast thou invisible that spell o’erheard?” Myrthyr does
not mean to address her sister like this but she fails to recognise her and mistakes Delica for a
common Egyptian woman. She accuses Delica of profanity. Delica’s in her reply reveals her patriotic feelings: “Dalica cried, ‘To heaven, not earth, addressed, / Prayers for protection cannot be profane’” (84). The sisters recognise each other and from the conversation that follows, we get to know that they belong to a race of magicians preserving their tradition for generations. Delica in a long speech explains to Myrthyr the cause of her visit, and while referring to Gebir’s invasion she defines Charoba as an infant like queen who does not know the value of the crown (“She thought the crown a plaything to amuse”) nor can she protect the country: “Herself, and not the people, for she thought/Who mimic infant words might infant toys” (88). As the queen cannot protect herself and her country Delica has assumed the responsibility to do so and she has planned to kill Gebir.

One notable aspect of her speech is her misinterpretation of Charoba’s behaviour. She suspected that Charoba has fallen in love with Gebir but Charoba protests that she was in love: “Then saw I, plainly saw I, ‘twas not love,” because it is her “natural temper” that “what she likes/ She speaks it out, or rather she commands.” Therefore, for Delica “the death of Gebir is resolved” (92-93). To protect the queen and her country she has planned Gebir’s death. Accordingly, she is not the person to blame; yet at the end of the poem, she is made the villain and Gebir becomes the victim of her villainy achieving the status of a tragic hero.

If the poem is interpreted as a radical critique of British imperialism as indicated by Butler, Sharafuddin and Garcia, Delica should be considered the hero of the poem since she is the instrument of punishment; Gebir’s colonial desire is thwarted by her. However, the problem is that her actions are not approved and the readers’ sympathy is drawn towards Gebir, the dying hero and Charoba, the suffering queen. In Reeve’s narrative, the queen and her nurse (Delica) together plan to kill the invader, but Landor’s scheme Delica alone commits the murder. She is presented as a sorceress who is a hindrance to the union of the invader and the invaded—the colonized and the colonizer. Her counterpart is primarily
Tamar’s beloved nymph who has magical power but she uses it for ‘good.’ The nymph is the
docile sister of Delica. Delica also stands in contrast to Charoba, the innocent queen who is
acquiescent to the desire of the king as she herself has fallen in love with the conquer. She
gives Gebir the upper hand: “He was a conqueror, still am I a queen” (Book IV, 71).
Therefore, reading Delica in the context of the history of Western polemics and politics of
representation it becomes impossible to read the romance as an anti-colonial tale.

Nigel Leask interprets Landor’s tale as depicting the fall of the old mercantilism
(Gebir’s colonizing mission) and the rise of the new free trade empire (Napoleon’s
redemptive freedom). Leask’s study once again concentrates on the first two journeys;
particularly, on the sixth book of Gebir where Tamar’s beloved the Egyptian nymph takes
him on a flight over Europe (British Romantic Writers 25-26). Leask’s reading, once again,
has in focus the colonizers not the colonized. If we concentrate on Charoba and Delica
instead of Gebir and Napoleon we may better understand the politics in the poem. If we
accept Butler’s interpretation that Iberia is not Spain but England then Gebir is the English
invader/ colonizer and Egypt may be any colonized/ to be colonized country. Following the
same formulation Delica and Charoba are the natives. In Landor’s poem, Charoba is
conquerable and awaiting assimilation whereas Delica is resistant and unassailable. The tale,
therefore, becomes a narrative of the ‘good native’ and the ‘bad native.’ Gayatri Spivak’s
interesting formulations regarding the distinction between the “self-consolidating other” and
the “absolute other” helps one to understand the politics in Landor’s poem. Spivak analyses
the Western myth making of the Other in terms of psychoanalysis and her psychoanalytical
triangle consists of a self and two kind of Others “a self consolidating other” and an “absolute
other” (Spivak, “The Rani of Simur” 128). Delica who resists the imperial ambitions of Gebir
can be defined as what Spivak calls the “absolute other.” Charoba, who is the docile sister of
Delica and is willing to submit to Gebir, is Spivak’s “self-consolidating other.” Therefore, in
Landor’s narrative Delica becomes the villain, Charoba the sufferer and Gebir, the helpless victim of Delica’s villainy.

One of the important aspects of Landor’s Gebir is that it does not contain any explicit reference to any religion. Southey’s epic Thalaba is completely different from Landor’s poem in this respect. Thalaba is an Islamic Arabian tale, a kind of religious narrative.

Southey wrote in 1798 to Joseph Cottle about his aim in Thalaba: “My intention is, to show off all the splendor of the Mohammedan belief. I intend to do the same to the Runic, and Oriental systems; to preserve the costume of place as well as of religion” (CL 1798-1803, No. 344). It formed part of Southey’s project to compose a poem on each of the religious systems. Since his younger age he was attracted to different systems of faith. In retrospection he wrote to John Martyn Longmire (4 November 1812): “I got at Picart when I was about fifteen, & soon became as well acquainted with the Gods of Asia & America as {with those} of Greece & Rome. This led me to conceive a design of rendering every mythology which had ever extended itself widely & powerfully influenced the human mind, the basis of a narrative poem.” He “began with the religion of the Koran, & consequently founded the interest of the story upon that resignation which is the only virtue it [Islam] has produced” (CL 1810-15, No. 2172). While writing Thalaba Southey also planned to write an epic on Muhammad in collaboration with Coleridge, and the poet extensively read on Islam and its prophet Muhammad. “Of the few books with me I am most engaged by the Koran,” he wrote to John May, on 29 July 1799 (CL 1798-1803, No. 424). Entries in his Commonplace Book and the notes to Thalaba also prove his engagement with Islam during the period.

As Southey’s plan to write the epic on Muhammad remained unfulfilled, much of his reading on Islam was worked into Thalaba. Naturally, Southey’s plans for the epic and the little fragment that he wrote in 1799 are relevant to a reading of Thalaba. The epic on Muhammad was supposed to have the title, “The Flight and Return of Mohammad.” In a
letter to William Taylor, Southey (c. 3 February 1800) elaborately discussed his plan for the epic:

Mohammed will be, what I believe the Arabian was in the beginning of his career, sincere in enthusiasm – & it would puzzle a casuist to distinguish between the belief of inspiration & the actual impulse. from Coleridge I am promised the half, & we divided the books according as their subjects suited us – but I expect to have nearly the whole work. his ardour is not lasting, & the only inconvenience that his dereliction can occasion will be that I shall write the poem in fragments & have to seam them together at last. the action ends with the capture of Mecca. the mob of his wives are kept out of sight – & only[MS torn] the Egyptian introduced. (CL 1798-1803, No. 486)

In Southey’s epic on Mohammad his hero would be Ali, not the prophet himself, for he writes in the same letter, “Ali is of course my hero.” The letter is also remarkable for its observation that Coleridge might not continue as collaborator and Southey’s willingness to produce the epic all by him. Ultimately, neither Coleridge nor Southey completed the epic. Southey wrote an epic fragment and Coleridge a short poem “Mahomet.”

One reason for Southey’s abandoning the epic, as it is expressed in the letter quoted above, was his doubts regarding the success of the epic: “Whether Mohammed be a hero likely to blast a poem in a Christian country is doubtful.” The success of a poem was important to him and the failure of Thalaba became another reason for abandoning the epic on Muhammad as well as his plan for other religious epics. Southey was also confused about his opinion on Islam itself. In the letter to John May (29 July 1799), he wrote: “What was Mohammed? self-deceived, or knowingly a deceiver? if an enthusiast, the question again occurs wherein does real inspiration differ from mistaken? this is a question that puzzles me” (CL 1798-1803, No. 424). This confusion might have been another obstacle in the way to
composing the epic. Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch points out that the poem was abandoned because of Southey’s inability to suspend his “disbelief sufficiently to create Muhammed as the hero of a serious work” (Robert Southey 84). This confusion whether to adore Muhammad as a hero or to condemn him as an idolater becomes relevant to his representation of Islam in Thalaba. In the narrative of the poem, he celebrates Thalaba’s belief in Islamic monotheism but in the notes, he seems to condemn everything that is Islamic and Oriental. A simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion is enacted in the text and in the notes to the poem. Marilyn Butler has explained this as a characteristic of Romantic Orientalism. Butler considers the epic as laying down “the narrative paradigms of Romantic poetic orientalising, above all the cunning juxtaposition of desire and terror, the exotic and the grotesque, a formula which in the next generation sold plenty of other people’s poems, if never enough his own” (Orientalism” 415). Naturally, the issue of Southey’s representation of Islam and the Islamic Orient in Thalaba has remained a matter of debate among the critics of Southey.

A very brief look at his 109-line fragment ‘Mahomet,’ the supposed beginning of “The Flight and Return of Muhammed” would be relevant before turning to Thalaba. It begins with a description of Mohammad’s flight to the cave and categorically mentions Ali as his hero. The enemies of Mohammad waiting outside Ali’s house to kill the prophet find Ali coming out instead: “But when the youth went forth, they saw, and behold! it was Ali!” (CPW 839). Muhammad has escaped to the cave in fear of the Koreish people. When they go in search of Muhammad he is helped by the providential power, as at the mouth, the cave is covered with cobweb and “a pigeon fled from her nest” at the sound of their coming (CPW 840). The Koreish people conclude from this that there is nobody in the cave and they return promising to come back the next day. The fragment ends with Ali’s arrival at the cave with the sad news that Muhammad’s wife “Cadijah in sickness/Lies on her bed of pain” (CPW 841).
Anyone reading the passages from the fragment may find it similar to *Thalaba* differing only in the use of metre. The tone, the atmosphere, the setting, the sentiment and Southey’s descriptive phrases seem to be echoes of *Thalaba* or vice versa. The Koreish people are like the idolaters of the Domdaniel and they search for Muhammad as the disciples of Eblis searches for Thalaba. In *Thalaba* Southey realizes his unfulfilled dream of writing an epic on the prophet of Islam. This seems to be more so when one considers the fact that Southey did not have any intention of making Muhammad the hero of his epic; his preference was Ali, the disciple of the prophet. Thalaba, as Ali was, is a staunch adherent to the faith that remains unaltered in all circumstances. Carol Bolton notes that in *Thalaba* Southey on the one hand could freely explore the Islamic belief, and on the other hand could “syncretize it with what he valued from the Protestant religion” (“Southey’s Nationalist Romance,”” pa. 12). This was perhaps, something difficult to do in the epic on Muhammad.

Interpreted from this perspective *Thalaba* is a religious poem illustrating the ‘Islamic’ tenets. However, the poet defines his creation as an ‘Arabian Romance’ and Southey’s interests and his sources, as revealed in the notes to the poem, were not confined to Islam neither to any particular Oriental source material. He collected the materials from disparate sources and worked them together to create the epic. Like Landor’s *Gebir*, *Thalaba* is also a kind of pastiche patching together materials and inspiration from the East, the West, the North wherever possible, the Eastern sources being the dominant ones. Marilyn Butler identifies it as “an eclectic historical pastiche, most obviously of medieval romance and Spenserian epic” (“Orientalism” 413). However, Butler could not be oblivious to other sources as in a footnote she writes that Southey built up his “leading villains . . . from great variety of sources, including the rich Jewish-Christian -Muslim sources” (414).

The immediate source of *Thalaba’s* central plot was “the continuation of the Arabian Tales” where “Domdaniel is mentioned –a seminary of evil magicians under the roots of the
sea” (*CPW* 225). The poem’s metre, regular blank verse, Southey wrote, is used as
“Arabesque ornamentation to an Arabian Tale” (*CPW* 225). Southey’s source story, “The
History of Maugraby the Magician” narrates the tale of an Arabian hero, Habed who fights
against the Domdaniel and the evil disciples of Zatani/Satan. Habed-il-Kalib, king of
Tadmur, engages in a spiritual combat with Maugraby. Maugraby specializes in kidnapping
children, whom he takes to caverns of the Domdaniel under the roots of the sea where they
may be brainwashed and trained in the evil art of sorcery. Hadeb receives guidance in
dreams, studies magic and undergoes an ordeal of initiation, in preparation for his battle with
the shape-shifting Maugraby. Irwin observes that “this weird grim tale was unmistakably
intended by Cazzotte to serve as a parable about the Martinist programme for spiritual
reintegration and salvation.” Southey, Irwin remarks, turned the story into "an allegory of
Christian duty and endeavour” (*The Arabian Nights* 163). Seen from Irwin’s perspective,
Thalaba is rather a Christian hero than a Muslim one. Discussing Southey’s debt to the “Tale
of Maugraby” Sharafuddin observes: “Southey’s elaboration of this story is extensive but his
obligations to it are unmistakable” (51). He also relates various episodes in the poem to the
Koran, particularly the episode of the destruction of the Adites and their false paradise Irem.

None of these critics, however, go into the specific features of the Oriental Tales and
the Gothic writings to show how they are blended together in Southey’s annotated verse tale
in the manner of *Vathek*. Similarly, influences of pseudo-Oriental verse tales like Collins’s
*Persian Eclogues* in the description of the desert journeys go unrecognised. It is important to
note that *Thalaba* was part of the “effulgence of the gothic” and Southey exploited the taste
for the Gothic together with cashing in on the Oriental Renaissance. The poem has scenes of
Gothic ruins (ruined city of Bagdad); dark claustrophobic spaces (the cave of the Haruth
Maruth, Maimuna’s cave, Domdaniel under the sea); supernatural elements (the Simoom, a
gust of wind intervenes and saves *Thalaba*); element of magic (the breed of female magicians
Maimuna, Khawla, Ocba who belong to the race of the demonic women in the Gothic novels); a wandering hero (a number of journeys are undertaken). The Gothic features of Thalaba are, therefore, similar to Vathek or The Monk and it combines the Gothic and the Oriental together, though it should be noted that it does not have a villain-hero—the villains and the hero are demarcated in the poem. In this respect, it is closer to The Castle of Otranto where the villain is clearly marked off from the hero. Oneiza, the heroine is also closer to Isabella than to Nouronihar in Vathek or Matilda in The Monk.

In fact, the characters in the poem can be classed into two categories: the good, poor and simple (Thalaba, Oneiza and Moath) and the bad, rich and villainous (all the members of the Domdaniel and Aloudin). This clear cut division of characters in Thalaba can be interpreted with reference to Gary Kelly’s theorization of the use of Gothic and the Oriental elements in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century European literature. Gary Kelly argues that the images from the Gothic novel and the Oriental tale have been used as the figure of the Other and the alien in European literature and culture. In the last half of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth, Kelly argues, these images of Otherness were used to criticise the feudal aristocracy as decadent and evil and bourgeois values are celebrated. There was a transposition of the Gothic Other upon the Oriental Other and the Romantic poets played a very important role in this. The images of ruin, barbarity, cruelty, lust are Gothic motifs transferred to the Orient making the Oriental interchangeable with the Gothic Other (3-18). Similarly, Sara Suleri makes the point that the “British claimed to bring ‘modernity’ to the ‘feudalism’ of the subcontinent” (The Rhetoric of British India 32). If Thalaba is “an allegory of Christian duty and endeavour” (Irwin, A Companion 263) the hero illustrates bourgeois virtue as opposed to the “feudal vices” of the Oriental rulers represented by the Domdaniel.
The images of Gothic horror in the poem, it can be further argued, suggest the imperial anxiety – the fear that the dark forces from the imperial periphery may engulf the centre of the Empire. Edmund Burke in his Hastings trial speeches betrays similar concerns and in his speeches, the language of Gothic Otherness is employed in distancing the colonial subject. Suleri’s analysis of Burke’s use of the Gothic rhetoric in his speeches against Hastings is very relevant in this context. In her book, *The Rhetoric of English India*, Suleri notes that the portrait of Hastings in Burke’s trial speeches is parallel to the Gothic villains—Montoni of Ann Radcliffe’s novels or Milton’s Satan. The Gothic, Suleri argues, incorporates the fear and anxiety of empire as the vocabulary of these speeches reveals. Massimilliano Demata makes similar arguments analysing Beckford’s use of dark, enclosed and claustrophobic spaces. According to Demata, the East “resurfaces in the West in shapes which are the domains of the uncanny” (“Discovering Eastern Horror” 23).

Apart from the problem of the lack of recognition of the Gothic elements in the poem there are debates, arguments and counter arguments regarding the politics of representation in the poem: how one can summarize Southey’s view of Islam, in particular and the East in general. Whereas critics like Sharafuddin and Garcia have interpreted Southey’s Orientalism in positive terms, other critics have found the poem as participating in the popular Orientalism of the day. ⁸ According to Sharafuddin, Southey’s aim in the poem “was to discover the common ethical denominator between Islam and Christianity so as to liberate the West from a self-regarding, therefore, tyrannical, perspective”(49). Praising Southey’s Orientalism (together with Byron’s) as “realistic” (49), he comments that Southey saw Muhammad as the “original biblical prophet” (90).

Sharafuddin competently traces the Islamic sources of the poem but at times he turns a blind eye to the Orientalism and Anglicism in the poem. Referring to one of the manifest examples of Southey’s view of comparative superiority Christianity and inferiority of Islam,
Sharafuddin remarks that “it is the redemption of East as the East, and not in the imposition of western ideology, that is Southey’s fundamental concern” (66). The concerned lines in Book V (stanza 6) of the poem run thus:

So one day may the Crescent from the Mosques
Be pluck’d by Wisdom, when the enlighten’d arm
Of Europe conquers to redeem the East. (CPW 266)

It is very difficult to accept Sharafuddin’s comment that the author did not wish to impose Western ideology because this goes against the interpretation of the text itself, and this has been scathingly criticised by Seyed Mohammad Marandi in his article “The Redemption of Thalaba and the Enduring Influence of Oriental Discourse.” Marandi observes that “obviously in the eyes of the poet, the inferior and fallen Orient must be redeemed by Western conquerors who can replace Islam with Christianity” (Marandi 10-11). The problem for Sharafuddin and equally for Garcia is that they do not pay any attention to the ‘paratext’ of the poem. Garcia interprets Thalaba as “the twin brother of Gebir (Islam and English Enlightenment 82). According to him it “embodies a republican account of universal history that replaces Noahecht prophesy with the Islamic revolution” and Southey’s “universal history deploys Unitarian Islam as an anti-imperial” agency (183). Such observations are difficult to accept when one concentrates closely on the text and paratext of the poem. Even when these authors recognise the appropriation or rather misappropriation of Islam they fail to recognise Southey’s Eurocentric bias.

Southey presented Thalaba as an authentic document on the Arabian life and Islam. In the preface to the 1837 edition of the poem Southey pointed out that Thalaba was not hastily written and he was collecting materials for a ‘Mahommedan’ poem for four (1795 to 1799) years: “I had fixed upon the ground four years before, for a Mahommedan tale; and in the course of that time the plan had been formed and materials collected” (CPW 224). Southey’s
authenticity was obviously textual. The reality he presents is mediated through the Orientalist
texts of the time. To give an example of his understanding of the Oriental people a single line
can be quoted from the preface to The Curse of Kehama. Explaining his depiction of the
Middle East in Thalaba, he comments: “Everyone who had read Arabian Nights’
Entertainment possessed all knowledge necessary for readily understanding and entering into
the intent and spirit of the poem” (CPW 565). On the one hand, he claims his text to be
authentic depiction of the Eastern reality, and on the other hand, he sets the fantastic
collection of tales, the Arabian Nights’ Entertainment as the touchstone for judgment. This
reveals his lack of understanding of the East. More importantly, Southey considers the Nights
as having some merit because the stories “have lost their metaphorical rubbish in passing
through the filter of French translation.” Southey’s Orient, therefore, is textual and he suffers
from the Eurocentric bias of the sources.

Stereotyping and homogenizing the Orient and the Orientals, in this case the Middle
East and the Islamic people of the Middle East, is strongly evident in Thalaba. Like the
romance narratives of the medieval age, Southey presents Mohammad not only as lustful but
the Arabs in general are presented with strong carnal passions. Southey observes in a note
that the Arab man “according to the custom of the nations has many wives, and when he gets
fed up with one sends for another” (CPW 301). There are a number of Harem images in the
poem. In the sixth book of Thalaba Southey describes a “voluptuous vale” where the very
atmosphere is described in terms of erotic pleasure and to add to this erotic atmosphere there
are beautiful women with equally erotic prospect. The women are lustful, gesticulating
wantonly and the men are looking at them with greedy eyes. Southey describes “a troop of
female” dancers whose “ankles [are] bound with bracelet-bells” and who “Exposed their
harlot limbs, / Which moved in every wanton gesture skill’d” “to the greedy eye” (CPW 277-78).
Resignation is presented as an Eastern vice—the Easterners completely resign themselves to fate: “Ye can shake the foundations of earth, / But not the Word of God: But not one letter can ye change” of what “his Will hath written” (CPW 238). Similarly, in a note to Book V Southey quotes from the Bahar-Danush to prove the point: “The Mahummedans believe that the decreed events of every man’s life are impressed in divine characters on his forehead, tho’ not to be seen by mortal eye. Hence, they use the word Nusseeb, anglicé stamped, for destiny” (CPW 273). Southey observes: “No nation in the world is so much given to superstition as the Arabs, or even as the Mahometans in general” (CPW 274). Syed Hussain Alatas in his book The Myth of the Lazy Native commenting on how the Europeans exploited the myths of the lazy Orientals observes that “in its historical empirical manifestation the colonial ideology utilized the idea of the lazy native to justify compulsion and unjust practices in the mobilization of labour in the colonies. It portrayed a negative image of the natives and their society to justify and rationalize European conquest and domination of the area”(2). Elsewhere in the book, Alatas analyzing the European social thinkers’ attitude to the Orientals in general comments that the great majority of the socialists gave the impression that “there was an Oriental variety of ignorance, stupidity, intolerance and despotism"(235). He was speaking of the twentieth century phenomenon but such stereotypes are seen in Southey’s writings.

Not only are the men presented as cruel but the women and children are also presented as equally barbaric in observing coolly the gory spectacle of crime. In the ninth book a Christian boy is cruelly murdered in front of a regaling crowd: as the execution begins men and women (“women that would shrink/ And shudder if they saw a worm”) watches it nonchalantly and “clap their hands for joy/ And lift their children up /To see the Christian die.”¹⁰ The cruel woman behind the act is of course Khawla, Maimuna’s sorceress sister. The
passage is marked by sense of religious hostility common in the medieval romances as the author emphasises on the enjoyment of the religious Other at the death of a Christian boy.

Equally notable in the text are the images of Oriental pomp and luxury, opulence and excesses: the over opulent city of Irem which is destroyed by God’s wrath; the false paradise of Alaodin; the once opulent now ruined city of Bagdad contain scattered images of Oriental opulence and wealth. Lobaba, for example, uses terms and phrases like “magnificent palaces,” “lofty obelisks,” “high-domed Mosques,” “rich Bazars” to describe the city of Bagdad where “merchants meet, and market . . . / The World’s collected wealth (CPW 256). However, there are equally contrasting images of Oriental ruins described by Southey in the manner of Volney. The past glory of the city of Bagdad is compared to the present decay and degeneration. The description reminds us of the ruined city of Masar described by Landor in Gebir: “A labyrinth of ruins, / Babylon Spreads o’er the blasted plain.” Thalaba is shown making his way “Thro’ the broken portal, / Over weedy fragments” (CPW 266). One of the imperialist excuses to conquer the Orient was by recourse to the logic that the degenerated Oriental society needed the enlightened hand of Europe; Southey’s evocation of the images of ruin and degeneration, therefore, could be useful to the empire builders. In The Curse of Kehama Southey uses similar images of ruin to condemn Indian despotism and to valorise the Western/Christian civilizing mission.

Regarding the images of the opulence, lusciousness, lust, and exoticism in Thalaba Diego Saglia observes that “Southey perceived the East as the reservoir of stories and objects and a material discursive-continuum” (“Words and Things” 172). He argues that the material and cultural benefits accruing to Britain from the East coalesce in the web of empire, production, consumption and knowledge. The Orient is the playground of the scholar and the administrator as well as of the artificer. He argues: “the presence of a material and often overtly sensuous East in Southey’s writings” is “one of the crucial expressions of Romantic
period orientalism” (“Words and Things” 168). Referring to Southey’s views expressed in his letters Saglia shows how he intended to exploit the East culturally and economically.

Southey, Saglia remarks, “depicts the orient as a land of personal fulfilment and sensual gratification, almost as a locale for an alternative pleasure-driven Pantisocracy” (“Words and Things” 174). There are a number of passages in the text as well as in the notes that deal with the tendency of the Easterners to ornamentation and images of gilding are abundantly used in the poem. In the sixth book (which describes Alaoudin’s false paradise) itself the word ‘gold’ or ‘golden’ is used for forty one times and every time the word is used to show the excess in ornamentation. In the first book of Thalaba, for example, in the midst of the Arabian desert Zeinab suddenly notices the palace of Irem and the narrator jumps on to the opportunity to show its ornamental excesses:

Here studding azure tablatures
And rayed with feeble light,
Star-like the ruby and the diamond shone:
Here on the golden towers
The yellow moon-beam lay;
Here with white splendour floods the silver wall. (CPW 226)

The note appended to explain this passage is more interesting. Southey quotes passages from Hakluyt and Tavernier to prove the excesses of Oriental artifice and then adds his own comment:

A waste of ornament and labour characterises all the works of the Orientalists. I have seen illuminated Persian manuscripts that must each have been the toil of many years, every page painted, not with representations of life and manners, but usually like the curves and lines of a Turkey carpet, conveying no idea whatever, as absurd to the eye as nonsense-verses to the ear. The little
of their literature that has reached us is equally worthless. Our barbarian scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer. We have a specimen of his poem; the translation is said to be bad, and certainly must be unfaithful, for it is in rhyme; but the vilest copy of a picture at least represents the subject and the composition. To make this Iliad of the East, as they have sacrilegiously stiled it, a good poem, would be realizing the dreams of Alchemy, and transmuting lead into gold. (CPW 318)

The passage is remarkable for its oscillation between the commodity and the culture. The material and the discursive fields indeed coalesce together. Saglia’s observation that Southey’s Orient is a “multiple construction of the Romantic East and a precious record of its intermediate status between commodity and narrative” seems appropriate (“Words and Things” 186).

Another aspect of Southey’s Orientalism in the poem is overwriting the Koranic language with a Biblical one. He wrote: “I thought it better to express a feeling of religion in that language with which our religious ideas are connected” (CPW 232). Just as Southey imposes the Biblical language upon the Koranic, materially he often imposes the British scene upon the Arabian desert. The desert is contrasted with the pleasing domestic scene from the English countryside. The travellers are sad and in despair as they look at “a wretched scene”: “They looked around, no wells were near, / No tent, no human aid!” However, joy fills their heart when in the “burning waste the Travellers / Saw a green meadow, fair with flowers besprent, / Azure and yellow, like the beautiful fields Of England” in the month of May (CPW 259). The barren Orient stands in contrast to the fertile West—the bower is Western whereas the desert is Eastern.

Nigel Leask interprets the homogenizing tendency evident throughout the poem in terms of Gayatri Spivak’s conception of epistemic violence. According to Leask, the notes
and the text of the poem together combine science and sentiment, information and experience, helping to reframe the bourgeois subjectivity. For Leask the notes appended to the Oriental epics are “informational hypertexts, acts of epistemic violence homogenising the diverse Orient for imperial expansion” (“Wandering through Eblis” 166). The Romantic epic or epic fragments, Leask observes, represent a new Romantic aesthetic of “cultural particularism.” The “absorptive pull of the exotic visual image or allusion” is “constantly checked and qualified by the descriptive discourse.” The text and the notes together produce the commanding vision of “imperialist objectively” (“Wandering through Eblis”168-69)

According to Javed Majid, Southeby’s epics can be interpreted in the light of the attempt made by Jones to formulate an idiom in which to compare and contrast cultures in response to the demands made on an “administrator scholar” by the heterogeneous character of the British Empire (51). For Majid, there were two axis around which the Oriental Renaissance revolved: a heroic universe of imaginative expansion thrilled with the prospect of untried possibility; and an equally heroic but disciplined world of legal codification. In other words, the conflict was between the visionary and the scholarly. Southeby in his poetic text (where he presents Thalaba as his hero) is a visionary; but in his notes, he seems to be the scholar. Southeby like Jones wanted to capture the ‘newfound world’ and use it as the source of poetic inspiration. Majid identifies in Southeby’s Thalaba and Curse of Kehama “a preoccupation with plumbing and probing depths” (49) as indicating “a tentative exploration and probing of new sources of creativity and material” made available by the Oriental Renaissance (50-51). He quotes a passage from the eleventh book of Thalaba to prove his point:

The spring was clear, the water deep,
A venturous man were he and rash
That should have probed its depths,
For all its loosened bed below
Heaved strangely up and down,
And to and fro, from side to side
It heaved, and waved, and tossed,
And yet the depths were clear,
And yet no ripple wrinkled o’er
The face of that fair Well. (*CPW* 317)

Such passages are quite common in the poem and the images of well, river and springs are recurrent. In the fifth book, for example, there is a passage similar to the above passage in its use of the images of fluidity:

Blue flames that hovered o’er the springs
Flung thro’ the Cavern their uncertain light
Now waving on the waves they lay,
And now their fiery curls Flowed in long tresses up,
And now contracting glowed with whiter heat.
Then up they poured again
Darting pale flashes thro’ the tremulous air;
The flames, the red and yellow sulphur-smoke,
And the black darkness of the vault
Commingling indivisibly. (*CPW* 209)

There is, however, an obvious difference between this passage and the earlier one: whereas in the first images of light prevail and the well is deep but visible, in the second the smoke and flames of different colour give it a demonic quality, like some of the images in “Kubla Khan.” If the images in the first passage are attractive, the images in the second are terrible. Such contrasting qualities in the images of liquidity lead Majid to conclude that the attempts
to tap new sources of creativity posed a threat to the cultural superiority of the Grecio-Roman heritage (84). It explains Southey’s condemnation of Eastern art and literature: “A waste of ornament and labour characterises all the works of the Orientalists.” Elsewhere he condemns the Eastern style as “oriental bombast” (CPW 232). It marks a point of departure from Jones. Jones’s praise for the Oriental poets and literature are no longer acceptable to Southey: “Our barbarian scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer” (CPW 232). Southey’s condemnation of the Oriental art and literature seems to foreshadow Macaulay in his condemnation of the Indian culture and knowledge in the infamous Minutes.

This change in attitude marks the shift in the dynamics of England’s relationship with the colonies and it can be interpreted as signs of Southey’s changing ideological position during the time. From a half-rebel he gradually turned into a nationalist. The bonhomie of the Hastings era underwent a sea change during the 1790s with the Hastings trial and the rise of the Anglicists led by Charles Grant and William Wilberforce. The events changed Europe’s attitude not only to India but also to Oriental art, literature and culture in general. The ‘exoticist’ and the ‘magisterial’ approach were gradually replacing the ‘curatorial’ approach of the Jones era. The ‘Indianism’ and Orientalism of the Jones era was getting replaced by Anglo-centrism and Anglicanism. The “oriental Homer” now can be condemned together with the Western ‘barbarian’ who equated ‘Ferdusi’ with Homer. The dichotomy of Southey is that he uses both Firdos and Jones as creative inspiration only to condemn them in his critical verbiage. Southey is inspired by Jones era curatorial approach in the poetic text but in his notes he turns the ‘magistrate’ whose full flourish would be seen within a few years when he would write The Curse of Kehama.

Although Southey condemns Islam and the people of the East Southey’s treatment of Islam cannot straightforwardly be dismissed as completely prejudiced because of his characterization of Thalaba. Thalaba is a celebration of the unflattering faith of the
eponymous hero in the teaching of Muhammad. Even if Southey represents his own version of Christianity through Thalaba’s unwavering faith in God, one cannot ignore Thalaba’s story of success and sacrifice for the cause of destroying evil. The central conflict between Thalaba and magicians of the Domdaniel has been, and can be, explained with reference to the use of the Gothic language of Otherness where the Oriental Other and the medieval/feudal Other are conflated. Southey’s valorisation of working class Thalaba and his scathing criticism of the rich magician members of the Domdaniel or other rich people of the East can also be explained by referring to his early radicalism and republicanism.

Southey’s involvement in the anti-slavery campaign in the early days of his career was related to the unprecedented growth of republicanism and radicalism in England as a result of some continental events. In the last two decades of the eighteenth century British republicanism was at a peak and so was Southey’s. In 1788, he wrote an article “The Flagellant” with his friend Grosvenor Charles Bedford and he criticised the English education system for repressing the freedom of the students by its authoritarian approach of corporeal punishment. He described flogging as the invention of the devil. This irked the authority and resulted in his ouster from the Westminster School. The mood of the paper reflects his radical sensibilities not uncommon among the Romantics in the 1790s. Like other Romantics Southey was also influenced by the radical philosophers. Moreover, Southey’s radicalism had also something to do with his dissenting sensibility. Southey was an admirer of Joseph Priestly and his Bristol upbringing helped him imbibe the dissenting influence. He attended a school run by William Foot, a dissenting minister. As Chene Sonoi points out by the 1790s he had started mixing with dissenters like George Burnet and other Unitarians educated by Anna Barbauld. His dissenting sensibility shaped his political outlook in the early phase of his career (22). Southey also had connections with Henry Thornton as is evidenced by many of his letters written during 1795-96. In one of his letters to his friend Grosvenor Charles
Bedford in 1796 Southey writes: “I mean to pass Saturday with Hannah More, you heard from me of my former visit to Cowslip Green. an elder brother of Cottles goes there Friday. with whom I shall return. he is a young man of some talents & patronised by Thornton the Friend of the Negroes” (CL 1791-1797, No. 159). Henry Thornton was a banker and a political economist and more importantly, was a cousin of William Wilberforce and a leading member of the Clapham Sect. In 1791, Thornton became chairperson of the Court of Directors of the newly constituted Sierra Leone Company, dedicated to establishing a colony of freed slaves in Africa.

Another factor that might have contributed to his republican attitude—his sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy for the wealthy oppressor—was the financial disparity that he noticed as a boy between his aunt Elizabeth Tyler’s house, where he spent much of his childhood, and his own. The wealth and prosperity of his aunt stood in stark contrast to the poverty of their own. This was the common phenomenon at Bristol, where “Pride and Luxury” cohabited with “meanness” as the abolitionist poet Chatterton put it (“A Burlesque,” 1-2). Even before he wrote on slavery he diagnosed the socio-political situation in terms of mastery/slavery in Wat Tyler (Bolton, Writing the Empire 20). Southey was not alone in serving the domestic agenda by recourse to the discourse of slavery or colonialism but it was a tactic used by evangelicals like William Wilberforce for whom antislavery trade agitation was part of a larger attempt to effect a moral reform to the governing classes. In Thalaba by setting up a ‘working class’ hero who rebels against the immorality and the degeneration of the rich ‘feudal’ members of the Domdaniel, Southey is also directing a criticism towards the immoral, the degenerate and the wealthy of his own country.

While Southey’s radicalism was mellowed down at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was not completely lost and a displacement mechanism was at work in poems like Thalaba and The Curse of Kehama. His support for the working class and the down trodden
and hatred for the life of luxury and opulence as evidenced in early works like *Wat Tyler* now was to some extent re-enacted in the poems set in the Middle East or India. Thalaba is a working class hero like Wyt. He stands for simplicity and hard work as opposed to the luxury and opulence of his enemies. In *The Curse of Kehama* Ladurlad and Kailyal are poor and oppressed and Southey’s radicalism is embodied in their fight against Kehama.

Southey started thinking of writing a Hindu epic even when he was composing *Thalaba*. In a letter to his friend Wynn (on 23 July 1800), while correcting and rectifying the final copy of *Thalaba*, Southey expressed his wish to compose a poem based on Hindu mythology: “I have some distant view of manufacturing a Hindoo romance, wild as Thalaba: & a nearer one of a Persian story of which see the germ of vitality. I take the system of the Zendavesta for my mythology, & introduce the powers of Darkness persecuting a Persian, one of the hundred & fifty sons of the Great King. . .” (*CL 1798-1803*, No. 538). On 28 March 1801, he wrote to Coleridge about it and by then he had already decided upon a title for the poem: “I have planned a Hindoo romance of original extravagance, and have christened it “The Curse of Kerodon” (*CL 1798-1803*, No. 572). As the remarks in the letters reveal, Southey began thinking of the romance by 1800 and he started composing it in 1802 but it was not completed until 1809. During this time Southey was equally interested in writing an epic on the Persians as the letter to Wynn (on 23 July 1800) reveals. While *The Curse of Kehama* was still a “distant dream” he already had a definite plan for an epic on Zoroastrianism. Southey read Duperron’s translation of the *Zend Avesta* and he had better opinion of the French translator compared to the English speaking William Jones, for he wrote in the same letter: “it is rather disgraceful that the most important acquisition of Oriental learning should have been given us by a Frenchman. but Anquetil du Perron was certainly a far more usefull & meritorious Orientalist than Sir Wm Jones, who disgraced himself by enviously abusing him” (*CL 1798-1803*, No. 538).
The religious system of the *Zend Avesta* was closer to Southey’s heart. However, the plan to write an epic based on his reading of Duperron’s translation remained unfulfilled, while *The Curse of Kehama* was completed after about a decade’s delay. The failure to write an epic on a religious system that he preferred over Islam and Hinduism is explained by Lynda Pratt with reference to Southey’s plan of the poem as a bridge between two “generically and geographically disparate part of his output: the epic and the romance, South America and the Orient” (“Where . . . success [is] certain” 135). According to Pratt Southey wanted to fulfil his long cherished dream of writing an epic on Manco Capac, the legendary progenitor of Inca Peru. Southey, according to Pratt, conceived of an idea of working him into a romance on Zoroaster and to bring Inca from Persia to Peru, but its geographical implausibility according to her was responsible for the poem being abandoned (133-38).

Southey’s failure to write the ‘Persian epic’ and delaying *The Curse of Kehama* for almost ten years has something to do with the lack of success with *Thalaba*. He was more interested in writing prose pieces and reviews that fetched him quick money than composing another unsuccessful poem like *Thalaba*. *The Curse of Kehama* was resumed only after meeting with W. S. Landor who assured Southey of printing the poem. Ultimately Southey declined the offer, but he was inspired by Landor to complete the poem. At a time when *The Curse of Kehama* was nearly finished in a letter to Landor (on 21 February 1809) Southey pointed out the slow sale and lack of success that greeted *Thalaba*: “I sold the first edition of Thalaba to Longmans for 115 £, they printed 1000, – that edition is just now exhausted, & a second about to come forth– But this has been a slow sale, – & when seven years ago I offered them another poem on the same terms (meaning to have finished Kehama for the purpose) they demurred & offered only the 100” (*CL 1804-1809*, No. 1585). Javed Majid believes that Southey could write the ‘Persian epic’ later in his career, but publication of
Thomas Moore’s “The Fire Worshipper” in *Lalla Rookh* based on *Zend-Avesta* pre-empted any such possibility (47-48).

Nonetheless, *The Curse of Kehama* was completed, but in the ten years or so that Southey took in conceiving and completing the poem Southey’s world had undergone a sea change—particularly, in relation to Southey’s radicalism and the British perception of India and Hinduism—and this has larger implication for any reading of the poem. The poem had its roots in Jones era but it was finished in post-Jones ideological formations towards the Indian empire. Southey conceived the poem when he was still a critic of British polity, but when he completed the poem he was already transformed into a nationalist of some sort, and his perspectives on continental and colonial politics underwent major changes. It is an imperative to read the poem in the context of these changing politics and polemics both personal and national. Before going into that it is necessary to deliberate on the question as to why Southey composed the poem on a subject that he apparently disliked.

Lynda Pratt argues that Southey used to write on subjects not so dear to him. She refers to the fact that Southey disliked Jones but that did not deter him from using Jones in his poetry. She observes that the “origins of *Kehama* could have lain in the topicality of the subject.” Impetus, according to her, might have also come from his labours on *History of Portugal* where he wanted to include a section on the Portuguese involvement in India (“Where . . . success [is] certain” 138-40). One of the important reasons for Southey to embark on writing on Hinduism arguably was the topicality as India was the topic of much interest and discussion after the loss of Britain’s American colonies and particularly after the Hastings trial and the debate between the Anglicists and the Orientalists that gained ground after 1787. Charles Grant published his “A Proposal Establishing Protestant Mission in Bengal and Behar” in 1787 and it was followed by “Observations on the State of Society Among the Asiatic subjects of great Britain” in 1792 rousing the pitch for proselytization. A
number of missionary societies were established during this time: the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, the London Missionary Society in 1795, and the Church Missionary Society in 1799. *The Evangelical Magazine* was established in 1793 and it took up task of creating public opinion in its favour proselytizing. The pitch for permitting the missionaries to proselytize in India was rising, and ultimately it led to the limited permission given to missionaries in the Charter Act of 1813. **This success was largely due to Southey’s friend William Wilberforce and, needless to say, Southey and Wilberforce were arguing in favour of** the missionaries.

A related reason for not abandoning the Indian epic might have been Southey’s personal interest in an Indian career. Southey **in his writings exploited the large resources of** the East in an attempt to make money, and also thought of an Eastern career to become rich as many of his fellow citizens did. In many of the letters written during 1799-1800, Southey expressed his feelings of attraction and repulsion to an Indian career. In a letter to Charles Danvers (6 November 1800) he wrote: “the East-Indian bar: where the climate is warm enough, & success certain...” *(CL 1798-1803, No. 557)*. This attraction for the riches was balanced by the fear of leaving England and living among the people he disliked: “curiosity inclines me to go—but every other motive will certainly knock curiosity on the head. assuredly I would rather get two hundred a year in England, than two thousand in India & no after affluence could compensate for the misery of passing my best years among strangers” *(CL 1798-1803, No.557)*. A month before this letter he wrote to his friend Wynn “India is too hot for comfort – & I have an abhorrence of East-Indianised Englishmen *(CL 1798-1803, No. 556. 30 October 1800)*. Five years ago he was ready to leave the British isle with his pantisocratic dream, but now he speaks of missing the isle he had wanted to leave so eagerly. It indicates Southey’s growing nationalism and conservatism in place of whatever republican ideals he had earlier nurtured. Another letter written to Wynn (October 1800) expresses
similar sentiments: “But of India I can talk and think in England – England – the land of
intelect [sic] and morality – my own dear country, where I grew up and where I would be cut
down”(CL 1798-1803, No. 549). During this time he was in Portugal and that might have
increased his passion for his country. It was his fear and anxiety of living in an alien land
among alien people combined with the hatred for the “East-Indianised English men” led
Southey to the rejection of an Indian career.¹³

Though Southey declined Wynn’s proposal to join the rank of East India Company he
was deeply interested in Indian matters. He wrote in 1799 to Humphrey Davy regarding his
intellectual/cultural journey—his imaginative travels: “So I travelled into Egypt & the
Levant & Persia & the East Indies with every traveller whom I could find going that way”
(CL 1798-1803, No. 447, 18 October 1799). He explained his plan for the “Hindoo tale”
in the letter (30 October 1800) to Wynn:

For a Hindoo tale I have set another seed. there is a singular absurdity in that
system – prayers and penance have a sterling – not a relative, value. they are
actual coin for which the Gods are obliged to sell their gifts even to the
wicked: & thus have they often given such power to the Penitents as they are
called, as to endanger themselves. now one of these Penitents would I take, &
set him on an enterprize to get at the Amortam. (CL 1798-1803, No. 556)

He disliked Hinduism, India and the “Indianised English men,” but he loved the riches of
India and that is how he came to write a poem on Hinduism, the religion he condemns in
most derogatory terms. The production, he thought, would make him rich. One of the
important aspects of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century literature on the East was the
author’s aim to earn some quick money. Even a writer like Dr Johnson exploited the public
desire for Eastern stories by writing Rasselas (Schmidt 104). Lynda Pratt observes that
Southey might have refused to go to India, “but that did not prevent him from making use of
it—a use which was arguably as commercial as that made by those he condemned” (“‘Where . . . success [is] certain’” 143).

When Southey resumed writing *The Curse of Kehama* after meeting Landor he was thinking in terms of his nationalistic concerns and his support for the missionaries. Carol Bolton argues that Southey’s colonial ambitions are manifest in his “Hindoo romance” and it provided the political and social context for his representation of India (*Writing the Empire* 207-08). Between 1800 and 1809 Southey wrote a number of review articles on “Periodical Accounts relating to the Baptist Missionary Society.” In these articles he was arguing in favour of the missionary efforts in Christianizing the natives. Reading in the light of Southey’s reviews, Daniel White interprets *The Curse of Kehama* as Southey’s “conversion poem.” According to White, the question of how “to Christianize the natives became the question that motivated Southey first in his reviews and then in *The Curse of Kehama*” (“Idolatry” 5).

If Southey’s desire for material success and serving nationalistic, evangelical and imperial purpose were the objectives behind writing the poem, it must be noted that the poem was neither successful in terms of sales nor in terms of its celebration of nationalism at the cost of the ‘Indianism’ of the Orientalists in Calcutta. Contemporary reviewers criticized him for spreading the corrupting influence of a demonic religion upon the British public. He was accused of idolatry and was supposedly infected with the monstrous religion called Hinduism. An unsigned review in the *Monthly Mirror*, for example, slyly remarked: “In his former works, he has prepared the reader for an indulgence in *the wild and wonderous,*’ but here he has out-run himself, and put *The Tales of the Genni* and the *Thousand—and—one Nights* utterly to blush” (Madden 132). It is this review which, after condemning Southey’s implausible presentation of the Hindu deities, famously commented that “Mr. Southey will never acquire all the fame, that his poem is capable of conferring until he obtains readers who
reverence and adore his deities; and that time can never be until *The Curse of Kehama* be translated into *Hindoostanee*” (Madden 134). Another anonymous review in the *Critical Review* condemns Southey’s poem as attractive at first glance but very tiring and “we seldom or never, perhaps, be tempted to renew our visit.” The poem according to this reviewer “has scorned the limits of ordinary poetry” (Madden 134-35). Among the reviewers John Forster was most scathing on Southey. Forster condemned every aspect of Southey’s ‘monstrous’ display in the poem but he was chiefly critical of Southey’s valorisation of Hinduism, the “strenuous attempt to confer English popularity on the Hindoo Gods” (Madden 144). He famously compared ludicrous nature of the mythological imports to “the shit of Lama.” The poem is like a fine British fleet sent out to India “just for the purpose of bringing back, each ship, a basket of the Gods of crockery, or some portions of that materials with which the lama of Tibet is reported to enrich the craving hands of his devotees, and at length coming into the channel with flags flying, and their canons thundering, in celebration of the Cargo” (Madden 144). These adverse reviews are proofs that Southey’s “conversion poem” failed to achieve its desired effect on the reading public. His depiction of Indian mythology no doubt aroused aversion which was his desired aim but it also roused the fear of what Gouri Viswanathan refers to as “reverse acculturation”(28). Southey shared the common anxiety about this “reverse acculturation” and he hated the ‘East-Indianised’ English men, Southey’s critics feared for the “reverse acculturation” of Southey and his readers.

There had been different explanations as to why Southey failed to achieve his aim. The most common explanation has been the schism between the text of the poem and the notes. It is argued that the notes condemn what is upheld in the text within its imaginative boundary that requires suspension of disbelief and in a sense valorises Hinduism. As a result of the conflict between the text and the notes the readers and reviewers were confused. Javed Majid observes that the conflict between the scholarly and the administrative aspect of the
poem is the reason behind the confusion (51-52). Lynda Pratt argues that Southey’s poem was intended to demonstrate “the superiority of all things national and Christian over all things ‘Hindoo,’ simultaneously feeding an appetite for the orient whilst demonstrating that ‘home’ was best. What he saw as a poetic blend of the commercial with the national interest, others saw as deeply worrying and threatening” (“‘Where . . . success [is] certain’” 148). Some recent criticism, however, tries to deny the schism between the text and the paratext. Carol Bolton finds a link between the text and the notes in condemning Hinduism. She regards Kailyal and Ladurlad as “Christianly virtuous.” Bolton writes: “Kailyal and Ladurlad are no less than Thalaba, on a Christian mission through a world of superstition – dominated by gods and demons – on the path to heaven.” For her the text and the notes are in collusion in condemning Hinduism (Writing the Empire 243).

Readers’ confusion has also been explained with reference to Southey’s imposition of the English form upon an Oriental subject. Southey in the preface to his 1837 edition of the poem defended its style and versification and illustrated how he had followed the British poetic standard. Southey wrote: “The spirit of the poem was Indian, but there was nothing Oriental in the style. I had learnt the language of poetry from our own great masters and the great poets of antiquity” (CPW 566). These comments by Southey lead to the discussion on the disjunction between the form and the content. However, the most obvious reason for the disjunctions within the text and the rupture between the text and the paratext is the long time that elapsed between its first conception and its completion. In the 1838 preface Southey refers to the poem as well planned and carefully composed but the preface also marks the halts in the process of its composition. He begins by observing: “No poem could have been more deliberately planned, nor more carefully composed.” However, he ends by remarking: “It is the only one of my long poems of which detached parts were written to be afterwards inserted in their proper places” (CPW 566). The patching together of different sources and
information makes Southey’s Oriental romances a pastiche, but another form of pastiche that works in *The Curse of Kehama* is insertion of “detached parts” that were composed later or at different periods of time. Naturally, there is a gap between the text and the paratext, but there is also a conflict within the text itself.

*The Curse of Kehama* is at bottom a story of two lower caste natives, the father-daughter duo Ladurlad and Kailyal and their struggle for survival in the oppressive regime of the Brahminical king, Kehama. The poem begins with a description of Arvalan’s (Kehama’s son) funeral and the ritual of the sati. However, it is foregrounded against the tale of oppression of Kailayal and Ladurlad. Kailyal is a lower caste girl who became the object of Arvalan’s sexual appetite. When Arvalan attempted to violate her sexually, Ladurlad strikes Arvalan to death to save his child from the oppressor. It was an instinctive act on the part of Ladurlad: "Only instinctively... /Only to save my child I smote the Prince" (*CPW* 571). Arvalan’s spirit seeks revenge upon the two through his father the mighty king Kehama. While Kailyal escapes the wrath of the king falling into the river, Ladurlad is cursed with unending suffering. The rest of the poem is Kailyal and Ladurlad’s escape-adventure from the revenging spirit of Arvalan and the ‘man-Almighty’ Kehama. The tale concludes with Kehama’s failure to achieve supreme authority in the universe and his imprisonment in hell. Ladurlad and Kailyal are rewarded with the heavenly abode. Kehama may be the ‘villain-hero’ of the epic, but the central focus of the story is on Kailyal and Ladurlad and their tale of oppression, persecution and subsequent redemption.

When we consider this story in relation growing Anglicism and Evangelism in Southey, the scheme of the poem is laid bare. Post-1800, Southey was siding with the growing demand of the missionaries to allow them to convert the natives of the colonized nations. He wrote in 1802 in *Annual Review* on the *Periodical Accounts relative to the Baptist Missionary Society* (1802) that “Christianity would produce the greatest possible good, individual and
general; because it would root out polygamy with its whole train of evils; because it would abolish human sacrifices, infanticide, and practices of self-torture; because it is a system best adapted for our happiness here as well as hereafter” (Cuttings from the Annual Review 207).

In another review of the Missionary Tracts Southey argued: “The better and the teachable natives would connect themselves with their civilized neighbours, and their children be exulted into the higher race; the more obstinate would cut off by spirituous liquors, their own vices and their own ferocity. This is the order of nature: beasts give place to man; and savages to civilized man.” (Cuttings from the Annual Review 603, emphasis added). This missionary zeal in Southey was ever growing. On 14 July, 1813 Southey wrote in a letter to W. Wilberforce that the “Hindoos were easy proselytes to the Moors” and he wished “that Government should promote such plans [for proselytizing], furnish the means, & leave the Missionary to Societies to find men, & direct the execution. At present there is no hope of this, but we are told to cast our bread upon the waters (CL 1791-1797, No. 280). Southey’s arguments in these reviews are similar to those of Charles Grant who wrote in his Observations, about the “general depravity of Hindus” and suggested a cure: “The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindoos err, because they are ignorant; and their errors have never fairly been laid before them. The communication of our light and knowledge to them, would prove the best remedy for their disorders. . .” (148). Trautman argues that Southey’s creative inspiration of the poem comes from William Jones’s Indianism and Orientalism, but Southey cannot use his creative inspiration freely because of the changes that Southey’s politics and British attitude towards India underwent during this time. To use Trautman’s formations, the originary conceptions of the epic and its sources belong to the era of ‘Indomania’ but the epic was completed in the era of ‘Indophobia.’ He argues that “British Indomania did not die of natural causes; it was killed off. The ‘Indophobia’ that became the norm in early nineteenth-century Britain was constructed by Evangelicalism and
Utilitarianism, and its chief architects were Charles Grant and James Mill” (99). He refers to John Shore's *Life of Jones (Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of Sir William Jones, London)* and Charles Grant’s *Observations* and argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century British ‘Indomania’ gradually gave way to ‘Indophobia.’ This reminds us of Schwab’s observation that England could not become the home Oriental Renaissance because of imperial politics of the conquerors (43).

Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama* must be read in terms of the ‘Indophobia’ which took control of the popular imagination at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Southey participated in and contributed to the process of building the ‘Indophobic’ atmosphere, but paradoxically, the poem received adverse reviews from the ‘Indophobic’ British reviewers. The emerging ‘Indophobe’ culture is the dominant factor in Southey’s representation of Hinduism in *The Curse of Kehama*. He had to break down the Jonesean view of India and Hinduism. His ‘Indophobia’ was also the reason behind his hatred for Jones, because Jones projected India as challenging the superiority of the Western civilization and culture. Southey, therefore, paints a picture of the Hindu society as degenerate, corrupt and priest ridden and barbarous. Southey wrote that “of all false religions [Hinduism] is the most monstrous in its fables, and the most fatal in its effects” (*CPW* 567) and was responsible for the general degradation of the Indians. The backwardness and barbarity of the Hindus warranted change, and for this it was necessary to preach Christianity.

However, the representation of the backward and hostile natives could discourage the missionaries in their attempts to convert them and it would be equally discouraging to the imperial forces to find the hostile natives (like Kehama) unwilling to bow before them. Therefore, there was a necessity to portray ‘domesticable’ image of the natives. Thus in Southey’s scheme of things Kehama and his idolaters as well as Ladurlad and Kailyal serve the evangelical purpose. Kehama is the image of the “Indian Bonaparte” whom the British
dispensation in India was anxious to control, and Ladurlad and Kailyal are the ‘domesticable’
natives who the missionaries could convert. They are the “better teachable natives” ready to
be “exulted into the higher race.”

Southey wrote to his brother Henry in December, 1804 that it is not true that the
Hindus are not convertible and cites past examples of their conversion by Muslims. He
mentions the caste system and the practice of sati as loopholes in Hindu society that can be
exploited for the purpose of conversion. He makes the intriguing observation that the target
of the missionaries should be converting the lower caste Hindus: “it is the interest of all the
oppressed casts to become Xtians, & the oppressors are everywhere the few. As for the
Bramins let them alone – convert those who pay the Bramins & who support them – & the
business is done. Xtianity would increase the temporal comforts of all. prove this by detailing
the inconveniences of the Brahminical ritual” (CL 1804-09 No. 995). In Southey’s scheme of
things, therefore, the upper caste Bramins are the oppressors and not convertible but the
lower castes are oppressed and can be converted, and this is the message that Southey
illustrates in *The Curse of Kehama*.

Southey’s valorisation of one group of Hindus over the other is, therefore,
problematic, since the valorisation is not for its own sake but for the sake of justifying their
Christianization. Southey draws the sympathy of the British readers towards the lower caste
sufferers and they are portrayed in positive light in contrast to the king and the priest
Kehama, because his hidden intention was to build a public opinion in favour of conversion
and Christianization of the natives. His method is to show the inconvenience of the
Brahminical religion and their oppression on the one hand, and the docile and domesticable
image of the lower class and caste people on the other. In the letter quoted above, he
mentions two categories of victims: the women and the lower caste people. The victimization
of the women in the hands of the Brahman dominated society is portrayed through one of the central events in the poem, the sati and through the suffering of Kailayal.

The poem begins with the description of widow burning. Arvalan, Kehama’s son is dead and his wives are now to be immolated. Needless to say the evil custom of sati practised in India during the period was one of the inhuman aspects of the Hindu society. By depicting the ritual burning Southey’s aim is to shock the readers with the images of Oriental barbarity, Hindu degeneration, priest craft and despotism. It was easier for him to do so with the ritual burning of young widows because the issue was familiar to the British readers. Of the two widows of Arvalan, Azla seems to have accepted her fate and she sits on the pyre calmly, but Nealliny is afraid and unwilling and is forced upon the pyre. The third woman to be burned alive is Kailyal. Kailyal is to be burned in an act of revenge. The other victims are a number of slaves, who dance around the funeral pyre and, one by one, they plunge into the fire until “the devouring flames have swallow’d all” (CPW 569). Southey quotes from a number of sources to show different faces of the sati. On the one hand he shows that it is forced upon the widows; on the other hand he gives accounts where the widows willingly sacrifice themselves on the pyre of their husband.\(^\text{14}\) He quotes from the evangelical historian Buchanan who hoped that the practice would end with the introduction of Christianity: “The civilized world may expect soon to hear of the abolition of this opprobrium of a Christian administration, the female sacrifice; which has subsisted, to our certain knowledge, since the lime of Alexander the Great” (CPW 618). According to Bolton, Southey hated this barbaric tradition as he did loath the barbaric bullfighting in Portugal. Southey, she observes, confesses that the sight of the bullfight impressed itself so strongly on him, that it caused him ‘pain.’ But this pain was necessary because in “recoiling from gruesome scenes, readers are expected to make a distinction between alien cultures and their own” (Writing the Empire 220-21). Southey’s depiction of the sati is aimed at producing this ‘recoiling effect.’
However, some the passages that he quotes to ‘historicise’ his description are marked by a sense of admiration for the sati—the calm and quiet way they sacrifice themselves on the pyre.

British attitude to sati during the Romantic period was ambivalent. Hermione De Almeida and George H. Gilpin explain the Romantic artists’ attitude to sati by referring to Johan Zofanny's painting *Sacrifice of an Hindoo Widow upon the Funeral Pyre of her Husband.* According them, the painting “is perhaps the most comprehensive representation of what early English Romantic artists of India understood of the Ritual and its mythological imports.” The painting depicts a “complex scene: the sati, a woman portrayed slightly larger than life, occupies the centre stage of the painting. Beautiful and fine-featured and draped in volumes of white linen, she sits on a high platform, with the body of her husband resting at her feet and his head cradled in her lap” (229). The Romantic poets also shared similar attitudes. P. B. Shelley in *The Revolt of Islam,* for example, glorifies self-immolation of Cythna. In the opening scene of the poem Southey blames the evil practice, but he seems to endorse the self-sacrifice of Kailyal later in the poem. In section XIV helped by the enchantress Lorrinthe, Arvalan’s spirit attempts to rape Kailyal and Kailyal decides to burn herself to save her honour.

In section I and section II Southey does not only depict the victim widows, but also shows the perpetrators and the spectators—Kehama, his idolaters and the mob. In the figure of Kehama Southey combines the Oriental despot with the despotic and corrupt Hindu Brahmins. The source of Kehama’s despotic power is not entirely earthly, but its sources are the gods themselves. His power comes from “prayers, penances, and sacrifices,” from the very ‘absurdity’ of Hinduism where even an evil person may achieve power through these means: “They are drafts upon Heaven, for which the Gods cannot refuse payment” (*CPW* 567). Kehama is not the only Brahmin in the poem who is projected as corrupt and despotic,
but there are other Brahmins portrayed in section XIV ("JAGA-NAUT"). These Brahmins are equally corrupt and fraudulent: in the name of the gods they sexually exploit young women.

Kehama’s despotism is revealed all through the poem. In the first two books, for example, we find his worldly power in commanding his people none of whom dares to face his anger. His power, however, extends beyond, and he can command the elements. He checks the elements from torturing Arvalan’s spirit but he charms Ladurlad’s life so that weapons, fire flood or serpent, or a “beast of blood” or sickness or time “shall not harm thee” (CPW 570). He commands the elements and the earth: the earth will deny him food; water will “know thee and fly [from] thee;” the wind “shall not touch thee” “And the Dews shall not wet thee” (CPW 570).

Assisted by the ‘unwilling’ gods in achieving superhuman power, Kehama exercises most barbarous cruelty upon his subjects. His cruelty and barbarity are depicted on a number of occasions in the poem. In the first section a number of slaves are sacrificed at the funeral of his son. In section VIII (“The Sacrifice”) when he fails to sacrifice the animal because it was made impure by Ladurlad’s touch, the ‘Rajah’ kills thousands of the multitude who did not prevent Ladurlad from his ‘impious’ act. Kehama called his horsemen and “gave command / To hem the offenders in, and hew them down” and “At noon the massacre begun, /And night closed in before the work of death was done” (CPW 582).

Such a scene of sadistic massacre helped the poet to build an image of the Indian despot, because such an image of the Indian ruler was necessary to justify British imperialism. If the figure of Kehama is based on the mythical Ravana, his portrayal was also inspired by the British fear of Indian rulers like Tipu Sultan. The Mysore rulers Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan posed a major threat to the British dominance in India. The third and the fourth Anglo-Mysore wars were given large attention by the British media. Tipu’s defeat was
celebrated. Southey in a number of letters, written after the third battle of Mysore (1789–92) refers to the publicity given to Tipu and the Mysore wars. For example, he wrote to his friend Grossvenor Bedford (c. 9 July 1792): “Let the newspapers now no more talk of Tippoo/ Of the fine fighting Christian or pugilist Jew” (CL 1791-1797, No.17). Again on 23 October, 1795 writing to Bedford he refers to ‘Tipooing’: “that man deserves ten years more

**Tippooing for not writing his life**” (CL 1791-1797, No. 137). As Rajani Sudan points out

**after the third battle of Mysore and in thirty** years after his death in 1799 Tipu became a

figure “the British loved to hate” (71-72). In The Curse of Kehama, therefore, is encoded the

imperial anxiety of its author. Kehama as the despotic tyrant, it is also argued, reflects the

**British fear of the Napoleonic power.** Bolton argues that Southey during this time turned into

a patriot and a reformist from a republican and in the changing ideological situation Southey

saw Napoleon as a threat to Britain and to the British Empire with his expansionist policy and

his Egyptian expedition. Southey, however, regarded Kehama as a greater threat than

Napoleon; an “Eastern Bonaparte” like Tipu Sultan could topple the British empire (Bolton,

*Writing the Empire* 221-24). Kehama became a name for every kind of despotism even to

Coleridge who wrote that Jacobinism which “still walks in Great Britain and Ireland . . . like

the Kehama of our laurel-honouring laureate, one and the same, yet many and multiform and

divisive, assaulting with combined attack all the gates and portals of law and usage”(*Essays

on his Times* 387, 405). Ireland, we should not forget, was another colony of Britain. Irish

people are also demonized by Coleridge in terms of Indian despotism.

The Brahmins are not only the corrupt and degenerate population but under the

corrupting influence of the Brahmins the common lot has also degenerated. The fate of the

common lot is represented by the mob in the poem. The crowd is chiefly present on three

occasions in the poem: in section I and II, they are the active spectators of the sati; in section

VII and XII, (“The Sacrifice” and “The Sacrifice Completed”) the crowd watches the King
making the sacrifice; and in section XIV ("JAGA-NAUT") the crowd participates in the Jagannath festival. The crowd is presented as an unmanageable herd of people, having a slavish nature. They are savage and barbarous. Similar to the Turkish women enjoying the sight of “red-headed boy” being killed in *Thalaba*, the mob here enjoys the inhuman ritual of sati:

Master and slave, old age and infancy,
All, all abroad to gaze;
House-top and balcony
Clustered with women, who throw back their veils
With unimpeded and insatiate sight
To view the funeral pomp which passes by,
As if the mournful rite.

Were but to them a scene of joyance and delight. (*CPW* 568)

The crowd represent the general degeneration of the Indians as they are just a mob with no individual identity. Carol Bolton suggests that Southey often used the mob imagery in his letters displaying his fears of civil insurrection in Britain. Bolton quotes Southey’s comment on the later Bristol riots (1833), where he speaks of the reformist crowd as an unstoppable force, a “brutalized populace [that] is ready to break in upon us.” Similar concern with the crowd, according to her, is there in Wordsworth but quoting from Makdisi she shows that Wordsworth’s representation of the crowd/mob imagery in *The Prelude* is different: “Wordsworth’s ongoing effort to distinguish individual faces in the crowd is an attempt to keep the crowd from working any sudden (and not quite understood) transformation into a mob – as though to reassure himself, as he wanders through the streets of London, that what he sees is still ‘only’ a crowd, and not yet the mob of his nightmares.” In contrast to this Southey “does not try to control his ‘mob’ in *Kehama*, but deliberately releases this huge,
overflowing, intimidating element of his Indian world, so employing Wordsworth’s ‘nightmares’ to exacerbate the horror of the scene” (Writing the Empire 219). In fact, during 1810–11 Southey became increasingly worried about mob violence in the domestic context because he thought, “it would be instigated by the challenges of radicals to the government, as well as by pressure from the economic crisis of 1810–11” (Writing the Empire 66). In Kehama there is no mob violence or mob frenzy but the mob becomes a swarming mass of people with no will of their own, and who could be easily put in thralldom as Kehama has done with them. In Southey’s imaginative scheme, this mob requires moral lessoning—the teaching of Christianity to uplift them from their present degeneration.

The ‘fallenness’ of Hinduism is represented in the poem also through its use of the Gothic images. In the first two sections, Gothic horror permeates the scene with the description of the sati and Kehama’s curse upon Ladurlad. The section entitled “The Scarifice” once again presents before us the images of horror. The description of the ritualistic killing of the horse which will enable the King to achieve power over the gods brings to the fore the horror of the scene. The element of magic is introduced in the poem in the character of the malicious enchantress, Lorrinite, who promises assistance to Arvalan in fulfilling his lust and revenge. The motif of lust in the poem is introduced from the very beginning as Arvalan’s death is due to his unquenchable lust. He had a number of wives and slaves to fulfill his lustful desires, but he could not control his libidinal drives. Even after his death, the uncontrollable libido leads to his pursuit of Kailyal. The incident at Jagannath showing the lustful Brahmins befooling the devotees and exploiting young women in the name of religion adds to the theme of lust in the poem. The Brahmins with a group of women maintain a kind of harem in the temple. These women sing bridal songs and sends Kailyal to the jaws of the libidinous Brahmins. The spectacle of the Gothic ruins and the ruins of empire becomes Southey’s subject in sections XV, XVI, XVII and XVIII, “The City of Baly,” “The
Ancient Sepulchres,” “Baly” and “Kehama’s Descent,” respectively. The images of ruin and a dark claustrophobic atmosphere prevail in these parts of the poem. To this are added the images of suffering, guilt and punishment in the final sections (“The Padalon” and “The Amreeta”) of the poem.

Just as it happens in Thalaba or in Gebir so the Gothic images are associated with the forces of evil in the poem—Arvalan, Kehama and Lorrinite. Together with these, there are images of Oriental ruins –of fallen cities and destroyed civilizations. The images are used to symbolically represent the fallenness of the Orient and in this case the fallenness of Hinduism in particular. Commenting on the use of the Gothic in the poem Leask observes: “Southey exposed the cruelty of sati (widow-burning), temple prostitution, child exposure and Brahman instigated sacrifices at Jagannath. In this respect the poem anticipated the popular Victorian and Edwardian genre of ‘Imperial Gothic’ discussed in Branlinger's Rule of Darkness” (British Romantic Writers 95-96). The poem is a case of demonization or Gothicizing of culture “through the Gothic languages of both fictional symbolism and critical Othering” (Smith and Hughes, “Intro.”). The Clapham sect, as Marilyn Butler observes, often used the ‘suttee’ and other indigenous images of horror to Gothicise India (“Orientalism”). Southey had close of link with W. Wilberforce and other members of the Clapham sect, and therefore, similar effort at Gothicising India is visible in the poem.

Apart from the Gothic images of darkness, horror, dungeons and ruins, images of gardens, rivers and fountains are also employed by Southey in the poem. In section VIII (“Mount-Meru”) Southey describes the source of the Ganges in the following terms: “A Stream descends on Meru Mountain;/None hath seen its secret fountain”(CPW584). In the third stanza of this section there is another description of the river that reminds us of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”:

It springs at once, with sudden leap,
Down from the immeasurable steep.
From rock to rock, with shivering force rebounding.
The mighty cataract rushes; Heaven around.
Like thunder, with the incessant roar resounding.
And Meru’s summit shaking with the sound. (CPW 584)

Similar images are there in the section “Swerga” where Southey describes Indra’s “Bower of Bliss” as characterised by a combination of contrasting elements as is the palace of Kubla Khan. The palace is built on a lake, “the waters were its floor;” and “its walls were water arch’d with fire;”

And domes of rainbow rest on fiery towers,
And roofs of flame are turreted around
With cloud, and shafts of cloud with flame are bound. (CPW 579)

The description of Indra’s “bower of bliss,” it is argued, was inspired by the popular opinion about Cashmere. Thomas Maurice in his History of Hindustan describes Cashmere as the “present Paradise” (365). Maurice inspired both Coleridge and Southey. According to Tim Fulford, “oriental bowers were movable fantasy zones, products of European desire for a free and fecund arcadia . . . they constantly retreated just ahead of the advance of knowledge. Imagined first in Palestine, they were relocated in Arabia, Persia, Kashmir, Tartary and Tibet when remaining essentially unchanged in their nature and function.” During the Romantic period Cashmere was regarded as the “Paradise of the East” having beautiful gardens, fountains, and rills (“Poetic flowers” 113).^{16}

As Javed Majid has pointed out, the images of fountains and rivers in Thalaba and in The Curse of Kehama are suggestive of the effort of the poet to appropriate the new sources of creativity made available by the Oriental Renaissance. The description of the source of the Ganges as secret and pure, untainted by any human hand is, therefore, also symbolic of
Southey’s exploration of the pure and untainted territories of the East for English poetry. However, the images of brightness and beauty that stand in strong contrast to the Gothic images of darkness and ruin also serve other functions in the scheme of the poem. Southey develops a binary model in depicting his characters in the poem: on the one side of the binary are Kehama, his son Arvalan and Lorrin shortage and on the other side stand Kailayal and Ladurlad. The despotic king Kehama and his group could be the source of anxiety to the colonisers and missionaries, but the docile Kailyal and Laduralad could play an alluring and assuring role to the missionaries. Southey balanced the horrible with the alluring. Similarly, the images of danger, ruin and darkness are balanced by the images of brightness and beauty. This balancing was necessary as a completely horrible, unattractive and unmanageable picture of India could prove very unsuitable to the colonizers and the missionaries. The dangerous and the fearful are, therefore, balanced by the fascinating and the beautiful.

Southey did not want the Jones’s eulogy glorifying India and Hinduism. The days of ‘Indomania’ were gone; there could be no celebration of a ‘pre-lapsarian’ India but the traces of the Jones’s image of India, could not be could not be effaced because Jones was his creative inspiration. Jones in his *Hymns* devised the methodology and pioneered the use of myths of Hinduism in English poetry. Southey’s followed Jones in conceiving his poem. It is not unlikely, therefore, that contrasting images of India are combined in *The Curse of Kehama*. Another point to note is that Southey’s paradisal landscape does not belong to the tangible ‘real’ world; rather it is mythical and imaginary in contrast to the description of the nightmarish ‘real’ India—the world of Kehama. Southey does not attempt to historicise the description of the ‘Swarga’ by providing historical notes. The notes for this section are purely mythical. It helped him to foreground the discourse of the poem better, for the mythical ‘lights’ set forth the ‘real’ darkness.
The Curse of Kehama, therefore, becomes a document on Southey’s transformation from a republican and radical thinker who embraced Jonesean syncretism at in the 1790s to a nationalist who embraced the theory that Christianization of the Hindus in India is a precondition for civilizing them. Coleridge perhaps had an inkling of this much in advance. As early as in November, 1796 in a letter to John Thelwall, Coleridge noted the nationalistic tendency in Southey. Coleridge was commenting on Southey’s Joan of Arc. Coleridge. He remarked: “Homer is the poet for the warrior—Milton for the Religionist—Tasso for Women—Robert Southey for the Patriot” (LSTC 178). By the time, he completed The Curse of Kehama his patriotism was strongly visible, and the ‘patriot’ Southey was to become the poet laureate very soon.
Notes

1 Once De Quincey remarked that Gebir had "the sublime distinction, for some time, of having enjoyed only two readers, Southey and myself" (qtd. in Williams, S. T. 615).

2 While Thalaba the Destroyer was in the process of composition Southey was reading Landor's tale and in many of his letters he praised the poem. In one of such letters to William Taylor (22 October 1799) he wrote:

I am finishing the fourth book of my Dom-Daniel-romance – the plan of the remainder is matured, my head full of eastern scenery & I look to speedily conclude it. have you seen a poem called Gebir? It appears to me the miraculous work of a madman – its intelligible passages are flashes of lightning at midnight... in every distinct touch you see the Masters hand.

(CL 1798-1803, No. 449)

3 Elsewhere Garcia interprets the poem as an “anti-colonial allegory condemning William Pitt’s reactionary policies and Bonaparte’s false prophecies as the ‘Grand Sultan’ of Egypt Gebir” (Islam and English Enlightenment 182).

4 All citations of Landor’s Gebir are from Gebir: a Poem Seven Books (London: Printed by and for Slatter and Munday ; R.S. Kirby, 1803). Numbers in the parenthetical citations are page numbers from this edition.

5 Sharafuddin quotes from De Quincey who commented that “Aroar is too Tom-Painish and seems up to a little treason” (39).

6 A scholarly web edition of Southey’s letters is published in the website Romantic Circles (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/> ) in four parts. The general editors are Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer. The letters are numbered in this edition and the volumes are chronologically
arranged. This edition will be referred to as ‘CL’ in the parenthesis. Instead of mentioning the volume number the year covered in each volume (as it is in the title) will be mentioned together with the letter number, e.g. CL 1791-1797, No. 159. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Southey’s letters are to this edition. Punctuations, capitalizations or bracketing are reproduced as it is in this edition. Often in these quoted letters there is a no capitalization at the beginning of a sentence, and it is reproduced here without any changes.

7 This short summary is derived from Robert Irwin’s The Arabian Knights: A Companion (263).


9 Gérard Genette defines paratext as those things in published works that accompany the text, things such as the author’s name, the title, preface or introduction, or illustrations. Genette observes: "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold." It is “a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that . . . is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (1).

10 This passage that occurs in the penultimate stanza of the ninth book in 1801 edition of Thalaba the Destroyer was deleted in the later editions.

11 Southey wrote to Landor on November 26, 1809: “Yesterday I finished Kehama. There will be a few things in the course of corrections to explain the story more clearly, – a few trifles altered, – & many improvements to be made in metre” (CL 1804-1809, No.1716).

12 See Southey’s letter to Walter Savage Landor, 2 May 1808: “I have sent you all that is written of the Curse of Kehama. You offered to print it for me, – if ever I finish the poem it
will be because of that offer, tho[ough] without the slightest intention of accepting it (CL 1804-1809, No. 1455.)

13 The hatred for the white ‘nabobs’ was not uncommon among the British. P. J. Marshall in his article “British–Indian connections c.1780 to c.1830: the empire of the officials” has analysed the attitude of the British gentlemen towards the English officials working in India. There were also caricatures of the “white nabobs” in England. Christina Smylitopoulos in her interesting essay "Portrait of a Nabob: Graphic Satire, Portraiture, and the Anglo-Indian in Late Eighteenth Century" has illustrated how the East India Company officials were mocked in the British society by drawing attention to the contemporary representation of them.

14 Southey provides extensive notes on this. He uses Bernier’s testimony for both the purposes: two incidents as reported by Bernier are quoted by Southey: one that happens in Surat which shows the willing submission of the widow and the other that happens in Lahore where a young girl is forced upon the pyre. Southey also quotes from missionary Claudius Buchanan.

15 In a letter to Bedford, Southey defines Indian despots like Kehama as “Eastern Buonapartes” (CL 1798-1803, No. 784, Robert Southey to Grosvenor Charles Bedford, 20 May 1803)

16 See also Fulford’s essay “Poetic Flowers / Indian Bowers.”