Conclusion

Said writes in the “Preface” to Orientalism that “nothing that goes in our world has ever been isolated and pure of any outside influence.” However, the “disheartening part,” Said notes, is the extent to which the “critical study of culture shows us that this is the case” (xxiii). This has been the case with the study of Romanticism also. Although the Romantics lived, what Said designates as a “pluri-cultural life,” (“Preface” xxiii), for long Romanticism has been defined as a purely European phenomenon. Thus in defining Wordsworth’s place in English poetic tradition Seamus Heaney as late as in 2001 wrote that Wordsworth’s achievement “is most securely founded in the canon of native English poetry” (vii).

However, as it has been explored in the present dissertation, the history of the cultural exchange in English literature goes back to the Middle Ages and it saw a new high in the “global village” of Romanticism. There had been unforeseen growth of the knowledge of the East during the Romantic period and there was a daring use of this ‘new’ knowledge. The early Romantic poets appropriated the Eastern influence in their attempt to redefine English poetry. This process of redefinition started with William Jones, who introduced the Romantics to the Perso-Arabic poetic tradition as well as to the ancient literary tradition of India. Jones was the first English author who courageously spoke in favour of Oriental poetry and wrote about its potential power that could reinvigorate the British poetic tradition. With his translation of the Persian and Arabian poets, Jones introduced a new set of images, a simple direct manner of speaking, a description of the beautiful forms of nature and the poetry of expression, replacing the imitative poetry of the neoclassical poets. In his Hindu Hymns he initiated the custom of using Hindu mythology in English poetry. As has been adequately shown in the present dissertation, Jones and his colleagues in Calcutta played a colossal role in giving shape to Romanticism. Similarly, the translation of the Nights and
other collections of Oriental tales also had a phenomenal role to play in the development of
Romanticism. The Nights “altered” the course of English poetry (Fulford, “Coleridge and the
Oriental Tale” 214). “It was Shaharzad, the story teller of the Arabian Nights, that taught all
of them the art of narration, the simple direct diction, the significance of imagination.
Through her the English Romantic poets found poetic freedom” (Attar 175).

The path laid down by Jones was adopted by the Romantic poets as they turned to the
East in search of “new poetry and new poetics” (Fulford, “Coleridge and the Oriental Tale”
223). None of the early Romantics, however, did have a firsthand experience of the East,
Eastern poetry or philosophy, because none of them visited the East or had knowledge of
Sanskrit, Arabic, or Persian, or any other Eastern language. They banked on the large body of
Oriental tales, travel narratives, scholarly treatises, translations, histories, and scientific and
pseudo-scientific discourses for their knowledge of the East. There was also a large body of
Oriental artefacts all around them giving them a glimpse of the life in the East. While
forming his mythographic world Blake turned to Indian mythology and Islamic theology and
to India, Egypt, Africa and the Americas. Landor sourced his narrative for the verse tale
Gebir from the translation of the Arabian “The History of Ancient Egypt.” Southey was
inspired to compose Thalaba by his reading of the Arabian tale “The History of Maugraby
the Magician” and Sale’s translation of the Koran. The Hindu mythology of The Curse of
Kehama came from the numerous scholarly works from Calcutta. Coleridge assimilated his
reading of the Oriental tales, Islamic theology, and Hindu philosophy into most of the poems
he wrote in the 1790s. It would have been impossible to have his “Kubla Khan,” “Religious
Musings,” “Christabel,” Ancient Mariner, “The Lewti” or the tragedy Osorio without the
Oriental Renaissance. Similarly, Wordsworth’s enchantment with the Nights and his reading
of other Perso-Arabic literature went to contribute to The Prelude. His “Preface” to Lyrical
Ballads would not have been possible without the preceding works of Jones or his reading of Eastern literatures available in translations.

The early Romantic poets borrowed the themes, stories, and formal elements from the Oriental tales, the Gothic novels, the travelogues and the translations of Eastern literary, philosophical and religious texts. The femme-fatale figures, the breed of female magicians, the villain-heroes, the despotic feudal lords or the despotic rulers of the East, the wanderer were adopted and transformed by the early Romantic poets; Oriental degeneration and decadence were often conveyed through the Gothic images of ruin and darkness. The technique of using frame tales, the use of the narratorial voice as having the power to change the world, an emphasis on simplicity of diction and form, imagination and expressive poetry during the Romantic period developed under the influence of the Oriental Renaissance. Coleridge, Blake and Southey made use of the Islamic monotheism for conveying their radical Unitarian principles. Hinduism influenced the early Romantic poets’ valorisation of the principle of ‘One Life’, and pantheism in a radical departure from the Christian theology.

Though they appropriated various Eastern elements in their poetry, these poets had reservations (arrière pensée) about the East that prevented them from accepting the East wholeheartedly. A politics of control and containment was at work. Blake is considered a poet of the spiritual world and most radical among the Romantics. However, as the reading here reveals, his universalism had problems. Blake’s approach to the religions was syncretic and he equated Islam and Hinduism with Christianity. He condemned Hinduism as the first organised religion, but he also condemned other religions including Christianity as equally evil. He uses Gothic vocabulary in describing the fallen Egypt or Africa, Asia and Europe. The problem with his vision is that it is completely Anglo-centric and Christo-centric if not Christian-centric, as it is revealed in Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion, the poem he composed through two decades. In his vision Albion and Christ would regenerate the
world. In spite of himself Blake was following the arguments of the evangelicalists and the apologists for empire, who argued that Christianity and British civilization would regenerate the decadent India and the savage Africa.

If Christianity limits Blake’s vision of liberation, Landor’s dream of writing a poem that would illustrate the ‘folly’ and ‘injustice’ of invasion and “colonization of a peopled country” fails, because he fails to see the world from the perspective of the imperial Other. The (mis-)reading of the poem here reveals that Landor’s objective of writing the poem went wrong because he failed to get rid of the Oriental stereotypes. Egypt is depicted as a country ruled by forces of darkness and evil; figures of savagery and primitivism pervade Landor’s Egypt. An emphasis on Charoba’s nurse, Delica, her journey to the ancient city of Masar, her patriotism and her scheme to kill Gebir, lays bare the core of the Western stereotyping of the Orient. The author fails to sympathise with the patriotic acts of Egyptian Delica, and on the contrary in his scheme of things the Western invader Gebir and the acquiescent Egyptian queen Chaorba become tragic victims of Delica’s villainy. The text of Landor’s poem fails to justify his claim in the preface. Moreover, the question also arises would Landor support the colonization of a country which is not ‘peopled’ because he claims in the preface that the ‘folly’ lies in invading a ‘peopled’ country. Imagining a wild virginal space awaiting domestication was part of the discourse of colonization (Kitson, “Romanticism and Colonialism” 31). Coleridge and Southey, for example, in their Pantisocracy project wanted to establish a colony at Susquehanna which they imagined as a habitat of wild animals uninhabited by human beings (McKuisick).

Under Jones-era syncretism Robert Southey made a scheme to write a poem on each of the mythological systems of the world: “every mythology which had ever extended itself widely & powerfully influenced the human mind, the basis of a narrative poem.” As part of his scheme he wrote Thalaba, where he uses Islamic monotheism to explore his Unitarian
beliefs in the figure of the Bedouin hero; and *The Curse of Kehama* where the degenerated Hindu society and despotic Hinduism serve an evangelical and nationalistic purpose. In Landor’s tale the conflict is between the Western Gebir and the Eastern Delica. In Southey’s poems East is pitted against East. A monotheist, simple ‘working class’ Thalaba fights against the rich and polytheist magicians of the Domdaniel. *Thalaba* as a follower of Muhammad is presented as an iconoclastic warrior hero just as Coleridge would present Muhammad in the fragment, “Mahomet.” Thalaba’s valour and unwavering faith is celebrated in the poem, but throughout the poem Southey goes on condemning Islam, the people, the art, architecture and literature of the East. This shows that though Thalaba is an Eastern hero, in him is hidden a “Western interior,” the Unitarian Southey of the 1790s whose radicalism Thalaba embodies. In *The Curse of Kehama*, Kailayal and Ladurlad, the lower caste father and daughter fight an unequal battle with the ‘man Almighty’ Kehama. Like Thalaba their belief in gods is unwavering and ultimately they emerge victorious. However, this tale is used by Southey as pretext to condemn Hinduism as evil, priest-ridden, a religion responsible for the suffering of the lower caste Hindus. The poem marks his movement away from the Jonean syncretism and valorisation of Hinduism to the Anglican criticism of Hindu society that would prepare the ground for conversion. However, the poem produced confusion among the contemporary readers, who often mistook Southey’s denigration of Hinduism as an act of glorification. This confusion of the contemporary readers is indicative of public paranoia regarding ‘monstrous’ Hinduism, and also suggestive of the fact that Southey could not efface his syncretism, even though he was guided by the Evangelical rhetoric of the Clapham sect and the British nationalistic ideals.

Coleridge’s negotiations with the East present a spectacle different from that of Southey. Southey did not try to assimilate the Eastern elements; rather he maintained a distance from his subjects. Coleridge’s assimilation of theological ideas of Hinduism and
Islam or the Oriental tales into his poetry was exceptional and unequalled by any of the early Romantics. His Osorio is perhaps the best example of the Romantic reception of the Hindu philosophy, and he was equally inspired by Islamic monotheism. However, some of the strongest criticism of Hinduism and Islam also came from him. There is strong contrast between the early and the late Coleridge. Once he rejected Unitarianism, he criticised Prophet Muhammad as a ‘trickster.’ He rejected his early belief in pantheism and “Oneness” as he moved towards Fichte’s idealism from Spinozan materialism. This movement, as it has been argued, cannot be dissociated from Coleridge’s growing nationalism and conservatism—the Anglo-centric and Christian-centric turn in his career. However, he could not efface the mark of the Eastern influence in most of his representative poems, and it would not be an overstatement to say that the East was all pervasive in the most creative phase of his career; the more insular he grew, the more the ‘oriental wells’ dried up and he became less creative.

Unlike Coleridge and Southey, Wordsworth never flaunted his knowledge of the East. However, two distinct phases of Wordsworth’s engagement with the East have been traced in this dissertation: his early negotiations with Eastern poetic customs and literature from the East as seen in the Preface and The Prelude and his writing late in his career a few poems which are marked by a distinct hostility towards the East. It is curious that Wordsworth never acknowledges his reading of the Perso-Arabic poetry and the works of William Jones, though he acknowledges his enchantment with the Nights in Book V of The Prelude. It seems that Wordsworth in his anxiety of influence failed to acknowledge his debt to Jones; he revised Jones’s ideas and replaced the East of Jones with the English countryside and desperately criticised the Eastern landscapes and natural beauty of the East, which inspired the kind of poetry he valorises in the “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads.

The initial fascination of the early Romantics with the East was replaced by a late condemnation of it. Raymond Schwab explains the failure of the Oriental Renaissance in
England by referring to the imperial politics of Britain: “The conquerors felt obliged to
defend their conquest, which meant exulting their own race and religion” (43). In the effort to
exalt the self, the Other was relegated to a secondary position. Schwab argues:

This resulted in political and spiritual unrest, which spread like an epidemic.
The activities at Serampore, which provided many useful publications in the
early days of Indic studies, seemed to coincide with the appearance of this
‘missionary attitude’, which wreaked havoc . . . Later it would become clear
how the episodes of colonial politics—the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the
substitution of crown for company, and the proliferation of English personnel
in India—came in gusts, reinforcing the English prejudice of Western
superiority minimizing, for the parent state, the phenomena of the Oriental
Renaissance. (43)
The complete shift in England’s relationship with the East that Schwab locates in the mid-
ineteenth century started to show its signs in the first decade of the nineteenth century, as
hinted by Schwab, with the emergence of the missionary activities in India. 1780 to 1810 is
roughly the period when British policy towards India took a definite shape. In the 1770s
British Orientalists started their scholarly discoveries of the ancient Indian religious,
philosophical and literary texts for the European audience. It reached its peak under
Hastings’s patronage and Jones’s curatorship; philosophical Hinduism was valorised as the
ideal religion. While it provided a great impetus to the development of Romanticism, it also
challenged the superiority of the Western civilization and Christianity as the primacy of the
Bible came to be questioned. It was politically challenged by the evangelicals under the
leadership of Wilberforce and Grant. The early Romantic poets had to re-negotiate with the
situation. They were located in the imperial centre and were discursively inside it; while they
initially responded to the situation by adapting the syncretism of Jones they ended up by
clutching to their national and religious identity. Faced with the danger from outside they
turned insular and whatever intra-national radicalism they had, started vanishing. The
creative use of Eastern resources was affected by the geopolitical discourses. Therefore, an
Osorio could no longer be written, the only possibility was The Curse of Kehama. As they
grew more insular and more nationalistic, the Eastern art and literature came to be
condemned as worthless. Jones could compare Firdous with Homer in the 1770s, but for
Southey in 1808-09 Jones is a ‘barbarian’, and Firdous’s poem, Shahnameh is but “the vilest
copy of a picture” (CPW 318).

As England consolidated its hold over the Indian territories there was a major policy
makeover. “The moment called for a construction of Indian history that would provide the
future with a different empowerment” (Rajan 90). James Mill became the spokesperson for
the new policy in India and was followed by Macaulay. Mill wrote a “new text” for India’s
past (and thus its future) rather than “amend[ing] an old one” (Rajan 90). Rather than
cultivating syncretism, Mill advocated cultural assimilation. In this changed atmosphere, the
opium that produced “Kubla Khan” would now produce the nightmares in Thomas De
Quincey’s “Oriental Dreams” in Confessions of an English Opium Eater. The latent anxiety
of the early Romantics became manifest in De Quincey’s Oriental dreams:

The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of
faith, etc., is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name
overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me
an antediluvian man renewed. Even Englishmen, though not bred in any
knowledge of such institutions, cannot but shudder at the mystic sublimity of
castes that have flowed apart and refused to mix, through such immemorial
tracts of time . . . Man is a weed in those regions. (81)
Faced with the immensity of the Asiatic civilizations the early Romantics attempted to negotiate with it creatively, but such negotiations seem to be a distant dream when one reads De Quincey. Though Shelley was an exception, and following jonesean syncretism he wrote *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) as late as in 1819-20 and conceived of ‘Asia’ as regenerator of Europe.

On the other front, the power struggle in the Middle East and the Greek War of Independence led to Romantic philhellenism, which resulted in a renewed hostility towards the Muslim East. As Martin Bernal argues in *Black Athena*, European philhellenism indirectly sustained Eurocentrism and Orientalism: throughout Western Europe the Greek war of Independence was seen as “a struggle between European youthful vigour, and Asiatic and African decadence, corruption and cruelty” (291). Byron took up the Greek cause and wrote *Don Juan* (1819-24) and many of the Turkish tales as a philhellen (Mc Gann, *Beauty of Inflections* 260). Similar hopes of the renewal of Greece led Shelley to produce *Hellas* (1822).

The early Romantic poets, therefore, wrote in a very tense intellectual atmosphere divided between men like Jones on the one hand and Grant, Macaulay and Mill on the other; where the desire for freedom engendered by the French Revolution co-existed with the bondage of slavery and racial classification; the imperial domination co-existed with the fear of being dominated and infected by the Empire. Romanticism was complicit in these developments. It was born in the borderline of these opposing forces. The Romantic poets turned to the Oriental tales and the Gothic, to the Middle East and India, to Islam and Hinduism because these provided them with the opportunity to explore and inhabit the borderlines, the “contact zone” where self and the Other could meet, yet could not properly mingle.
It is evident that “the Orient provided much more than merely a thematic stage for British Romanticism” and Orientalism was not “merely one of Romanticism’s many sideshows” (“Romantic Cultural imperialism” 601). Raymond Schwab argues that Romanticism would have been impossible without the Oriental Renaissance and defines Romanticism as the “oriental irruption of the intellect” (482). Perhaps, it is time to argue that the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* of William Wordsworth would have been impossible without the Oriental Renaissance, without William Jones, without the translations of the Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit literature in the eighteenth century, without the liberating discourse of the Gothic, without the invasion of the Oriental tales that disrupted the neoclassical creed. Theorisation on a different poetic idiom by Wordsworth would have been impossible without these disruptions—the rupture created by these forms paved the way for the Romantic rapture.

Finally, it is necessary to expend some words on the early Romantic poets’ approach to the East. Commenting on the contemporary approach in social sciences that emphasize the complicity between knowledge and power, Amartya Sen observes: “An epistemic methodology that sees pursuit of knowledge as entirely congruent with the search of power is a great deal more cunning than wise. It can needlessly undermine the value of knowledge in satisfying curiosity and interest; it significantly weakens one of the profound characteristics of human beings” (143). Sen makes this statement while considering the curatorial approach of Jones and his companions to India. He observes that Jones had genuine interest to know India (143-46). The early Romantic poets depended on the curatorial approach of Jones but their approach to India and Hinduism can roughly be defined as exoticist. Sen observes that “out bursts of fascinated wonder in the exoticist approaches” (154) had always been followed by ebb, and this is what happened with the Romantic exoticism with India. Moreover, as it has been argued through this dissertation, the exotic boom was also curtailed by the
magisterial policy adopted by the British government. If Coleridge’s Osorio represents the exotic fascination with Hindu philosophy, Southey took up the magisterial burden to dismiss the sense of wonder and fascination in The Curse of Kehama. The early Romantics poets’ approach to the Middle East was also partially characterised by exoticism as they had been engrossed by the highly imaginative Oriental tales and the tales of travel or the translations of Perso-Arabic poetry. However, their approach to Islam was not exotic; they incorporated Islam in their poetry with a particular scheme. Islam was traditionally familiar to the Westerners and, as Said notes, in many ways Islam “lay very close to Christianity, geographically and culturally. It drew on Judeo-Hellenic traditions; it borrowed creatively from Christianity...” (74). The early Romantic poets explored and exploited Islam’s closeness to Christianity in different ways. Simon Ockley’s History of the Saracens, Henry Stubbe’s The Rise and Progress of Mahometanism (1674), or William Whiston’s An Essay on the Revelation of St. John. So far as Concerns the Past and Present Time (1706) interpreted Islam without the traditional prejudices. Napoleon’s Egyptian invasion, his dealings with Muslims there and his desire “to render it completely open... to the European scrutiny” (Said 83) also helped in the reinterpretation of Islam in early Romantic poetry. The early Romantics initially followed the alternative approach to Islam. Coleridge and Southey looked forward to monotheistic Islam to express their Unitarian beliefs; Blake criticised the Christian austerity by recourse to the “loose Bible” (i.e. the Koran). However, just as it happened with Hinduism the early phase of sympathetic reception of Islam was followed by a phase of rejection.

Another consideration is that irrespective of their approach to India and the Middle East the early Romantic poets, as is revealed in this dissertation, homogenised the East; even when they valorised Hinduism or Islamic monotheism they could not get rid of the stereotypes of the Orient. They missed the immense cultural diversity of India and
succumbed to the binary of the spirituality of India or its degeneration. They conceived of Islam as more materially grounded and a heroic religion. They did not pay attention to the very ancient rational tradition and the scientific spirit of India or the Middle East. As it has been assessed, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* is the only poem that allows rationality to the Arabs. Each one of the Romantic poets considered in this dissertation, ultimately asserted the superiority of Christianity and the British culture as opposed to the Indian or the Middle Eastern. The more mature they grew, the more ‘magisterial’ they became in their approach to the East. This transformation had its roots in the geopolitics of the time, though the personal ideologies and individual circumstances of the poets’ themselves also played a considerable role.