ORIENTAL WELLS: THE EAST AND THE EARLY ROMANTIC POETS

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Raymond Schwab in his book *The Oriental Renaissance* argues that the Roman and the Grecian wave ruled the European mind since the fifteenth century, but Europe’s entire landscape changed as the Asian influence poured in during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. A seismic effect, of what Schwab defines as the ‘Oriental Renaissance,’ was felt in European art, literature, culture during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. As the title of this dissertation indicates the East was also a major source of inspiration for the Romantic poets, who generously borrowed from the East in their effort to regenerate the British poetic tradition. However, simultaneously they were concerned with ‘self’ preservation—upholding the superiority of the British, the European and the Christian tradition. With reference to the five early Romantic poets namely, William Blake (1757–1827), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) Robert Southey (1774–1843) and Walter Savage Landor (1775 –1864) the present dissertation explores the relationship between Romantic poetry and the East. The study examines their Orientalism as well as the ‘orientalization’ of them. The dissertation connects the critique of Romantic Orientalism on the one hand, and the critics who have attempted to delineate the relation between Romantic poetics and the East, on the other. It follows the path laid down by critics like J.L. Lowes Raymond Schwab, Garland Canon, and Samar Attar, but it does so without dissociating poetics from politics. Taking a stimulus from Schwab’s observation that England, the ‘hearth’ of the Oriental Renaissance could not be its home, because of England’s imperial concern, this dissertation explores how the early Romantic poets’ response to the East was mired in contemporary imperial, political and religious discourses. Therefore, by using the discourse
of Said’s *Orientalism* as the inaugural point, this dissertation explores the complicity of the politics and the poetics in Romanticism.

The texts that are covered in this dissertation were written roughly between 1790 and 1810. It is the period when Romanticism took a definite shape, so did British policy towards the East. Britain’s relationship with the Middle East and India underwent major transformations during this period. In the 1770s British Orientalists started their scholarly discoveries of the ancient Indian religious, philosophical and literary texts and translated these for the benefit of the European audience. It reached its peak under Hastings’s patronage and Jones’s curatorship; Hinduism was valorised as the ideal religion giving birth to ideal texts, literary and philosophical. However, the rise of the Evangelicals under the leadership of William Wilberforce and Charles Grant changed the scenario. Public opinion was created in Britain in favour of conversion of the Hindus by projecting Hinduism as a degenerated religion giving birth to various forms of social evils. Evangelicals argued that Hindus divided by the caste system could be an easy target of the missionaries for conversion. The Romantic poets’ approach to India and Hinduism changed with the swings in geopolitical situation. The ‘Indomania’ that was visible at the beginning of the career of the early Romantics was replaced by a strong sense of dislike for India and Hinduism by the second decade of the nineteenth century.

In the Middle East the Turkish power was on the ebb, and European superpowers vied with one another for dominance over the Ottoman Empire. Austria, Russia, France and England all had stakes in the decadent Ottoman Empire. Russia under the Czars had the aim to annex some part of the Balkans and the rest of Europe feared that Russia may occupy the whole Ottoman territory. The Habsburgs of Austria were the first to taste victory over the Turks and they wanted to increase their hold over the Black Sea, and so did Russia. England
was more concerned with the growing empire in Asia, where it became the unrivalled
European power after the defeat of the French in India in the Seven Years War (1756-63).
England’s policy towards the Middle East was dictated by its concern with safe passage to its
growing empire in the Indian subcontinent, which was always under the French threat. The
rise of Napoleon and the fear of being invaded by his army put most of the European
countries on tenterhooks. England had multiple problems with the French Revolution and the
rise of Napoleon—the fear of being invaded, the fear of its access to the colonies being
blocked, the fear of losing dominance in India, and the fear of revolutionary forces rising
within Britain, to mention a few. The situation led England to strengthen ties with the Turkish
rulers in the Middle East. These developments had larger implication for British reception of
the East. Firstly, the partial decrement of the traditional enmity with Islam helped in
interrogating the notion of European Christendom and increased the competition and conflict
among the European nations. This partial loss of the Pan European Christian identity also
helped in the consolidation of the national identity. In spite of the intra-national religious,
political and ideological divisions in England, there was a consolidation of the British identity
during the Romantic period. It was often English or British that stood in opposition to the
East. Non-European and even the Europeans were compared and contrasted with the British.
Secondly, with the improved relationship with the Islamic East, cross-cultural negotiations
with the Middle East became easier during the Romantic period. The conflict between the
residual traces and a more ‘enlightened’ emergent notion of Islam and the Middle East
resulted in a sort of ambivalent and confused attitude to Islam and the Middle East in the
Romantic imagination. Some of the early Romantic poets had Unitarian sensibility at the
beginning of their career, and this brought them closer to the Islamic theology. However,
once the Unitarian phase was over, they rejected Islamic monotheism in favour of Trinitarian Christianity.

While most of the studies on Romantic Orientalism have focussed on the Middle East and India in isolation, this dissertation interconnects the two, because the interest of the European superpowers in the Middle East was directly linked to their position in the South-Asian countries. Moreover, the religious syncretism of the early Romantics is explored by placing their approach to Islam and Hinduism side by side. There was a tendency in the early Romantic poets to homogenize the East where one could easily connect an experience in Egypt to an experience in India. This dissertation looks into, unravels and critiques the sweeping generalizations and stereotypes of the East in Romantic poetry. This, however, does not mean that it is assumed in this study that two Eastern spaces are considered a monolithic whole and that the Romantic reception and representation of India and the Middle East can be analysed on similar lines. Islam and the Middle East had been familiar to the West for long and there had been regular presence of Middle Eastern elements in English literature since the Middle English period. The contact with Islam did not pose any major theological challenge to Christianity, and Islam was often dismissed as deviant Christianity, a heresy, though it politically challenged Europe; the emergence of the knowledge on Hinduism and of the ancient Indian philosophical and literary texts towards the end of the eighteenth century, on the contrary, brought the Christian West in confrontation with a completely new and a very ancient theological tradition that posed a major threat to the primacy of Christianity. it is argued that each of the early Romantic poets responded to this challenge in their own individual way, but there was also a pattern in their response: syncretism was adopted initially, but later it was rejected and replaced by Christian-centrism(Christo-centrism in case of Blake).
This dissertation also addresses the issue of the lack of critical works on the
correlation of the Oriental tale in the development of Romanticism. The relationship
between the Gothic novels and the Oriental tales and how the combined features of the
Gothic and the Oriental tales are incorporated into Romantic poetry are little discussed in
critical circles. Elements from the Oriental tales migrated into Romantic poetry directly as the
Romantics were avid readers of the collections of Oriental tales, and also indirectly, mediated
by the Gothic. The intimate connection between Romantic Gothicism and Romantic
Orientalism is explored. It also examines how the Gothic Other and the Oriental Other is
conflated in Romanticism—the dark fallen world of the Gothic and the degenerated East are
woven together in the works of Blake, Coleridge, Southey and Landor. Similarly, the role of
the scholarly writings, translations and creative pieces of Jones shaping the Wordsworthian
poetic theory in “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads, is given adequate attention. The impact of
Wilkins’s translation and publication of the Bhagwat-Geeta and its reception among the early
Romantics is also investigated.

A lacuna in the study of the Romantic poets’ changing relationship and position with
regard to the East results from a lack of critical attention paid to the role of religion. The early
Romantic poets creatively employed the theological ideas of Hinduism and Islam in the
poems written in the early days of their career, and both Islam and Hinduism played vital
roles in shaping the spirit of Romanticism. Christianity, however, played a neutralizing role
in containing and controlling the Eastern influence. The early Romantic poets sacrificed their
early syncretism and sympathetic approach to other religions in favour of Christianity. The
use of the myths of Hinduism and theological ideas of Hinduism and Islam in Blake,
Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey and their simultaneous privileging of Christianity create
a complex web which is closely examined.
The dissertation is subdivided into five chapters. The first chapter is preceded by an introduction that attempts to forge a frame of reference for the whole thesis. The opening chapter is entitled “The Beginning of Interest in the Orient in English Literature.” The presence and representation of the East in English literature beginning from the Middle English period to the end of the seventeenth century is traced in this chapter. On the one hand, the attempt is to delineate how the Eastern histories, stories, and literary forms travelled to the West and was used by the British writers, and on the other hand, the making and breaking of different stereotypes of the Eastern people, their religion and customs is also traced through the literary texts. Writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, Christopher Marlowe, John Milton, William Shakespeare or John Dryden all were using Eastern materials in their literary output, and were contributing to the development of the Western stereotypes about the East.

The second chapter of the thesis entitled “The Oriental Tales, Gothic and Others” is a survey of the factors that led to the unprecedented impact of the East on English literature of the Romantic period. The Oriental tale had been a major literary form of the pre-Romantic period and the Romantic poets were fascinated by the Oriental tales. Secondly, the chapter traces the role of the Oriental tale in the development of the Gothic and how the Gothic and the Oriental tale helped in the creation of an alternative aesthetic principle away from the neo-classical creed. Thirdly, the chapter concentrates on the rise of travelogues and scholarly translations. The travel narratives on the Middle East, India and China fuelled the growth of the Eastern elements in Romantic poetry. Scholarly translations of poetic, religious, literary as well as philosophical texts oriented the Romantic poets to think beyond the European tradition, but also created a sense of anxiety in regard to their conception of the superiority of the Greco-Roman culture and Christianity. This dissertation contends that it is this anxiety that might be the cause of the growth of syncretism during the early phase of Romanticism.
Forthly, the chapter tries to analyse the nature of Orientalism practised in the eighteenth century and how Romantic period saw the transition from the Jones’s era Orientalism to the more rigid form of Orientalist discourse that emerged during the nineteenth century.

The third chapter entitled “Blake and the East”, studies Blake’s relationship to the East. Blake has been regarded as the poet of the spiritual world beyond the grip of materiality. However, as the reading here reveals much of his spirituality was grounded on solid reality. The East of the scholars, travellers and painters was adapted by Blake to suit his own creative design and his poetic mythography. The argument about Blake’s relationship with the East reveals that he was deeply influenced by the scholarly works of the Orientalists based in Calcutta, and for him India and Hinduism was synonymous. His approach to Hinduism is syncretic, as he equates Hinduism with other religions, including Christianity. In his effort to criticise organised religion, he uses Hinduism as the example of first organised religion. He was inspired by scholars like William Jones who valorised Hinduism, but was also influenced by negative image of Hinduism and India that was created during the Hastings trial or in the writings of Evangelicals like Charles Grant. Blake’s engagement with Islam is very complex. He uses the popular belief of the licentiousness of Islam to criticise the rigidity of the monastic life and he uses a ‘wise tale’ from the Koran to illustrate Christian morality. About Muhammad and Islam, Blake harboured an ambivalent attitude. The paintings and engravings of Muhammed, “The Vision of the Last Judgement,” “The Visionary Head “and ”The Schismatic and Sowers of Discord: Mohammed” all reveal this ambivalence. This ambivalence, it is argued, was the result of the conflict between the residual and the emergent ideas on Islam. Though the traditional views of Islam and Muhammad still prevailed, the Romantic poets were inspired by some of the alternative and subversive writings that made its presence felt during this period. However, as is revealed in
the discussion, in Blakean mythography India as well as the Middle East is part of the world of ‘Generation’ the domain of Urizen, awaiting regeneration. Blake envisions a resurrection of the world in Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion, the poem he composed through two decades. The problem with his vision, however, is that it is completely Anglo-centric and Christo-centric—Albion and Christ are forces of regeneration.

The fourth chapter “Landor, Southey and ‘Orientaliana’” begins 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. It is argued that Landor fails to justify his claim in the preface to the poem that Gebir about the “folly of invading a peopled country”, and the question is raised about the use of the phrase “peopled country.” 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 a 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 Jonesean 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 contemporary readers, who often mistook Southey’s denigration of Hinduism as an act of glorification. It is argued that this confusion of the contemporary readers is indicative of a public paranoia regarding Hinduism. It is 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.

The final chapter entitled “Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Eastern Muse” begins with the argument that Coleridge’s negotiation with the East presents 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 the 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 is 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 is contended 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. Two distinct phases of Wordsworth’s engagement with the East is 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 late in his career he wrote a few poems which are marked by a distinct hostility towards the East. It is argued that though Wordsworth was influenced by the Perso-Arabic poetry and the works of William Jones. 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*.

Finally, it is concluded that the early Romantic poets 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 on 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 borderline, the ‘contact zone’ where the ‘self’ and the Other could meet, yet could not properly mingle. The early Romantic poets borrowed the themes, stories, and formal elements from the Oriental tales, the Gothic novels, the travelogues and the translations. 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 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. Although they appropriated various Eastern elements in their poetry, the early Romantic 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. Christian-centrism and Anglo-centrism of the early Romantic poets played a crucial role in this politics of containment.