

*The Giaour: Islam, Gender,
and the Ethics of Orientalism*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted representation of Orientalism in Lord Byron's poem The Giaour, with a particular focus on its spiritual and symbolic portrayal of the Islamic East. Rather than a superficial or exoticized treatment of the East, Byron's engagement with Orientalist themes emerges as a complex result of personal, emotional, and philosophical motivations. The poem is examined through a close reading of its central characters. The study identifies how Byron incorporates Qur'anic references, Islamic moral codes, and aesthetic motifs in a manner that transcends decorative exoticism and instead forms part of a deeper spiritual inquiry. This article employs a qualitative, interpretative literary analysis based on Romantic theory and Orientalist criticism. Special attention is given to Byron's critique of patriarchal misreadings of Islamic scripture, especially his portrayal of Eastern womanhood through the character of Leila. Her idealization serves as a counterpoint to dominant Western stereotypes, highlighting a nuanced representation of moral agency, spiritual depth, and gendered subjectivity in Eastern contexts. Ultimately, this study argues that The Giaour reflects not only Byron's personal tensions and metaphysical search but also contributes to a more layered understanding of East-West literary dialogue within the Romantic tradition.

Keywords: Byron, Giaour, Leila, Orientalism, Islam, hospitality.

INTRODUCTION

George Gordon Byron and Orientalism remain among the most pertinent topics in literary scholarship, having been studied for decades and continuing to attract scholarly attention. The comparison of Eastern and Western literary traditions is one of the fundamental concerns of comparative literature (Said 1978). Byron's work represents a vivid embodiment of Orientalism during the Romantic era. As Franklin (2000) notes, Byron's literary output is among the most expressive reflections of Romantic Orientalism.

In examining Byron's engagement with Oriental themes, we follow in the footsteps of Peter Cochran. Cochran (2006) interprets the term "Oriental" in a narrow sense, equating it primarily with the "Islamic East," despite acknowledging Byron's interest in other cultural spheres, including Armenian culture. He argues that the core of Byron's inspiration stemmed predominantly from Islamic Eastern imagery.

Furthermore, this thematic direction remains highly relevant in contemporary literary studies. Although Byron's poetic inclination toward Eastern aesthetics has frequently been examined within the framework of Romantic Orientalism, his fascination with the East was not the result of a one-sided cultural influence. Rather, it was a complex phenomenon shaped by a convergence of multiple factors. Accordingly, this article investigates the reasons behind Byron's attraction to the East from two major dimensions:

- Internal factors (personal, emotional, psychological),
- External factors (political circumstances, travel experiences, and religious knowledge).

Byron's childhood was marked by emotional instability and personal unrest, primarily due to his father's reckless financial habits and his mother's erratic behavior. These experiences inevitably left an imprint on his creative output. Although Byron appeared to enjoy the privileges of aristocratic life, his upbringing was fraught with challenges, emotional solitude, and

psychological suffering (MacCarthy 2002). His letters addressed to friends, his sister, and his mother offer a candid depiction of his life's hardships and the emotional depths of his creative journey (Cochran 2010).

Byron's traumatic childhood experiences, personal isolation, and inner torment (Marchand 1993) influenced the formation of the "East" in his poetic imagination as a symbolic space of salvation, self-realization, and emotional expression. The East became, in Byron's consciousness, a realm of existential meaning and inner longing. This is particularly evident in his main characters – Giaour, Conrad, Selim, and Lara who undergo profound internal crises within Eastern settings. Through these figures, Byron projected his own emotional struggles and psychological complexities.

For Byron, the East was not merely an exotic locale it also served as an "inner space" where the poet sought emotional refuge and spiritual solace. The Oriental vocabulary in *The Giaour*, the longing for ancient reconciliation in *The Bride of Abydos*, and the philosophical monologues in *The Pilgrimage of Childe Harold* all demonstrate how the Eastern context mirrored Byron's inner portrait, his thoughts, and psychological tensions. Without acknowledging these internal factors, it is impossible to fully grasp the nature of Byron's engagement with the East. It was, in fact, his emotional emptiness, longing for love, sense of loss, and pursuit of freedom that drew him most powerfully toward the poetic and religious landscapes of Eastern culture.

Byron's fascination with the East was not limited to biographical events but found vivid expression through the poetic imagery and thematic motifs in his literary work. His travels from 1809 to 1811 through the Ottoman Empire including Albania, Greece, Constantinople, and the Levant – greatly enriched his imagination and became a foundational source of inspiration for his later creative endeavors (Mirusmanova 2024). During these journeys, he directly encountered local customs, religious ceremonies, and natural scenery. These experiences were later poetically rendered in what became known as his "Oriental Tales," including *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), and *The Siege*

of *Corinth* (1816). In his letters, Byron described these regions as “exotic, grand, and enchanting.”

In addition, Byron lived during a time of major political upheaval. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had a profound impact on European society. These historical events, coupled with the rise of industrialization, triggered significant social and economic transformations, marking the beginning of what we now recognize as a crucial set of external factors. The political instability of the era compelled Byron to travel, and these journeys became turning points in his literary life. Through travel, he rediscovered the East, not as a distant other, but as a symbolic and creative territory deeply intertwined with his poetic identity.

As Peter Cochran highlights, Byron’s mastery in portraying Eastern landscapes is rooted in his empirical observations in those lands. He employs Oriental architecture, natural environments, and cultural signifiers not merely as decorative elements, but as semantically significant components that drive plot and character development. In *The Giaour*, for example, the mountainous regions and coastal vistas of Greece are vividly rendered; in *The Corsair*, the narrative unfolds among pirate-infested Mediterranean isles; and in *The Siege of Corinth*, events unfold between Corinth and Istanbul. Through these portrayals, Byron achieves a synthesis of East and West not only in geographical but also in cultural and aesthetic dimensions.

Byron’s travels afforded him a unique authenticity compared to his contemporaries in Western literature. He famously asserted, “I write what I have seen myself, while others copy from other people’s pictures” (Marchand 1973: 211). His interest in Eastern culture transcended superficial fascination; he engaged deeply with religious ceremonies, quotidian life, and the collective mentalities of the people he encountered.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Among his celebrated Oriental Tales, *The Giaour* stands out as one of the richest in Eastern thematic substance. While many

scholars, such as P. Cochran, N. Liassis, D. Bone, and D. Margarete, have examined this poem, several interpretative and analytical dimensions remain underexplored. This article concentrates on three pivotal aspects:

- Byron's approach to Qur'anic verses and ḥadīths.
- The representation of Eastern women.
- The shared motifs and imagery of Oriental themes and characters.

In Eastern, particularly Islamic, culture, the hosting of guests as “the guest of God” and the ritual offering of “bread and salt” (non-u tuz) have long been regarded as sacred traditions. Byron recognizes these customs not merely as religious practices, but as profound social conventions. He affirms that hospitality and generosity are central to Muslim cultural life.

Many esteemed ḥadīths advocate for honoring guests. For instance, the ḥadīth narrated by Abū Hurayrah (raḍiyallāhu ‘anhu) states:

هُوَ مَنْكَانِيؤُ مِنْمَنْكَانِيؤُ مِنْبِاللَّهِو الْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَلْيُكْرِمْضَيْفَهُو مَنْكَانِيؤُ مِنْبِاللَّهِو الْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَلْيَبْصُرْ حَمَّ
«بِاللَّهِو الْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَلْيُقْخِرْ أَوْ لِيَصْمُتْ»

Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him honour his guest; whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him uphold kinship ties; whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him speak good or remain silent. (Muttafaqun ‘Alayh)

Byron's interpretation of these virtues as benchmarks for leadership is particularly noteworthy. He positions generosity above martial valour in Islamic society, subtly critiquing Western value systems that often prioritize courage and strength above all. In *The Giaour*, Byron annotates every Oriental character and religious motif with precise quotations and interpretative commentary, facilitating a fuller comprehension of the work.

The character Ḥassan epitomizes generosity and hospitality. Following his death, these virtues wither: dervishes and wanderers cease to visit, travelers no longer expect non-u tuz, and guests no longer enter homes. This narrative development

symbolises not merely a plot turn, but a profound moral and spiritual crisis.

In *The Giaour*, Byron presents the character of Leila as a symbolic embodiment of Eastern womanhood. She is not merely idealized as a figure of physical beauty, but is also portrayed as possessing spiritual refinement, divine radiance, and moral autonomy. Leila is elevated to a high level of aesthetic and spiritual meaning through lines such as:

Her eye's dark charm 'twere vain to tell,
 But gaze on that of the Gazelle,
 It will assist thy fancy well;
 As large, as languishingly dark,
 But Soul beamed forth in every spark
 That darted from beneath the lid,
 Bright as the jewel of Giamschid.
 Yea, Soul, and should our Prophet say
 That form was nought but breathing clay,
 By Allah! I would answer nay;
 Though on Al-Sirat's arch I stood,
 Which totters o'er the fiery flood,
 With Paradise within my view,
 And all his Houris beckoning through.
 Oh! Who young Leila's glance could read
 And keep that portion of his creed,
 Which saith that woman is but dust,
 A soulless toy for tyrant's lust?, (The Giaour, 1813)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In these lines, Byron explicitly challenges ancient patriarchal stereotypes namely, the belief that women exist only as physical entities or objects of desire. Through Leila, he exalts the inner richness, spiritual depth, and moral dignity of the Eastern woman. Particularly significant is Byron's poetic use of "the gaze," which in his symbolism serves as a conduit through which the soul, heart, and metaphysical truth are revealed.

Moreover, Byron adds the following commentary that deserves attention:

It is a widely diffused but erroneous notion that women are excluded from paradise in the Koran: they are not. At least, not more than half of them. The fact is that Mahomet has allotted a third of Paradise to well-behaved women; but the Mussulmans have interpreted the text their way, and make heaven a place only for males and houris. The great reason why women are excluded is because they object to the idea of Platonic love, and cannot understand spiritual perfection in sex.

Here, Byron criticizes what he sees as a misinterpretation of Islamic texts regarding the spiritual status of women. He accuses Muslim societies of distorting the Qur'anic message, marginalizing women's share in paradise. However, Byron himself errs in interpretive precision. The Qur'an does not contain any explicit passage assigning "a third of paradise" to women.

In fact, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that righteous men and women are equally entitled to paradise based on their faith and deeds. As stated in the verse:

صَابِرِينَ لِمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالإِنَّا
أَفِينُوا الصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَدِّ
ظِيْفَرُ وَجَهْمُوا الْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ بِاللَّهِ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَيْ عَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their chastity and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (Al-Ahzab: 35)

Also, in Surah An-Nahl, verse 97:

جَزَاءُ مِمَّا أَحْسَنُوا كَانُوا أَمْ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحِينَ أَمْ يَنْدُرُونَ أَوْ أَنْتَى وَهُوَ مُنْقَلَبٌ حَيَاتِيٌّ حَيَاتِيٌّ طَبِيعِيٌّ لَنْجَزِيٍّ لِيَهُمَا
يَعْمَلُونَ

Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer – We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do. (An-Nahl: 97)

Despite Byron's doctrinal inaccuracy, his critique reflects a protest not against Islam per se, but against patriarchal and historically skewed interpretations of Islamic scripture. His remarks indicate dissatisfaction with the unjust application of religious texts in Muslim societies, especially those that marginalize women. Even within his Orientalist lens, Byron seeks to humanize Eastern women as fully sentient beings worthy of paradise and capable of spiritual insight. In doing so, he encourages Western readers to reconsider not only their perception of Eastern women but also the broader consequences of theological misinterpretation.

In *The Giaour*, as in many classical works of Eastern literature, love stands at the thematic center. The central triangle comprising the passionate yet spiritually lost lover (the Giaour), the beloved Leila (executed by her husband for loving a non-believer), and the betrayed ruler Hassan is rendered with such narrative finesse that the reader feels as though immersed in a tale from the Orient. The Giaour, a disbeliever, contrasts sharply with the devout Hassan and the emotionally torn Leila. These characters are not only assigned quintessentially Eastern names, but they also inhabit a world rich in Oriental elements, described using original terms such as *serai*, *kiosk*, *minaret*, *harem*, and others.

I hear the sound of coming feet,
 But not a voice mine ear to greet—
 More near – each turban I can scan,
 And silver-sheathed ataghan;
 The foremost of the band is seen
 An Emir by his garb of green.

(*The Giaour*, lines 355-360)

Byron's detailed description of Hassan, the ruler, is particularly striking – his green attire not only signifies nobility but also carries deep symbolic resonance. Green is the color of Paradise in Islamic tradition and is mentioned eight times in the Qur'an. For example:

أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَقَالَ الْمَلَأُ أَيُّبَارِى سَبْعَ بَقَرَاتٍ سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعُ نَبْتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَاتٍ
«نَخْنُمِلُّنَّ رَبَّنَا عَبْرَ نُونٍ فَتُونٍ فَاقْنُ فِي رَبِّى بِأَيِّ»

The king said, 'Indeed I have seen [in a dream] seven fat cows being eaten by seven that were lean, and seven green ears [of grain] and others [that were] dry. O eminent ones, explain to me my vision if you should interpret visions. (Yusuf 12:43)

«عَلَيْهِمْ ثِيَابٌ سُنْدُسٍ خُضْرٌ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٌ وَحُلُوفٌ أُخْضِرُوا لَهَا أَسْوَارٌ مِّنْ فِضَّةٍ وَسَىٰ لَهُمْ يُهْمِسُ رَبُّهُمْ أَلِيًا طَهُورًا»

Upon them will be green garments of fine silk and brocade. And they will be adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord will give them a pure drink. (Al-Insan 76:21)

«مَلِكٌ يُعَلِّى رَأْفًا خُضْرًا وَعَبْقَرِيًّا حِسَانًا»

Reclining on green cushions and beautiful fine carpets. (Ar-Rahman 55:76)

Byron's deliberate attention to such symbolic detail-down to the choice of color in a character's clothing reflects his commitment to deeply understanding and authentically rendering Eastern culture. This level of engagement is a defining feature of Byron's Orientalism, setting it apart through its careful, layered construction.

In conclusion, Byron's attraction to Orientalism was shaped by both internal (psychological and emotional) and external (historical and cultural) factors. His incorporation of Eastern themes and characters is most vividly realized in the verse narratives that form his collection of Oriental Tales. Among these, *The Giaour* holds particular significance – not only for its evocative depiction of an Eastern setting, but also for its exploration of Islamic religious motifs, cultural elements, and symbolic imagery rooted in Eastern traditions.

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