

**The Eastern woman  
in Byron's poetry**

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The purpose of this study is to show the image of eastern woman in Byron's Poetry. Examining Byron's poetry and letters one finds an overwhelming interest in the eastern woman. Such an interest may be due to the fact that Lady Mary Montagu fired Byron's imagination about the eastern woman through her oriental writings<sup>(1)</sup>.

Byron's desire to see the East about which he had a romantic attitude could be one of the reasons for his journey to the East. Yet the most important reason is that he was deprived of love and suffered from loneliness. In his poem "On Leaving England" Byron says.

".....I must From this land be gone,

.....

[For] My weary heart is desolate;

I look around and can not trace

One friendly smile or welcome face,

.....

There `s not a kind congenial heart.<sup>(2)</sup>

The poet does not find 'friendly smile' or 'welcome face' or 'kind congenial heart' in his home country-England. More painful is that the poet doesn't have anyone who may have an interest in him.

"I go - but wheresoe' er I flee

**There's not an eye will weep for me"<sup>(3)</sup>.**

Byron as a man and a poet was affectionate and needed to have

**"strong attachments and a yearning desire after affection in return....."<sup>(4)</sup>**

He experienced failure in love when his love relationship with Miss Chaworth was broken in the early months of 1809 .

In a poem entitled "To Mrs. Musters, on being asked my reason for quitting England in the spring" Byron shows how much he suffered because of the breakdown of his relationship with Miss Chaworth

**"When man, expell'd from Eden's bowers**

**A moment linger'd near the gate,**

**Each scene recall'd the vanish'd hours,**

**And bade him curse his future fate"<sup>(5)</sup>.**

Having such a bitter feeling of failure, Byron left England

**"..... I will cross the whitening foam,**

**And I will seek a foreign home;**

**Till I forget a false fair face"<sup>(6)</sup>.**

This had an influence on his attitude towards the eastern woman, which is clear in his oriental poems and poetical tales.

The First Canto of Childe Harold shows how much Byron is infatuated and fascinated by the beauty of the

Spanish woman. He romanticizes her fine features and characteristics:

**"Ye who shall marvel when you hear her tale.**

**Oh ! had you known her softer hour,**

**Mark'd her black eye that mocks her coal black veil,**

**Heard her light, lively tones in lady's bower,**

**Seen her long locks that foil the painter power,**

**Her fairy form, with more than female grace"<sup>(7)</sup>**

[1, stanza LV

However his description of Spanish women is accurate and realistic. It happened that Byron visited Seville, a Spanish town, and rented a room

**"in the house of two Spanish unmarried ladies ... who gave him a curious specimen of Spanish manners"<sup>(8)</sup>**

Their beauty and outstanding character impressed him deeply. This note is confirmed in Byron's letter to his mother dated August 11, 1809.

**"They are women of character and the eldest a fine woman, the youngest pretty. ... The characteristics of the Spanish belles... are in general very handsome, with large black eyes and very fine forms."<sup>(9)</sup>**

In another stanza of the First Canto the poet refers to the beauty and non-artificiality of women in Spain

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**"in contrast to the minauderies of the  
Southwell belles and the London harlots." (10)**

They never try to change their nature:

**"Her glance how wildly beautiful how much  
Hath Phoebus wooed in vain to spoil her cheek  
Which glows yet smoother from his amorous clutch  
Who round the North for paler dames would seek?  
How poor their forms appear, how languid, wan and weak  
(I, Stanza LV111)**

In a letter to Mr. Hodgson dated August 6, 1809, Byron notes that Cadiz women are much more beautiful than English women.

**"...with all national prejudice, I must confess the  
women of Cadiz are as far superior to the  
English women in beauty". (11)**

The same note is stressed in stanza LXXXIV

**"Oh never talk again to me  
Of northern climes and British ladies;  
It has not been your lot to see  
Like me, the lovely Girl of Cadiz..."**

In stanza LVII in the First Canto the poet explains how the Spanish woman masters all the arts of love and that she cares too much for her children and her mate.

**"Yet are Spain's maids no race of Amazons,  
But form'd for all the witching arts of love:**

**Though thus in arms they emulate her sons,  
 And in the horrid phalanx dare to move  
 'Tis but the tender fierceness of the dove  
 Pecking the hand that hovers o'er her mate,  
 .....**  
**Her mind is nobler sure, her charms perchance as great**  
 (1, Stanza LV11)

The courage of Spanish woman is shown in stanza LIV of the same canto where she no longer fears fighting at war. Even the scene of blood and dead bodies does not frighten her.

**"Is it for this the Spanish maid, aroused,  
 Hangs on the willow her unstrung guitar,  
 And, all unsex'd, the anlace hath espoused  
 Sung the loud song, and dared the deed of war?  
 And she, whom once the semblance of a scar  
 Appall'd, an owlet's larum chill'd with dread,  
 Now views the column - scattering bay' net jar,  
 The falchion flash, and o'er the yet warm dead  
 Stalks with Minerva's step where Mars might quake to tread"**  
 (1, stanza ILIV)

Here is a direct reference to the Maid of Saragoza and her deeds of valour. When Saragossa was besieged, she was working on one of the guns after the death of the gunners.

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It is interesting to add that Byron attended the honouring of the Maid of Saragoza while he was in Spain.<sup>(12)</sup>

In the Second Canto of Childe Harold we see a portrayal of the Albanian woman.

**"Here woman's voice is never heard: apart  
And scarce permitted, guarded, veil'd to move  
She yields to one her person and her heart  
Tamed to her cage, nor feels a wish to rove  
For, not unhappy in her master's love,  
And joyful in a mother's gentlest cares;  
Blest cares! all other feelings far above!  
Herself more sweetly rears the babe she bears,  
Who never quits the breast, no meaner passion shares"**

(11, Stanza LXI)

The poet here refers to her seclusion, submission, and lack of freedom. She has commitments to her family — she has to be a dutiful wife and a caring mother.

This has a relation with real life. Visiting Albania while ruled by the Turks, Byron sympathised with the Albanian woman because she was ill-treated, enslaved and deprived of freedom. This note is confirmed in Byron's letter to his mother dated November 12, 1809.

**[Albanian] women are sometimes handsome ... but they are treated like slaves, beaten, and in short complete beasts of burden; they plough, dig and sow..."**<sup>(13)</sup>

Yet, I disagree with Byron if he considers woman's ploughing, digging and sowing as an aspect of their enslavement . For the Eastern woman generally helps her family or her husband in farming willingly. One adds that she may also work to earn her living if she does not have a sponsor. This explains even her

**"carrying wood and repairing the highways"<sup>(14)</sup>**

In "The Bride of Abydos" Byron goes deeper into the world of oriental woman through a poetical tale he weaves out of real events in Turkey.

**"I [Byron] had a living character on my eye for Zuleika [the heroine of the Bride of Abydos]"<sup>(15)</sup>**

It tells about a love affair between two cousins, Zuleika and Selim. Though they are in love with each other, the father who adores his daughter too much refuses to let his nephew marry his daughter. Besides, he is afraid of his nephew who might kill him one day because he treacherously murdered his father many years ago.

Throughout the tale one must note the oriental feminine atmosphere in which Zuleika is portrayed beginning with the poet's handling of her beauty, the luxurious life she lives, the commanding masculinity represented here by father's control over his daughter and ending with her death.

Describing the heavenly beauty of Zuleika, the poet says

**"Who hath not proved how feebly words essay  
To fix one spark of Beauty's heavenly ray ?**

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.....  
**Such was Zuleika, such around her shone**  
**The nameless charms unmarked by her alone**  
**The light of love, the purity of grace**  
**The mind the music breathing from her face.**  
**The heart whose softness harmonised the whole”**

(I.170-77, 176-80)

Here the blooming Zuleika is all purity and loveliness. She is highly natural, attractive, affectionate and innocent.

An interesting oriental image is shown in the following description of the beauty of Zuleika's voice .

**“...I hear Zuleika's voice**

**Like Houris' hymn it meets mine ear”**

(I.146-147.)

Zuleika's voice is similar to the hymns of houris who are the fascinating maids of paradise .

Through a description of the contents of Zuleika's room we can have a glimpse of the life of such a Turkish lady

**“...there is light in that lone chamber,**  
**And o'er her silken Ottoman**  
**Are thrown the fragrant beads of amber,**  
**O'er which her fairy fingers ran;**  
**Near these with emerald rays beset,**  
**(How could she thus that gem forget?)**  
**Her mother's sainted amulet,**  
**Whereon engraved the Koorsee Text,**



**Could smooth this life, and win the next;  
 And by her Comboloio lies  
 A Koran of illumin'd dyes;  
 And round her lamp of fretted gold  
 Bloom flowers in urns, of China's mould,  
 The richest work of Iran's loom,  
 And Shiraz' tribute of perfume;"**

(II,63-73,78-82)

Zuleika has the fragrant amber beads to get perfume and the Koran to read to win the earthly and the unearthly life. She has also Chinese vases from which sweet fragrance of living flowers diffuses and a golden lamp to cast light on the splendid contents of the rooms including the Turkish rosary and the Persian carpets.

Zuleika's interest in using many kinds of perfume is stressed elsewhere in the tale.

**"she snatched the urn, where in was mixed  
 The Persian Atar- gul's perfume"**

(I.269-270)

This means that perfume is one of the essentials of cosmetics to the Turkish lady.

We now proceed to Zuleika as a daughter of an oriental father who can not accept his daughter's disobedience or even her right to choose the man she marries. Moved by resentment, and sense of loss of dignity and honour he follows and murders Zuleika's lover who is mistakenly thought to have seduced her.

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This is followed by Zuleika's death due to excess of grief over the death of her lover. Mourning the death of Zuleika, we note an eastern custom of women, which is their loud crying over the death of someone dear to them.

**"By Helle's stream there is a voice of wail!**

**And woman's eye is wet**

**Zuleika ! last of Giaffir's race**

.....

**The loud Wul-wullah warn his distant ear"**

(II.621-23, 627)

The poet's choice of the Turkish word 'Wul-wulleh' is great because such a word best describes the sad words and loud cries of women on this occasion.

The prayer for the dead lady in the mosque is one of the rituals of Muslim funeral, which should be performed.

**"The Koran-Chanters of the hymn of fate --**

**The silent slaves with folded arms that wait**

**Sighs in the hall - and shrieks upon the gale**

**Tell him the tale**

(II.629-32)

The poet then wonders where Zuleika will go after death

**"And oft her Koran conned apart;**

**And oft in youthful reverie**

**She dream'd what paradise might be:  
Where woman's parted soul shall go  
Her prophet had disdained to show;"**

(II.103-07)

Though Byron here admits that woman has a soul he denies that paradise will be the destination of good women. This is due to Byron's misunderstanding of Islamic view of woman. However, the Koran shows that.

**"Women [as well as men] in the next life, will not only be punished for their evil actions, but will also receive the rewards of their good deeds [paradise] and in this case God makes no distinction of sexes".(16)**

Reading the 'Giaour', which is another poetical tale, one notes that the oriental feminine world in which Leila - the heroine of the tale - lives is coloured by her beauty and Turkish customs. Describing Leila's beauty, Byron says

**"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".**

(473-76)

Here is an oriental simile; he likens Leila with her wide black eyes and graceful body to a gazelle. Another oriental simile is seen in comparing Leila's cheek to the blossoms of 'the young pomegranate'. This is to note that she has lively, blushing cheeks :

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**"On her fair cheek's unfading hue  
The young pomegranate's blossoms strew  
Their bloom in blushes ever new."**

(493-95)

Leila's hair is also likened to

**"...hyacinthine [that] flows  
When left to roll its folds below"**

(496-97)

In Arabic hyacinthine means 'sunbul' which is associated with beautiful hair. In fact this simile is used by eastern as well as Greek poets.

More interesting is the oriental image in which Leila's beauty is compared to that of

**"the blue-winged butterfly of Kashmeer, the most  
rare and beautiful of the species" <sup>(17)</sup>**

Putting it poetically, Byron says

**"As rising on its purple wing,  
The insect-queen of eastern spring,  
O'er emerald meadows of Kashmeer  
Invites the young pursuer near**

.....  
**So beauty lures the full - grown child**

(388-91, 396)

Here the image not only embodies the fascinating beauty of the butterfly of Kashmeer but also its downfall, i.e , when such beauty rapidly declines and fades

**"...blighted in an hour**

**Find joy within her broken bower?  
No....."**

(414-16)

The same tragic end is expected to happen to Leila whose unsurpassed beauty has made her the object of attraction, temptation persuasion and finally damnation . She has come to betray her lover, Hassan and have a sinful relationship with another one, the Giaour. In accordance with the Turkish customs Leila is sentenced to death for adultery by drowning her.<sup>(18)</sup>

This has a relation with reality. In 1810 Byron saw this Turkish lady and sixteen others taken by soldiers to be drowned for their faithlessness.<sup>(19)</sup>

Commenting on Leila's death, the poet says

**"Oh` who young Leila glance could read**

**And keep that portion of his creed**

**What saith that woman is but dust**

**A soulless toy for Tyrant's lust"**

(487-90)

These lines refer again to the poet's misconception of Islamic beliefs-- that women have no souls; they are mortal beings; they are 'but dust' . However, Byron admits later

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that that idea is a mistaken one he has to correct. He even declares that his idea of the soullessness of women is

**"a vulgar error... [ and that] the Koran allots  
at least a third of paradise to well behaved  
woman".(20)**

In 'Beppo' we know more about Turkish women; they are veiled, locked up and secluded by their husbands.

**"They lock them up and veil and guard them daily  
They scarcely can behold their male relations  
So that their moments do not pass so gaily  
As is supposed the case with northern nations.**

(Stanza LXXI)

The poet also shows that though Turkish men love and are fond of their women, they

**"...so much admire philogyny."**

(Stanza LXX)

They humiliate and ill- treat them.

**"...their usage of their wives is sad  
'Tis said they use no better than a dog any  
Poor woman, whom they purchase like a pad  
They have a number, though they purchase like a pad  
They have a number, though they ne'er exhibit`em  
Four wives by law and concubines adlibitum".**

(Stanza LXX)

The last line in the above quotation refers to polygamy in Islamic society, which allows man to have four wives at the same time.

It is interesting to end such a study with a change in Byron's opinion of the severe life women live in the Turkish society.

**"They cannot read, and so don't lisp in criticism,  
Nor write, and so they don't affect the muse  
Were never caught in epigram witticism,  
Have no romances, sermon, plays, reviews,  
In harems learning soon would make a pretty schism"**  
(Stanza LXX11)

The poet sees merit in women's seclusion and ignorance. She helps her husband live a quiet life; she never gives rise to problems. Confirming this point of view, James Browne, Byron's companion during his journey to the East, says that Byron supported

**"the oriental custom of secluding females, and teaching them only a few pleasing accomplishments, affirming the learned education lavished so frequently in England on the sex, only served to turn their heads with conceit and look with contempt on domestic duties".** <sup>(21)</sup>

Byron is infatuated by the eastern woman's beauty, manners and even seclusion to the extent that

**"had he to choose a second wife he would select one born in the East, young and beautiful, whom he alone**

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had been permitted to visit and whom he taught to love him exclusively , but of her he would be jealous as a tiger".<sup>(22)</sup>

In my study of Byron's interest in the eastern woman represented by women from Spain, Albania, Greece and Turkey, I am aware of the fact that most of these countries are geographically European. Yet

"they have all come under the influence of oriental culture and civilisation during some time or other of their history"<sup>(23)</sup>



## Notes

- 1- It was stated that Lady Mary Montagu was the only traveller who had been allowed into the Turkish Harems. See Mohammed Sharafuddin, Islam and Romantic Orientalism Literary Encounters with the Orient (London: I.B. Tauris publishers, 1995) P. 217.
  - 2- Thomas Moore ed., The Letters and journals of Lord Byron, with notices of his life . 2 vol. (London: John Murray, 1830) , vol. I, P. 141. Hereafter the letters and journals of lord Byron.
  - 3- Ibid, vol. 1, P.141.
  - 4- Ibid, vol. 1, p. 138.
  - 5- Ibid, vol. 1, p. 140.
  - 6- Ibid, vol. 1, p. 141.
  - 7- This and subsequent references to Byron's poetry are quoted from Frederick Page ed., Byron Poetical Works (London. Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 189.
  - 8- P.C. Quennell A self portrait : letters and diaries 2 vol. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950). Vol. 1, P. 54. Hereafter letters and diaries.
  - 9- Ibid, vol. 1, p. 54.
  - 10- Bernard Blackstone, Byron : A survey (London: Longman Group Limited, 1975), P. 82.
  - 11- The Letters and journals of Lord Byron, Vol. 1, P. 151.
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- 12- Desola Pintoed ed . Byron's poems (London: Everyman's Library, 1966), P. 31 f
- 13- Letters and diaries, vol. 1, p.61.
- 14- Ibid, p. 61.
- 15- Letters and journals of Lord Byron, vol. III, P. 195.
- 16- Quoted in Mohammed Sharafuddin, op. cit., P.220.
- 17- Quoted in Anahid Melikiam, Byron and the East (Beirut: American University Press, 1977) , P. 48 .
- 18- Wallace Cable Brown, English Travel Books and Minor poetry about the Near East 1775-1825, Philological Quarterly. Vol. XVI (1937) P. 249.
- 19- Robert Nye, The Memoirs of Lord Byron, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), P. XCIV .
- 20- Quoted in Mohammed Sharafuddin, op. cit., p. 220.
- 21- Ibid, p. 79 F.
- 22- Ibid, p. 79 F.
- 23- Nadia Abul Magd, A poet in love with the orient, the Egyptian Gazette, 5 (November 1986) P. 4.