

Kare Dergi

International academic journal on comparative literary, cultural, linguistics, and folklore studies.

ISSN: 2536-4596, Kayseri / Turkey

Volume 1, Issue 1, p. 5-12

www.karedergi.net

EASTERN DESPOTISM IN LORD BYRON'S WORKS: CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE, THE BRIDE OF ABYDOS AND THE CORSAIR

Eda Kevser ŞAHİN

ABSTRACT

Being one of the most prominent Romantic writers of his time, with his flamboyant life style and sensational personality, Lord Byron attracted his contemporaries and the society to a great extent. Having been an outcast by scandalous incidents, along with his personal quest for meaning in life, he set a long journey to the "exotic" East. He wrote many letters as well as journals to keep the track of his observations and experiences and also fictionalised what he saw to get the public attention. The East (Orient), occupied, altered and exploited in physical and theoretical terms, was the major concern of the Europe (West-Occident) at that time. Byron, the Romantic, employed and manipulated his encounters with the people of Eastern cultures and mentioned them in his works. He had liberal leanings and sympathized with the people, who sought refuge from strict governments and policies that put borders to their freedom. As East was mostly described to be governed by oppressive tyrants, Byron, taking this claim real, visited Ali Pasha of Tepelene and stressed his features as the epitome for the majority of Eastern governors. In his Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, he mostly reflected his inspirations of the Albanian Ali Pasha and his palace. In The Bride of Abydos, a pasha and his domestic oppression against his household, was fictionalized. In The Corsair, another pasha and his wife were depicted. All three works accommodate a very authoritarian male, who controls the people around him, which, is the exact point where Byron makes his criticism about the Eastern way of living and this paper will try to examine how Byron employed the idea of despotism in his aforementioned works.

Key Words: Byron, Orientalism, Eastern Despotism, Romanticism

Eastern Despotism Through Ottoman Empire in Lord Byron's Works: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, The Bride of Abydos and The Corsair

The good the bad, the right the wrong, the powerful the weak, the civilized the barbarian... and so forth... More binary oppositions can be held when the East and the West are considered, examined and classified. From an Orientalised perspective, the West, to construct its own identity, needs an "other" to depict and to define its own characteristics. The "other" is the mirror held up to reflect its adverse sides, lower virtues or less-appreciated features of the "self", which, as Said remarks is nothing but a reflection of the European subconscious (Said 2003:17). In addition, Tatar remarks that this Eurocentric identity is strengthened when the discrepancies are revealed and it gains confidence when the "other" is positioned, limited and restated (Tatar 2012:92). As Sezai Karakoç, in one of his poems, asserts referring to the Europeans "Sizin bir tek ama büyük bir gücünüz var / Karşınızdakini değiştirmek" (You only have a single but great power / which is to change the addressee) (Karakoç 2013:156), so the "other" is not welcomed or tolerated with its diversity but rather manipulated by a distinctive self-oriented approach. Minding the systematic progress, Orientalism, and oriental studies consist of the otherization process and the continuous construction of that "other" through sociological, cultural, and a number of other scientific examinations and evaluations.

The East, being the subject of intervenes and oppression inside and out, thus, has been depicted as a territory where only despotism and tyranny can rule and control the nations. Aristotle notes that "For barbarians, being more servile in character than Hellenes, and Asiatics than Europeans, do not rebel against a despotic government." (qtd. in. Boesche, 1990:741) The democracy or more civilized forms of government are suitable for the West, yet it does not fit the mindset or life style of the Easterners. Montesquieu on the other hand, claims that the "effeminacy of the people in hot climates has almost always rendered them slaves, and the bravery of those in cold climates has enabled them to maintain their liberties." (qtd. in. Çırakman 2001:57) Hence, the people living in Eastern countries which Byron also notes the land in his tales as "The sunny regions/ sunny climes", cannot establish a system where people choose their rulers and legislate according to the needs and wishes of the nation. They are effeminate, so to speak, passive and obedient compared to their Western counterparts. Even though majority of the states around Europe governed by monarchies, where a single monarch to be the authority, they are for Montesquieu are not despotisms yet he excludes Ottoman Empire and the Asiatic states claiming them to be the corrupted versions of monarchies, which are again, despotisms in the East.

Byron, who is regarded to be an Orientalist, who employed Eastern characters, themes and motifs in his works, was a “prodigious reader” as he stressed in one of his letters that he read Knolles, Cantemir and Rycout to broaden his vision especially about the Ottoman history and life style (Moore 1829:34). Among 1809-1811 he took a journey to the East, where he visited Albania, Greece and Istanbul and was given many privileges as a guest. As a result of his prior knowledge and face-to-face interaction with Eastern people, mainly the Turks, he got inspired to produce more on Oriental subjects. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Byron 1833) which brought Byron an immediate fame and success, Lord Byron employs his first Byronic hero, Harold, who takes a journey to the Mediterranean and adopting the travelogue style, he narrates his environment through vivid descriptions and witty expressions. In the first two cantos, the exotic atmosphere and society of Albania and Greece, are notable with regards to the protagonist's criticism towards the government, Ottoman Empire at that time, and his remarks on society's persistent obedience to the monarchy where Ali Pasha is given as the example.

Harold, the self-exiled hero, after seeing Athena (Athens), cries “Ancient of days! August Athena! where / Where are thy men of might? Thy grand in soul?” (Canto II, II). Due to the fact that Greece was under the control of Ottoman Empire at that time, Byron being an ardent follower of philhellenism reflects his longing for a Greece, free off the boundaries and control of any other nation. The narrator remarks that the Greece is torn apart, and parts of the Acropolis is collapsed “Look on its broken arch, its ruined wall, / Its chambers desolate, the portals foul: / Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall, / The dome of Thought, the Palace of the Soul:” (Canto II, VI). In a way, Harold accuses the Eastern governors who conquered and terminated the cradle of civilization, since Greece was suffering under “Despot's chains” (Canto II, XII) and there were only “tyrants left to stand” (Canto II, XIII).

Arriving at Albania, Harold, as a Christian, feels very lonely and a little bit scared of the new territory he is in, which he stresses that “Here the red Cross, for still the Cross is here, / Though sadly scoffed at by the circumcised” (Canto II, XLIV) as the land once belonged to Christians now belongs to the Muslims, he feels saddened and desperate. The Chief of the region, Ali Pasha, on the other hand, is depicted to be a lawless man “with a bloody hand / He sways a nation turbulent and bold”. The atmosphere in the town of Tepelene is war-like and chaotic with “busy hum of warrior-men” (Canto II, LV) and “The Turk, The Greek, The Albanian and The Moor, / Here mingled in their many-hued array, / While the deep war- drum's sound announced the close of the day.” (Canto II, LVII).

Ali Pasha is portrayed to be a barbarian warmonger, “a man of war and woes” (Canto II, LXII) having “his cap of terror on”(Canto II, LVIII) “rarely deigns to speak” (Canto II, LVIII). Under his rule, the women are not allowed to speak, hid behind the veils, passivated and “yield to one her person and her heart / Tamed to her cage, nor feels a wish to rove:” (Canto II, LXI). Pasha is despotic, as he governs all by himself, none of the rules bound him; he is furious and revengeful. The women in the country, like majority of the men are oppressed and controlled like slaves; barbarian acts are common yet never scrutinized. The fear and chaos in the society hinder the public from any sort of revolt or claim their rights from the Pasha. “But ne’er will Freedom seek this fated soil, / But slave succeed to slave through years of endless toil.” (Canto II, LXXVII). This statement of Byron is likely to be inspired by the remark of Aristotle who spoke of “the peoples of the East who are accustomed to slavery and in consequence submit to a –princey despotique-” (qtd. in. Venturi 133).

Besides that, Herder, another philosopher, adopting Philhellenic idealism, might have formed the basis for Byron’s mindset through his claim that “Turkey (Ottoman Empire) is governed by democratic despotism” (Kula 2010:99) in addition he asserts that Turks are inertial and careless even about crucial issues which prevent them even achieve their less probable progress. All the negative images filling the history about the Eastern way of living, as transferred from one generation to another consolidates the terminology and sustains the misperception through fiction. Similarly, in an article by Mehmet Uysal and Ayşe Yasemin Uyar, where they examined and compared the biographies of Ali Pasha through the lenses of British William Plomer, Slovenian Marius Jokai and French Alexandre Dumas all of whom centred and fictionalized the Pacha as an antihero not less than a monster, illiterate, wild, cruel and a sexually perverted tyrant. (2013:394)

Harold’s displeasure of Ali Pasha is similar to the concept in the aforementioned works and he also stresses the religious distinction of the East and the West “The city won for Allah from the Giaour” (Canto II, LXXVII), “Oh Stamboul! ... Though turbans now pollute Sophia’s shrine” (Canto II, LXXIX). He is not contended with the Eastern rule over the former Western lands, where he considers Turks to be annoying with their religious and ethnic costumes, practices and domination. Being an epitome of Western mindset, the conquest of the Constantinople by Ottoman Empire is disturbing for him.

In *The Bride of Abydos* (Byron 1833), Byron excavates the theme of despotism in a household again in Turkey. In ancient Greek, “a despot was technically a master who ruled in a household over those who were slaves or servants by nature.” (Boesche 1990:741)

In the tale, the father of the family, Pasha Giaffir, is described to be a “fierce” (Canto I, V), “rude” (Canto I, VI), “a meaner soul” (Canto I, XII), “haughty” (Canto I, XIII), “usurper” (Canto II, XV) and a “tyrant” (Canto II, XVI). He is not questioned for his acts, but as he scares the people around him “Pacha! To hear is to obey. / No more must slave to despot say” (Canto I, III) everybody submit to his orders. Pacha's daily life is depicted to be a life full of lethargic and lazy practices, an orientalisised form of living where he claps his hands and servants appear, he smokes a germ-adorned chibouque, around him Moors and Kızlar Ağası (Kızlar Agasi - Eunuch) lounge and he satisfies himself with the maidens in his harem. He is very hot-blooded and “often storms at nought” (Canto I, XIII) and excluding the servants or slaves around him, even his first degree relatives like his daughter “tremble[s] to meet his eye” (Canto I, XIII).

To Montesquieu, “In despotic states, each house is a separate government.” (qtd. in. Boesche 745) The Pasha, in the tale, murders his brother to be the only heir of his position and adopts his niece Selim to keep him under surveillance. He enforces his own laws, and slaughters anyone who threatens his rule. Selim, on the other hand, discovers that his father Abdullah was killed by his uncle, who announces “By Giaffir's order drugged and given, / With venom subtle as his soul, / Dismissed Abdullah's hence to Heaven.” (Canto II, XIV) and revengeful he asserts that he cannot forgive “a father's blood” (Canto II, XV) Besides being in love with Giaffir's daughter Zuleika, Selim is determined to avenge the death of his father. Attacking Giaffir, Selim gets wounded and dies “By that same hand Abdullah-Selim bled.” (Canto II, XXVII) and as Zuleika and Selim are parted by death, “as if they loved in vain” (Canto II, XXVIII) Zuleika also dies from a broken heart.

The theme of the story, reflection of Byron's incestuous love affair with his half-sister Augusta, may also be a criticism of social pressure against his preferences; however the depictions of Eastern characters as wild, revengeful, Pashas spreading terror as an epitome of the Eastern way of living is crucially important in that it displays the image of the East, especially the Ottoman East, in the lenses of the Westerners at that time. Tyrants even in the households rule and their crimes are hidden as their strength is enough to prove them right and others are marginalised as a result of cruelty, and oppression.

In the last tale, *The Corsair* (Byron 1833), where the protagonist Conrad is “a mixture of Byronic hero and gothic villain” (Bloom2009:183) is a pirate “famed and feared” (Canto I, II) on every shore.

He is a man who speaks a few words but his men obey and fulfil his orders. “So that Conrad guides; / And who dare question aught that he decides? / That man of loneliness and mystery, / Scarce seen to smile, and seldom heard to sigh;” (Canto I, VIII) Deciding to capture the wealth of Pasha Seyd, Conrad disguises himself as a dervise and enters into the seraglio while his men plot to attack and accomplish their target. The Pasha, is described to “talk[.] of blood” (Canto I, XVII), who commands and immediately gets obeyed by his slaves. He is the only authority, who is very strong and seems to be invincible. During the clashes of pirates and Seyd’s forces, Conrad hears the voice of women coming from harem:

A stern delight was fixed in Conrad’s eye,
But sudden sunk—for on his ear the cry
Of women struck, and like a deadly knell
Knocked at that heart unmoved by Battle’s yell
“Oh burst the Harem—wrong not on your lives
One female form—remember—we have wives.
On them such outrage Vengeance will repay;
Man is our foe, and such ‘tis ours to slay:
But still we spared—must spare the weaker prey.
Oh! I forgot—but Heaven will not forgive
If at my word the helpless cease to live. (Canto II, V)

Ironically as a man of virtues, the pirate Conrad attempts to save the women of harem yet fails and gets captured. Anquetil-Duperron notes; “the idea of despotism served to justify the violent intervention of Europeans in the East” (qtd. in. Venturi 139) which may form the basis for Byron’s characterization of Conrad and his act of saving the women from the usurper’s hands since he represents the Western saviour and his violent intervention is justified due to his “sacred duty”. However, Gülnare, Seyd’s favourite concubine, falls in love with Conrad as he is imprisoned while struggling to set them free. Both plans to escape from the palace and Gülnare remarks: “Corsair! Thy doom is named—but I have power / To soothe the Pasha in his weaker hour” (Canto II, XIV) because the intrigues and plotting of women in the East are very much estimated, Gülnare knows when and how to deal with the Pasha. Gülnare’s reaction is also interpreted with Francis Baron de Tot’s claim about “the despotism of the oppressed.” (Çırakman 62) As she is limited and marginalised, her attitude resembles with her oppressor, so she murders Seyd to save herself and her lover. Thus the victim becomes the perpetrator.

All the Eastern males, in the tales, are portrayed with beards and turbans, which Byron uses to depict a scary image in the minds of the readers.

There are slaves, many of whom to be women of harem, others consisting of Moors and eunuchs and the rest is soldiers waiting to wage a battle against "the Giaours". The Pashas symbolize the absolute monarchies, bounded by no law, limited by no one and respected with fear as if they are Gods. Conrad, on the other hand, carrying the characteristics of a despot, is not criticized but his authority is praised as he works for an honourable case, saving the captured woman of harem, yet for another form of slavery. "He knew himself a villain", "He knew himself detested, but he knew, / The hearts that loathed him, crouched and dreaded too." (Canto I, XI) even though he is not loved or praised by his surrounding community, he is still self-confident and very much justified by Byron.

As the despotisms rule over the East, the public, in the tales, is reflected to be marginalised, passivated and turned into a monolithic organism. However the society is hard to categorise as it is not formed with statistics or monotypic crowds carrying little remarkable distinctions but rather it is an entity of elaborate variations and sorts of specific characteristics. Even though Byron took a Grand Tour towards Mediterranean, got the chance to interact with many of the Orientals, he was under the influence of his predecessors who strengthened the biases and prejudices against the Eastern people by fictionalising them as "evil", "uncivilized", "barbarian", "warmonger", "libidinous" and "lethargic". Thus, even though there is another reality, Byron prefers to present it in the exact opposite way, as it is the tradition, also which obviously fits the public opinion; so the fiction defeats the facts and it gains more validity.

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: George Gordon, Lord Byron*. New York: Infobase Publishing. 2009.
- Boesche, Roger. "Fearing Monarchs and Merchants: Montesquieu's Two Theories of Despotism". *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec., 1990)
- Byron, Lord. Ed. George Dearborn. *The Works of Lord Byron in Verse and Prose*. New York. 1833.
- Çırakman, Aslı. "From Tyranny to Despotism: The Enlightenment's Unenlightened Image of the Turks". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Vol. 33.No.1. 2001.
- Karakoç, Sezai. *Gün Doğmadan*. İstanbul: Diriliş Yayınları. 2013.
- Kula, Onur Bilge. *Batı Felsefesi'nde Oryantalizm ve Türk İmgesi*. İstanbul: Türkiye İşBankası Kültür Yayınları. 2010.
- Moore, Thomas. (1829). *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron with Notices of His Life*, London: John Murray.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2003.

Tatar, Hüsniye Canbay. "Batı'nın Kimlik İnşasında Ötekinin Yeri (Other's Place in West's Construction of Identity)". *Karadeniz Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Sayı 6, 2012.

Uysal Mehmet, Uyar, Ayşe Yasemin. "Tepedelenli Ali Paşa Biyografileri Üzerine" *Tarih Okulu Dergisi (TOD)*. Yıl 6.Sayı XVI. 2013.

Venturi, Franco. "Oriental Despotism". *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. – Mar., 1963)