

“Byron and Beauty: His Eastern Female Characters”

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Caroline Franklin discusses Lord Byron's female Western and Eastern characters and briefly refers to Byron's idealization of the beauty of his Eastern heroines. After his first Eastern tour, Byron expressed his fascination with Eastern beauty to Lady Blessington, "I flatter myself that my Leila, Zuleika, Gulnare, Medora and Haidee will always vouch for my taste in beauty." Before this tour, his perception of Eastern beauty was mainly formed by his Oriental readings in general, and especially by Lady Mary Montagu's description of Turkish women in her correspondence. In the East, he observed, met, and even had close relations with Eastern females, such as the Macri family, and this had a great impact on his perception of Eastern beauty. In this paper, I expose Byron's description of Eastern Female beauty with emphasis on the beauty of their eyes and argue that he intentionally associates Eastern female beauty with physical, spiritual, and mental beauty; thus violating the common tradition of Western writers who exhibited the passive and erotic nature of Eastern females rather than their deep devotion, courage, and wisdom.

Byron's first impression of female Eastern beauty may have been framed by his reading of *The Arabian Nights*, which haunted his dreams with its exoticism and charm. Shahrazad, the main narrator of the *Nights*, has all the wisdom, education, charm, and beauty of an Eastern female. She is described early in the *Nights*: "She successfully applied herself to philosophy, physics, history, and the liberal arts; and for verse, exceeded the best poets of her time; besides this she was a perfect beauty, and all her fine qualifications were crowned with solid virtue" (p. 10).

Another impression of the beauty of Eastern women evolved from his readings of Lady Mary Montagu's letters in which she describes the Turkish women as "exactly proportioned as ever any goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or with ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces" (p. 59). Montagu also mentions that, "It is surprising to see a young woman that is not very handsome. They have naturally the most beautiful complexions in the world and generally large black eyes" (p.70). And when for some Western readers of Byron's Oriental tales, female veils may detach Eastern women from their freedom and rights, Montagu finds veils a source of both freedom and liberation. She states "it is very easy to see they have more liberty than we have ... no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street. This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery" (p.71).

But for Byron, female beauty isn't only restricted to physical charm; it is also embedded in the spiritual beauty of the soul—here I do not use the religious connotation of the term "spiritual"; I rather use it to refer to tender and divine-like emotions and loyalty. Byron finds in Eastern women a strong personality endowed with respect, wisdom, and power. In a letter to Henry Drury, Byron expresses his enchantment with Tarsia Macri, who welcomed him in her house despite the poverty of her husband.

She stayed devoted to her marriage and never neglected any responsibilities towards her three daughters, three Greek beauties competing with the Greek goddesses.

In the *Giaour*, Byron describes Leila's physical and spiritual charm:

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 beam'd forth in every spark
That darted from beneath the lid,
Bright as the jewel of Giamschid.

...

On her fair cheek's unfading hue,
The young pomegranate's blossoms strew
Their bloom in blushes ever new—
Her hair in hyacinthine flow
When left to roll its folds below,
As midst her handmaids in the hall
She stood superior to them all,

...

Thus rose fair Leila's whiter neck: —
Thus armed with beauty would she check
Intrusion's glance, till Folly's gaze
Shrunk from the charms it meant to praise.
Thus high and graceful was her gait;
Her heart as tender to her mate—

(I, 55,475–516)

Naji Oueijan mentions in his book *A compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron's Oriental Tale* that “Like most Eastern woman of the day, she [Leila] has been trained since childhood to obey and acquiesce rather than to act and choose” (p.114). I totally agree that Eastern women were and still are trained to obey their husbands with purity, loyalty and respectfulness. However, Leila violates her upbringing when she breaks all traditions through her love to Giaour. And because she revolts, she is doomed. Oueijan notes that Leila “has lived her life as a passive figure secluded from the world around her, and when she tries to choose and to become active, when she chooses her own lover, her society condemns her” (p.114). Hassan's superficial love and marriage to Leila is evident in that after Leila's death, he directly prepares for another marriage. And even though Leila's death prevents her from building a life with Giaour, she stands superior to her society by courageously liberating herself from a non-love relationship via death.

In *The Bride of Abydos*, Zuleika is described as “beau ideal,” whose physical, spiritual, and mental charms spark through her eyes:

Fair—as the first that fell of womankind—

...

Soft—as the memory of buried love—
Pure—as the prayer which Childhood wafts above—

...

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—
And, oh! that eye was in itself a Soul!

(IV, 112, 167–189)

Medora's beauty in the *Corsair* is another alluring charm streaming from her large eyes, which reflect the passion and tenderness of her soul and spirit. Medora's deep blue eyes reflect love, purity, and loyalty. Before Conrad leaves her to sail the sea:

He dared not raise to his that deep-blue eye,
Which downcast drooped in tearless agony.
Her long fair hair lay floating o'er his arms,
In all the wildness of disheveled charms;
Scarce beat that bosom where his image dwelt
So full—that feeling seemed almost Unfelt!

(XIV, 166,468–473)

Medora's passion and loyalty to Conrad is evident when she keeps the flame of beacon fire lest Conrad is misguided in the sea.

Still would I rise to rouse the beacon fire,
Lest spies less true should let the blaze expire.

(XIV, 163,370–374)

This substantiates Medora's suffering and self torture which she endures during the absence of her lover and proves more her loyalty to Conrad. Besides her utmost devotion to her lover, Medora is an educated lady who can play guitar and tell tales of Ariosto to Conrad:

Or my guitar, which still thou lov'st to hear,
Shall soothe or lull—or, should it vex thine ear,
We'll turn the tale, by Ariosto told,
Of fair Olympia loved and left of old.

(XIV, 165, 437–440)

Thus Byron defies the distorted images of Eastern women as uneducated, erotic, and passive. In the *Corsair*, Gulnare's fairy-like allure is again reflected through her eyes:

That form, with eye so dark, and cheek so fair,

And auburn waves of gemmed and braided hair;

With shape of fairy lightness –naked foot,

That shines like snow, and falls on earth as mute”

(XII, 184,402–405).

Gulnare’s “fairy lightness” and her courageous, liberal, and wise actions and her decency defy the typical images of Eastern females in Western eyes. As a decent woman she refrains from seducing Conrad after saving him from prison although she falls in love with him because she is aware that his heart belongs to Medora. Gulnare’s spiritual charm surpasses her physical beauty reflected in her eyes, and her wisdom is that of a philosopher when she proclaims: “I felt—I feel—love dwells with—with the free” (XIII, 188,501—502). As a slave, Gulnare cannot love her master, Seyd; and her choice to free Conrad is a choice to free herself from slavery and to love freely and decently. Byron’s description of Gulnare recalls in many ways his description of Haideein *Don Juan* Canto III:

Her hair's long auburn waves down to her heel
Flow'd like an Alpine torrent which the sun
Dyes with his morning light...

...

Round her she made an atmosphere of life,
The very air seem'd lighter from her eyes,
They were so soft and beautiful, and rife
With all we can imagine of the skies,
And pure as Psyche ere she grew a wife ——
Too pure even for the purest human ties;
Her overpowering presence made you feel
It would not be idolatry to kneel.
Her eyelashes, though dark as night, were tinged
(It is the country's custom), but in vain;
For those large black eyes were so blackly fringed,
(III, 184, 577—605).

Haidee’s beautiful hair and eyes resemble those of Gulnare, both being described as fairies living in mythical world and not in reality. By this Byron raises their beauty to the beauty of Greek goddesses invading the Westerners’ dreams and visions. Like Gulnare, Haidee’s courage and love pushes her to save Don Juan although she is aware of the dangers associated with her act. As Eastern females, Gulnare and Haidee sacrifice their lives to preserve their fidelity for love. Who would not be fascinated by such females? And who is better than Byron to describe Eastern female beauty which combines all that he missed in his Western female lovers except perhaps Teresa Guicciardi, who, though Italian, was also adorned by Eastern beauty?

As a conclusion, Byron excels on his description of Eastern female characters due to their corporal and spiritual beauty, which complete each other to form unique female charms. The sincere emotions of Eastern females for their lovers portray them

as exclusive women, and their active actions and lively personality proves their power of conquering the whole society with generosity, loyalty and respectfulness.

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