

Eastern Superstition in Byron's *The Giaour*

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Abstract

Lord Byron, during his years of fame, wrote a lot about what goes on in the East especially through *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, and *The Bride of Abydos*. In these poems, Lord Byron highlights some of the Eastern customs. This paper will attempt to recognize the source of Lord Byron's insight to these customs through relating the experiences he faced during his two year stay in the East to his knowledge of the customs he portrays in his work. Through his journals and correspondence, this paper will link his life to his work and will concretize the authenticity of his knowledge of the Eastern customs and his admiration of the way of life of the Easterners.

Eastern Superstition in Byron's *The Giaour*

During his years of fame, Lord Byron wrote all of his Oriental tales *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and *The Siege of Corinth* all of which expose various aspects of Oriental life and culture. Byron highlights Eastern customs and traditions in an effort to introduce to the West a different world with a peculiar culture. But as several Byron scholars such as Naji Oueijan, Nigel Leask, Mohammed Sharafuddin, and Abdur Raheem Kidwai have already discussed various aspects of Orientalism in Byron's works, this paper will emphasize Oriental superstitions, specifically in *The Giaour*. In addition to comparing the superstitions portrayed in the tales to the practiced superstitions in the East, this paper will attempt to recognize the source of Byron's insight to the traditions and will refer to his personal experiences in the East to concretize his authenticity.

Byron wrote his Oriental tales after his grand tour during which he visited the Eastern countries of Turkey, Albania, and Greece. Therefore, in order to best reflect on his authenticity in portraying Eastern superstitions, an understanding of the superstitions mentioned in his works is essential. Easterners in the nineteenth century

lived a life that was colored by the various superstitions they took to heart and abided by, for they believed in the evil eye, foretelling the future, good luck charms, and the existence of various supernatural beings that intervened in the daily lives of humans. The above-mentioned superstitions are not the only superstitions that the peoples of the East hold but reflect on what is most relevant to the superstitions dealt with by Byron.

Eastern superstitions are most portrayed in *The Giaour*, but they show up in some of the other tales as well. The belief in the evil eye is the most common in the East as the Turkish people, Greeks, and Albanians practice it. The evil eye is expressed in *The Giaour* through Hassan's and the Fisherman's belief in it. In fact, Hassan believes that the Giaour's evil eye is what facilitated his betrayal as he says: "I know him by the evil eye/That aids his envious treachery" (Oueijan, 1999, p.142). In Turkey, the evil eye is called a *saffah* (Dankoff, 1975, p.75). The Turkish people of the nineteenth century believed that an envious look, especially from a blue-eyed person, could cast a spell on the recipient and lead to misfortunes and harm (A to Z, p. 382). However, and according to their beliefs, the evil eye does not terminate one's good luck as he/she can protect himself/herself using an amulet called the *NazarBoncuk* (A to Z, p. 382) which is usually a blue eye glass bead that absorbs evil (Hacaoglu, 2000, p.16). The Greeks, on the other hand, call the evil eye *metiasma*. In Greece, it is believed, in a very similar way to in Turkey, that a look of malice or jealousy might cause the recipient harm such as accidents, injuries, misfortunes, and even death. Protection against this superstition includes not showing newborn babies to the public eye for the first 40 days, rubbing dirt on the face of older children, carrying garlic around one's person, wearing a charm, and spitting. The charm is an amulet called *badastraya*; it is a blue glass with a black dot in the middle making it look like an eye that mirrors and counters the evil eye. This amulet is drawn on the Greek battle ships showing that this superstition has been around for more than 2000 years. (A to Z, p. 150) The Albanians also believe in the evil eye and believe that protection against it comes from the *dordolec* or scarecrow, which is the Albanian equivalent to the amulet. (A to Z, p.9). Byron portrays the use of the above

mentioned amulets to ward off evil in *The Bride of Abydos* though a description of Zuleika during which her mother's amulet is described (Byron, 1981, l.551).

Foretelling the future shows in *The Giaour* as well, for reading the future which is stamped on one's brow is just a form of the foretelling that the Easterners practice. In the tale, the Giaour's future is shown to be set on his brow through "It breathes the same dark spirit now,/As death were stamped upon his brow" (Byron, 1981, ll.797-798) and "To thee, old man, my deeds appear:/ I read abhorrence on thy brow,/And this too was I born to bear!" (Byron, 1981, l. 1160-1162). In Turkey, diviners are very common as the Turkish people believe in the ability to foretell one's future (Dankoff, 1975, p.76) which is practiced, here, through reading the Giaour's brow. Moreover, the Greeks believe in various means of predicting the future; for example, it is thought that the length of the lines on one's palm reflect the length of his/her life (A to Z, p. 152). The Easterners also believe in charms that help them slightly manipulate their future through gaining them good luck. In *The Siege of Corinth*, the belief is shown through the success attracting charms as "[t]he well-worn charms success was sure to snatch. All was ripe-he waits but to proclaim/ His close but glittering casque, and sable plume" (Byron, 1981, ll. 854-855). The use of amulets in all three countries has been discussed alongside the evil eye; however, the Greeks also used talismans to attract good luck for the *filatha* (talismans) go beyond the *badastraya* to gold medallions, sachets with minced olives, and various charms that are carried in order to attract good fortune to the holder (A to Z, p. 153).

The existence of Jinn, is also discussed in Byron's tales through the Fisherman's discussion of the bundle's sinking into the sea in *The Giaour* : "And all its hidden secrets sleep,/ Known but to Genii of the deep" (Byron, 1981, ll.384-385). Jinns are also discussed in *The Bride of Abydos* through the mentions of Peri, which is Persian for Jinn. The first time peri are mentioned is during Giaffir's praise of his daughter, Zuleika (Byron, 1981, l.151), and the second mention is when Selim praises Zuleika (Byron, 1981, l.567). Easterners believe in Jinn which, in the legends of the East, is a spirit that communicates with humans and the Divine (Oueijan, 1999, p.106). The Turks,

moreover, categorize these spirits into various parties called *ahzab*. An example of these is the *B B M-ciwi*, a group of jinn that fight the night before a battle and predict the outcomes (Dankoff, 1975, p.74). Jinns are not the only beings the Easterns believe in for they believe in Gouls and Afrits as well. In *The Giaour*, this belief manifests as when the Giaour's fate is being told, he is said to end up residing with the Gouls and Afrits until even they get repelled by his malice. Go--and with Gouls and Afrits rave;/Till these in horror shrink away/ From Spectre more accursed than they! (Byron, 1981, ll.784-786). In *The Corsair*, the Afrit is portrayed when the king realizes that they have been attacked, His close but glittering casque, and sable plume,/ More glittering eye, and black brow's sabler gloom,/ Glared on Moslem's eyes some Afrit sprite (Byron, 1981, ll.753-755). The term Afrit is a general term that refers to any jinn, giant, demon, or monster (Oueijan, 1999, p.97). The belief of the Easterners in mythical creatures, therefore, dictates their believing in Afrits. The Goul, on the other hand, is a kind of goblin the Turks believe in. They believe that a Goul strikes a person when he/she is alone in a deserted place (Dankoff, 1975, p.74).

The existence of vampires is also widespread in the East and is not only portrayed in Byron's *The Giaour*, but also discussed by Byron in his notes. The mention of Vampires comes with the curse that shall fall on the Giaour in his becoming a vampire: But first, on earth as Vampire sent,/Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent (Byron, 1981, ll.755-756). Vampires are a common belief in the East especially in both the Greek and Albanian cultures. The Greek name for vampires is *vrykolas*. The origin of the vampires in Greek mythology comes with the myth of Lamia (A to Z, p. 152). Vampires also exist amongst the Albanian superstitions in that they believe in two variations. The first is the *Kukuhdi*, which is the vampire that is fully grown and lives at home during the day; it is not even forced to return to its grave. The second type is the *Lugat* or *Sampiro* which is believed to be a vampire that does not kill but simply drinks some of its victim's blood. They believed that some of the Albanians with Turkish descent were doomed to become vampires after their deaths and roam the streets at night spreading chaos (A to Z, p. 10). The vampire the Giaour is cursed to become is related mostly to the

Albanian of Turkish origin who turns into a vampire after death and not because of having been bitten.

The portrayed superstitions are accurate; moreover, Byron manages to portray them well due to his accumulated knowledge of the East through his readings and experiences. Among his readings of the East, Byron read *Vathek* and the *Bibliothèque Orientale* (Oueijan, 1999, p.64) from which he gained great insight to the superstitions of the East. In the *Vathek*, Byron learnt of the evil eye for when Vathek was angry one of his eyes became so terrible that no person could bear to behold it, and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired (Beckford, 1868, p.19). He also learnt of diviners through Carathis's readings of the stars such as when she reminded her son of the promise which the stars had made him, and intimated an intention of consulting them again (Beckford, 1868, p.32). Byron's knowledge of Jinn, Gouls, and Afrits also stems from the *Vathek* as they are all mentioned in the novel. In the *Bibliothèque Orientale*, Byron learnt of the Afrits that intervene in the matters of the earth (Barthélemy, 1776, p.258) and of the Genie who are the Jinn in that they are angels that link the earthly to the divine (Barthélemy, 1776, p. 687). In addition, this encyclopedia gave Byron insight to the Easterners' belief in the ability to predict the future (Barthélemy, 1776, p.206).

Byron's knowledge of the East was refined by his experiences there for he portrays the superstitions with the perspective of an Easterner. This perspective was made authentic through Byron's time amongst the holders of these beliefs and his desire to learn more than what one would learn if he/she had only academic interest in a culture. Therefore, through truly living amongst the Easterners, Byron became capable of being valid in his portrayal of their superstitions. For example, Byron learned of the Easterners' belief in the Amulets and how dearly they hold this belief to their hearts through meeting a wearer of an Amulet as Hobhouse mentions in his diary, on the 7th of October 1809, an amulet which was on the neck of Bey and which no one could touch (Hobhouse, p.61). Also, Byron learned how true the Easterners are to the evil eye belief on May 29, 1810 for Hobhouse mentions their encounter with the evil eye in Constantinople where the

Sultan hides in a little wooden chamber from the eyes of his people (Hobhouse, p.242). Moreover, as the tales are based on experiences Byron underwent during his time in the East, he manages to portray, through the responses the natives had and how they referred to their superstitions in the various situations, genuine character responses in the tales. For example, since Byron based *The Giaour* on his hearing of 12 Grecian women being drowned as they were accused of distracting Ali Pasha from his wife (Oueijan, 1999, p.64) and his saving a Turkish girl from being sewn into a bag and drowned for suspicion of illicit love (Oueijan, 1999, p. 63), he is capable of portraying how the general population might have referred to superstitions in such situations. He can portray how they might consider one's evil eye to be a facilitator in his/her sinning and how they believed that what has happened and will happen has been stamped on the person's brow. His being part of the society at the time it faced the above-mentioned incidents also allowed him to portray how the people believed that Jinn might accompany cherished objects on their path to being drowned. Moreover, the cursing the Giaour was recipient of, represents the references to Gouls, Afrits, and one's becoming a vampire someone might hear Easterners pronounce as they curse someone who might have caused one of their own women to go rogue. Similarly, Byron writes to John Galt that *The Bride of Abydos* was drawn from observations of [his] and to Lord Holland that it is [his] story and [his] East (Oueijan, 1999, p. 64). Therefore, the tale is based on events he might have witnessed. Consequently, Byron's insight to the superstitions he mentioned in *The Bride of Abydos*, allows him to be able to reliably portray the use of Jinn in describing a woman and the use of amulets to protect someone from the evil eye as a beautiful woman would wear them to ward off said evil eyes. Likewise, *The Corsair* was written con amore, and much from existence (Oueijan, 1999, p.64); therefore, Byron is capable of portraying how an Easterner might refer to an Afrit in his/her cursing upon receiving terrible news. Also, Byron's portrayal of *The Siege of Corinth* reflects on the orally exchanged version of the historical event (Oueijan, 1999, p.67) and allows him to portray how the Easterners might have believed that a good luck charm would bring its wearer success.

B B B B B B B B B B B B B Through the recognition of the accuracy of the superstitions portrayed in the tales, their compatibility to the practiced superstitions in the East, and the legitimate background that allowed Byron such insight to the Superstitions, one cannot but accept the superstitions portrayed in the tales as true. Moreover, upon reading these tales, one accepts Byron's genuine interest in the culture and life of the Easterners for he, although raised in the West and could have easily assumed a judgmental view to a set of beliefs that might seem absurd to an outsider, accepts the superstitions as facts in Easterners' lives. However, his accepting the differences that lay between him and the people he loved greatly does not imply his belief in Eastern superstitions, for even though he does not belittle their practices, he does not take part in them or offer negative judgments about them.

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