

Byron's Politics in "The Giaour": A Socio-Political Speculation

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"Revolutions are not to be made with Rose-water"
(Lord Byron 1819)

ABSTRACT

Historically, Europe was fearful of the remarkably swift expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. And it was not until the middle of the 18th century that the brutal struggle between Europeans and Turks ended; but the West then still situated Turkey in an indelible, despotic frame despite the fact that some scholars instigated an interest in Oriental culture. Western literature had for centuries portrayed the East in an aggressive and bigoted manner; this hostile perception distanced the West from the Orient. A new political situation prevailed as the West began a political propaganda to dominate the weak East; that political and even literary propaganda was the main thrust for the Western colonial ambitions. Several British men of letters directly or indirectly contributed to this propaganda during the 18th and 19th centuries, but not Lord Byron, who used his Oriental tales, and specifically "The Giaour," to broaden his political horizon in order to re-evaluate both state and global affairs and to reveal to Eastern and Western readers his impartial stance towards European and Turkish policies. In this work, I contend that Byron's political ideology was prompted by not only an idealistic Romantic spirit but also by a realistic one, as well. And although "The Giaour" is political par excellence, yet it does not reveal any colonial, imperial schemes, contrary to what a number of critics think. Peter Cochran believes that "The Giaour" is "... a metaphor for western imperialist expansion into and forcible domination of eastern countries" (Cochran *Byron and Orientalism* 2), while deceitfully supporting nations desiring autonomy in the Occident. Cochran discerns in Byron's tale the Western longing for subjugating and governing the East. This study, however, proves that Byron's 1st Oriental tale after his return from his 1st Oriental tour is emblematic of his concern with liberalism and with admiration for the East, thus deviating from the popular imperialism that existed at the time.

Keywords: Lord Byron; "The Giaour"; Byron's political ideology concerning the East; anti-imperialistic tale; liberalism

1. INSTILLING THE SPIRIT OF GREEK NATIONALISM AND REVOLUTION

The primary political implication of "The Giaour" involves Greek nationalism and liberation. Byron's passion for self-governance and independence existed before he embarked on a grandiose Eastern tour. He abhorred any facets of imperialism, totally siding with repressed nations; indeed, he was "... a generous liberal who hated tyranny and believed in

national independence” (Sharafuddin 243). He supported self-autonomy of any subjugated country whether Portugal under the rule of France, Italy under Austria, or Greece under Turkey. During his journey to Athens and at the end of 1809, Byron came to realize the extent to which Greek people despised their Ottoman tyrants and their profound yearning for freedom. Byron mentioned in 1812, in an appendix to the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, his resolute belief concerning the Turkish occupation of Greece:

The Greeks will never be independent; they will never be sovereigns as heretofore, and God forbid that they ever should! But they may be subjects without being slaves. Our colonies are not independent, but they are free and industrious, and such may Greece be hereafter. (qtd. in Rumore 4)

In “The Giaour,” Byron exposes his fervent advocacy of the political, historical, and social destiny of the subdued Greeks. He demonstrates an utter engagement in its liberation. As the tale starts, Byron mourns and evokes the Athenian hero who sacrifices his life for Greek independence: “No breath of air to break the wave/ That rolls below the Athenian’s grave,/ That tomb which, gleaming o’er the cliff” (ll. 1-3). Byron is excessively agitated witnessing the downfall of Greece, lamenting the ruins of its past and his inability to act. Byron wonders if another Greek hero would readily grasp the torch of emancipation and assume a similar sacrificial role: “When shall such hero live again?” (l. 6).

The poet juxtaposes Greece’s pleasant and moderate climate with the bitter and hostile Ottomans’ invasion: “Fair clime! where every season smiles/.../ And lust and rapine wildly reign,/ To darken o’er the fair domain./ It is as though the fiends prevail’d” (ll. 7, 60-63). Byron compares climate to the deteriorating political situation of a dying country. Greece is seemingly dead, devoid of an uplifting soul: “ ‘Tis Greece- but living Greece no more!” (l. 91). Byron enhances the the Greek scene by using a metaphor associating the Greek islands with a freshly deceased person: “Hers is the loveliness in death,/ That parts not quite with parting breath;/ But beauty with that fearful bloom,/ That hue which haunts it to the tomb” (ll. 94-96). He conceives that the sole way for this dead person to become a Lazarus is through struggling for freedom:

“For Freedom’s battle once begun,/ Bequeathed by bleeding Sire to Son,/ Though baffled oft is ever won./ Bear witness, Greece, thy living page,/ Attest it many a deathless age!” (ll. 123-127).

From the above, the reader conjectures Byron’s ideal political philosophy; he is entirely against warfare, cruelty, and domination and is instead involved in liberating colonized nations. Byron is opposed to English or European political plans pertaining to dominance and conquest (Watkins 97), despising all forms of domestic and foreign subjugation. Once, Byron wrote to Thomas Moore, “... I am sick at heart of politics and slaughters...” (qtd. in Foot 166). Paul Trueblood asserts that Byron highlights the essence of revolution, appealing directly to the emotions of socially subdued people. Byron stirs the national spirit of revolt, urging oppressed folks to rise against their tyrannical governments (“Byron’s Championship” 25-26). In Paul Stock’s account, it was in 1820 that Byron first became involved in Greece’s independence, subsequently initiating “this association of liberty with revolution and national self-determination” (126).

Using “The Giaour” as a political medium, Byron raises his rebellious voice and calls for emancipation from oppression: “Pronounce what sea, what shore is this?/ The gulf, the

rock of Salamis! / These scenes-their story not unknown- / Arise, and make again your own; / Snatch from the ashes of your sires / The embers of their former fires” (ll. 112-117).

The scope of his political prophecy or vision is a revolution, which would advocate social and political reform. The poet naturally, astutely and prophetically discerns the course of action of tyrannized people. Daniel Watkins asserts that Byron “...believed himself to be writing more for the future than for the moment” (p. 96). In his *Letters and Journals*, Byron notifies his readers “...mark what I now say, that the time will come when these will be preferred to any I have before written” (qtd. in Watkins 96). In the same fashion, Professor Talmon assures that Byron is “the prophet and law-giver of revolutionary Romanticism on the Continent” (qtd. in Trueblood “Byron’s Championship” 33).

*All quoted lines from “The Giaour” are taken from Jerome J. McGann’s edition of Byron’s works (volume III).

As a Romantic poet, Byron values the concept of revolution and vehemently projects it in the tale. Byron warns, “There is no freedom, even for Masters, in the midst of slaves: it makes my blood boil to see the thing. As to the political slavery... it is man’s own fault; if they will be slaves, let them! Yet this is but a word and a blow” (*BLJ* 451). This idea is highlighted in “The Giaour.” Byron is exasperated with compliant Greeks - submissive to Turkish despotism - exhibiting no symptoms of revolt: “’Twere long to tell, and sad to trace, / Each step from splendour to disgrace, /... / Yes! Self-abasement pav’d the way / To villain-bonds and despot-sway” (ll. 136-137, 140-141).

He despises their servile attitude vis-a-vis their oppressors; Byron concludes that Greek passivity led to their subjugation: “The fiery souls that might have led / Thy sons to deeds sublime; / Now crawl from cradle to the grave, / Slaves-nay, the bondsmen of a slave, / And callous, save to crime;” (ll. 148-152). He hectors Greeks to be inspired by their glorious past and assail their tyrants: “Clime of the unforgotten brave! / Whose land from plain to mountain-cave / Was Freedom’s home or Glory’s grave- /... / Approach thou craven crouching slave- /... / Oh servile offspring of the free- /... / Arise, and make again your own; /... / That Tyranny shall quake to hear, /... / Enough-no foreign foe could quell /... Thy soul...” (ll. 103-105, 108, 111, 115, 120, 138-139). The poet deploys his fiery discourse to animate and embolden Greek patriotism. Byron penetrates the minds of readers pinning for liberty; he sensed that the Greeks were capable of uniting and resisting the brutal, despotic Ottoman rule. He did not assume that Western nations would aid Greece in their effort to attain political justice.

In June 19, 1823, as Byron ventured on his last trip to aid the Greek rebellion, he wrote: “The dead have been awakened - shall I sleep? / The world’s at war with tyrants - shall I crouch? / The harvest’s ripe - and shall I pause to reap? / I slumber not; the thorn is in my couch; / Each day a trumpet soundeth in mine ear, / Its echo in my heart” (*BLJ* 15).

Byron’s voice sounded throughout Europe: Italy, Spain, Greece, Germany and France resorted to violence in order to attain freedom from cruelty and oppression.

*Most quotations from Byron’s letters and journals are taken from Peter Cochran, ed., *Byron’s Correspondence and Journals* 2012 referred to as *BLJ*. Retrieved from: <http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/02-meterranean-1809-181126.pdf>

The strident voice of Byron, “the veritable poet-laureate of political freedom” (Trueblood “Byron’s Championship” 33), powerfully reverberated to inspire the enslaved and speak on their behalf.

At the start of the 19th century, Byron’s “antidespotic” Eastern tales were “much translated and widely circulated on the Continent... to appeal to the emotions of the

politically submerged and to stimulate rebellion against established régimes of whatever variety” (Trueblood “Byron’s Championship” 25). Byron has faith in the power of maltreated people and anticipates fervent uprisals. His prophecy revealed on January 13, 1821 is encapsulated in the following lines: “The king-times are fast finishing. There will be blood shed like water, and tears like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it” (*BLJ* 26). He not only inspires the oppressed Greeks to rise from under Ottoman rule, but provokes all tyrannized nations to liberate their countries from autocracy. He represents an icon of freedom and a “tower of strength,” to use Professor Trueblood’s term, to the subjugated nations at large. Eventually, Byron “the political Revolutionary” historical champion becomes “an icon of political rebellion, almost from China to Peru” to employ Peter Cochran’s words (Cochran *Byron’s Romantic* 8).

Byron is consistent in his political pronouncements and opinions. He cements his anti-imperialistic stance not only in “The Giaour”: “Arise, and make again your own;/ Snatch from the ashes of your sires/ The embers of their former fires” (ll. 115-117) but also in the second Canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. In the latter work he urges Greeks to rise similar to the Sphinx and dethrone the Turks: “When riseth Lacedemon’s hardihood,/ When Thebes’ Epaminondas rears again,/ When Athens’ children are with hearts endued,/ When Grecian mothers shall give birth to men,/ Then may’st thou be restored; but not till then” (ll. xxxv). Mirella Billi believes that Byron sides with the tyrant Ottomans and not the beleaguered Greeks (7). This study entirely disagrees with Billi’s notion. Byron evidently supports the justice of politically and socially subjugated people, accordingly siding with the feeble against their oppressors.

2. DIVERSITY

Another political perspective that is emphasized in “The Giaour” is diversity. I concur with Mohammed Sharafuddin who believes that Romantic poets are blatantly and wholly against Western dominance over the East. Led by Rousseau and Burke, Romanticism promotes the understanding of other cultures. The movement believes in embracing other cultures; thus, writers believed in globalization and universalism, not in tyrannical authority (qtd. in Oueijan “Futile Encounters” 194). In fact, there was a benevolent “... tolerance and cultural pluralism inherent in the Ottoman Empire itself, one that allows simultaneous identities to coexist peacefully” (Gawrych 519). Byron was aware that Christians and Muslims shared parallel and comparable tasks, existing harmoniously together (*BLJ* 229).

The presence of cultural diversity is significantly evident in the tale. The Giaour is an Islamic name for an unfaithful Christian. Byron places Hassan (a Muslem Turk), Leila (a Circassian) and the Giaour (a Christian Venetian) in one frame, freezing them in a “triangular love-hate relationship” (Peterson 32-33). This love/hate relationship is in the context of the cultural diversity that existed in Turkey at that time. This image is entirely opposite to the barbaric view of an Islamic East; hence, Byron ‘reconstructs’ or adjusts the faulty image drawn by the West of the East. Byron embraces multiculturalism, situating his characters in a pluralistic environment where they coexist but retain their individual identities.

According to Malcolm Kelsall, Venice at one point becomes “the meeting place of Occident and Orient in a direct imperial and religious conflict” after the triumph of Napoleon who dominated Venice in 1797 (245-248); consequently, Venice becomes the melting pot of contradictions: “empire and colony, Christianity and Islam, freedom and tyranny” (Stock 124). The Giaour is a typical intricate and mysterious Venetian figure who embraces the traits

of both a Christian and Muslim at the same time. The tale describes him this way: “-His Christian crest and haughty mien” (l. 256). He seeks confession from a monk and enjoins that the cross be placed on his tomb. Other features in the tale render him a Muslim; he entreats Allah and not God: “One cry to Mahomet for aid./ One prayer to Allah- all he made” (ll. 1082-1083); “... Love indeed is light from heaven-/.../ With angels shar’d- by Alla given” (ll. 1131, 1133). He refuses to partake of “the scared bread and wine” (l. 815) and staunchly believes that man’s destiny is carved on his forehead since his birth. According to Naji Oueijan, the Giaour’s “religious creed falls half-way between Christianity and Islam” (*The Progress* 103).

In the tale, various religions, nationalities, and cultural backgrounds are traceable. Byron exhibits diversity by exposing religious and cultural differences, which he admires equally, this is why Byron does not leave room for unrealistic and European superiority.

3. BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

In fact, in “The Giaour,” Byron does not display any intentional, conscious discrepancy between the Orient and the Occident. Throughout his amicable encounter with Ali Pasha and fascination with the grandeur of Turkish/Albanian life and culture, Byron demonstrates his significantly positive notions concerning the Orient. By expressing his appreciation of Muslim or Eastern generosity, Byron reveals great sensitivity and openness towards other ethnicities. He provides ample evidence that the Ottoman culture is not subordinate but equal to other cultures. This charitable, benevolent Oriental icon drawn in the poet’s creative mind in “The Giaour” is projected in Hassan, who is Ali Pasha’s sequel. Hassan is portrayed as a very hospitable and generous pasha. After his death, his mansion is empty: “No serf is seen in Hassan’s hall;/ The lonely Spider’s thin grey pall/.../ The wild-dog howls o’er the fountain’s brim,/ With baffled thirst, and famine, grim” (ll. 289-290, 295-296), and its door is no longer open to welcome the needy who used to frequent his palace seeking food and shelter: “Nor there the Fakir’s self will wait;/ Nor there will wandering Dervise stay,/ For Bounty cheers not his delay;/ Nor there will weary stranger halt/ To bless the sacred ‘bread and salt’./.../ For Courtesy and Pity died/ With Hassan on the mountain side.-/ His roof-that refuge unto men-/ Is Desolation’s hungry den” (ll. 339-343, 346-348). In several instances, Byron displays a singularly positive image of the East; his vision is unlike the barbaric, despotic, and bigoted mental picture of Muslim Easterners that prevailed in Western minds. He stresses his admiration by saying “...[t]he Ottomans, with all their defects, are not a people to be despised... they are *not* treacherous, they are *not* cowardly, they do *not* burn heretics, they are *not* assassins, nor has an enemy advanced to *their* capital” (qtd. in Hyssen 52-53).

Critics influenced by Said’s *Orientalism* believe that the clash between Hassan and the Giaour is symbolic of the endless battle between the Orient and the Occident, a fight whose main contention is Eastern domination by the West (qtd. in Oueijan “Futile Encounters” 194). This study wholly disagrees with this assessment; the portrayal of a rigid East/West dichotomy is not promoted in “Giaour.” Byron neither sympathizes with Hassan nor with Giaour or any political representative in the tale - no character claims victory at the tale’s end.

Eastern Hassan, representing Muslim dignity, and Western Giaour, representing Christian farfetched romantic love, are both punished at the end for the violation of their religious code. First, Hassan’s destiny is no doubt hell: “But his shall be a redder grave” (l. 676). God won’t sympathize with Hassan because he ends his wife’s life and although “He call’d on Alla,” God wouldn’t answer his disloyal prayer that “Arose unheeded or unheard” (l.

682). In the same fashion, the Giaour is equally unfaithful to his religion since he plans to flee with a married woman consequent to slaughtering her husband.

The Giaour lives in a state of death: "I wander, father! for my soul/ Is fleeting towards the final goal" (ll. 1281-1282), and if Hassan's torment ends with his death, the Giaour's torment is eternal. It starts on earth and continues until eternity. He is embraced by a wave of depression: "Despair is stronger than my will" (l. 1267) and pessimism: "... his sorrow or disdain/ Forbade him e'er to smile again" (ll. 855-856).

He exists in an eternal void; his life is meaningless. Nothing eases his psychological torture: "I wish'd but for a single tear" (l. 1263); he is unable to confess or repent: "And all my sins and half my woe-/ But talk no more of penitence" (ll. 1201-1202) or pray "And hear the prayer-but utter none" (l. 891). All characters, Eastern and Western, are losers. Consequently, the battle of religions or of territory [McGann contends that since Leila is a Circassian and not Turkish, then she is the emblem of the territory "over which the Turks and the Venetians have been fighting for centuries, and to which neither can have any complete claim" (156)] remains open-ended. The study concurs with Suzan Hyssen that "Byron cements himself into the position of liaison between East and West, between known and unknown" (22). Byron sides neither with the East nor with the West. He assumes a neutral position towards these contradicting poles. Like the Byronic hero, Byron becomes "a homeless figure" or "an alienated outcast" (Sharafuddin 264). Byron accepts the Other, the East, as it is. Byron's exploration of the East authentically discovers the means to acquiring additional knowledge about the Other and representing its culture and tradition. Through building bridges between East and West, Byron provokes the West's interest in Eastern literature, culture and tradition. The poet corrects the distorted image the Western mind possesses about the Orient. He emphasizes in his tale that there exists no such notion as a superior or an inferior nation. There is no genuine discordance between East and West, and the idea of conquering the East by the West is an illusion and misapprehension.

4. CONCLUSION

"The Giaour" possesses an inordinate amount of political value. Byron's foremost political perspective as witnessed in "The Giaour" is correctly placed in its anti-imperial frame. Byron calls for a political dialogue between East and West; the notion of a political conversation negates the concept of imperialism. The relationship between the Occident and Orient should not be viewed as that of a strong entity conquering an effete one. Byron's Oriental tales ought to be perceived as stretching the West to East and appreciating other cultures, thus paving the way to international peace, in contrast to depreciating the Other in order to privilege senseless conflicts. Byron's "The Giaour" is not merely a means of alluding to nefarious British expansion and offering assistance to exploited entities. The holistic insight that Byron attains includes assuming the posture of a transnational delegate of freedom for the dominated, oppressed masses. Political autonomy attained through revolution develops into a steeled tenacity for all tyrannized nations. This notion embodies the specific political dimension "The Giaour" ought to be viewed from.

BIOGRAPHY



Savo Karam, born on July 4, 1972, is Lebanese. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the Lebanese University. She is currently a member of the International Byron Society and an assistant professor at Notre Dame University (NDU), Lebanon - Faculty of Humanities, Department of English, Translation, and Education. Previously, she was a part-time faculty member at the Lebanese American University (Byblos campus) and the Lebanese University (Tripoli). She is experienced in teaching language and literature. She has published an article titled "Truths and Euphemisms: How Euphemisms Are Used in the Political Arena" in *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. She has also published an English-Arabic dictionary entitled *A Current Dictionary*; a teaching booklet called *English for Beginners*; and is the author of a book called *Ameen Fares Rihani: The Multifold Critic*. She participated in various local and international English and Arabic conferences such as "Common Platforms for

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