Lord Byron vis-à-vis Leila: Gender Politics in "Rumour"

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Abstract

In light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988), the present paper suggests an alternative reading of Lord Byron's *The Giaour* (1813). Criticisms of Byron's Turkish tales in the past decades center upon the problematic Orientalist representations of Byron's female characters. However, readings as such can hardly avoid the danger of essentialization.

The paper first explicates the fragmentary and erotic representations of Leila and the gender stereotypes revealed by her counterparts, the Giaour and Hassan. Both the Christian and the Muslim attitudes toward the female sex are ironically placed in juxtaposition, and this subtly destabilizes the shared male gaze of both characters and the fixed value systems of Western/Eastern imperialism/colonialism. As for Leila, aside from being a synecdoche of the racial and gendered other, her "transparent" character is endowed with a narrative function: it is only by retrieving the lost fragments of her subject from various male perspectives can the readers successfully rearrange the entangled plots. Furthermore, Byron's charisma affects his (mostly female) readers so much that the act of reading is eroticized in the imaginary liaisons between the (present) readers and their (absent) celebrity idol, the "sexy" Byron.

Here, Byron shows an exceptional desire for the discerned readers, welcoming their emotional identification (sometimes in pathetic fallacy) with a seductive fictionality. Some critics regard the phenomenon merely as Byron's investment of cultural capital in conspiracy with commodity

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fetishism; nevertheless, such interpretations ignore the positive social effect of Byron's texts. The mechanism of textual reception not only enhances the intimacy between the author and the reader but also connects the private and the public. Byron's popularity, with the reading, sharing, and selling of his works, contains the potentiality of social change. The circulation of Byron's contested texts and ideologies thus offers a locus of signification, where the collective conditions of the Subaltern women in the rest of the world become imaginable.

The Spivakian idea of "rumour" is served as part of the conclusion of the paper. Texts with social significance solicit the readers to observe and elaborate various referential connections in biographical, political, and historical aspects. The sense of "comradeship" in the act of reading belongs to every "transmitter" of a text (Spivak 1988), and so such closeness between the author and the reader might possibly result in actual social action. In a nutshell, *The Giaour* as a "rumour" is rapidly popularized due to its intriguing gender politics and its Romantic dynamics of readership, and it provides a source of connections between Byron's socio-historical present and the quest of political possibilities in the 21st century.

Keywords: *The Giaour*, gender politics, Romantic readership, rumour, Gayatri Spivak

In recent decades, Romantic studies have been affected by postcolonial approaches due to the historical contingency that the Romantic Movement, in a way, marks the socio-historical origins of modern British imperialism and empire. Romantic writers, though not themselves imperialists in a literal sense, are often unconsciously complicit with the domination and exploitation brought forth by the imperialist project. As a major theme in Romantic studies, Romantic Orientalism, with its representation and appropriation of the East, has been celebrated among the Romantics—for the Romantics from the West, the East is served as "a source of imaginative and creative renewal" (Kitson 107). These Romantic Orientalists are desperately in need of "an irrational, sybaritic, passive, feminine, despotic and corrupt" (Kitson 109) counterpart to legitimize their own identities, and the examination of this kind of epistemology has been pivotal in Byron studies.

In the global context of Romantic colonial history, whether the Romantic writers' exoticizing (and eroticizing) the East is downright politically incorrect requires further discussion. In Lord Byron's "Oriental Tales"—*The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), and *Lara* (1814)[1], the ambivalent dynamics between the colonized female subjects and the racially advantaged male protagonists, has long been proved to be "a creative response to Orientalisms as a plural rather than a singular category" (Aravamudan 18).

The paper first explicates the fragmentary and erotic representations of Leila and the gender stereotypes revealed by her counterparts, the Giaour and Hassan. Both the Christian and the Muslim attitudes toward the female sex are ironically placed in juxtaposition, and this subtly destabilizes the shared male gaze of both characters and the fixed value systems of Western/Eastern imperialism/colonialism. As for Leila, aside from being a synecdoche of the racial and gendered other, her "transparent" character is endowed with a narrative function: it is only by retrieving the lost fragments of her subject from a various male perspectives can the readers successfully rearrange the entangled plots. Furthermore, Byron's charisma affects his (mostly female)

[1] A note on the texts: "*CPW* III" refers to Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*.

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Here, Byron shows an exceptional desire for the discerned readers, welcoming their emotional identification (sometimes in pathetic fallacy) with a seductive fictionality. Some critics regard the phenomenon merely as Byron's investment of cultural capital in conspiracy with commodity fetishism; nevertheless, such interpretations ignore the positive social effect of Byron's texts. The mechanism of textual reception not only enhances the intimacy between the author and the reader but also connects the private and the public. Byron's popularity, with the reading, sharing, and selling of his works, contains the potentiality of social change. The circulation of Byron's contested texts and ideologies thus offers a locus of signification, where the collective conditions of the Subaltern women in the rest of the world become imaginable.

Byron's first Turkish tale—*The Giaour* (1813)—fascinates the contemporary readers with its exotic elements of the East and narrative sophistication. One of the intriguing facts concerning the moulding of the female character Leila: Unlike the relatively alive, active, or even "phallic" (Giuliano 786) female characters in the later tales (e.g. Gulnare in *The Corsair*), Leila has already perished when the story begins, but she maintains a peculiar "absent presence." This textual fact, however, cannot be too easily seen as the author's pretext for easier plot development.[2]

Leila's characterization is ironically equivocal owing to the fact that she is basically represented by all the rest of the (male) characters in the tale.[3] By such design, Byron subtly destabilizes the social significances of

[2] All of Byron's "Oriental Tales" were written and published after his sudden fame brought by the successful publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. It is thus reasonable for critics to speculate that these tales were composed with economic aim. However, this kind of speculation or accusation oversimplifies the tale and does the author (or the field) no justice.

[3] Leila is passively represented by the Moslem fisherman (Fragments 3-4), the boatman (Fragments 5-6), the narrator (Fragments 7-8, 11-16), Hassan's subjects

the tale. Specifically speaking, through a myriad of fragmented (both stylistically and thematically) representations of the female character, Byron indirectly presents a social critique, problematizing both the Christian and the Islam ideas of woman(hood) by the ironic juxtaposition of the Giaour's and Hassan's[4] stereotypes of women. In a way, the present paper suggests that *The Giaour* challenges the fixed value system of imperialism/colonialism through such interplay of gender.

Jerome McGann's allegorical reading of *The Giaour* indicates the text's tendency not to identify with any straightforward moral or ethical values. The device of "fragments" is regarded as a token of "cultural authenticity" proved by the author Byron's real-life experience; however, such device (in self-dramatization) inevitably reveals a "failure of memory" (McGann 143). In other words, it is a series of translatable (and probably easily fabricated) events. Since the characters of the tale do not necessarily speak for themselves, the readers commonly struggle with the form so as to escape from the confusing plots. In McGann's reading, unfortunately, Leila turns out to exist merely for the well-roundedness of the Giaour's and Hassan's characters.

According to Nigel Leask, the opening invocation of Greece in *The Giaour* connects Greece with Leila's (corporeal) body as an allegorical site (54); i.e., the absent Leila is monumentalized and made present with the help of this narrative of nation. Leila as an icon is double-faceted. She can be regarded as both the site of male desire and the apple of the eyes of the Christian Venetian empire and the Islamic Ottoman empire. In terms of readership, *The Giaour* can thus be understood as Byron's cultural capital invested in a market driven by imperial and colonial imperatives, in Leask's term, "a public corrupted by commodity fetishism" (33).

To fully understand the mechanism behind the representation of Leila as the gender and racial other, the present paper consists of two layers of

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(Fragment 9-10), and the Giaour (Fragments 25-27)—though through his disturbing confession. She is sometimes read as a sheer narrative trope (Leask), but this is not my take on it.

[4] Hassan is Leila's master, a Turkish tyrant.

discourse: First, the problematic, stereotypical representations of this character as a double minority. Second, the socio-historical significance behind the ironic juxtaposition of the gender stereotypes of female from both the East and the West.

The story of *The Giaour* is based on Byron's real-life experience in which he successfully rescued a Turkish woman accused of infidelity (who was said to be his mistress). However, there seems to be an unutterable sense of guilt in his confession after the very event: "L. [Lewis] wondered I did not introduce the situation into *The Giaour*. He may wonder; —he might wonder more at the production being written at all. But to describe the *feelings* of *that situation* were impossible—it is *icy* even to recollect them" (*Letters and Journals* iii. 230). In reality, the girl was rescued; while in Byron's semi-fictional/semi-autobiographical product, the girl fails to survive. Since the overnight success of Byron's first autobiographical narrative epic *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage:A Romaunt*, Byron had taken up an extraordinary experimental mode of narrative that often tantalizes his contemporary readers, and Byron intentionally makes it hard to resist the compulsion of identification. As a means of unreliable self-dramatization, the narrative performs a seductive fictionality which both fascinates and embitters its readers. Tom Mole suggests that this seductiveness is achieved through the poet's mesmerizing descriptions of the Giaour's and Leila's bodies—the "somatic inscription/semioticization" (Mole 66) of the body (as a sheer trope or a significant site of desire), so to speak: "['T]is written on my brow! / There read of Cain the curse and crime, / In characters unworn by time" (*CPW* III, 73).

When it comes to Leila's foiled image in the narrative, it seems rather awkward to say that there is a direct, "standardized" characterization of her. Though Leila is not frequently mentioned by the narrators, the singularity of her textual presence haunts the readers' mind like an omnipresent specter. Nevertheless, this problematic fragmentariness of representation is the gist of the entire tale. The heroine's inconspicuous past has to be painstakingly reconstructed by the readers from considerable male perspectives; unfortunately, during the process, some of the narratives had been vanishing

from the readers'"horizons of expectations" [5] like Leila's sinking, irretrievable corpse. Significant only as an object of desire under the male narrators' and readers' gaze, Leila's imagined purity/chastity has nothing to do with her free will. For instance, she is compared to various exotic plants and animals, as if being lined up with commodities in the craze of Oriental collecting:

> The young pomegranate's blossom's strew
> Their bloom in blushes ever new—
> Her hair in hyacinthine flow
> When left to roll its folds below
> [. . .]
> The cygnet nobly walks the water—
> So moved on earth's Circassia daughter—
> The loveliest bird of Franguestan! (*CPW* III, 55-56)

The "Circassia" and "Franguestan" here are apparently given an Oriental touch. Yet, according to Naji Oueijan, either the material or the metaphysical possession of the Oriental objects makes one "a victim of the illusion of possessing the exotic East" (29). Hence, the exoticized objects of the mysterious Orient should be observed from a safe distance to avoid such illusion. Allegorically, the Orient is adjacent to the sublime, and both of them have the potentiality to incite horror.

Leila's role becomes more ambivalent when Byron poses several ironic juxtapositions of the gender stereotypes of female from both the West (the Giaour) and the East (Hassan). The following section aims to provide a (re-)contextualized overview of the fluid female identities in both the half-imaginary literary scene and the determined historical present. The Foucauldian notion of episteme is pivotal here owing to the fact that "institutions such as theasylum, hospital, or prison function as laboratories for observation of individuals, experimentation with correctional techniques, and acquisition of knowledge for social control" (Best and Kellner 50). How

[5] The term is borrowed from Hans Robert Jauss's theory of reception

these locations are constructed for the individual agents thus summons the multiple *concerns of history*: What exactly has happened in those sites? Who exactly were silenced? What exactly remained in the retelling of the event? By nature, the Ottoman harem depicted in *The Giaour* is certainly among these sites of power/locations of culture "endorsed by transcultural male-bonding" (Wolfson 174).

Coming back to the condition of the agent circumscribed within its location, although Leila's body is transformed into a locus of narration of which the "transgressive sexual desire [of male gaze] sets *The Giaour*'s plot in motion" (Mole 71), her subjectivity is still as fragmented as the narrative itself. Owing to the aforementioned inherent limitation of plots, Leila the Subaltern can never speak for herself, and even her male lover had hindered her from a chance of utterance. In reality, the Giaour's conservative Christian ideal camouflaged by the code of chivalric love further traps Leila into an identity dilemma. For the Giaour, Leila is "the unattainable ideal in his internalized individualistic quest for self-completion" (Franklin 38): "She was my life's unerring light— [. . .] My good, my guilt, my weal, my woe, / My hope on high—my all below" (*CPW* III, 76-77). The voice of the heroine is cryptically suppressed in the Giaour's cultic imagination of his beloved "object" of spiritual ideal. Aside from this egotistic Romantic yearning, the Giaour's attitude toward adultery and marriage falls into the pitfalls of patriarchal hegemony and sexual conservatism. His attitude toward women only appears to be friendlier, and it turns out that he is not so different from Hassan, his enemy:

> And let the fool still prone to range,
> And sneer on all who cannot change—
> Partake his jest with boasting boys,
> I envy not his varied joys—
> [. . .]
> Far—far beneath the shallow maid
> He left believing and betray'd. (*CPW* III, 77)

Commonly represented as the ruthless persecutor of Leila, Hassan is deemed to be the downright antagonist of the story. Intriguingly, Leila and Hassan, albeit represented differently, are the only two characters who share the same fate, ending up in death. Nevertheless, the duplicity/deceptiveness of representation has somehow reversed the power relationship established by the narrative, making Hassan a figure persecuted by the author or the readers of the text. Taking Hassan's "barbaric" Muslim value as a case in point, the author Byron actually attacks it rather fiercely and unjustly[6], but the extravagant sentimentalism of the narrative has in fact neutralized such kind of attack:

> Oh! who young Leila's glance could read
> And keep that portion of his creed
> Which saith, that woman is but dust,
> A soulless toy for tyrant's lust? (*CPW* III, 55).

The embedded Muslimic message that women have no soul—that their purpose of living is only guaranteed by the pleasure of their dominant sex—is sarcastically refuted by the author Byron in an appended note of comment:

> A vulgar error; the Koran allots at least a third of Paradise to well-behaved women; but by for the greater number of Mussulmans interpret the text their own way, and exclude their moieties from heaven. Being enemies to Platonics, they cannot

[6] In the last attached note, Byron recounts a recent event that twelve women are drowned in the name of adultery (*CPW* III, 422-23). He adds no disclaimer of any accurate source. However, the Advertisement bewilderingly opens with "[t]he tale which these disjointed fragments present, is founded upon circumstances now less common in the East then formerly" (*CPW* III, 39). Byron's stance toward this social phenomenon thus cannot be easily ascertained here.

> discern "any fitness of things' in the souls of the other sex, conceiving them to be superseded by the Houris.[7]
> (CPW III, 419)

Sadly, the cultural critic Byron, with his partial knowledge and comment of wishful thinking, fails to give his Western readers a more in-depth investigation of the Islamic history of idea and a more comprehensive interpretation of Koran (Quran). Taken together, his hasty social critique risks the danger of essentialism and reductionism.

Yet, it is no doubt that Leila is still strongly suppressed by Hassan's patriarchal idea of conformity. In other words, Hassan's persecution targeting at Leila conforms to the mores and logics of his race and nation. But I hope to read Hassan not as an individual that can arbitrarily be blamed for all of the hostilities the society imposes on women. If we look at the structural conduciveness of things, the cultural signification of the Turkish harem is surely what influences the reception of *The Giaour*. The role of Leila is attached to "the topos of the Oriental harem" as "a synechdoche [sic.] for the colonial other" (Meyer 659). The harem promises "a sexual space, a voyage away from the dictates of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis" (Kabbani 112). This hybrid location of culture teases out what the West (falsely) conceives of the sexual conditions in the rest of the world, and what the dominant sex believes about the female—the gender other. For Hassan, his harem is his sovereignty and power visualized. Leila is not only "Circassia's daughter" (*CPW* III, 56) but also the rare human-form specimen collected, the "Kashmeer butterfly," "[the] lovely toy so fiercely sought [. . .] with wounded wing, or bleeding breast" (*CPW* III, 52). The exoticized Leila in double inferiority is featured for her twofold role as a passive victim/slave and a sheer property/commodity owned by her patriarchal master. In other

[7] houri (n.)"nymph of Muslim paradise," 1737, from French houri (1650s), from Persian huri "nymph in Paradise," from Arabic haura "to be beautifully dark-eyed," like a gazelle + -i, Persian formative element denoting the singular. (*Online Etymology Dictionary*)

words, the collective East is represented as feminized and effeminate under the hegemony of the masculine and powerful West.[8]

What can we do with these disturbing Oriental representations? What is the purpose of this kind of study—a (post-)colonial study of the "disinterested" Romantic past, lacking tangible connections to the postmodern present? These Oriental representations are not problematic if we regard them as sheer literary tropes. If Byron's readers do consider these materials to be fact-based, or if Byron did intend to make *The Giaour* a response to the contemporary social condition, this kind of dynamics may as well be problematic. I would boldly conjecture that Romantics such as Byron "us[e] the extravagant mediums [sic.] of the Romantic novel and verse romance," introduce thought-provoking ideas worthy of contestation to their contemporary readers, and blend "popular entertainment with political polemic" with an unprecedented "openness to other cultures" (Bohls 163). Most of the time, they still abruptly understand the racial other in an idiosyncratic way—this is something that should always be examined. Nevertheless, their ongoing attempts, in Homi K. Bhabha's words, not only turn "the specifying or localizing process of cultural translation into a complex process of signification" (Bhabha, "Freedom's Basis" 49) but "initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (Bhabha, "Locations of Culture" 1).

If we put this text in conversation with Foucauldian discourse analysis, we see an innate dissymmetry between the male ethics and female ethics (especially among the aristocrats) in ancient Greece that "[a] man's marriage did not restrict him sexually" and that "while the wife belonged to the husband, the husband belonged only to himself" (Foucault, *History, Vol. II*147). The issue of fidelity is never mutual: the female gender is always subordinated to the male gender. Such curious saying by *Against Neaera* doubtlessly bewilders the contemporary readers:

[8] Masculinity and femininity in this delineation do not necessarily correspond to male and female. I would say the major difference actually lies in the roles of the persecutor and the persecuted.

> Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be a faithful guardians of our households. [. . .] [P]leasure is the only thing a courtesan can give; as for the concubine, she is capable of providing the satisfactions of everyday life besides; but only the wife can [. . .] ensure the continuity of the family [owning to her special status]. (Foucault, *History,* Vol. II 143/149)

The gender problems here can be seen in most of Lord Byron's "social texts," in which the virtue promised by legitimate marriage and the fossilized social norms are imposed on the female figures (not only on the wife). The wife's status and "privileges" these writers claimed to be pivotal to the marital relationship are, at best, an excuse that allows the husband to live a life with more choices and much agency. Moreover, the individuality/subjectivity of the female figure has also become the sacrificial lamb of the masculine subject's "aesthetics of existence" (Foucault, *History,* Vol. II 253); i.e., the "techniques of the self." The public is taken care of, while the private is not. The sexual conduct is merely understood "as a moral problem" (Foucault, *History,* Vol. II 183), the personal aspect of it is most of the time ignored.

From a radically diverse perspective, in the feminist light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988), I would like to bring in the theme of "rumour" as part of the conclusion of this essay. If we read Byron's widely-circulated "Oriental Tales" as a type of rumour, what might they do to/for the British literary landscape in the nineteenth-century? Byron's "hermeneutics of intimacy"[9]

[9] This is a concept elucidated in details in Tom Mole's *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (2007). It is in essence the side effect of Byron's *pseudo*-biographical writings which often form *une liaison dangereuse* for Byron's admirers; i.e., an overtly intimate and flirtatious relationship between the readers and the author. Two key factors are required in this special hermeneutic and the accompanied cult: the author's problematic self-revelation and the hidden gesture of welcome from him/her. Mole asserts that this very hermeneutic in Romantic celebrity culture often

calling for a perceptive group of readers (with relatively more knowledge) has an innate tendency toward the destabilization of meaning that "shares a common distancing from a self so that meaning can arise" (Spivak 22). Though *The Giaour* is not the typical type of oral poetry (McGann), it is capable of rapid circulation due to its popularity. Here, the Spivakian mechanism of "rumour" functions accordingly as "the signal characteristic of writing [that] evokes comradeship because it belongs to every "reader' or transmitter [, and therefore] not error but primordially (originarily) errant, always in circulation with no assigned source" (Spivak 23). The "anonymity and transitivity" (Spivak 24) of the circulation of this text as rumour allow its readers to think in-depth about the collective predicament encountered by the women in the Turkish harem. At least, the situation is made known, and the disposal of the inaccurate representations of the East shall be the work after. Byron chose to raise questions through his writing, indirectly generating "object of representation and agent of resistance" (Aravamudan 4). The "Turkish Tales" of Byron do not simply celebrate Western values but create troublesome questions about the relationships between cultures and the processes of economic, military and imperial expansion. And this fact leaves us to the central concern of history—this mutable idea with few certainties: How can we avoid making mistakes by knowing the past? How can we challenge the authority of its cultural codes by understanding the enterprise itself? How can the deployment of "right of death and power over life" (Foucault, *History*, Vol. I) be emancipatory? How can this "will to truth [or knowledge], that prodigious machinery designed to exclude" (Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" 56) in Romantic literature make liberation (or decolonization) possible? Can the Romantic ethics of gender (in this exquisite author-reader interaction) avoid being trapped in the "stubborn will

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conspires with new cultural technologies and industries, and it allows the authors, the readers, and even the publishers "an escape from the standardised impersonality of commodity culture" (25).

to nonknowledge [in the refusal of truth's *emergence*]" (Foucault, *History*, Vol. I 55)?[10]

What the readers might agree with is that the maneuvering of gender issue in Lord Byron's oriental tales creates "interpretive possibilities [with] sensitivity to social, historical, and political pressures" (Watkins 889). The story's meanings and points of reference are as rich and elusive as history itself. *The Giaour* has thus become an inquiring poem of history which "examines and challenges the assumptions about human experience which usually go unquestioned or which are believed to be absolute and unchanging" (Watkins 890). Toward this rethinking of history, the historical condition of the Subaltern women might help us, the relatively detached "common reader(s)" nowadays, to *think* more properly within the tangled contexts of each and every historical event:

If thinking—the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue—actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful form ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeedprevent catastrophes, at least for the self (Arendt 193).

[10] These inquiries are originally based on Foucault's critique of sexuality within the Western scientific discourse. Fortunately, it sure has a chance to resonate with the signified situation in the past as well as the ethical concern of historical representation in the present.

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