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ORIENTALISM IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE

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Abstract:

The notions of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity of the French Revolution have a tremendous influence on the Romantic expressions in Europe. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education and natural history. Romanticism believes in the notion of free expression of the feelings of the artist. The central argument of Orientalism is how the West acquires this knowledge is not innocent or objective and the end result of the process of acquiring this knowledge has some drastic results. Edward Said argues that the way in which the West, specially the US and UK looks at the countries and peoples of the East is through a lens that actually distorts the realities of those places and those peoples. He calls this lens through which the part of the East is viewed as Orientalism. The present paper examines the notions of Romanticism, Orientalism and the Romantic- Orientalism of English literature.

Keywords: *Romanticism, Orientalism and the Romantic- Orientalism of English literature, etc.*

Introduction:

Romanticism or the Romantic era/Period was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century approximately from 1800 to 1840. M. H. Abrams placed it between 1789 (the beginning of the French Revolution), or 1798 (the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge), and about 1837 (Queen Victoria ascending the British throne). It is partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, and partly a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature. It also is against the satirical, formal, and aristocratic manners and mannerisms of society and literature of the 18th century. The notions of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity of the French Revolution have a tremendous influence on the Romantic expressions in Europe. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education and natural history. Romanticism believes in the notion of free expression of the feelings of the artist. To William Wordsworth poetry should be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings".

The Romantic Movement:

The word romantic may be understood as about fluffy feelings and soft focused rooms with candle light dinners and valentine day cards. But that is not what the word 'romantic' means. In fact, the Romantic Movement was about rebellion, being about one self, taking adventure, about the expression of powerful emotions like anger and love, about taking adventures and travelling into the unknown lands and about not following the established order. The Romantics could not stand beliefs of another historical movement called the Enlightenment Movement of Europe. This was created by the rich and the powerful men, the social elites of the day who believed in science and reason, logic, progress, controlling the people and their lives with politics, law, religion, church, education etc. The

romantics hated all this and used their poetry, music, painting, and songs and the way they lived their lives to rebel all these social laws.

They were inspired by two huge contemporary movements. One was the French Revolution which was the rebel by the ordinary people of the entire French country against the monarchy, ruling class and feudalism. And the other was the Industrial Revolution in which science and technology between 1770 to 1850 changed everything in the society. The Romantic Movement is a reaction to both these European movements. The important features of the Romantic Movement are as following.

I. Folk lore and not the high art: The Romantics liked the idea of their art to be natural and spontaneous. They rebelled against the sophisticated and aristocratic art forms which they grew up with. The romantic poets started taking interest in the folk stories, ballads popular songs and felt the felicity in the simple, more ordinary and natural expression of poetry as one observes in the poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley, Samuel Coleridge, John Keats and others.

II. Shakespeare not classical: The Romantics were more inspired by William Shakespeare as they noticed Shakespeare to be the rebel of the Classical rules of mingling the comedy and tragedy, and creating a new art form called tragic-comedy. In Shakespeare did the Romantics see the breaking of the classical rules and this aspect was most appreciated and followed by them.

III. Gothic and Medieval Art and not Modern: The Romantics loved gothic stories which were full of murder, bloodshed, horror, supernatural, vampires etc. Breaking the conventions of the day of following the rules and the sophisticated life, the Romantics wanted to pose the dark side of being human with gothic fantasies and wild imagination. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the best example of exploring the hysterical and passionate feelings of the ordinary people at the mercy of dark and terrible forces of nature.

IV. Poetic fantasies: The romantics didn't like the idea of life always to make sense and to be understood and controlled. They knew that life could be bad, mad, wild, terrifying and extra-ordinary as expressed in the poetry of William Blake. He used the anti-religious myths and legends, Christianity, folk tales, to create amazing poetic fantasies. He illustrated many poems with extra-ordinary and sometimes grotesque pictures. Similarly is Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*.

V. Romantic love and not just marriage contracts: The Romantics explored the emotion of love and saw it as the driving force behind everything in life. It was not the feeling and touchy love but, it was passionate and sexy, out of controlled love. They believed that every individual has a right to be in love and sexual love is essential for a successful marriage. Before them in the medieval age, being in love was considered as a serious mental illness. Even in the Romantic times marriage was seen as a means of getting money, land, more power and social status where love had no role to play. The Romantics opined to be very unconventional in love, sex and marriage relationships. Blake believed to have free love and relationships. Similarly was P. B. Shelley who ran away with Mary Godwin who was quite young comparing to him. Most of these poets believed in many relationships and very relaxed in the sexual relationships and felt free to express the erotic content than the others who dared to write to.

VI. Individualism and not fixed roles in the society: The Romantic Movement did a great thing about giving importance to individual rather than society and social roles. Until then nobody ever bothered about giving importance to individual identities. 'God put you on earth as peasants, carpenters, tradesman or craftsman or queen or wife and that is all' was the belief till then. Modern idea of finding who one is; what his/her likes and dislikes are is a Romantic notion. A teen age rebellion of having choices in life rose from the Romantics. The Romantic Poets often put their ideas into practice. They had a habit of living recklessly and dying young. They had affairs, took drugs, joined wars and had pretty chaotic life. Shelley had a very romantic life and died by drowning before he was thirty. John Keats saw the deaths of his parents, brother and he too died before twenty five. Lord Byron had had many romantic affairs with many women and died at the age of thirty six in

Greece while participating in a civil war. So the Romantics believed in individualism and practiced the same in their life.

VII. Nature and country side and not cities and industrialism: The Romantics hated the growing industrialisation in Europe and rebelled against it. They found tremendous inspiration in nature and country side as one observes in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake. Wordsworth, Coleridge lived in the Lake District and wrote about natural and scenic beauty. Similarly are Shelley and John Keats. Every Romantic wrote about the adverse effects of industrialization and celebrated the beauty of nature.

Orientalism:

Edward Said of Columbia University is regarded as very important and influential in the regard of understanding the notion of Orientalism; in particular from the ideas in his book *Orientalism* published in 1978. It revolutionised the study of the Middle East, especially in developing an entire new field of study as post-colonial theory as well as influencing the disciplines of English language, literature, history, anthropology and cultural studies. Orientalism asks the question of how the Middle East are understood and represented in the writing of the West. There is a preconceived notion about what kind of people live in the East, their customs, what they believed etc. even though the West never met them. Orientalism asks questions about how the people who are different from the West by virtue of their colour behave, look, talk and act and how does the West understand them. The central argument of *Orientalism* is how the West acquires this knowledge is not innocent or objective and the end result of the process of acquiring this knowledge has some drastic results. Said argues that the way in which the West, specially the US and UK looks at the countries and peoples of the East is through a lens that actually distorts the realities of those places and those peoples. He calls this lens through which the part of the East is viewed as *Orientalism*. The frame work that the West used to understand the East that are unfamiliar and strange is the frame work that presents them as different and threatening.

Said took interest in this issue of Orientalism because of two reasons,

I. The war of 1973-Until then the Arabs and East were depicted as coward, timid and sensuous; but during the war they crossed the canal and fought very bravely like anybody else.

II. Said himself being an Arab boy, the difference between his own experience and the way they are represented in the Western poetry and art seemed quite controversial. Novelists like Desraile, Flaubert; poets like Blake represented the East as something different from what Said knew. Hence is the book of Said's *Orientalism*. *Orientalism* refers to the *Orient* or East, in contrast to the *Occident* or West.

If somebody in London or Paris wanted to talk about the East, say India or Egypt, there is very little freedom that the writer has to know, see, think and write because there is already a great deal of writing gone before that has represented the East. This is an organised writing as organised science and this predetermined notion on the East is called as *Orientalism*. There was a kind of repertoire images like a sensual woman used by the man, the East as a kind of mysterious place full of secrets, monsters, the marvels of the East as very primitive etc. Hence there were many modifications to these representations which were far from the realistic life and society. This extended to the recent times as well. The picture is not different during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Ex: Edward William Lane's book on *Manners and Customs of Egyptians* in the late 1830s and the modern French poet Gerard de Nerval's the *Journey to the Orient* has almost the same representations of the Orient. No matter where one finds an Orient in India or Egypt or Syria, it is the same. Unlike the West, the East has no development, progress, and has an image that is placid and still and eternal with no change. But these are contradictory to the facts of history. So in one sense it is the creation of the ideal other. Said looks at the concept of Orientalism in the context of imperialism.

As empires spread across the East, the British and the French were important to dominate the East. With the notions of understanding the natives better, so that they could conquer and subdue them easier, they relied on the large and abstract categories of knowledge available to them already in history, which obviously was insufficient and conceptually the 'Orientalism'. This objective knowledge has become the understanding of the East to be more formal and different than the actual. The Napoleon's invasion and conquest of Egypt in 1798 is the best example of Orientalism which

automatically marks the beginning of imperial and colonial conquest. Biologists, geologists, historians, archaeologists recorded Egypt and represented it not as Egypt is but how the West wanted to see it. Egypt is recorded as the other of the West, which automatically gave the West an authority to civilise the East and thereby established the fact that a vice-versa is not possible; as if the East has no competency to rule the West. Thus the West justifies its presence in the eastern land to “civilise the orient.” They became the protector (police, army), educator (teacher), administrator (bureaucracy, political dominance), and saviour (missionary). But thereby, the result is that the cultural differences widened and the ‘otherness’ increased between the East and west. The orient is an ‘orient’ first and then a man. Thus it paved way to imperialism and the colonial period of the west begins.

Discussion:

Edward Said’s book thus presented Said’s influential ideas on Orientalism, the Western study of Eastern cultures. Said contended that the Oriental scholarship was and continues to be inextricably tied to the imperialist societies that produced it, making much of the work inherently politicized, servile to power, and therefore suspect. A central idea of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) is that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts or reality, but from preconceived archetypes that envision all "Eastern" societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to "Western" societies. This ‘*a priori*’ knowledge establishes "the East" as antithetical to "the West". Such Eastern knowledge is constructed with literary texts and historical records that often are of limited understanding of the facts of life in the Middle East.

Following the ideas of Michel Foucault, Said emphasized the relationship between power and knowledge in scholarly and popular thinking, in particular regarding European views of the Islamic Arab world. Said argued that Orient and Occident worked as oppositional terms, so that the "Orient" was constructed as a negative inversion of Western culture. The work of another thinker, Antonio Gramsci, was also important in shaping Edward Said's analysis in this area. In particular, Said can be seen to have been influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony in understanding the pervasiveness of Orientalist constructs and representations in Western scholarship and reporting, and their relation to the exercise of power over the "Orient".

Said claimed a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for Europe and the US' colonial and imperial ambitions. So far as the West seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What one has instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.

Influence on Literature:

Said argued that the West has stereotyped the East in art and literature, since antiquity—such as the composition of *The Persians* by Aeschylus. The Orientalism of British Romantic literature has roots in the first decade of the eighteenth century, with the earliest translations of *The Arabian Nights* into English (from a version in French, 1705–08). The popularity of *The Arabian Nights* inspired writers to develop a new genre, the Oriental tale, of which Samuel Johnson's *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) is the best mid-century example. Romantic Orientalism continues to develop into the nineteenth century, paralleling another component of Romanticism already presented in the Norton Web sites, "Literary Gothicism." Two of the authors here — Clara Reeve and William Beckford — are important figures in the history of both movements. Like Gothic novels and plays, Oriental tales feature exotic settings, supernatural happenings, and deliberate extravagance of event, character, behaviour, emotion, and speech — an extravagance sometimes countered by wry humour even to the point of buffoonery. It is as though the "otherness" of Oriental settings and characters gives the staid British temperament a holiday. Gothicism and Orientalism do the work of fiction more generally — providing imaginary characters, situations, and stories as alternative to, even as escape from, the reader's everyday reality. But they operate more sensationally than other types of fiction. Pleasurable terror and pleasurable exoticism are kindred experiences, with unreality and strangeness at the root of both.

Even more so in modern times, Europe has dominated Asia politically so that even the most outwardly objective Western texts on the East were permeated with a bias that Western scholars could not recognize. Western scholars appropriated the task of exploration and interpretation of the Orient's languages, history and culture for themselves, with the implication that the East was not capable of composing its own narrative. They have written Asia's past and constructed its modern identities from a perspective that takes Europe as the norm, from which the "exotic", "inscrutable" Orient deviates. Western writings about the Orient depict it as an irrational, weak, feminised "Other", contrasted with the rational, strong, masculine West, a contrast he suggests derives from the need to create "difference" between West and East that can be attributed to immutable "essences" in the Oriental make-up. The European Romantic imagination was saturated with Orientalism, but it reflected persistent ambivalence concerning the East, complicated in Britain by colonial anxiety and imperial guilt.

Romanticism and Orientalism:

In literary history, Romantic Orientalism is the recurrence of recognizable elements of Asian and African place names, historical and legendary people, religions, philosophies, art, architecture, interior decoration, costume, and the like in the writings of the British Romantics. The great impact of Orientalism on Romanticism, Said admits was a powerful one: "Popular Orientalism during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth attained a vogue of considerable intensity" (118-119). However, he doubts the genuine interest of the Romantics in Oriental matter for its own sake. The first quarter of the 19th century witnessed two significant strains of Orientalism in Romantic literature: The growing popularity of the Oriental tales, especially the *Arabian Nights*, stimulated a burst of Orientalism in prose-fiction, and the natural proclivity of the Romantics for exploring innovative dimensions of the mind generated the second wave in various genres. Writers of prose-fiction followed the tradition of *The Arabian Nights* by using the "frame-tale" structure. Some based their tales on translated Oriental works, others took material from travel and history accounts, but very few wrote from personal observation. Interesting enough, the most popular prose tales were written by female writers.

Prose writers:

Among the females, Clara Reeve's *History of Charoba, Queen of Egypt* (1785) is based on a French translation from Arabic by Pierre Vattier and on an English version by John Davies in 1672. Reeve went far ahead of her times as literary figure and critic when she exposed the communality "of human growth".

Elizabeth Hamilton's, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) constitute a tale transforming readers to the exotic world of India. Maria Edgeworth's *Murad the Unlucky* (1802) was an excellent imitation of *The Arabian Nights* and enjoyed great popularity. Julia Pardoe in *The Romance of the Harem* (1839) used the frame-tale, Katinka, a Greek slave, tells her master, Carinfil, several inter-plotted stories which Pardoe asserted to be original Turkish tales. And Mary Lamb studied the history of Islam before she wrote her *The Young Mahometan* (1809).

Among the male figures, Thomas Hood wrote *A Tale of the Harem* (1828), and Isaac Disraeli based his *Mejnoun and Leila, the Arabian Petrarch and Laura* (1797) on a pre-Islamic poem about a weary lover who roams the desert like a "Mejnoun" because of a thwarted love. Other works included Edward Upham's *Karmath, an Arabian Tale* (1827) and Benjamin Disraeli's *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833). All of these tales, however, were surpassed in popularity by two tales: James Morier's *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824) and Thomas Hope's *Anastasiuss; or, Memoirs of a Greek* (1819). *Anastasiuss* served at once as an Oriental tale, a novel and a travelogue. Infact the "*Arabian Tales*" was the fairy godmother of English novel.

Poets and Poetry:

The Oriental tale in verse flourished after Lord Byron published *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), *The Siege of Corinth* (1816), and *Beppo* (1817). Eastern plots, characters, and themes in Byron's "Oriental tales," some of which show up later in *Don Juan* are good examples of Romantic Orientalism.

Robert Southey's verse tale *Thalaba* (1801) was distinctive for its frame-tale structure and for carrying the traditional epic theme of Western mythology into the dimension of Oriental tale. The above mentioned proves that the Oriental verse-tale became an integral subgenre of Romantic poetry, and that Orientalism became a sublime medium which intoxicated the imagination and mind with the distant, different and dexterous.

The first of Romantic Oriental poems is William Blake's *Jerusalem, the Emancipation of the Giant Albion* (1818); although the epic poem exhibits Blake's mythological quest towards Oriental Biblical Jerusalem, the land of revelations and prophets. Blake hopes that Cambridge, Oxford, and London would live in harmony with Gaza, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Sinai; even the mountains of the Alps and the Apennines bow together with the mountains of Herman and of Lebanon to greet Jerusalem, and the waters of the Thames flow with those of the Dead Sea and the Euphrates River. Blake seemed to bring about a harmonious fusion of *present* with *past*, of West with East, to achieve the elevated goal of liberating Western Self from egocentric geography and relocate it in the realms Eternity.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's visionary poem *Kubla Khan* (1797), actual Eastern places and events are utilized to create an exotic and supernatural world and historic Eastern matter flashes back and forth in a work bearing the core of his theory of imagination.

William Wordsworth seeks a sense of desert wonder and strangeness in "Book V" of *The Prelude* with Oriental matter. In a dream, he finds himself in a waterless sea, a desert, and beholds and follows an Arab Bedouin who bears books of wisdom in his hands. In his *The Egyptian Maid*, Wordsworth fuses Egyptian exoticism with medieval heroism and creates an Oriental female, desired, seductive and passive, to expose Western fantasies about Oriental females.

In *Ozymandias* (1817–1818), Shelley asserts an "antique land" in order to reveal the emptiness of pomp and power. A poet's journey into the innermost reaches of the Caucasus (the legendary boundary between Europe and Asia) in Percy Shelley's *Alastor*; a tempting affair with an Indian maiden in Keats's "Endymion" and a feast of "dainties" from Fez, Samarcand, and Lebanon in "The Eve of St. Agnes" are the oriental reflections in the later romantics. John Keats imagines an urn with two scenes epitomizing the Romantic search for an ultimate Truth, the infinite superiority of art over death and the eternal reality of art presents his conception of art in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819).

The less known poet, Joseph Dacre Carlyle, wrote *Poems*, suggested chiefly by Scenes in Asia-Minor, Syria and Greece (1805); he alludes to some famous verse by the Arabic poet al-Mutanabi, ("the pretender to prophecy"), who was the court poet at Aleppo between 948 and 957.

Leigh Hunt wrote *Abou Ben Adhem* (1838) and *Mahmoud* (1823), both of which exhibit Eastern attributes such as wisdom, justice and the love of God. In *Abou Ben Adhem*, an angel appears to Ben Adhem in a dream and tells him that he is writing "in a book of gold" the names of those who love the Lord and the poem advocates the notion of 'service to humanity is service to the Lord'.

John Gibson Lockhart introduces in his *Ancient Spanish Ballads, Historical and Romantic* (1823), several ballads that deal with Oriental matter commemorating the invasion of Spain by the Arabs and the collaboration of the Spanish Christians and Arab Muslims against Charlemagne.

An Arab maiden, Safie, as the most liberated character in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* represents Orientalism through the literature and art of the time, was increasingly in the air in both London and the British countryside.

Conclusion:

The current need to genuinely understand the Middle Eastern Arab and Persian peoples and cultures revitalized the interest of modern scholars of Romanticism in Romantic Orientalism. The subgenres, however, still await more serious attention; and the Orient of the 19th century which offered the British Romantics the opportunity to gaze backwards and inwards and to explore remote otherness itself responsible for shaping or reshaping present self, could also help modern scholars to reflect seriously on present East-West relations. In other words, if better cross-cultural understanding and tolerance are to be achieved between East and West, current studies of the East must refer to Augustan and Romantic Orientalism for candid enlightenment.

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