

ORIENTAL READING OF ROBERT SOUTHEY'S *THALABA THE DESTROYER*

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Abstract

The research paper presents an Oriental reading of Robert Southey's epic poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*. Mainly, it focuses on Southey's delineation of the East and Islam. Southey's appropriation of Islamic ideology to suit his poetic purpose and his readers' taste is discussed. His frequent use of Christian texts in an epic based on Islam is analysed. The stereotypes of lazy and meek Eastern people and his description of Oriental luxury are examined. It also questions Southey's version of Islam that is completely contradictory to the real Islam. In his opinion the ruined and rotten religion is in dire need of Western help to come out of its murk.

Introduction

Thalaba the Destroyer (1801) was Southey's (1774-1843) first initiative for his ambitious project to write an epic for each religious tradition of the world. The plotline goes thus: An Arabian youth Thalaba's family is killed. He sets out in search of the murderers to take revenge. In the meantime, he meets the love of his life, Oneiza but they do not unite and Thalaba continues with his quest. He kills the evil sorcerers at last and the lovers are united in Heaven. The plot may sound like a revenge story, but Southey introduces divine power to help Thalaba in his pursuit of revenge and the murderers are sketched as ungodly. Thus, it lends the pivotal conflict of the epic a Jihadist colour.

Christianity in Islam Epic

At the beginning, the readers meet the two characters wandering aimlessly, looking dejected and defeated. They are Thalaba, a young boy and Zeinab, his mother whose husband had died. They are the only survivors after the wicked sorcerers of Domdaniel cave murdered all of his other family members. Thalaba feels low for this fatal turn of events. He is angry at God for putting him and his mother in this pitiable and hapless condition. Zeinab is not happy with her son's brazen contempt of God. She chides him for showing disrespect and unfaithfulness to God. She explains:

Praised be the Lord!
He gave, he takes away,

The Lord our God is good! (*Thalaba*, I. 9)

Southey's notes on Zeinab's dialogue refer to the Book of Job, a Christian text. The readers might wonder what the Christian text is doing in an Islamic epic. Cannot the author express loyalty to Almighty with reference to the Holy Quran or any other Islamic text? The Book of Job is not a single aberration, but a close study of notes indicates that he often refers to the Bible in his notes appended to the epic. Southey defends his drawing upon the Old Testament thus: "I must remind my readers that an allusion to the Old Testament is no ways improper in a Mohammedan."¹ In another note he opines:

I have placed a scripture phrase in the mouth of a Mohammedan; but it is a saying of Job, and there can be no impropriety in making a modern Arab speak like an ancient one...It had been easy to have made Zeinab speak from the Koran, if the tame language of the Koran could be remembered by the few who have toiled through its dull tautology. I thought it better to express a feeling of religion in that language with which our religious ideas are connected.²

Since the religion Christianity is connected with English readers, rather than the "foreign" Quran, the readers may not feel connected to the foreign religious text of Islam, he conveniently inserts the references to the Christian texts into his notes. However, in his intention of getting the readers "connected" with his epic, there is a danger of ignoring the foreign and strange. Another danger is his authorial appropriation may misrepresent Islam.

In addition to this, Southey also frequently mentions and quotes European authors like George Sale, Carsten Niebuhr and Constantin Volney instead Eastern, Islamic scholars. As a result, it fails to give the readers a composite view of Islam. Instead, what readers get is fragments of Islam attached with "familiar" Christianity.

Docile and Submissive Orientals

His notes appended to the line "He gave, he takes away" reads: "Resignation is particularly inculcated by Mohammed, and of all his precepts it is that which his followers have best observed: it is even the vice of the East."³ It appears that Southey grossly misinterprets the meaning of Islam that is "peace through surrender or submission to God."⁴

In Southey's interpretation of Islam, it is a religion that imposes on its followers to follow blindly the words of the Prophet Muhammad, though this is not so. For every commandment, the Prophet provides a reason and logic. Islam is not a faith of the brain-dead devotees who cannot think or act by themselves and are slaves of the Almighty as the readers might conclude from Southey's version. Southey distorts the fact to show Islam in a bad light, a religion having "vices" like unquestionable submission to God. Shockingly enough, the vice he detests so much is transformed into a Christian virtue when his hero follows it. Bolton argues:

While he admired (Christian) resignation himself – and his hero is the model of such virtue, with his unwavering faith against all odds – in applying it to the East, Southey converts it into a common stereotype of excessive oriental passivity.⁵

Southey wrongly criticizes the subjects of Shedad's empire. Why did they never revolt against the tyrannical and vain ruler Shedad? It is because they allow him to rule over them. Orientals are too passive to raise a voice against a despot and accept totalitarianism as God's will. Or they are too dumb to differentiate between God's will and the will of cruel Shedad.

Irreligious Oriental Luxury

Thalaba is on his way to look for murderers and encounters a majestic palace. It is built by Shedad who was a notorious Oriental dictator. Surprisingly, the gigantic palace is surrounded by an endless desert:

Amid a grove embowered
 Stood the prodigious pile,
 Trees of such ancient majesty
 Towered not on Yemen's happy hills,
 Nor crowned the stately brow of Lebanon.
 Fabric so vast, so lavishly enriched,
 For Idol, or for Tyrant, never yet
 Raised the slave race of men
 In Rome, nor in the elder Babylon,
 Nor old Persepolis,
 Nor where the family of Greece
 Hymned Eleutherian Jove. (*Thalaba*, I. 12)

The impressiveness of the palace and its artificial elements give us an impression that Shedad has godly power, that he is not a normal human but a superman with an ability to overthrow God's supremacy. The natural world like trees and fruits are not natural, God-created but man-made, artificial.

Here towered the palm, a silver trunk,
 The fine gold net-work growing out
 Loose from its rugged boughs.
 Tall as the Cedar of the mountain, here
 Rose the gold branches, hung with emerald leaves,
 Blossomed with pearls, and rich with ruby fruit. (*Thalaba*, I. 24)

In addition, there is no one living there. The mammoth opulent palace is useless. Even if it is used, it proves how Oriental rulers and the powerful class were obsessed with worthless flaunting of their material richness at the cost of human labor and resources.

Thalaba, no doubt, exemplifies Southey's skillful narration, but he crosses the limit with the exaggerated depiction of something that is not found on Oriental lands. In addition, Southey boasts about his restraint in narration, as compared to Eastern writers. In the notes, he comments: "I have ornamented his palace less profusely than the oriental writers who describe it."⁶ Southey does not stop here. He adds another string of wisdom by asserting:

A waste of ornament and labour characterises all the works of the Orientalists. I have seen illuminated Persian manuscripts that must each have been the toil of many years, every page painted, not with representations of life and manners, but usually like the curves and lines of a Turkey carpet, conveying no idea whatever, as absurd to the eye as

nonsense-verses to the ear. The little of their literature that has reached us is equally worthless. Our barbarian scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer.⁷

He himself is guilty of excessive ornamentation. However, in his note, he outrightly disapproves the same opulence described by Eastern writers and thus exposes his double standards.

Southey's Representation of Islam

Southey's presentation of Islam is convoluted. It seems that he has "othered" the religion itself. Southey narrates two contrasting scenes of prayer:

Before their Tent the mat is spread,
 The old man's awful voice
 Intones the holy Book.
 What if beneath no lamp-illumined dome,
 Its marble walls bedecked with flourished truth,
 Azure and gold adornment? sinks the Word
 With deeper influence from the Imam's voice,
 Where in the day of congregation, crowds
 Perform the duty-task?
 The Father is their Priest,
 The Stars of Heaven their point of prayer,
 And the blue Firmament
 The glorious Temple, where they feel
 The present Deity. (*Thalaba*, III. 117-118)

In the first image, the crowd is performing their duty of praying, doing it as mechanical routine rather than with full devotion to and faith in the Almighty. The mosque, he describes is a luxurious and palace like, decorated with gold and its walls are made of marble. The Imam is trying to influence the worshippers with his oratory. The use of word "influence" leads us to believe that his speech could be against the tenets of Islam. The second image is of a simple family offering a prayer. There is no stately mosque, but the open sky. Nature itself is their mosque made by God Himself. Here Imam's place is taken up by a patriarch of the family, Moath. Southey prefers the faith followed by the Bedouin family as he portrays it in a positive note, while the crowd in the mosque is looked down upon with contempt.

Southey's Baghdad

The depiction of Baghdad points to the deterioration the city is undergoing. Its present appalling condition is seen as the rotteness spread in the religion Islam itself. But there is hope. The West can save the city and Islam! He triumphantly proclaims:

So one day may the Crescent from thy Mosques
 Be plucked by Wisdom, when the enlightened arm
 Of Europe conquers to redeem the East. (*Thalaba*, V. 229)

Southey believes, once Islam is uprooted, the conditions will improve. The wisdom of the West, the enlightened race will do the job. It makes us believe that Islam is sinful and an evil religion. So are its followers. As a Christian sinner requires the redeemer Christ, the same holds true for Muslims who need the light of Christianity.

Love versus Faith

The lovers Thalaba and Oneiza never unite, though deeply in love. Thalaba wishes to but he is instructed by the Guiding Force to postpone it until his goal is complete. His quest is of supreme importance rather than the union of two lovers. His achievement at the end will prove that he deserves Oneiza. He is constantly examined whether he chooses the instructions of divine authority to continue the noble quest or degenerates himself by falling for Oneiza. His choice boils down to God vs. Oneiza. In Southey's morality, to make love in the course of his quest is immoral. This entire framework sounds Christian as Islam never stops loving someone. It never instructs to follow celibacy in order to attain a place in heaven. Islam teaches to perform one's worldly duty, make family happy along with worshipping the Almighty. Loving someone never features in Islamic ideology as a sinful activity. It is rather a Christian idea that considers sex as a sin from the very time of Adam and Eve.

Works Cited

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5. Bolton, Carol. *Writing the Empire: Robert Southey and Romantic Colonialism*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007. 177. Print.
6. Ibid, 60.
7. Ibid, 39.