

ELEMENTS OF ORIENTALISM IN ROBERT SOUTHEY’S *THALABA THE DESTROYER*

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ABSTRACT

Romanticism is strangeness added to beauty and the return to the past is one of its major features. Southey’s long narrative Arabian Romance *Thalaba the Destroyer* presents how the protagonist successfully goes through the trials to overcome the supernatural enemies and ultimately wins his love in ideal form of the notion romantic love-Platonic union. In his mission which is more like a holy crusade against the magicians and sorcerers in the undersea caverns of Domdaniel. As a result, there are various elements associated with *Orientalism* which are revealed. Edward Said has argued that the traditional romantic image of Europe towards Asian culture in general, and the Middle East in particular, was only justification for colonial imperial aspirations of the European countries and the United States of America as well. In consequence, according to Said in his seminal book *Orientalism* 1978 those most European studies of Islamic civilization were of Western rational orientation aims to self-assertion rather than objective study. Besides, this study adopted the tools of imperialist hegemony.

Islam means peace and demands unconditional submission to the will of Allah (God). The spirit of resignation in absolute fatalism due to the unflinching faith in the will of God as a feature of Orientalism is highlighted in *Thalaba the Destroyer*. In addition to this Oriental feature, the acts of Islamic worship, tyranny of the despots, the noble savage, the brood of sorcerers, spiritualization of female character-Oneiza, magic, miracles, superstitious beliefs, ornamentation pomp, and grandeur are some other features of Orientalism in *Thalaba the Destroyer*.

Keywords: fatalism, resignation, despots, sorcerers, noble savage, ornamentation, Islamic worship and Orientalism.

1-1 INTRODUCTION

British Romantic poetry from 1780 to 1830 blossomed in the works of the precursors of Romanticism in Britain – William Blake, the first generation of Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, and the second generation of romantic poets – Shelley, Byron and Keats. William Blake concentrated on the states of ‘innocence’ and ‘experience.’ Wordsworth’s poetry is characterised by the love of nature and his celebration of childhood as the period of intimations of immortality. Coleridge in his *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* revealed the elements of the supernatural. Shelley asserted individualism and graced his lyrical output with his myth-making faculty. Byron championed the spirit of liberty, both in his poetry and his life. Keats is known as the worshipper of Beauty. For whom Beauty is Truth, Truth beauty. All the romantic poets have been inspired by the power of imagination and flights in fancy. Romanticism is characterised by the feature of Strangeness added to Beauty. Along with the return to nature, the return to the past has featured in the writings of the English Romantic poets. Wordsworth’s *Book V of the Prelude*, Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam* and, Byron’s *the Giaour* are the illustrations of their interest in the past of the Orientals.

Southey (1774-1843) in his poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* narrates the adventures of Thalaba who successfully goes through the trials to overcome his supernatural enemies and destroys the sorcerers. He demolished the caverns of Domdaniel, under the sea, with the support of a magical talisman. This poem, an Arabian romance, reflects the elements of Orientalism as imagined by the poet Southey. “He (Robert Southey) is the only existing entire man of letters” (Byron 1920:203). This appraisal of Southey by Byron, in the context of the relationship between the two poets, rightly and judiciously brings out Southey’s breadth of erudition, variety of genres immense productivity. Southey passionately continued to adhere to the eighteenth-century antiquarian tradition. He continuously retained the tendency of the deification of education and learning. Edward Said shows that due to European and American colonial and imperial respective realities the notion of Orientalism has got a false imprint in the mind-set of the Europeans. Said summarizes his seminal book in a nutshell “My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally is a political doctrine willed over the orient because the orient was weaker than the west, which alluded the orient’s differences with its weakness.... As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-do and knowledge.” (1978:204).

In the terms of Edward Said, Southey’s thirst for knowledge was imperial. He crossed the boundaries of familiar European culture and embraced and attempted to domesticate the exotic Oriental cultures. Southey’s precious personal library had a stock of fourteen thousand volumes. In a letter of 1821 to his friend, Robert Southey confessed “I have a dangerous love of detail and a desire of accuracy, which is much more expensive (both in material and time) than I ought to afford.” (Warter 1856: 77). Southey’s passion for facts, his immense reading and his encyclopaedic scholarship are noticed in this remark. His collection of books occupied a separate room, the largest, and every way the most agreeable, in the house, and this room was styled as and rightly deserved its name- the library. This shows how British Romantic poets who treated the Oriental themes and stories were keen on the scholastic and authentic compilation of details through different sources, antiquarianism and scholarly erudition of the past.

1-2 SOUTHEY’S EXTENSIVE ORIENTAL SCHOLARSHIP

Robert Southey’s extraordinarily abundant notes hold a very prominent position in his lengthy oriental narrative poems such as *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and the *Curse of Kehama* (1810). His poem “*Thalaba the Destroyer* became..... The first of a new Romantic genre, on

updated oriental tale, now in verse and with a weighty apparatus of factual footnotes to convince the reader of the historical veracity” (Fulford and Roberts 2004: IX). Southey’s notes evidently disclosed the industry, the perseverance and the extensive research of the learned author. These notes give an idea about enormous quarries in which the author must have labored. In addition, they include a wealth of details and curiosities on a range of subjects from civil, religious, literary and natural history to travel literature, topography, socio-political analysis and miscellaneous collections and sayings.

Southey used to keep notes while reading and, he transformed a large amount of the content of these exhaustive notes in the para- text of the scholarly apparatus that surround his works like *Thalaba the Destroyer* primarily in the form of footnotes, endnotes and appendixes. Southey’s authorship of the poems on oriental tales depended on his extensive and writing practices conversed facts, legends and anecdotes into fiction. Furthermore, Robert Southey’s romantic oriental tales were in remote places removed not only historically, or geographically but ideologically from his native English countryside as well.

In (1789) the fifteen-year-old Southey, a student at Westminster school at that time, came across Bernard Picart’s 1733-seven-volume, *The Ceremonies and Religions Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World*. In his *Vindiciae Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1826) Southey recalled his deeply momentous encounter with Picart’s work: “The book impressed my imagination strongly; and before I left school, I had formed the intention of exhibiting all the more prominent and poetical forms of mythology, which have at any time obtained among mankind, by making each the groundwork of a heroic poem”(Southey 1826:7). Similarly, on May 28, 1808, Southey wrote to Anna Sewan, placing Kehama within a broader and more ambitious scheme of development. “ My old design was to build a metrical romance upon every poetic faith that have ever been established, and have gone after the Mohammedan in *Thalaba*, and the Hindoo in this present poem (The Curse of Kehama), with the Persian, the Runic, Keltic, the Greek, the Jewish, the Roman Catholick and the Japanese.” *Thalaba the Destroyer* makes Southey’s initial attempt in his ambitious project to depict all the mythologies of the world in epic form. *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) is based around Islam and *Madoc* (1805) is an Aztec epic. The *Curse of Kehama* is a Hindu epic mythology in terms of Christian allegory. *Roderick, the last of the Goths* (1814) is a Christian epic about the Moorish invasion of Spain. Robert Southey’s oriental poems are significant because they can help create a clearer picture of the *Orient* and its representations in the early nineteenth century English Romantic Poetry. Thus, Southey presented his poems as authentic portrayals of oriental life and literature. Southey’s interest was followed by his reading of George Sale’s *Koran* (1734).

Respecting Southey’s attitude of Islam, he explains: “I am most engaged by the *Koran*; it is dull and full of repetitions, but there is an interesting simplicity in the tenets it inculcates” (Curry 1956:476). Therefore, Southey combined his knowledge of Islam with his own religious precepts to construct an Orientalists fantasy. *Thalaba the Destroyer* is thus a curious mixture of Southey’s response to Islam, a Christian quest and an oriental tale of tyranny and magic as the hero *Thalaba* is on his search in the quest of *Domdaniel*. William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and Walter Sarge Landor’s *Giber* (1798) were the poems to which Southey himself acknowledged his indebtedness. Like William Beckford, Southey in writing *Thalaba the Destroyer* was modernizing the established genre of oriental tales by effectively incorporating two texts within a single framework. The *Obriens* text is the long narrative poem- *ThalabaThe Destroyer*, the second text is formed by Southey’s contribution as a cultural historian of the appended footnotes.

The beginning of the poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* presents the young hero Thalaba and his mother Zeinab wandering through the desert.

“The widower mother and the fatherless boy, Wander o’er the
desert sands”. (Thalaba, BK1:11.6-8)

Zeinab, Hodeirah’s beloved wife wandered over the wilderness. Zeinab is willing to accept everything. Zeinab was now prepared to follow her babies and to go where the babies have gone and she desired to join Hodeirah. Her wish was granted by the Angel of Death. Meanwhile, Thalaba’s work is characterized by the spirit of the mutual trust. He was destined to do whatever was necessary to avenge his father’s death. Robert Southey, in his notes to *Thalaba the Destroyer* has commented on Zeinab’s statement. “He gave, he takes away.” He has quoted from the Book of Job from the Bible. “I have placed a scripture phrase in 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. Resignation is particularly inculcated by Mohammed and of all his precepts it is that which his followers have best observed: it is even the voice of the East.” Southey’s notes provide a Biblical frame for the ‘Islamic text’.

Southey’s claim is that it is not improper to allude to the Bible while referring to the Islamic religion. Such references do push the Biblical, the Christian and the European viewpoints forward and prevent aspects of Arabian society and Koranic material in the work of Robert Southey becoming more familiar. Islam requires total and unconditional submission or rather full surrender to God’s divine will. The meaning of the very word Islam is peace which implies “peace through submission or surrender to God.” For Christianity, Southey approved the virtue of resignation. This resignation when Southey applies it to the East is converted to a common stereotype of excessive oriental passivity. *Thalaba the Destroyer* desires to seek revenge of his father’s murderers. His faith remains unwavering against all odds. Thalaba’s mission is channelized into a holy crusade against the magicians and sorcerers caverns of Domdaiel which is pursued through all odds trials and tribulations.

1-3 ABSOLUTE FATALISM

The resignation of God’s will is the main-spring of the Islamic religion. Southey has presented it as part of absolute fatalism that is prevalent in the oriental countries and among the Orientals like *Thalaba The Destroyer*. For Zeinab “The lord our God is good!” (BK1:iv.12), but her son Thalaba is distraught and questions the unconditional submission to the will of God. On Zeinab’s part, she reaffirms her unbendable faith and steadfastness in her surrender saying: “Allah, thy will be done!” (BK1:Vii.5). She is confident that “A day will come when all things that are dark/ will be made clear. (BK1:Vii.8-9). Zeinab believes in the providence and justice of God “Then see and understand what now my heart believes and feels!” (BK1:Vii.11-17)

Fatalism is characteristically the spirit of resignation and submission to the will of God. Southey admires it as a Christian virtue. In his poem on Orientalism story *Thalaba the Destroyer*, the protagonist of the romantic tale is with his unshakeable faith against all odds is the model of this virtue, but in the notes, he terms it as a vice of the East. Southey as a Romantic Orientalist poet has written a long narrative poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* based on an Arabian tale from Arabian Nights’ Entertainment in which the exotic visual image of Southey’s Arabian romance is restrained by the imperial objectivity of the notes. The characteristic element of Orientalism presented by Southey in *Thalaba the Destroyer* is the spirit of Resignation in absolute Fatalism on account of the unflinching faith in the will of God.

1-4 ACTS OF WORSHIP-PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Religious faith is presented as the central theme of the poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*. At the cool evening hour the mat is spread before the tent. The family's simple act of prayer is put in direct contrast with the worship by the multitude of Islamic worshippers. In "lamp-illuminated dome", the marble walls of the mosques are decorated with azure and golden adornment. There "in the day of congregation crowds/ perform the duty-task?" (BKiii: XXI.11-12). In the case of the worshippers near the tent Moath, his daughter Oneiza and their guest *Thalaba*-the priest was the father-Moath and the stars of heaven their point of prayer. "And the blue firmament/ The glorious temple, where they feel/ The present deity"(BKIII:XXI.15-17). Southey while presenting the two acts of offering religious prayers-family prayer and the conventional Islamic worship in the mosque-chooses appropriate images. The Imam's voice with deeper influence calls the congregation to say their prayers in the mosque. The lamp-illuminated dome, the azure and golden ornamentation on the decorated marble walls impress the crowds to perform the duty-task worship with flourished truth. Moath, the Bedouin father, is a patriarch of the family different from the Imam the priest. The centre of religious life for the family is not the mosque but the natural world around them. In the footnotes Southey gives evidence of public worship but in the poem he gives due value to the private worship. This is how Southey reveals his dislike of tyranny of any kind, oriental or western and religious or secular. In his view, the poet has presented the best features of the Islamic system belief and worship. This shows how he has placed it in the most favourable light of the morality of the Koran as a feature of peculiar Southeyan Orientalism.

1-5 TYRANT DESPOTS

Southey disliked royal despotism in all its forms. This is copiously displayed in his portrayals of the oriental despot. However, this device is presented by him several times in 'Thalaba' poem. It was a device that he employed in order to highlight the benefits of democracy in England. Southey also brings out the oriental passivity, inaction in the face of tyranny. In the first book of *Thalaba the Destroyer* "A mighty work the pride of Shedad plann'd" and "The work of pride went on----" (BK I:XXI.1 and XIII.1). The inhabitants of Irem ruled by Shedad worshipped the idols- "Sakiah, the dispenser of rain, Hafedah, the protector of travelers, Razekah, the giver of food and Salemah, the preserver in sickness."(*Thalaba the Destroyer*). Notes, p.171). Hence, Southey finds it convenient to blame both the tyrant and his subjects who submitted meekly to his tyranny. The presentation of the tyrant despots is an element of Orientalism in Southey's poem-*Thalaba the Destroyer* noticed in his portrayals of Shedad (BK.I) and Sultan (BK.IX).

1-6 NOBLE SAVAGE

The opposite of the tyrant despot is also portrayed in Southey's presentation of the Bedouin Patriarch Moath in *Thalaba*, BK. III. After his mother Zeinab's death, the Bedouin Moath took *Thalaba* to his tent, and there *Thalaba* met the 'loveliest of Arabian maidens-Oneiza'. The poet 'Southey' was influenced by portraits of Bedouin in Niebuhr's and Volney's works Moath is the holder of the values, which Southey appreciated. Southey desires to present the image of the noble savage "fit servant of the lord." Modesty, natural dignity, freedom and self-consolidation are the qualities with which Moath has been endowed. The nomadic life-style of Bedouins like Moath is considered to be one of independence and of resistance to corruption. The life style consists of simple and austere habits. It is mild as well as sociable. Moath is represented as one of the 'self-consolidating others' as opposed to the tyrannical absolute other like Shedad and the

Sultan. This is an element of Orientalism which asserts that pastoral life-style and sublime landscapes have a strong positive impact on moral character of these Nature's children like Moath.

1-7 SORCERERS AND MAGICIANS

In *Thalaba the Destroyer* poem, Southey presents those who have religious faith like Thalaba, Oneiza and Moath, and those who believe in superstition and magic- the sorcerers and magicians from Domdaniel such as Abdaldar, Khawla, Lobaba and others. The poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* begins with a quotation from Spenser:

...worse and worse, young orphan, he thy payne If thou due
vengeance do forbear. Till guiltie blood her guerdon doe obtayne
(*Thalaba*,BKI)

The first book of *Thalaba the Destroyer* ends with Azrael as God's messenger commands Thalaba: "Live/ and remember Destiny/ Hath marked thee from mankind" (*Thalaba*,BKI. 48-9-10) . It will be Thalaba's struggle for justice against evil and oppression of those who murdered his father Hodeirah and other members of his family. Therefore, he will undertake a journey to the subterranean head-quarters of the sorcerers in the Domdaniel caverns:

Khawla cried loud in her blasphemy:
But Eblis would not stoop to man...
But who is he of woman born
That shall vie with the might of Eblis. (*Thalaba*, BKII: XII.8, 13-14)

The sorcerers stand for irreligion, superstitious beliefs and the abuse of the power. They embody the negative aspects of the evil power. Lobaba cunningly argues, "nothing in itself is good or evil/ But only in its use"(*Thalaba*,BK IV.XV.18-19). He emphasizes repeatedly that all things have a double power alike for good and evil. He has to face Khawla and Mohareb and Othatha in the twelfth book of the narrative poem of *Thalaba the Destroyer*. As he defeats one source of wickedness, he finds another rising up to depict the magnitude of evil. There are trials against magic, evil, tyranny, and he has to kill Afreet, learn his moral lesson from Othatha's fate, face Khawla Okba , and Mohareb and finally the living image of Eblis strikes the found Altar at which all the sorcerers brood are compelled to come. *Thalaba* drives his sword and "Oneiza's Houri-form welcomed her husband to eternal bliss." (*Thalaba*,BK XII: xxxi-7.8) The race of sorcerers, the broad of magicians is presented by Southey in the poem as an element of Orientalism.

1-8 SPIRITUALIZATION OF THE FEMALE

One of the elements of oriental love poetry is the spiritualization of the female character. Oneiza is continuously and consistently a figure of virtue and piety. The pure Bedouin environment around *Thalaba* makes him grow to maturity and to deserve a suitable helpmate. Under the moral influence of Moath, *Thalaba* becomes faithful, pious and courageous. Oneiza is shown to have become worthy to be his bride. In the development of their love, *Thalaba* composes poetry. Watching him with an ardent gaze, Oneiza will ultimately present herself as his "black-eyed houri". When the two lovers meet in their paradise together to strike a spiritual blending, chaste and modest *Thalaba* and Oneiza are instructed by a divine directive to keep their love deferred until the goal is achieved. Their mission is complete in which their commitment to love is tested. Ultimately they emerge into an "Earthly Eden", and enjoy "the

joys of Paradise” (*Thalaba*, BK II: XVIII-1 and XIX-4). The spiritualization of Oneiza is a dominant element of Orientalism in this ‘oriental romance’ poem.

1-9 MAGIC, MIRACLES AND SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS

The death of the sorcerer Abdaldar by a ‘Simoon’ or Blast of the Desert or the appearance of the cloud of locusts and the deaths of Zeinab and Aswad are miracles. The orient is a land of magic and miracles. The finding of the shell is another event of this type. Miracles and superstitions make the other distinctive elements of Orientalism in Southey’s Arabian romance on *Thalaba*.

1-10 ORNAMENTATION, POMP AND GRANDEUR

Ornamentation, pomp, and grandeur mentioned in Southey’s description of the magnificent palace and the rich banquet in the Books I,II and VI. The description of the garden too has “delightful coolness” (*Thalaba*,BK VI:XXIII.11) and the delicious juice of Shiraz golden grape (BK VI:XXIII.25-56). *Thalaba* drank the cool draught of innocence (BK VI: XXIII.9). Southey has captured the sensuous and luxurious orient in such passages which are characterized by exotic opulent, sensuous appeal, hyperbolic expression. In the notes he commented: “I have ornamented his palace less profusely than the oriental writers who described it.”(*Thalaba the Destroyer*, Notes, p.173). Even then this element of Orientalism is richly ornamental and pompous.

1-11 CONCLUSIONS

The Orient is described as a strange world full of secrets, through which the romantics admired its nobility and illuminating of feelings that became fuel of imagination and a fertile source for the expression of emotion. It is more vital than the light of reason, materialism and love of power that fascinated the romantic western poets and inspired their imagination. Southey has executed a great deal of producing *Thalaba the Destroyer* as an “Arabian Tale” narrated from an Arabian perspective. Southey’s erudition of the Arab Bedouin mind helps him to think and write like them. The world of the poem is purely imaginative. Southey’s poem *Thalaba The Destroyer* actually deals with Oriental aspects such as absolute fatalism, acts of Islamic worship, tyrant despots, noble savage, Moath, the race of sorcerers, the ideal of virtue, piety Oneiza, magic, miracles, superstitious beliefs and the ornamental and pompous descriptive passages. These oriental matters play an important role in shaping the western creative and intellectual discourse, especially the romantics who directly or indirectly are influenced by the orient which determines the ideological dimension of their imagination. Southey in *Thalaba* focuses on the predominant myths and superstitions dated back to the pre-Islamic era. He employs Islam the central theme of his narrative poem. Islam as religion of peace, tolerance and fraternity refutes and calls for disillusion of myths, superstitions, sorcery and despotism. Southey touches upon the moral and religious values in Islam through the cynical representations. He attempts to show the interrelations between the two religions Islam and Christianity. Southey seeks to integrate the orient with the western culture not politically but rather on spiritual and humanistic aspiration.

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