

Shelley's Strategy to Orientalism in *Alastor; Or, the Spirit of Solitude***Mushira Saleh Abd Alhameed Talafha**

MA in Translation

MA in English Literature

The Language Centre, The University of Jordan

Abstract:

In Orientalism, Edward Said used the term "strategy" to refer to "the problem every writer of the Orient has faced: how to get hold of it, how to approach it, how not to be defeated or overwhelmed by its sublimity, its scope, its dimension" (Said, 20). Clearly, Said's definition of the term implies the difficulty of the orientalist's task, i.e. penetrating the Orient's realms and characters and framing them to the English audience. Paradoxically, this task poses a danger on the subjectivity of the Orientalist, who is positioned as an observer, by the different aspects of the observed object itself, leaving him/her in an overwhelming state of defeat as Said points out. This task is deemed harder for the Romantic poets, whose ideological project of cultural universalism seems to be hard to extend in the Orient's realm. In this paper, the researcher sheds the lights on Percy Shelley's strategy to the Orient, his subjectivity, and his cultural universalism. In doing so, the researcher will discuss Shelly's *Alastor; Or The Spirit of Solitude* in relation to the previously mentioned aspects with direct references to the poem.

Key Words: Orientalism, Strategy, Subjectivity, Romanticism, Universalism, Percy Shelley.

Introduction:

Orientalism was a prominent feature of the literary works stamped as "Romantic" in the early years of the nineteenth century due to many factors, which are mainly related to politics and economy. During that period, revolts were going viral all over the regions subject to Britain's main enemy, the Turkish Empire such the Peninsula, Egypt, Algiers, and Greece; piracy in the Mediterranean was being attacked by European powers; and Britain's imperial interest in India was steadily expanding (Smith, 142). Along with these factors comes the increasing records of European journeys in the Eastern countries, a thing that left behind a great body of literature usually referred to as "travel literature", in which allusions are made to the different aspects of the Eastern modes of living in the main cultural centers such as Constantinople, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Cairo (Smith, 143). Surely, that's not to say that the interest in researching the Orient was a new trend for many academic institutions had been erected to enhance the efforts for that cause in the last quarter of the past century such as Sir William Jones' the Asiatic Society (Alber, 108). The Romantic poet, Percy Shelley, whose work is at the center of this paper, and his contemporaries such as Lord Byron, Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley all had orientalist ambitions, with some themselves travelling to East such as Lord Byron (Smith, 143).

Review of Related Literature:

Before setting out for the discussion of Romantic Orientalism and specifically Shelley's Orientalism, it sounds useful here to examine the various definitions of the term Orientalism in the first place, along with the Romantic subjectivity and universalism. The historical origins of the term are not similar to the contemporary uses, especially after Edward Said's added a third definition to the term in his *Orientalism*:

By Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient--and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist--either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism... I come to the third meaning of Orientalism, which is something more historically and materially defined than either of the other two in short... Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 2-3)

Using Said's words, the three definitions are "interdependent", and the third one is the related connotation commonly used in the contemporary theoretical usage in Oriental studies. When discussing literature produced in the Romantic era, the third definition sounds to come into a clash with the ideologies of the Romantic poets based on universalism. Along with Hellenism, Pastoralism, and Medievalism, Orientalism had been a channel through which the Romantic poets could project their ideals of love, freedom, and liberty. They found the oriental characters as good models for such ideals, and Shelley surely is one of them (Khan, 1). Shelley's poetry is full of these models, which are brought to by various Eastern cultures such as India, Turkey, and the Middle East. In fact, many recent works such as those of Nigel Leask and Manu Samriti Chander on Romantic Orientalism cast doubts with Said's orientalist narrative, which see the Western writings, including the Romantic, as a mode of Western domination (Attar, 10). These critics usually give alternative narratives characterized mainly by the poets' anxiety and ambivalence.

The poet as a subjective agent was emphasized by the Romantic poets, particularly as revealed in Wordsworth's definition of poetry in his preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*, which is considered as a manifesto of the Romantic revolution (Maddike, 48). Inspecting Wordsworth definition, one can understand the base of this revolution, that is – the turn towards the poet as a subjective agent, who is claimed authority (Middeke, 49). In addition to subjectivity, the Romantic poets tended to have a universalistic perception of humanity, breaking away from the restrictive Judo-Christian tradition (Khan, 45). Undoubtedly, the scholarly activities of the Asiatic Society led by Sir William Jones had their influence on the Romantic poets in their use of traditions of other cultures, most particularly the Oriental ones. Sir William Jones said praising the Asiatic Society:

“The Asiatics excel[led] the inhabitants of our colder regions... in the liveliness of their fancy and the richness of their invention” [and while] “Reason and Taste

[were] the grand prerogatives of the European mind, the Asiatics have soared to loftier heights in the sphere of Imagination” (Quoted in Khan, 41)

Throughout his life, Percy Shelley used the Orient as an element in his philosophical and political poems. It is true that Shelley didn't get as intimate as Lord Byron did when approaching the Orient; however, the oriental presence is prevailing in his works, especially its political being. In his collections *The Revolt of Islam* and *Hellas*, Shelley gets directly into the Harem and the Turkish court so that the readers are taken to the center of things (Turhan, 75). Some critics claim that Shelley's use of the oriental setting and characters is targeted at the critique of the British Empire, a thing done by many of his contemporary especially Byron (Turhan. 76). Accordingly, Shelley uses the Oriental space as an alternative space to project his ideas and envisions relating to the British one. Whatever Shelley's concern about choosing the setting, whether it is political or philosophical, and the Oriental space persists as a significant trope in his poems. The focus in this paper is shifted to the difficulties Shelley faces in experiencing the abstract space of the Orient, of which he shows instability (Turhan, 76). The following study of Shelley's *Alastor* explains his instability towards the Orient.

Methodology:

To recognize Shelley's confusion about sublimity of the Orient's space, the researcher follows the strategies of close reading such thematic and textual analyzes. The researcher opts for close reading as a method of analysis because it lends the researcher a helping hand to bring a reading of Shelley's poem *Alastor*. Some particulars and specifics in the poem, mainly setting and characters, have been analyzed to support the researcher's arguments on Shelley's confusion about the Orient following Edward Said's term of "strategy".

Alastor; Or, The Spirit of Solitude: A Synopsis and Analysis

Thematically speaking, the poem is divided into four sections, which are further subdivided in sub-sections. The first section gives details about the poet's education and his orientalist journeying. The second shows the Poet's visionary encounter with "veiled maid". The third elaborates on the veiled maid's disappearance and the Poet's journey in Asian countries. The poem ends with the Poet's death. It's worth noting that there are two active entities in the poem: the Narrator, who relates to Nature, and the Poet, who is characterized with idealism (Warren 135).

The poem is inaugurated with a hymn by the Narrator addressing Nature described as "The Mother of this unfathomable world" (18). The Narrator aspires that his hymn would "modulate with the murmurs of the air... The voice of living beings... [and] the deep heart of men" (48-49). Then the Narrator comes to the subject of his hymn, that is, the Poet:

There was a Poet whose untimely tomb
No human hands with pious reverence reared,
But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds

Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid
Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—
A lovely youth,—no mourning maiden decked
With weeping flowers, or votive cypress wreath,
The lone couch of his everlasting sleep:—
Gentle, and brave, and generous,—no lorn bard
Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh:
He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude. (50 -60)

After that, the Narrator goes on describing the poet's remarkable education. The poet forsakes his "alienated home" (75) and opt for living with "savage men". The Poet travels through places holding "the thrilling secret of the birth of time" (128), which is a theme common in the Romantic era such as in Byron's poetry (Andrew 137). Then the reader is moved to the Poet's encounter of the "Arab maiden" (129), who provides the Poet's with the food, supposed to be hers. Her love and care are not returned by the Poet, who seems to reject her, who is interestingly the first human figure the Poet meets in his quest. Yet, in spite of her efforts to sustain the Poet, he ignores her for his vision of the "veiled maid" (140), and he sets out for another quest, where he keeps pursuing the "veiled woman" to the end of the poem until his "untimely" death (50).

Andrew assumes that the "veiled woman" can be the "idealized"/Orientalized" version of the Poet's himself (138). This supposition proves valid because for instance, her voice "was like the voice of his own/heard in the calm of thought" (153-154). Yet, his persistence to pursue his own self, which is obviously narcissistic, leads him to his destruction, an inevitable end the Occident faces in the Orient lands, as happens, for example, to Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The Poet's pursuit pushes him to go through destruction as well as conquest; he travels through from Orno (Pakistan), Petra (Jordan), Balk (Northern Iraq), to the Caucasus mountains, where he is tempted to commit a suicide by the "fair fiend". Throughout lines (296-351), the reader is left wondering about the Poet's destiny. The Poet's appears again in lines (304-305) taking a boat, taking him along a series of rivers in the Caucasus mountains, in one of which the Poet's descends to peer into the surface of the water, declaring "Thou imagest my life!" (505), which is again an illusion to the Narcissus' myth. At last, the Poet is drawn to "one silent hook" (570), where he meets with his death, elegized throughout line (672-720). As seen by the Narrator's and the Poet's attitudes, Shelley's confusion is revealed by his torn self between grasping the Oriental and creating the "Orientalized".

To Andrew, Shelley's Orientalism, as shown in *Alastor*, staged in an Oriental fantasized space, "becomes a kind of ethical failing- a failure of love coincides with a failure of imagination". Andrew continues his criticism of Shelley connecting his confusion and ethical failure to British imperial attitudes, which "misguided [Shelley's] notion of the relationship

between the self and the world (134). Shelley's failure lies in "The poet's ethical failing – choosing a feminized dream to human love of an Arab maiden- is not merely personal, but imperial... The Poet's properly "poetic activity is the creation of both his Orientalized Ideal (his vision) and the Oriental quest to capture the Ideal..." (Andrew, 134). Though the Romantic poet's political project is stamped as "universal", in which he anticipates to reform political practices and patterns, Orientalism as a device seems to be "problematic" to Shelley in *Alastor* (Warren, 132). Andrew agrees with Saree Madiski agree concerning Shelley's Oriental dilemma, in which "universality and truth" are disrupted and limited in context Orientalism and imperialism. In his book *Romantic Imperialis*, Madiski argues that the Orient seems to be a colonial possession:

"*Alastor's* vision or re-vision of the East is *the* East, which is being faithfully represented to Western readers ... *Alastor* makes a claim about the universality and truth of its vision and representation of the Orient. Its Orient is the Orient; there is no other. Or, the Orient in *Alastor* discovers – that is, invent, is not just cut off, isolated, and placed in a radical opposition to other versions of the Orient; it is linked to, and placed in continuity with, larger vision of the world which lies to the west." (145-146)

In *Alastor*, Shelley can be considered as a "Romantic explorer", who goes for a vision beyond the space of England:

Nature's most secret steps

Nature's most secret steps

He like her shadow has pursued, where'er

The red volcano overcanopies

Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice

With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes

On black bare pointed islets ever beat

With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves

Rugged and dark, winding among the springs

Of fire and poison, inaccessible

To avarice or pride, their starry domes

Of diamond and of gold expand above

Numberless and immeasurable halls,

Frequent with crystal column, and clear shrines

Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.
Nor had that scene of ampler majesty
Than gems or gold, the varying roof of heaven
And the green earth lost in his heart its claims
To love and wonder. (81-98)

Moreover, the desire of Shelley's poet is "to seek strange truth in undiscovered land" (77); this desire is recurrent in other Shelley's poems like "Queen Mab", apart from the fact that the motif of *Alastor* is mainly nature. Nevertheless, both poems incarnate Shelley's search for the ideal place where one may meet one's other (Alvey, 78).

However, Shelley's anxiety clearly reveals itself in line (38), in which Shelley's Poet, addressing Nature, seems not to be able to grasp the other's space, where Nature has never unveiled her "inmost sanctuary" to him. Actually, throughout the Poet's lines addressing Nature (18-49), though, as revealed by Mrs. Shelley in her "Note on *Alastor*", *Alastor* is a good example of the typical "Romantic internalized quest" (Madeleine Callaghan 50), which is driven by "an individual interest only" (Shelley 30), historical and political elements can be cited in the text (Chander 79; Alvey 39). For instance, throughout the line (149-51), the craving of Shelley's Poet for a veiled maid in a dream can be contextualized as being Orientalist. Further, taking into account the year when *Alastor* (1815), when Great Britain was arising as an imperialistic power, one cannot but question the nature of the quest to the Oriental Land (Chander 79; Alvey 79).

Back to the Shelleyan vision maid, Shelley places this figure in two frames within the poem: in a dream in a veil; this double-framing has a significance to Shelley's Orientalism (Chander 87). To Nigel Leask in his characterization of Coleridge and Shelley, framing the oriental figures in a vision may imply an attempt to "suppress the cultural specificity of resources in order to create vivid dream landscapes consistent with ideological goal of cultural universalism" (Fulford & Kitson 182).

However, Shelley's veil frame, an Oriental trope, seems to betray his universalism. Situating the maid, which is considered as a counterpoint to the Arab maiden refrained from by the poet, complicates the universal perspective (Chander, 87). The maid is systematically, through double-framing, excluded out of the subjective space, which is wholly and only managed by Shelley's Poet. In the vision field, the maid is unable to act.

Another important issue to bring forth here is Shelley's dilemma between the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions; he is torn between the two, which can never meet. The dramatic tension between the two dimensions is created in the Preface, where Shelley's Narrator describes the poem as a "picture not barren of instruction to actual men", and is obvious the scene of the veiled maid. Shelley's metaphor of the poem as a picture refers to its representational function, visually and artistically; and again, this aesthetic presentation to "actual men" universalizes them onto the ethics of sympathy (Chander, 88). As for the ethical framework, it is so obvious in the Preface:

They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred. thirst of
doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this

earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. ... the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave. (Preface)

Yet, the Arab maiden, whom is rejected by the visionary, represents the dreamer's failure to universal sympathy to the other. The Arab maiden:

..... brought his food,
 Her daily portion, from her father's tent,
 And spread her matting for his couch, and stole
 From duties and repose to tend his steps:—
 Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe
 To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,
 Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips
 Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath
 Of innocent dreams arose. (129-37)

As Chander explained, the Arab maiden's gaze shows sympathy towards the visionary by giving him sympathetic "gaze", while he instead rejects her and turns his gaze to the other, the veiled woman (Chander, 89):

Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
 Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
 Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
 And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
 Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
 The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (123-28)

When discussing the Arab maiden, the veiled women seems to persist as an interpretive key to Shelley's confused Orientalism, the question arising here concerning the emblematic implication of the veil. Another important point to refer to here lies in Shelley's veil as a motif in his poems such as his sonnet entitled as "Lift not the Painted Veil (1818). Just like *Alastor*, this sonnet is

concerned with the glories as well as the dangers of searching out for the truth. In the sonnet, the poet seems to be reluctant and fearful of the truth behind the veil, which are “Fear and Hope” (Monk, 34).

Conclusion:

In the context of Orientalism, that’s *Alastor*, the Poet’s reluctance relates to Said’s explanation of the Occident’s reluctance because of his fear “not to be defeated or overwhelmed by sublimity” (Said 20). Again, Shelley’s project of Orientalism fails in *Alastor* due to him being overwhelmed by the sublimity of the East. Perhaps, the threat of lifting the veil puts the visionary to “unspeakable sublimity” (Chander, 92).

References

- Alber, Jan (2013). “The Specific Orientalism of Lord Byron's Poetry.” *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2013, pp. 107–127. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43025854.
- Alvey, Nahoko (2009). *Strange Truths in Undiscovered Lands: Shelley's Poetic Development and Romantic Geography*. University of Toronto Press.
- Attar, Samar (2014). *Borrowed Imagination: The British Romantic Poets and Their Arabic-Islamic Sources*. Lexington Books.
- Chander, Manu S (2011). “Framing Difference: The Orientalist Aesthetics of David Roberts and Percy Shelley.” *Keats-Shelley Journal*, vol. 60, pp. 77–94. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41409556.
- Fulford, Tim, and Kitson, Peter (1998). *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, Jalal (2008). “Shelley’s Orientalia: Indian Elements in his Poetry.” *ATLANTIS. Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 35–51.
- Leask, Nigel (1992). *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*. Cambridge.
- Madiski, Saree (1998). *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Middeke, Martin (2012). *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Metzler.
- Monk, Ray (1979). *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude, 1872-1921*. The Free Press, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.

Shelley, Mary (2010). *Notes to the Complete Poetical Work of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. The Floating Press.

Shelley, Percy (2013). *Alastor; Or, the Spirit of Solitude, and Other Poems*. The Classics.

Smith, Byron P (1939). *Islam in English Literature*. Caravan Books.

Turhan, Filiz (2003). *The Other Empire: British Romantic Writings about the Ottoman Empire*. Routledge.

Warren, Andrew (2014). *The Orient and the Young Romantics*. Cambridge University Press.