

THE MYSTERIOUS WORLD OF LORD BYRON'S “THE GIAOUR”: BALKANS

Salih OKUMUŞ* - Seniha KRASNIQI**

ABSTRACT

Lord Byron was one of many English writers who chose the East as the subject of their writings. However, his uniqueness stands in truly experiencing the region. Lord Byron, in his Grand Tour through Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania and Greece, found a non-drying source for his writings. Above all, Balkan was the place where his muse dwelled. Sources that Balkan offered fascinated him and made him become a bridge between The East and the West.

This study aims to reveal Byron's depiction of this mystical world in his work, The Giaour, as the first poem of The Turkish Tales. Being familiar with the diversity of religions and nations in Balkan, Byron used more than one narrator in the poem. This narration is the subject of our study through which we tried to prove that the mentality is something that Balkan inhabitants share and it prevails over their religious belief.

Keywords: Lord Byron, Balkans, Narrator, Mentality.

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ÖZET

Lord Byron Doğu'yu konu olarak seçen İngiliz yazarlarından. Ancak Byron'un özelliği, bu bölgeyi gerçekten tecrübe etmesine dayanır. Portekiz, İspanya, Malta, Arnavutluk ve Yunanistan'a yaptığı seyahatlerinde, yazıları için kurumayan bir kaynak bulmuştur. Bilhassa Balkanlar onun ilham perisinin yattığı yerdir. Balkanların sunduğu kaynaklar Byron'ı büyülemiş ve onu Doğu ile Batı arasındaki bir köprü haline dönüştürmüştür.

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., University of Prishtina, Faculty of Philology, Department of Turkish Language and Literature, Prishtina, E-mektup: salihokumus@gmail.com.

** Ph.D., University of Prishtina, Faculty of Philology, Department of English Language and Literature.

Çalışmamızın amacı, Gâvur hikâyesinden hareketle Byron'un bu gizemli dünyasını göstermektir. Balkanlardaki dinî ve ulusal çeşitlemeyi göz önünde bulundurarak birden fazla anlatıcı kullanan Byron, bu anlatıcılar vasıtasıyla Balkanlılardaki genel anlayışı vermeye çalışır. Amacımız, Lord Byron'un Balkanlarda karşılaştığı gizemli dünyayı öne çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Lord Byron, Balkanlar, Anlatıcı, Mentalite.

1. Lord Byron's interest for Balkans

One of the works where Byron expressed his interest for Balkan is *The Giaour*. It is a poem written as a part of his *The Turkish Tales*. Published in 1813, it is the first of this series of romances which continues with: *Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara* and *The Siege of Corinth*. The reason of being set in one group is similarity of the stories and Byron's mirroring of Balkan setting, society, mentality, life, battles, costumes, strength and weaknesses, in each and every one of them. Hence, this cultural clash between his own English and Balkan mentality is what made Byron's tales intriguing.

While he wrote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* during his tour through Portugal, Spain, Malta, Turkey, Greece and Albania, he started *The Giaour* upon his return to England. As other of his tales, this one is the reminiscence of his journey in Balkans.

Byron did not start his journey with a blank mind. He had prejudice about this region which was shaped by the travelogues he read, and this was proved in his letters to his mother where he wrote "of Constantinople you have of course that I have nothing to add on the subject".¹ Though the works he read gave him a certain idea of the East, Byron unrevealed a mystery that the others were not able to solve. He understood that his predecessors wrote of Balkans and the East based on the assumptions, as Edward Said² says:

¹ Peter Cochran, *Byron and Orientalism*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle 2006, p. 156.
² Apart of William Backford, Goethe, Hugo, Chaucer, Dryden Pope, who according to Said, designated this region, geographically, morally and culturally, he mentioned Byron as one of the Western writers who congratulate their own culture and demeans the other. Related to this, Said based his studies of the East and its representation by the West and Western literature, to the theory of "other" vs "self". Within this, westerns consider themselves as "self" thus maximize their culture, mentality and world in overall; while they represent the east, within it the Balkans as well, as "other" and different from their "perfect" and civilized

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"Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination", thus, portrayed as defeated and distant in comparison to Europe which was powerful and articulate³, but Byron believed that he gave something more of Balkan region than what his judgmental predecessors did.

Byron depicted Balkans with its warm and wild nature, mystical and violent ways of the natives. Apparently his approach is bitter sweet; he both praised and criticized this mysterious place. Being aware of the authenticity of each part of this region, he used every Balkan country in his works of Turkish tales.

The idea of *The Turkish Tales* came after Byron's accomplishment with the *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, as a work that regenerated his denigrated name. Seeing the unexpected interest of the English audience in his work, Byron knew that he found his stimulus and that was the East, respectively the Balkans which he considered as the part of Orient, since it was under Ottoman rule. He praised himself for the uniqueness of his work, as being written from the first-hand experience, therefore, different from the stories on East written thus far. From that moment on, he advised his friend Tom Moore to follow his footsteps as "the public was Orientalizing" and all the other parts of the world were drained:

*"Stick to the East; the oracle, Stael, told me it was the only poetic policy. The North, South, and West, have all been exhausted; but from the East, we have nothing. The little I have done in that way is merely a "voice in the wilderness" for you; and, if it has had any success that also will prove that the public are Orientalizing, and pave the path for you."*⁴

We cannot hail only the ingenuity of the Eastern world; nonetheless we should mention his "eye for detail, his meticulous accuracy, and his positive appreciation of the Orient"⁵, which distinguished Byron from the rest of the oriental theme writers. He was known for his defiant personality, thus people could not expect anything else except an unconventional

world. Therefore, Balkan mentality as "other" in comparison to west "self" was presented as backwards and violent in nature.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York 1979, p. 56-57.

⁴ Rowland E. Prothero, George Gordon, *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, Octagon Books, Inc., New York 1966, p. 154-163.

⁵ Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Orientalism in Lord Byron's Turkish Tales*, Mellen Press, Lampeter 1995, p. 30.

treatment of the selected themes. So, he did not fail his reputation and dealt with the material befitting his character.

2. Narration and Balkan mentality in “The Giaour”

The setting of *The Giaour* which is the subject of our study is the Balkan country he mostly adored, Greece. The story is considered a mixture of reality and Byron’s imagination, inasmuch as one of the sources write of Byron overhearing the story in the coffee house, while the others interpret the story as being inspired by his experience in Athens, where he saw a group of people carrying a girl in a sack and throwing her into the sea. This extraordinary act was conveyed by Byron, through *The Giaour* and was well accepted by the readers. “Byron gives his fans a dramatic story of frustrated passion, bloody vengeance and despairing love beyond the grave, set in exotic, chaotic corner of the Ottoman Empire.”⁶

Embracing all these qualities, the poem’s first manuscript consisted of 407 lines, just to add the number each time, ending with the 1334 in its final edition. This constant revision made Byron call the *The Giaour* “snake of a poem”.

In order to better convey the cultural perception of the Balkans, Byron uses the word Giaour as a title, by which he shows religious distinction and people’s approach to it. The word giaour carries the meaning of infidel, respectively non-Muslim, giving the glimpse of hostility towards the Christians in the region.

The plot of this tale is one of a triangle love story between Hassan, Leila and the Giaour. Leila is one of Hassan’s wives, who breaks all the social norms, and has a relationship with the Giaour. Hassan, as a man with reputation does not let this betrayal unpunished, and throws Leila into the sea. The Giaour, feeling guilty for Leila’s death, ambushes and kills Hassan for revenge. Hassan’s palace is now desolated and the Giaour finds shelter in the monastery where he lives his final days in remorse.

⁶ Elisabeth Bohls, *Romantic Literature and Postcolonial Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p. 156.

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The point of view of the poem includes three different perspectives and a general narrator in the prologue. Since we believe that every narrator makes his comments relying to his affiance, we traced the narrators on an individual bases, with the aim of revealing their mentality as a Balkan locals.

The story opens with the narrator who immediately shows conflicting opinion with the rulers of the region. He is protective over Greece as a country, yet critical over its passivity, for the state it is in, as a subsidiary to the Ottoman rule. This narration gives us an impression of the first narrator being Byron himself, who used the same criticism towards Greece in other of his works related to Balkans and Ottoman Empire.

The second perspective draws closer to the event with the fisherman who is the voice that recounts the love story. The fisherman is Muslim and represents only one part of Balkan inhabitants. Loyal to his inheritance, he strives to emphasize tragic outcome, by blaming the Giaour for the collapse, through the expression of his hatred with the words:

*"I know thee not, I loathe thy race.
But in thy lineaments I trace
What Time shall strengthen, not efface: ...
Right well I view and deem thee one
Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun."
(191-193; 198-199)*

Fisherman's rage is triggered by the scene of Hassan's palace which was deserted, after he found the death by the Giaour's hands. He continues by justifying Leila's death with indifferent tone which mirrors his support for her punishment, accordingly, ascertaining his mentality as a member of Muslim community.

The third narrator is the Christian monk, through whom we expect the religious conflict and opposing view to the previous Muslim fisherman. However, his lines show the prevailing power of the mentality over the religion. Monk does not utter protective words for the Giaour, as Giaour was a person who "heard prayers but utter none". Monk is not willing to accept the Giaour as a member of his religion. He never prayed and he is suspicious of a dark deed. To monk, the Giaour is just a person with a Christian face but not emulating a Christian faith. Monk clearly shows the traces of Balkan

mentality in his stance, where he protects his religion, as well as Ottoman race against the Giaour. For monk this man is unknown but his morality is doubtful, this is why he relies to his Balkan mentality and is ready to judge the Giaour.

*“Tis twice three years at summer tide
Since first among our freres he came;
And here it soothes him to abide
For some dark deed he will not name.
But never at our vesper prayer,
Nor e'er before confession chair
Kneels he, ...
But broods within his cell alone,
His faith and race alike unknown.
...
Yet seems he not of Othman race,
But only Christian in his face:
I'd judge him some stray renegade,
Repentant of the change he made.”*

(791-805)

The fourth narrator is the Giaour himself who describes his love and his state of mind during his relationship with Leila, giving some meaning to his deeds. He confesses to the monk about his days that passed “in much of joy, but more in woe”.

The character of Giaour is an outcast of Christian religion and judged through his forbidden love affair with married Leila. Acting against Balkans social codes, which are considered strict, he is condemned by the other narrators for having no moral. Giaour tries to rescue his soul by confessing to the monk through which we are told his side of the story, his inner feelings which vindicate him as a person. He justifies his violent ways as coming from the love he had for Leila, and the guilt he felt for her death. In attempt to prove his dissimilarity with Hassan he talks of his love as:

*“But mine was like the lava flood
That boils in AEtna's breast of flame.
I cannot prate in puling strain
Of Ladye-love, and Beauty's chain:
If changing cheek, and scorching vein.
Lips taught to writhe, but not complain.
If bursting heart, and maddening brain,*

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*And daring deed, and vengeful steel.
And all that I have felt, and feel.
Betoken love-that love was mine."*
(1101-1110)

This deep feeling was one thing that differentiates him from Hassan, the tyrant, who kept Leila as his slave, who was "a soulless toy for tyrant's lust". The Giaour's wordiness in the description of his love reinforces readers' support of him as a person in love fighting against the narrow mentality of Balkan region. Byron's attempt truly functioned after he gave the Giaour the closing word to justify himself and make the reader sympathize with his condition of a lover, putting in his mouth the most touching words that made the amoral act of infidelity sound romantic:

*"I loved her, Friar! nay, adored –
But these are words that all can use –
I proved it more in deed than word;
There's blood upon that dinted sword,
A stain its steel can never lose:
'Twas shed for her, who died for me,
It warmed the heart of one abhorred:
Nay, start not - no - nor bend thy knee,
Nor midst my sins such act record;
Thou wilt absolve me from the deed,
For he was hostile to thy creed!"*
(1156-1166)

This loved woman, Leila was a female living in Balkan, therefore, was not given any identity. It is even a surprise that she was given a name in the poem, as women did not possess any role in life except that of a wife, a daughter, a mother, a sister and often not given even a name just like Lady Macbeth who was known only through her husband, Macbeth's name.

Leila was given a name and a role of one of Hassan's wives. As the social canon requires she is "other"⁷ in the society which considers men

⁷ The occurrence of "Self" is the self-perception of a person as being the starting point. Identifying himself as the center of the world he is different from the "Other" who is outside his circle. The individual with the mentality of "Self" has the perception of his own perfection, thus holds the "Other" in contempt. This phenomenon was practiced in comparisons of nations, countries as well as genders where the last one was used in our study.

“self”. Being “other” means being in the background or being obscure. Leila was invisible in Hassan’s eyes until she tried to play her role of a romantically active woman, by which she caused Hassan’s rage and her death.

Leila did not play her role of a submissive wife. She fractured the figurative shell of her world and let the foreign bodies reach the untouchables. She was in the center of the plot as a reason and trigger of everything. Hence she was not given a voice nor any line to introduce or defend herself. The effort to ensure her autonomy just reinforced her isolation. Her beauty described in the most vivid way did not help her situation.

*“On her fair cheek’s unfading hue
The young pomegranate’s blossoms strew
Their bloom in blushes ever new;
Her hair in hyacinthine flow,
When left to roll its folds below.”*
(493-497)

Her tender creation was not spared by social conventions, or Balkan mentality which if defined by historical perception, was considered as backwards by the westerns. Initially Byron’s writings are of eighteenth century depicting the mentality he witnessed firsthand. He saw different ethnicities, different nationalities but also beheld the convergence of the mentality of the locals. There existed the Balkan identity which overshadowed all the national attitudes. Although this caught Byron by surprise, the sustained common experience, spiritual development and constant interaction built its foundation in the hearts and minds of the locals.

This interbedded state of Balkan people led Byron to frequent degradation of the society, in spite of his striving to present himself as a person who felt the “real” East, respectively Balkans in its core. His stories revealed his believe of Balkan society as misogynistic. Husbands in the tales are cruel and harsh in their punishment, just like Hassan. He often mentions harems in his tales, by which he points out the disdain of women and their insignificance in the eyes of the men.

Men’s conception and judgment was alike. Therefore, though different in the religion from Hassan, the Giaour did not differ from the rest

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of the Balkan men. This was proved with the clothes he wore which did not differentiate him from the Muslims as he was "now array'd in Arnaut garb". Except resemblance in clothes these two main male characters had the same mentality, thus could be considered as mirroring characters. They were both active, proud and fighters.

Their behavior was the same as well where Giaour expressed the same state of mind, as his enemy Hassan. Opposing sides and interests did not create conflict in the two men's treatment of the infidelity coming of one's wife, such as the case of Leila's infidelity to Hassan. Thus, the Giaour justified Hassan's deed with the words:

*"Yet did he but what I had done
Had she been false to more than one.
Faithless to him - he gave the blow ;
But true to me - I laid him low :
Howe'er deserved her doom might be,
Her treachery was truth to me."*

The quotation does not make Byron's heart go with Hassan, as he depicted the difference in the relationship between Hassan and Leila, and Leila and Giaour. Leila was Hassan's slave and forced to marry him, while the connection she felt with Giaour was personal choice and presented deep affection. Nonetheless, the infidelity would be subject to the same reaction, as Franklin writes on the poem as: "paradoxically both a strongly charged plea for female sexual autonomy and an acknowledgment that as the fabric of society is built on the foundation of female chastity, woman will always be the chief victim of illegitimate love."⁸

Apart of the Gioaur's resemblance to the rest of Balkan men, Byron reinforced the affiliation with the Balkan mentality through the third narrator, the monk. The monk does not vindicate Giaour's act and condemn his own religious follower, instantiating the force of Balkan state of mind infused in the head of this men of God. Nonetheless, this time next to Islamic "nonsense" tradition according to Byron, there stood Christian stance. "The poem's villains are the two great monotheistic codes, Christianity and Islam, comparable instruments of control over the lives of

⁸ Michael J. Franklin, *Indian Culture and Imperial Control in Eighteenth-Century British Orientalist Discourse*, Routledge, 2000, p. 47.

men and women.”⁹ These two prevailing religions both fail the Giaour. Thus monk’s words for the portrayal of the Giaour are:

*“If ever evil angel bore
The form of mortal, such he wore;
By all my hope of sins forgiven,
Such looks are not of earth nor heaven!”*

While the development of the story puts main character in the spot light, the social mentality is the issue that covers the entire story. Consequently, we have the conflict between the characters and the society as two opposing actors in this battle of life. Individuals fight for their choices while the society fights for its norms. One might argue that there is no society directly neither involved nor pictured in any moment throughout the story. However, its effects are seen through the outcome which was punishment for inappropriate behavior. Hassan acted violently as a member of his society who does not know any better reaction for the betrayal, except the death sentence for the unfaithful wife. Moreover, even if this punishment would not have been his choice, we are certain that he would have acted, in the exact manner, just to fulfill social expectation as a betrayed husband, and that is to punish his wife as severely as he can. Due to this we are convinced that Hassan’s personality was carved by his society, respectively Balkan society and he performs such attitude as a result of his upbringing. The solution to his problem was a punishment which satisfied social norms and gave Byron material to depict Balkan society as fierce and harsh.

Conclusion

Travelogues were riveting literary form of the eighteenth century, knowing the fact that they give the best depiction of a national culture and character. Such was Byron’s work, starting with *The Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and passing to *The Turkish Tales* as reminiscence from his Balkan journey, he wrote in harmony with historical conditions. Balkan’s historical circumstance was being under the Ottoman rule and as such part of Orient. However, even though Balkan wasn’t able to resist the influences of the life stream, Balkan did not give up that easy and became a muddle of cultural values by keeping something of itself and accepting something from

⁹ Marilyn Butler, “The Orientalism of Byron’s Giaour”, Bernard Beatty, Vincent Newey ed., *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, Barnes and Noble Books, New Jersey 1988, p. 91.

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the new rule. This mixture created Balkan mentality. In attempt to depict this mentality which rose admiration in him, Byron tried to live taste and then convey it. One of these attempts is seen in *The Giaour*. In order to communicate the fusion that Balkan life is based upon, he used more than one narrator, each presenting his own opinion, his own values. Nonetheless, we aimed to prove the existence of Balkan mentality, in spite of the religious differences. Going through Muslim fisherman and Christian monk we saw the condemnation of extramarital affair. Moreover, even Giaour himself as a main character in this love triangle, and a person who truly adored Leila, expresses the same mentality as Hassan, Leila's husband, stating that he would do the same thing as Hassan did, if his wife would have been adulterous. Reading the verses of all the narrators, with different religious background, we are convinced in existence of one Balkan mentality, which covers the Balkan Peninsula and was ingrained in people's head despite their national and spiritual belonging.

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