The Oriental Woman as *Objet Petit a*: Subverting Orientalist Fantasies in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*

Henrieta Krupa
Ege University, Dr.
0000-0003-3066-8813
elizabethhenrietakrupa@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Lord Byron's satirical depiction of the Oriental harem and its women in Canto Five of Don Juan (1821/1859), arguing that Byron's departure from conventional Orientalist narratives subverts Western fantasies, revealing the intricate dynamics of power, desire, and signifying processes. Through a Lacanian lens, the study explores the Western subject's desire to signify the Oriental other, positioning the harem and its women as the elusive objet petit a—the unattainable object-cause of desire that structures Western subjectivity. Byron's use of satire and gender role reversals disrupts the Western gaze from within, exposing the mechanisms that sustain Orientalist discourse. By analyzing the interplay of gender, sexuality, and the semiotics of desire, this article contends that Don Juan functions as a critique of Western attempts to construct and control the female Oriental other. In doing so, Byron not only deconstructs the imagined authority of the Western observer but also reconfigures the representational politics of Orientalist literature, offering a complex and self-reflexive engagement with the discursive forces that shape cultural perceptions of the East.

Keywords: Lord Byron, Don Juan, Orientalism, satire, harem

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Objet Petit a Olarak Oryantal Kadın: Lord Byron'ın *Don Juan*'ında Oryantalist Fantezileri Yıkmak

Henrieta Krupa
Ege Üniversitesi, Dr.
0000-0003-3066-8813
elizabethhenrietakrupa@gmail.com

Öz

Bu makale, Lord Byron'ın Don Juan'ın Beşinci Kantosunda (1821/1859) yer alan Oryantalist harem ve haremdeki kadınların satirik tasvirini inceleyerek, Byron'ın geleneksel Oryantalist anlatılardan sapmasının Batılı fantezileri altüst ettiğini ve iktidar, arzu ve anlamlandırma süreçlerinin karmaşık dinamiklerini açığa çıkardığını öne sürmektedir. Lacancı bir bakış açısıyla yapılan bu çalışma, Batılı öznenin Oryantal ötekini anlamlandırma arzusunu ele alarak harem ve haremdeki kadınları, Batı öznelliğini yapılandıran; ancak asla tamamen erişilemeyen arzu nesnesi objet petit a olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Byron'ın hiciv ve toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini tersine çevirme stratejisi, Batılı bakışı içeriden bozarak Oryantalist söylemi sürdüren mekanizmaları ifşa eder. Toplumsal cinsiyet, cinsellik ve arzu göstergebilimi arasındaki etkileşimi analiz eden bu makale, Don Juan'ın Batı'nın kadın Oryantal ötekini inşa etme ve kontrol etme girişimlerine yönelik bir eleştiri işlevi gördüğünü savunmaktadır. Böylelikle Byron, yalnızca Batılı gözlemcinin hayali otoritesini yapıbozuma uğratmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda Oryantalist edebiyatın temsiliyet politikalarını yeniden yapılandırarak Doğu'ya yönelik kültürel algıları şekillendiren söylemsel güçlerle karmaşık ve özdüşünümsel bir etkileşim sunar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ZLord Byron, Don Juan, Oryantalizm, hiciv, harem

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Introduction

The term *harem* originates from the Arabic root *ḥ-r-m*, a triliteral form associated with notions of prohibition, sanctity, and seclusion. In its original context, *ḥarīm* denotes a *sacred, inviolable space*, often referring to the private quarters reserved for women in Muslim households, and by extension, to the women themselves. Closely related terms such as *haram* (forbidden) and *ḥarīmī* (the women of the harem) reinforce the semantic field of restriction and sanctity surrounding female spaces (Wehr 1976, 171-172). As Ruth Bernard Yeazell explains, the word *harem* derives from the Arabic signifying the *forbidden* or *sacred* and "refers both to the women who maintained their inviolability with the veil and to the private quarters these women occupied" (2000, 1). Thus, in English usage—recorded as early as the seventeenth century—the word evolved to signify not only the segregated space itself but also the wives and the concubines. The concept also resonates with the Hindu-Urdu word *purdah* or *pardah*, meaning *curtain* or *veil*, which similarly signifies both the

physical and social separation of women in traditional Hindu and Islamic communities (*Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2008). Under *Shari`ah* law, Muslim men are permitted multiple wives and concubines, who thus lived together within these secluded spaces. Since this societal structure, largely inaccessible to Western men, fuelled fascination and myth-making about the hidden world of the harem, over time, especially in Western discourse, the harem has become a loaded symbol, steeped in Orientalist fantasy, representing a sensualized and exoticized vision of the East that often distorts its cultural and historical realities. As Irvin Cemil Schick notes, the harem became a persistent myth in the Western imagination, representing "spaces of otherness" shaped by sexualized xenophobia (1999, 50). Emily Apter further adds that these spaces offered the Western imagination a "thrilling transgression of cultural voyeurism" (1993, 212). This voyeurism, according to Schick, was more than mere curiosity; it was a form of "topolagnia—a libidinous attraction to a place", revealing the West`s desire to dominate not just Eastern women but also the spaces they occupied (1999, 53).

The Western construction of the harem, however, is neither entirely fictional nor wholly foreign. Themes of sexuality and gendered control within harems are rooted in specific Islamic traditions and historical practices, making them partially reflective of religious and cultural realities. For instance, Leila Ahmed (1992) explores practices such as veiling and seclusion, offering insight into their significance within Islamic societies while also noting their varied adaptations and interpretations across regions and time periods. Similarly, Fatema Mernissi (1987) critically examines the origins of gender roles, the seclusion of women, and the establishment of private spaces like the harem, arguing that these practices have been shaped and justified through both religious doctrine and cultural history. Western Orientalist fantasies, however, further exaggerated and distorted these realities, blending voyeuristic fascination with selective readings of Islamic traditions. While these portrayals drew upon

existing structures of veiling and seclusion, they were largely fabrications, turning the harem into both a lived space in Eastern[1] societies and a projection of Western exoticism—an emblem of sensuality and otherness. As Yeazell (2000) argues, the Western portrayal of the harem was as much a product of imagination as it was an appropriation of real practices, transforming the harem into a site of mystery and erotic allure. This construction served not only to satisfy Western curiosity but also to reinforce colonial ideologies by depicting the Orient as decadent and morally inferior.

Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998) further highlights the dual nature of the harem's representation, arguing that Orientalist depictions of veiling and seclusion were deeply intertwined with Western fantasies of dominance and control. These depictions frequently ignored the lived experiences of women within these spaces, instead projecting Western desires and anxieties onto the figure of the veiled, secluded woman. Thus, the harem occupies a complex position in Western discourse, existing both as a site of cultural and religious practice within Islamic societies and as a projection of Western fantasies, desires, and anxieties. This duality complicates its representation, revealing the entangled relationship between historical realities and the imaginative constructs of Orientalism. The harem, as both a lived experience and a fictionalized space, demonstrates how Western discourse appropriated and reshaped Eastern practices to serve ideological and colonial objectives.

Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality as a mechanism of control offers a valuable framework for understanding the Western obsession with the harem. Foucault (1978) argues that the regulation of sexual discourse serves as a method of power, shaping both individual subjects and collective identities. Within this framework, Orientalist fantasies of harem women as idle odalisques and sexual objects reinforced colonial power dynamics by portraying the Orient as inherently subjugated. Yeğenoğlu further contends

that, within Orientalist discourse, "the Orient is identical to its women; they are its essence" (1998, 74). Similarly, Schick asserts that representations of harems, Turkish baths, and slave markets were central to defining the Orient as *other* (1999, 67). This *otherness* constructed through racial, cultural, and sexual difference, justified the West's colonial agenda by framing the East as a domain ripe for conquest and control.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism as a *citationary* discourse further elucidates how Western representations of the Orient rely on repeated images rather than direct observation (1993, xxiv). Said argues that the Orient is less a geographic reality than a constructed *topos*—a product of reiteration and imagination (1979, 117). This *citationary* nature of Orientalist discourse turns the harem into a symbol of the Orient's supposed mystique. The harem woman, as an object of fascination, becomes emblematic of the Orient's inaccessibility, amplifying Western fantasies of domination through the desire to signify. Within this framework, the veiled and secluded Oriental woman represents the ultimate frustration for the Western subject—an unattainable object of desire that reflects the limits of Western power.

By her seclusion, the harem woman resists the Western gaze, deterring signifying practices that would render her fully knowable. Unable to penetrate the mysteries of the Orient and subjugate the Oriental woman to its gaze, the Western subject projects fantasies onto the veiled woman, ultimately reflecting its own desires back upon itself. Homi Bhabha's (2004) concept of the *invisibility of the* other offers further insight into this dynamic. Bhabha argues that the Western gaze reflects upon itself, constructing the *other* as a projection of its own fantasies and anxieties. Within the context of the Oriental harem, this process is particularly acute. The veiled Oriental woman, inaccessible and enigmatic, becomes a screen onto which the Western subject projects its desires, fantasies, and fears. In this way, she becomes a constitutive force of

the desiring-to-signify Western subjectivity. This interplay between the desire to signify the unattainable aligns with Jacques Lacan's (2014) concept of *objet petit a*—the elusive object-cause of desire that fuels pursuit without ever being fully satisfied. The Oriental woman, as an object of desire, thus represents a Lacanian *lack*, embodying the unattainable and perpetuating a cycle of desire and frustration. However, this dynamic is not unidirectional. While the Oriental woman's invisibility resists the gaze that seeks to dominate her through signification, it also fuels Western fantasies. Since her inaccessibility prevents the Western subject from fully subjecting her to its signifying practices, this resistance complicates the notion of Orientalist domination, suggesting that the harem woman is not merely a passive object but a figure that subverts the Western gaze by her very absence. This duality—of being both the object of desire and a source of resistance—shapes the interplay between Western fantasies and Eastern realities.

This article argues that the Oriental woman, as constructed in Western Orientalist discourse, embodies the Lacanian *objet petit a*—the object-cause of desire of the Western subject desiring (and attempting) to signify her. She functions as both the driving force of Western desire and the reflection of Western anxieties. Her inaccessibility makes her central to the formation of Western subjectivity, symbolizing both the unattainable *other* and the repressed aspect of the self. As Yeğenoğlu observes, "the representations of Orient are interwoven by sexual images, unconscious fantasies, desires, fears, and dreams." (1998, 26) This interweaving of sexuality and textuality is most evident in depictions of the harem and its women, where the Western desire to signify the Oriental *other* serves as a means of self-definition as much as an assertion to dominate through signification. To explore these dynamics, the study first examines the psychoanalytic framework underpinning the portrayal of the harem women within Orientalism and colonial discourse. It then considers how these portrayals reflect or challenge Said's concept

of *citationary* discourse, emphasizing the role of desire in shaping Western constructions of the Orient. Finally, the article turns to Lord Byron's *Don Juan,* originally published between 1818 and 1824, particularly to his Canto the Fifth (1821/1859), analyzing how Byron's treatment of the harem critiques Orientalist stereotypes while exposing the interplay between fantasy, desire, and power in Western literature. By interrogating the intersections of sexuality, power, and representation, this study reveals the complexities of Western fantasies about the harem and their implications for both colonial and postcolonial discourses.

The Oriental Woman as *Objet Petit a*

The Oriental woman, within the framework of the Western gaze, functions as Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire. In the Western imagination, she embodies mystery, exoticism, and eroticism, captivating the Western subject precisely through her elusiveness. Much like the *objet petit a*—an object of desire arising from the subject's sense of lack—the Oriental woman fuels both longing and anxiety, becoming central to fantasies of the forbidden. The analogy between the Oriental woman and Lacan's *objet petit a* offers a compelling lens through which to understand the interplay of desire, signification, and identification. As the elusive object-cause of desire, the *objet petit a* represents what the subject seeks but can never fully attain. Similarly, the Oriental woman in Western discourse is constructed as an exotic, unattainable figure—both desired and mystified—whose imagined qualities reflect the West's fantasies and anxieties. This dynamic illuminates how Western depictions of the Oriental woman not only reflect, project, and sustain fantasies but also play a formative role in shaping the Western subject's identity that is defined by the desire to signify; in other words, that is formed through the very act of desiring to represent the other.

In Lacanian theory, the *objet petit a* operates within both the symbolic

and imaginary realms of the psyche. In the symbolic, it represents unconscious desires and deep-seated anxieties that drive subject formation, while in the imaginary realm, it manifests as an idealised image or object of fixation. Lacan's concept of *jouissance*—drive satisfaction—explains that this desire is inherently unattainable, rooted in a primordial loss, a loss that can never truly be recaptured (Lacan 1992, 199). The *objet petit a* thus symbolizes this unattainable drive satisfaction, representing the cost of entering the Symbolic order—the realm that grants subjectivity and the ability to signify. Lacan asserts that in the process of self-formation, the subject must separate from the *objet petit a*, which stands as the symbol of this lack and desire (1998, 101).

Beyond personal desire, the *objet petit a* extends into cultural and social dimensions, shaping collective subjectivity. It manifests in various cultural symbols, idealized images, and societal figures that persistently drive cycles of desire and dissatisfaction. The Oriental woman, as an inaccessible and enigmatic figure within the Western imaginary, embodies this *objet petit a*—an elusive object-cause of desire that fuels fantasies. Her inaccessibility only heightens her allure, solidifying her role as the focal point of Western fantasies and anxieties. The harem woman, concealed from the Western gaze, exemplifies this dynamic: as an unattainable object of obsession, she becomes the source of both fantasy and anxiety within Western culture. Her mystery and sexualized portrayal are inextricably linked to fear and frustration, positioning her a central figure in Western imagination`s complex engagement with the Orient.

This interplay of desire and anxiety is an active force that shapes Western identity formation. The Western signifying subject—immersed in fantasies of domination and the desire to signify—projects its internal anxieties onto the figure of the harem woman. The lack of direct access to her triggers a sense of absence—a lack that, in turn, fuels the desire, precisely the desire

to signify her. Yet, in this absence, she simultaneously represents an unknown cultural context—a realm of difference that both allures and threatens Western masculinity. Her invisibility becomes a canvas onto which Western anxieties about power, identity, control, and sexuality are projected, reinforcing stereotypes of exoticism and otherness. The portrayal of the harem woman as a sexually charged figure is thus inseparable from the Western subject's sense of self. In Lacanian terms, the *objet petit a* is also the cause of anxiety (Lacan 2014). The most striking manifestation of the *objet petit a,* Lacan argues, is the appearance of anxiety itself: "The most striking manifestation of this object *a*, the signal that it is intervening, is anxiety" (2014, 86; emphasis in original). This anxiety arises because the *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire—cannot be fully grasped or integrated into the subject`s self-perception. In the case of the Oriental woman, her status as the unattainable object-cause of desire provokes both longing and deep anxiety as the Western subject, eager to signify her, confronts its inability to access or fully understand the desired to be signified *other*.

As the *objet petit a*, the harem woman plays a critical role in structuring Western fantasies. She serves as the central point around which desires are organized, while simultaneously generating anxieties around cultural difference, the unknown, and the boundaries between self and other. By maintaining her inaccessibility, she embodies the Lacanian *lack*—the gap between desire and fulfillment that structures subjectivity itself. Thus, in the Western imagination, the Oriental woman is both the desired object and the cause of existential anxiety. Her objectification reflects the Western subject's internal struggle with desire and identity, mirroring a process of both identification and alienation.

Lacan's mirror stage theory further elucidates this process. According to Lacan, identity is formed through identification with an external image—

imago, a specular reflection of the self that is simultaneously idealized and alien. Since the *imago* is never fully congruent with the subject's inner sense of self, this tension drives identity formation. In Lacanian terms, the *imago* becomes an object of desire—a mirror through which the subject constructs an image of what they ought to be (Lacan 2006). For the Western subject, the Oriental woman becomes one such specular image—an idealized object of desire representing exoticism, sexuality, and cultural otherness, against which the Western signifying subject constructs its selfhood. Her inaccessibility thus reinforces the identity formation of the Western subject, who projects fantasies of dominance and control—including sexual fantasies—onto her. These fantasies serve the broader processes of Western identity construction.

Ultimately, the Oriental woman as the *objet petit a* encapsulates both the lack and the drive that define the desiring-to-signify subject. As a cultural construct, she shapes Western identity by sustaining fantasies of power—particularly the power to signify—as well as sexuality and exoticism, while simultaneously reflecting the anxieties and uncertainties embedded in the Western subject's self-conception.

The Representation of the Oriental Woman in Western Literature

Edward Said (1979) outlines how Western perceptions of the East rely on distorted representations designed to justify colonial agendas. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concepts of culture and hegemony, and Michel Foucault's theories of knowledge and power, Said highlights how Orientalist discourse not only produces knowledge but also constructs the reality it claims to describe. This construction creates a self-referential system that perpetuates stereotypes, as each representation of the Orient draws upon and reinforces earlier depictions (Said 1979, 94-95). As Said argues:

> Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. (Said 1979, 20)

This intertextual framework extends to the portrayal of the harem and the Oriental women in Western literature, where the intersection of the Western desire for dominance over the East is intricately linked to Western identity formation. The harem, a recurring exotic trope, functions as a site of unrestrained sexuality and erotic exoticism, reinforcing Western fantasies. As Leslie Peirce points out, the West's "obsession with the sexuality of Islamic society" becomes a central theme in the majority of Orientalist representations (1993, 3). Similarly, Schick observes that the Western fascination with harem life stems from its alignment with preconceived notions of Islam as "sensuous religion that granted its adherents boundless sexual license." (1998, 88) The literary harem thus becomes a *topos* of eroticized domination, fulfilling Western fantasies of both boundless pleasure and cultural superiority (Behdad 1994, 107).

This hyper-sexualized portrayal of Oriental woman is deeply entrenched in Western literary traditions. Rana Kabbani (1986) traces this trope back to Shakespeare`s *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Cleopatra embodies the sexualized Orient fabricated for the Western gaze. As Kabbani observes, Cleopatra emerges as a "narrative creation that fulfilled the longing of Western imagination," positioning her as both an object of desire and a justification for colonial control (1986, 22). Within such narratives, the Oriental woman's sexuality not only reinforces power dynamics but also externalizes suppressed anxieties about identity, masculinity, and control.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this discourse produces a narrative

of sexuality tied to power while in Lacanian terms, such portrayals reflect the West's attempt to externalise and project its anxieties onto the *other*. Such practice played a crucial role in shaping Western bourgeois identity, allowing the Western signifying subject to both fetishize and idealize certain traits while simultaneously disowning and projecting undesirable characteristics onto the Oriental *other*. The Oriental woman manifests as a hyper-sexualized *imago*—both as a fetishized ideal and a repository for repressed anxieties. As Leslie Peirce observes, such depictions were widely commodified, contributing to the popularity of books about the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries (1993, 114). Similarly, Schick's analysis of Orientalist paintings corroborates this argument, noting that the portrayal of the harem as "an indoor pool with myriad nude women reclining on pillows and smoking water-pipes" catered precisely to "the expectations of the British public." (1999, 51)

The enduring influence of *The Thousand and One Nights* further demonstrates how these narratives shaped Western perceptions of the Oriental woman. The tales reinforce the image of the Oriental woman as lecherous, cunning, and unpredictable—an image that captivated European audiences (Melman 1992). Filiz Turhan observes that female sexuality in *The Thousand and One Nights* "galvanized the image of the lascivious harem woman", influencing European readers and reinforcing stereotypes of Oriental women as fickle and promiscuous (2003, 54). For instance, the framing tale of Shahzaman and Shahrayar reflects this trope, as both brothers are betrayed by their wives, leading to their disillusionment with women. Even the demon Ifrit, despite locking his wife under seven steel padlocks, cannot prevent her infidelity. It becomes evident that these tales emphasize the imagined promiscuity of the Oriental woman and the perceived failure of Oriental patriarchy to control female sexuality. Even the famous Scheherazade, though celebrated for her storytelling skills, exemplifies these dynamics. Her ability to deceive through storytelling reinforces the trope of the cunning Oriental woman, who

simultaneously fascinates and threatens patriarchal order—while her narrative prowess saves her nation, it simultaneously reflects anxieties about female agency within a patriarchal context.

This *imago* of the Oriental woman serves multiple functions. She is constructed as a deviant figure, indulging in masculine-coded desires for sexual gratification, while simultaneously de-masculinizing Oriental patriarchy by portraying it as incapable of controlling its women. Consequently, the Oriental woman`s representation signifies not only the projection of Western fantasies but also the manifestation of suppressed Western anxieties about its own masculinity. As Kelly Hurley explains, the "stereotypes that construct the Oriental as 'Other' serve a unifying function for the culture that produces them", projecting undesirable qualities onto the *other* in order to construct "a coherent and idealized self-definition" that "denies those qualities that threaten or undermine its own self-image and project them on to extracultural groups" (1996, 127). Ultimately, the portrayal of the Oriental woman and her sexuality operates as a site of projection, embodying suppressed Western anxieties about identity and masculinity. Her representation not only justifies imperial control but also facilitates the construction of Western identity though the externalization of repressed desires and fears. By portraying the Oriental woman as both a figure of unbridled sexuality and a challenge to patriarchal authority, Western literature transforms her into a symbol of both allure and threat.

Lord Byron and His Epic Satire *Don Juan*

Byron's *Don Juan* is an epic poem based on the Spanish legendary figure Don Juan, a wealthy libertine renowned for seducing women across all social strata. The myth originated in Tirso de Molina`s 1630 play *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* and has since been adapted into numerous works,

including Molière's 1665 play *Dom Juan*, Goldoni's 1735 *Don Giovanni Tenorio*, Mozart's 1787 opera *Don Giovanni*, Pushkin's 1830 poetic drama *The Stone Guest*, Espronceda's 1840 poem *The Student of Salamanca*, Zorrilla's 1844 play *Don Juan Tenorio,* and Strauss's symphonic poem *Don Juan* (1888). The first English adaptation, Thomas Shadwell's 1676 play *The Libertine,* introduced the character to an English-speaking audience, and by the time Byron composed his version (1819-1824), the legend was well established in literary tradition. However, Byron subverted expectations by portraying Juan not as a dominant, masculine seducer but as a naive and passive figure, often at the mercy of women's seductive powers. Byron himself described his *Don Juan* as an epic satire, and with over sixteen thousand lines across sixteen completed cantos, the poem is widely regarded as his masterpiece—though it remains unfinished due to his death in 1824.

Byron's reimagining of Juan as a male victim of female seduction reverses traditional gender roles, simultaneously subverting audience expectations and challenging societal norms through satire. This inversion is particularly evident in Canto Five, which transports readers to an Ottoman harem in Constantinople. Following a shipwreck and subsequent capture by pirates, Juan is sold at a slave market in Constantinople and purchased by Baba, a black eunuch, who delivers him to the Sultan's palace. Forced to dress as a woman, Juan—now in transvestite drag as Juanna—is presented to Sultana Gulbeyaz, the Sultan's fourth and favorite wife.

The ensuing interaction between Juan and Sultana Gulbeyaz is infused with humor and irony. When the Sultana demands that Juan kiss her foot in accordance with Ottoman custom, he defies her command and instead, negotiates to kiss her hand. This moment, alongside Juan's comical transvestism—a parodic treat to masculine authority—underscores his quick wit and adaptability, creating a humorous contrast between cultural

norms and personal agency. Byron explores these contrasts to satirize rigid social conventions, presenting the harem as both an exoticized space and a desexualized-by-humor arena.

The absurdity escalates when it is revealed that the Sultana has purchased Juan as a secret lover, a role he proudly refuses out of loyalty to another woman. This unexpected turn further inverts conventional gender dynamics, positioning Juan as the object of female desire rather than the active seducer. The Sultana's reaction—ranging from rage to tears—heightens the comedic tension while critiquing gendered power structures. Byron humorously exploits stereotypes of feminine emotional manipulation, using the Sultana`s sudden outbursts to highlight the performative nature of gender roles. Her tears, which ultimately weaken Juan's resolve, serve as both a critique of gendered expectation and a reinforcement of their theatricality.

The humor reaches its peak with the arrival of the Sultan, preceded by a procession of his "twice five hundred" concubines (Byron [1859], 148). The exaggerated number highlights both the Sultan's power and the inherent absurdity of the harem. Further adding to the comedic effect is the Sultan's attraction to Juanna, despite possessing an entire harem of women. This moment undermines the Sultan's masculinity while Juan's ability to convincingly pass as a woman, challenges rigid gender boundaries. Byron's depiction of the Sultan's attraction to Juan-as-Juanna blurs the lines of gender identity, reinforcing the socially constructed and performative nature of gender itself. The canto concludes with the narrator's sardonic remark on the oppressive conditions of women in the harem, wryly noting that "wedlock and a padlock mean the same" (158). This parting comment solidifies the poem`s satirical tone, inviting readers to reflect on power, desire, and the artificiality of established norms.

Byron further subverts Orientalist tropes by portraying the harem

as grotesque rather than a site of exotic sensual pleasure. Through humor and parody, he dismantles the Western fantasy of the harem, exposing it as both a constructed illusion and a product of colonial imagination. Juan's transvestism not only upends traditional gender roles, foregrounding the fluidity of gender identity itself, but also emerges as a sign that undoubtedly mocks the Western desire to penetrate, decode, and signify the mysteries of the harem by metaphorically *castrating* the voyeuristic desiring gaze of the audience. Additionally, the Sultana's position as an assertive figure of power adds another layer of irony that defies sexual politics, as it is not the woman who is commodified in Byron's text, but rather the male protagonist. Ultimately, Byron's portrayal of the Ottoman harem weaves humor, gender politics, and issues of power into a multi-layered critique of Orientalism. His satirical approach destabilizes both Western fantasies and patriarchal conventions, transforming *Don Juan* into a playful yet incisive exploration of the intersections between gender, culture, and representation.

Byron and the Western Desire to Signify

Don Juan subverts Western Orientalist discourse through biting satire, critiquing the West's fantasies of the East. Central to this critique is the Western obsession with signification—the construction of the Orient as an exotic object of desire. By employing irony and parody, Byron disrupts the conventional narratives of Eastern sensuality and mystery, undermining and exposing the mechanisms that sustain Western representations of the East. His *Don Juan* thus enacts a complex interplay between desire and its object, drawing on Lacan's concept of *objet petit a*—the unattainable ideal that perpetuates desire itself.

The Western fascination with the Orient is encapsulated in the figure of the harem, a symbol of luxury and sensuality that embodies both the allure

of the unknown and the projection of Western fantasies. Byron manipulates this trope by presenting the harem not as an eroticized space but as an absurd, exaggerated construct, exposing the artificiality of Western depictions of the East. His portrayal underscores the gap between Western fantasies and the unknown reality, ridiculing the commodification of women in Orientalist discourse. By presenting the harem woman as an agent of desire, Byron forces readers to confront the constructed nature of these images. This manipulation of the harem trope reflects the Lacanian notion that desire is sustained precisely by its unattainability. Thus, Byron crafts a provocative parody that subverts Orientalist discourse from within, amplifying its tropes to the point of absurdity. By drawing on preconceived Western fantasies of the harem, Byron not only indulges the reader's expectations but simultaneously exposes their artificiality. The poem satirizes the Western desire to unveil the secrets of the Oriental harem and grant Don Juan—traditionally the epitome of masculinity—entry into this forbidden space. Instead, Byron metaphorically *castrates* his hero, forcing Juan to disguise himself as an odalisque. Only when disguised in feminized form, Juan gains access to the secluded harem—a space he could never enter as a man. The harem's description as "vast, still, fragrant and divine" (Byron [1859], 85) draws on ironically exaggerated Orientalist tropes that idealize the East as a site of mysterious sensual luxury. Byron's hyperbolic language, however, functions satirically, critiquing the Western fetishization of the harem, rather than affirming it, by exposing it as a cultural fantasy rooted in desire and projection. In other words, Byron's use of lush language is deliberately over-the-top to reveal the absurdity and constructed nature of Western projections onto the East.

Byron's description of the harem gates underscores this critique. The narrator details a "giant door" that is "broad, and bright, and high" (Byron [1859], 86), and an "enormous gate…in almost pyramidic pride" (86–87). These exaggerated features evoke a sense of inaccessibility and otherness,

reinforcing the Western fantasy of the Orient as a realm of sensual and spatial mystery. However, the gates are humorously guarded by "two little dwarfs" (87) who are "deaf and dumb" (88), suggesting that only the emasculated—castrated eunuchs or deformed figures—can approach the Oriental women of the harem. Byron's analogy between the phallus and the tongue, both organs of potential threat, adds additional layer of comedic critique. By crafting such absurd figures as gatekeepers of such a "divine" (85) space, Byron ridicules the Western obsession with the harem as an impenetrable site of forbidden allure, satirizing the very discourse that constructs it.

Once Juan disguised as Juanna, gains entry, the narrator's depiction of the harem further mocks Western fantasies of opulence and exoticism:

> … a room still nobler than the last;
> A rich confusion formed a disarray
> In such sort, that the eye along it cast
> Could hardly carry anything away,
> Object on object flashed so bright and fast;
> A dazzling mass of gems, and gold, and glitter,
> Magnificently mingled in a litter (Byron 1859, 93)

This passage ridicules Orientalist stereotypes by presenting a chaotic, almost overwhelming accumulation of wealth and luxury. The harem is portrayed as an overwhelming display of opulence and a visual excess, reflecting the sensory overload and surface-level fascination characteristic of the Orientalist gaze. By exaggerating the scene's extravagance, Byron critiques the West's romanticization of the Orient as a place of decadence and disorder. The final line undercuts the grandeur with a note of absurdity, revealing the constructed and exaggerated nature of the Orientalist fantasy. Moreover, Byron satirizes the Western tendency to view the Orient solely as

a site of sensual pleasure and indulgence, exposing the superficiality of such perceptions. The overwhelming but chaotic nature of the harem can also be read as Byron's critique of the Orientalist gaze itself—one that fails to truly understand the complexities of Oriental culture and reduces an entire culture to a collection of clichés, reinforcing Western notions of rationality and order in contrast to the supposed excess and disorder of the East. Through parody and exaggeration, *Don Juan* not only deconstructs Orientalist myths but also turns the Western reader's gaze back on itself, forcing a confrontation with the ideological assumptions that shape these fantasies.

Satire, Subversion and the *Objet Petit a*

Byron's use of satire is central to his subversion of Western Orientalist discourse. Through humor and irony, he exposes the absurdity of the Western desire for the Orient, revealing it as a construct sustained by its own unattainability. In this context, the *objet petit a* is not merely a literal object of desire—such as the harem women—but the very structure of desire itself: the endless pursuit of an ideal that can never be fully realized.

The poem's ironic tone destabilizes the Western gaze, laying bare the constructed nature of Orientalist fantasies. Byron's portrayal of harem women as both alluring and ridiculous, for instance, mocks the notion of the Orient as an exotic, mystical realm. By presenting these women as citationary palimpsest, he critiques their reduction to mere symbols of sensual pleasure, exposing the absurdity of Western signifying practices. The *objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire—is simultaneously revealed and reinforced through satire, as Byron illustrates the Western fixation on an imaginary Orient that remains forever elusive. This interplay is particularly evident when Juan encounters Sultana Gulbeyaz. Byron intensifies the parody by introducing her reclining "in a confidential queenly way" beneath a luxurious canopy (Byron

[1859], 95)—an image steeped in Orientalist stereotypes of harem women as sexually indulgent figures, awaiting the fulfillment of male desire. This depiction directly addresses the citationary nature of Orientalist discourse, evoking familiar representations of harem women in Western paintings. However, just as the narrator is about to describe the Sultana's beauty, Byron deliberately withdraws, leaving it to the reader's imagination:

> I'd rather leave it much to your own mind,
> Than lessen it by what I could relate
> Of forms and features; it would strike you blind
> Could I do justice to the full detail;
> So, luckily for both, my phrases fail. (Byron 1959, 97)

Here, Byron mocks the Orientalist gaze both by exaggerating its claims to visual mastery and representational power and by depriving it of these practices. His hyperbolic assertion that the Sultana's beauty would "strike [the reader] blind" parodies the overwrought language typical of Orientalist fantasy. By feigning an inability to describe her, Byron satirizes the desire to consume and control the Oriental woman through language. The signifying phallus—symbolic of Western discursive authority—attempts but fails to penetrate the Oriental harem and impose meaning upon its women. Instead, Byron positions both the implied signifying subject and the reader in a state of emasculated uncertainty, forced into what can be described as a transvestite gaze—failing to dominate/objectify the Sultana.

Byron's Sultana embodies power and agency, further disrupting traditional gender dynamics and satirizing the Western fantasy of control. This reversal is reinforced when the narrator compares her to Ninon de l`Enclos, the celebrated French courtesan known for her wealth and influence over male lovers. The comparison links the Sultana to sexual promiscuity, but more

significantly, it subverts conventional gender politics: rather than being an object of male desire, the Sultana is depicted as the one who wields power, purchasing male sexual service. Through this portrayal, Byron playfully dismantles the reader's preconceived assumptions, turning Orientalist discourse against itself. The entire episode operates as a satire that both indulges and exposes Western fantasies, forcing the reader to confront the artifice of their own expectations.

Problematizing the East-West Binary

Byron's critique of Orientalism extends beyond the mere subversion of Western fantasies; it problematizes the binary opposition between East and West, a dichotomy that Western discourse often employs to justify its colonial agenda. This is particularly evident in Byron's portrayal of the Sultana, which destabilizes essentialist notions of cultural difference. By blurring the lines between East and West, Byron exposes the constructed nature of these categories, revealing how the Orient functions as a mirror reflecting the West's desires, anxieties, and contradictions.

This destabilization is especially pronounced in the narrator's attempt to signify Gulbeyaz Sultana, likening her to Venus "rising nude from the wave," with "Paphian pair of eyes" (Byron [1859], 96). This comparison aligns her with Aphrodite, the goddess of love, invoking associations with sensuality and promiscuity. The reference to Paphos—Aphrodite's mythological birthplace—further reinforces this connection, as the city was historically renowned both as a center of her worship and as a site where, according to James Frazer, "before marriage all women were formerly obliged by custom to prostitute themselves to strangers at the sanctuary of the goddess" (2002, 330). By invoking this Western intertext, Byron not only reinforces the association between the Sultana and free sexuality but also links her to prostitution. However, he

simultaneously undermines this analogy by inverting traditional power dynamics: it is Juan, rather than the Sultana, who is objectified and reduced to a sexual commodity. As the narrator entices the reader's imagination with descriptions of the Sultana's beauty, he also critiques the Western gaze for its reductive projection of desire onto the Oriental woman, ultimately breaching the boundaries between the signifying West and the signified East.

Byron's physical depiction of his Sultana further subverts Orientalist conventions from within. Her features—"bright brow" (Byron [1859], 108), "blue eyes" (116), and "white arms" (126)—align with Western bourgeois aesthetics rather than distinctly Eastern attributes, underscoring how the West constructs the East through its own idealized standards.[2] As Yeğenoğlu suggests, "the self always knows and represents the other through himself" (1998, 85). The Oriental woman, then, becomes a projection of the familiar onto the unknown. This phenomenon is also evident in Western Orientalist paintings, where harem women are frequently portrayed with delicate features, fair skin, and hourglass silhouettes—traits valorized in nineteenth-century Europe. A notable example is *The White Slave* (1888) by Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ, housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (Fine Art Museum in Nantes, France), which depicts a fair-skinned, red haired concubine smoking nude in an opulent setting, exemplifying the Western idealization of the harem woman through a Eurocentric aesthetic lens— while ostensibly representing the exotic other, the painting simultaneously reflects European ideals of femininity. The concubine's whiteness, demure posture, and idealized nudity render her both erotically appealing within Western aesthetics and morally legible to the Western viewer. Her eroticism is rendered acceptable to the European viewer by cloaking it in exoticism, while her white skin and delicate features align her with the Western feminine ideal. In this way, her sensuality is sanitized through familiar aesthetic codes, revealing how Orientalist art displaces European sexual anxieties onto the Oriental setting,

while ultimately reaffirming Western norms, and framing the harem as both a site of desire and moral containment. Thus, Orientalist art often re-inscribes Puritan ideals under the guise of cultural difference, domesticating the foreign female body through familiar visual codes. Likewise, Byron's portrayal of the Sultana deliberately closely adheres to Western beauty ideals, reinforcing the Oriental woman's function as a projection of European fantasies. Her features conform to bourgeois aesthetic norms, and this alignment is further emphasized by the narrator's direct comparison of her to Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1484-1486), housed in Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, Italy, which is a canonical Renaissance image that epitomizes European ideals of feminine beauty and eroticism: "The lady rising up with such an air / As Venus rose with from the wave" (Byron [1859], 96). This allusion not only situates Byron's Sultana within a familiar artistic tradition but also transforms her into a recognizable symbol of Western desirability. Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, with its depiction of the nude goddess emerging from the sea, embodies the Renaissance ideal of the pure yet sensual woman. By likening his Sultana to this iconic figure, Byron deliberately collapses cultural boundaries, re-inscribing the Oriental woman within a European visual and symbolic order. Her otherness is thus neutralized through aesthetic assimilation, further illustrating how Orientalist discourse appropriates and reshapes the East according to the desires of the Western gaze.

By portraying the Oriental woman through Western bourgeois aesthetics while simultaneously granting her sexual autonomy, Byron signals the bourgeois ideal gone unruly. This portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and prefigures patriarchal anxieties that would intensify later in the century with the rise of the so-called New Woman. Although *Don Juan* predates the New Woman figure—most commonly associated with the late nineteenth century, especially post-1880s Britain—Sultana Gulbeyaz may be read as an early articulation of similar concerns, foreshadowing the anxieties that

the New Woman would later embody. The Sultana's commanding presence, erotic initiative, and rejection of passivity defy conventional femininity and anticipate later debates surrounding women's autonomy and sexuality. As the New Woman came to symbolize a disruption of Victorian domestic ideals through her independence and sexual agency, Byron's Sultana similarly unsettles dominant gender norms by embodying authority, desire, and refusal to be contained. Within the Orientalist framework, placing such a figure in the East allows Byron to critique not only the fetishization of the harem but also the patriarchal fear of empowered women—projecting Western gender anxieties onto an exoticized Other. Thus, Byron's Sultana emerges as a symbolic figure of disruption, one that foreshadows broader critiques of gender and power that would gain traction in later decades.

The Oriental Harem as Myth

In *Don Juan*, the harem functions as a central metaphor for the interplay between myth and reality in Orientalist thought. On one hand, it embodies an idealized fantasy of Eastern decadence—a space of sensual pleasure and unattainable desire. On the other, it is a site of confinement and control, where women are both fetishized and restricted. Byron exposes this tension by presenting the harem as both the object of the Western subject's desire and a narrative fabrication.

The harem, in Byron's depiction, is not merely a physical setting but a symbolic construct that reflects how Western discourse imagines and produces the East. The women within it exist as projections of Western fantasy, shaped by the desires and anxieties of Western men. However, Byron complicates this portrayal by granting these women agency, thereby destabilizing the notion of the harem as a passive and submissive space. This tension between myth and reality challenges the reductive Orientalist portrayal of the East as inherently

exotic and sensual. For instance, when the Sultana attempts to seduce Juan, her bold expressions of desire overturn conventional expectations. Juan's reaction—bursting into tears and proclaiming his willingness to die rather than submit to the Sultana's "strange phantasies" (Byron [1859], 115)—parodies the Western male fantasy of sexual dominance. His exaggerated declarations, professing a willingness "to be impaled, or quartered as a dish for dogs" (141), "to be slain with pangs refined, or thrown to lions, or made baits for fish" (141), rather than compromise his chastity, humorously invert Orientalist tropes and male bravado. The narrator further amplifies this irony by likening the Sultana's unfulfilled desire to that of legendary figures such as Potiphar's wife and Phaedra (131). Even her final attempt to manipulate Juan through tears is met with comic relief, as the narrator notes that her efforts nearly succeed before being abruptly interrupted by the eunuch announcing the Sultan's arrival.

Through parody, satire, and exaggeration, Byron's depiction of the Sultana and the harem ultimately exposes the constructed nature of Orientalist discourse. His critique of the Western gaze dismantles the fantasy of the East as a realm of sensual excess and exotic otherness. Simultaneously, his subversion of gender dynamics and the Sultana's assertion of agency challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, offering a layered commentary on power, desire, and representation.

Acknowledging the Ambiguity: Complicity and Critique

While *Don Juan* subverts Western Orientalist representations, it also reveals the complexity of Byron's critique. At times, his use of clichés and stereotypes risks reinforcing the very images he seeks to dismantle. The portrayal of the harem and the Oriental woman, for instance, though satirical, still operates within the framework of Orientalist discourse, even as it is being mocked.

Byron's Sultana is steeped in allusions to the *imago* of the harem woman—the Oriental woman as fickle and lustful, cunning and resistant to patriarchal control, as manipulative as the trickster Scheherazade. Through a parody that amplifies and subverts reader expectations, Byron exposes the constructed nature of these tropes, deconstructing the rigid binary oppositions inherent in Orientalist ideology. His deliberate blurring of boundaries—between West and East, masculine and feminine, oppressor and oppressed—allows *Don Juan* to function as a critique that subverts Orientalist discourse from within.

Yet this tension between critique and complicity also highlights the limitations of Byron's subversion. While *Don Juan* exposes the constructed nature of Orientalist fantasies, it does not fully escape the ideological framework it engages with. This raises the question: does Byron, through his use of Orientalist tropes, remain complicit in the very stereotypes he appears to critique? Such ambiguity invites a reading of the poem through Lacan's notion that desire is inherently paradoxical—the act of desiring something reinforces the distance between the subject and the object of desire. Similarly, Byron's satire can be read as simultaneously undermining and reproducing the Orientalist gaze, revealing the inextricable entanglement of critique and complicity within the structures of representation.

Conclusion

Byron's *Don Juan*, particularly Canto Five, invites readers to explore desire through the lens of Lacanian theory, centering on the impulse to signify. Byron masterfully engages with Western Orientalist discourse, invoking its collective *imago* only to subvert it from within. As Said observes, Orientalism is inherently citationary, with representations of the East shaped by prior depictions and cultural projections. Byron's narrative lays bare this recursive process, exposing how the Western self projects its identity onto the Oriental

other—a foundational mechanism of Orientalist ideology rooted in the desire to signify.

Through his portrayal of the harem and the Oriental woman, Byron reinforces Schick's assertion that spaces of otherness transcend physical boundaries, existing instead in a mythical realm. The harem and its women—unreachable to the Western male gaze—function as the *objet petit a* of desire, generating imagery that aligns with both public expectations and political imperatives. Yet Byron's satire critiques this dynamic, presenting the harem as a clichéd space of unbridled sensuality and the Sultana as a cunning, lustful figure, only to expose the artificiality of these Orientalist stereotypes.

Notably, Byron's parody inverts traditional power dynamics, positioning the feminine Easterner against the masculine Westerner to undermine Western claims of superiority. The exclusion of the Western male gaze from the harem reaches its comedic climax in Juan's transvestism, as he successfully disguises himself as a concubine to deceive the Sultan. This scene metaphorically castrates the Western signifying phallus, transforming its desiring gaze into a homoerotic encounter and dismantling the West's perceived dominance over the Oriental other. By subverting Orientalist tropes and exposing their reliance on rigid stereotypes, Byron not only mocks but fundamentally destabilizes the ideological foundations of Western Orientalism. His work transcends mere parody, offering a profound challenge to colonial narratives and their enduring legacy, ultimately prompting us to reconsider the mechanisms of cultural representation and power.

1 In this article, the term *Oriental* is used critically to denote the constructed and often stereotypical representations of the East as produced by Western discourse, particularly within the framework of Orientalism as theorized by Edward Said and others. It refers to ideological projections and aesthetic conventions in literature and art that portray the East as exotic, sensual, or fundamentally Other. In contrast, *Eastern* is employed more neutrally or geographically, referring to actual regions, cultures, or peoples situated in what is conventionally (if problematically) identified as the Eastern hemisphere—especially the Middle East and Asia. This distinction is maintained to highlight the difference between discursive constructions and real-world referents.

2 While these features—such as fair skin and light eyes—were also admired within Ottoman aesthetic traditions, their emphasis in Byron's description remains Eurocentric. This is because the traits are framed through a Western lens of desirability, reinforcing European standards of beauty as normative and implicitly superior. The Oriental woman is thus not represented in terms of culturally specific Eastern ideals, but rather re-imagined according to Western fantasies, reducing cultural specificity in favor of familiar, Western-coded markers of femininity and allure. This reflects a broader pattern in Orientalist discourse, which projects the familiar onto the foreign in order to render it intelligible—and desirable—within Western paradigms.

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