# CHAPTER THREE

## The Literary Marketplace of the Nineteenth Century and the Portrayal of the Byronic Hero

This chapter will delve into nineteenth-century literary culture and how Byron's shrewd understanding of the demands of his literary audience influenced his conception of the Byronic Hero. In order to discuss the literary scene then, this chapter will focus on the role of the publishers as well as the reviews, newspapers, periodicals and magazines in promoting the readership of literary works in the nineteenth century. It will examine how the reading public relied on these sources to learn about the latest and most fashionable texts in the market. Next, I will discuss the impact of the Byronic hero on the reading public at the time. The Byronic hero's exciting adventures provided entertainment and escapism as it helped lift the public's spirits after the post-war period, especially among the lower classes. Byron's depiction of the Byronic hero's bravery and chivalry towards women also won the approval of female readers who, under the influence of women writers at the time, had become increasingly aware of their inferior position in a patriarchal society.

In addition, this chapter will deal with Byron's best-selling Turkish Tales, where I will focus on two of Byron's tales, namely *The Giaour* and *The Corsair.* These tales were selected not only for Byron's portrayal of their courageous heroes but also due to their huge popularity and enormous success in the literary market. *The Giaour* was the first Turkish tale written and considered the most critically acclaimed, while *The Corsair* was Byron's most widely read and best-selling poem.

**The reading public in the eighteenth century**

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a time of cultural, social, economic, and political change. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the passing of the first Reform Bill in 1832 marked the beginning of a political movement, which witnessed the promotion of human rights and civil liberties against established systems of absolutist governments. Democratic ideas that form the constitutional basis of modern Western societies were developed and circulated in a political and cultural climate in the century between the Glorious Revolution and the French Revolution.[1] The huge political, social and economic developments from the eighteenth century onwards resulted in the growth of the reading public in society at the time.

Among the important factors for the growth of the reading public include an increase in the population at the time. The population in England rose from 7.0 million in the 1750s to 15.4 million in 1831. This enormous growth in the population coupled with an Evangelical zeal in teaching people to read helped to produce a huge increase in literacy (Everest, 72). The enormous increase in the population also helped to sustain the Industrial Revolution, which both directly and indirectly contributed to the growth of the reading public. Firstly, technological innovations such as a modern transport system and the mechanization of papermaking enabled the mass production of reading matter and its distribution across the country.[2] Next, readership was no longer confined to the upper classes. As a result of growing prosperity and the cheapness of labour, the middle classes could afford the time for reading, as they were able to hire others to do their tasks. The lower classes, on the other hand, had to contend with long working hours and their reading was largely confined to Sundays. When workers had leisure time on their hands, music

halls and spectator sports competed with reading as a means of distraction, excitement and release. As culture and sports became less elitist and increasingly public pursuits, they provoked the desire for social emulation, which in turn stimulated increasing consumption and expenditure.[3]

During this time, a competitive literary market emerged where literature became a profitable business venture. Publishers and distributors competed against one another by looking out for saleable value of the contents of works produced and promoting them through various methods of advertising and marketing.[4] The growing demand for reading matter led to a growing number of publishers and booksellers who supplied that demand. From 1740 to the 1790s the demand for books rose from about 400 in 200 towns to nearly 1000 in more than 300 places. A key factor in this business venture was that the distribution and production of literature was determined by the advanced value of the writing and agreed upon in financial terms by the co-operation of the whole literary culture. For instance, Byron's good friend Thomas Moore received from Longman in December 1814 an advance of 3,000 pounds for *Lalla Rookh* before a single word of it had been written (Everest, 70).

An important development in the eighteenth century literary market was that the functions of printer, bookseller and publisher, which had previously been provided by the same business enterprise, now functioned separately. One of the oldest, independent publishers and perhaps the most influential of all British publishing houses was John Murray Publishing House founded by John Murray in 1768. In 1803, his son John Murray Jr. inherited the business and quickly showed a literary astuteness which would firmly establish the company on the publishing map.[5] Other notable publishers at the time were

Thomas Longman, Archibald Constable and William Blackwood. In spite of the mechanization of the trade, books remained a relatively expensive commodity, so that authors who broke into print primarily did so in the periodical press. From the 1760s to the end of the century the number of periodicals in London rose from more than thirty to over eighty. The multiplication of national newspapers, magazines, reviews and other periodical publications helped to cultivate standards of taste among the reading public.[6] As a result, booksellers had to face stiff competition in the competitive climate:

> Public interest was stimulated by the attempts at comprehensive critical reviewing and by the publishing of readers' contributions to the magazines. Newspaper advertisements puffed 'latest' books by those said to be the most skilful or up-to-date authors.[7]

The growth of the reading public brought about a significant rise of the reviews in the literary market. The introduction of the reviews like the *Edinburgh Review* of which Murray became part owner made literature more and more accessible to the public. The emergence of the Romantic writers during this period coincided with the growth of these new forms of literature. *The Edinburgh Review* was established by Lord Francis Jeffrey in collaboration with two of his liberal Whig friends in 1802. This hugely influential quarterly magazine was a platform for the best-known writers of the day. The review was novel as it aimed at presenting selected publications in fewer but longer and more sophisticated articles than had previously been common.[8] It was in the Romantic period that best-sellers became a wide-spread phenomenon. Lord Francis Jeffrey became editor from 1803 until 1829, and it was under him that the magazine enjoyed its heyday as one of the most influential arbiters of taste in Europe.[9] Initially hostile towards Byron as seen in his attack on Byron's early poems, which in turn drew a satirical response from Byron in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, Jeffrey was eventually won over by the

originality of Byron's subsequent poems. He was especially drawn to the ingenious persona of the Byronic hero in the poems. Jeffrey's glowing reviews made a huge impact on the reading public who immediately lapped up the works of this latest fashionable writer in the market. The success of his poems not only brought Byron fame and money but also raised Jeffrey's profile as a distinguished and influential critic as well as helped increase the sales of the magazines.

The huge public receptions towards these reviews are evident with the wide circulation in the market. The *Edinburgh Review* had reached a circulation of 14,000 readers by 1818. By 1817, the *Quarterly Review* which was launched by Murray had a circulation of 10,000. In 1814, an estimate of 50,000 readers read 13,000 copies of *Edinburgh Review* but by 1820, it had reached about 500,000 readers within a month of its publication. These figures make it clear that this readership was no longer exclusively located within the upper classes. Apart from the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, at least sixty other periodicals carried reviews between 1802 and 1824, the majority being monthly publications such as the *Monthly Review* (1749 – 1845) and the *Critical Review* (1756 – 1817). Magazine reviewers writing for the *Gentlemen's Magazine* (1731 – 1868), the *Scots Magazine* (1739 – 1826), the *European Magazine* and *London Review* (1782 – 1826), the *Monthly Mirror* (1795 – 1811) and most notably, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817- 1880), were operating on a monthly basis. Finally, weekly papers such as the radical *Examiner* (1808 – 1881) carried reviews on a regular basis.[10] The birth of reviews and magazines reflected the growth of the reading public and the need for critical evaluation in an expanding literary marketplace:

> Certainly the rise in the popularity of reviews may partly be accounted for by fashionable demands for the most recent opinions on the most recent books. But it probably also depended upon subscription from a large proportion of the middle classes whose educational limitations encouraged them to regard the reviews as providing them with an assured basis for their reading, a basis protected by what was imagined to be the public consensus. This protection would have been of particular importance to those anxious to have their new place in the fashionable hierarchy confirmed (Martin, 35).

The reviews were able to fulfil the needs of the public. They taught them what to read as well as think. The reviewers allowed themselves to adopt a superior attitude as they were assured that the majority of readers were bound to accept their judgement. In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q.D. Leavis points out that the eighteenth-century peasant who learned to read had to read what the gentry and the university men read; that the nineteenth-century readers, on the other hand, are properly spoken of not as the 'public' but as 'publics.'[11] Philip W. Martin has argued that these readers looked for a guidance that was provided especially by the reviews, in an extension of the guiding functions provided by eighteenth-century moralist periodicals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (34).

Apart from these reviews, newspapers were also responsible for encouraging the reading habit among the population. According to Southey, in 1807, there were some 50,000 people in England who read the news every day and conversed upon it. Newspapers became established as a respectable way of life among the middle class public partly due to the value and status granted to the informed reader. It was a fact that being well informed on the most recent happenings in society was an access to formal conversation. The role of newspapers therefore, played an important role in the world of the regency. [12]

With the emergence of the critical reviews and periodicals, magazines as well as newspapers, readership was no longer confined to the upper classes although these largely remained the superior group. While this upper class reading public continued to exist, audiences for books, magazines, newspapers, and other reading matter were as diverse as never before. Although the reading of the bulk of lower-class readers was confined to penny shockers and sensational weeklies, a small but significant minority from these classes pursued more serious reading relying on cheap second-hand books and reprints of standard classics. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that cheap reprints became customary and free public libraries were established. Works of respectable poets in the nineteenth century such as Burns and Byron were popularised for a mass reading public in series such as *Dicks' English Library of Standard Works.*[13] Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* argues that it is the working class rather than the middle classes or the aristocracy who genuinely read with pleasure important works of poetry and politics. He maintained that:

> ...it is the workers who are most familiar with the poetry of Shelley and Byron. Shelley's prophetic genius has caught their imagination, while Byron attracts their sympathy by his sensuous fire and by the virulence of his satire against the existing order. The middle classes, on the other hand, have on their shelves only ruthlessly expurgated editions of these writers...prepared to suit the hypocritical moral standards of the bourgeoise. (272)

The growth of the reading public in the nineteenth century brought significant changes in the style of writing and perception of the romantic writers. J.W. Saunders defines the "Romantic dilemma":

> One insistent claim made by the Romantics was that writers, especially poets, had a special vision of truth which ought not to be socially corrupted or circumscribed: they should be free to write as their inspiration took them; it was enough for society to protect their special gifts and profit from their

> prophecies and insight. The Romantic dilemma, as far as the literary profession was concerned, was how to adapt the social context of literature to make room for this new claim. The dilemma became sharper when the reading public demanded an immediate and practical use for writers' dreams and visions, not as a means to truth and understanding of life, but as a kind of anodyne, a means of escape from life. Wide schisms were to open between what the public expected of literature and what the writers wanted to do: after an age of most extraordinary unbalance, producing in extreme instances literary schizophrenia. [14]

From this extract, it can be concluded that the reading public, especially the lower classes, were looking to literature as a form of escapism from the drudgery of their daily post-war existence. The political turmoil as well as the widespread unemployment and poverty had dampened the spirits of the people which led to disillusionment and despair. It was Lord Byron, more than any other Romantic writer, who provided this escapism for them through his poems and more importantly, his conception of the inimitable Byronic hero persona. Byron together with Walter Scott were the most successful writers in the early nineteenth century. At the height of their popularity, Scott received 2,000 guineas in advance for *Rokeby* (1812) from Ballantyne and John Murray offered Byron 1000 guineas for *The Giaour* (1813). Scott's *Marmion* was considered a best seller when it was published in 1808 and sold 2000 copies in its first month while *The Lady of The Lake* (1810) went on to sell 20,300 copies in the first year after publication.[15]

Lord Byron eventually superseded Scott in popularity and attention given by reviewers. Although his works were rejected by a number of publishers including Mr. Miller and Thomas Longman, it was John Murray who finally published Byron' poems having expressed his desire to publish Byron's works before. With his foresight and shrewd business instincts, John Murray decided to take a financial gamble with the publication of Byron's first major epic, *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* for which he paid the

author 500 guineas.[16] The gamble paid off handsomely for both Murray as well as Byron. John Murray made his fortune and John Murray publishing house was destined towards literary legacy. Byron's first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* sold 4,500 copies in less than six months in 1812, and *The Corsair* (1814) caused a sensation by selling 10,000 copies on the day of its publication.[17] As stated earlier, this success of his poems were mainly attributed to Byron's original conceptualisation of the Byronic Hero which was destined to influence other heroic figures in nineteenth-century literature as well as the future generation. The huge popularity of the tales were testimonies to the Byronic Hero's popularity among the masses. They indicated society's fascination for romantic, courageous, swashbuckling heroes. The charismatic persona of the Byronic hero which shall be explored later on in this chapter had indeed made a deep impact on the nineteenth century reading public elevating his status as a cultural icon in the Romantic period.

Although Byron's popularity transcended class and gender, it must be noted that a majority of the reading public who read Byron's works were in fact female readers. It is therefore, relevant to delve into the issues of gender and its' relation to the growth of the female writers at the time to understand the appeal of Byron's poems to women. The concept of gender was developed by feminists in the 1790s as a means of recognising that women do not relate to men in the same way in every culture and that the position of women in society has varied over time. It has described women's relationship to men in particular societies as well as the experiences of women and men in movements for political and social emancipation.[18] In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, social and economic changes led to a division of classes in society. Social conflict existed between the gentry and upper middle class. This situation led many people to resort to

reading as a means of escapism. Women, in particular faced conventional restrictions as professionals, intellectuals, and writers. With limited education and the range of domestic and social duties allowed to them, women were seen as the weaker sex in every class confronting superior male-dominated, patriarchal society.

The 1790s in Britain marked the beginning of the feminist movement in modern European culture. This was a period which supported masculinist dominance over female intellectual inferiority. Consequently, there was a new sense of empowerment among women writers and a sense of cohesive identity among the working class. Women writers in England of the Restoration and early eighteenth century consisted of Evangelical writers, aristocratic writers and professional writers. These women were seeking their own identity and independence through their writing.[19]

At about this time an important and influential movement known as The Bluestockings were formed in London in the 1750s and 1760s under the leadership of Elizabeth Montagu. The network sponsored by the Bluestockings succeeded in collaborating with their more educated and refined menfolk in a world where women were generally excluded from university education. Among the intellectual activities carried out by the Bluestokings were literary criticism, translation of classics and intellectual debates. The movement eventually exerted a strong force on literary culture at that time. The Bluestocking movement consisted of women of wealth and high social position. These women catered to the upper classes who were getting increasingly frustrated with the lack of intellectual stimulation in their lives. As a result of a division of classes in society brought about by political and economic changes, women of the elite and upper middle classes could afford leisurely pursuits. Reading and writing engaged the attention,

stimulated the mind and gave fashionable women something to do with their free time (Curran, 181). The disengagement of bourgeois women or 'ladies of leisure' from the necessities of work, therefore, contributed to the spread of literacy and the appeal of the literary among these women. Other notable women writers at the time were Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More and Frances Burney, followed by Mary Hays, Elizabeth Hamilton and Felicia Hemans who later went on to become the best-selling English poet of the nineteenth century. [20]

The emergence of women writers who dominated the literary scene influenced the predominantly female reading public's perception of women's role in society. They became increasingly aware of their social and intellectual roles as well as inferior status in the male-dominated world. Among other things, these women writers expressed the ills of society and other issues pertaining to women in their writings, which include patriarchal attitudes in society. They also depicted in their heroines the typical nineteenth-century feminine virtues such as selflessness, piety and faultlessness in her propriety. Female readers who read their books could easily identify with the issues depicted in these novels and poems. Interestingly, the themes of feminine virtue and loyalty to patriarchal leaders were not only the domain of women writers but were also found in the selected verse romances of male poets such as Scott, Southey, Campbell, Moore, Wordsworth and Byron. Caroline Franklin in *Byron's Heroines* observes that in both Scott and Southey, romantic love is devalued in favour of some domestic or conjugal attachment. In the tales of Wordsworth especially, the heroine as wife and mother often becomes a pathetic figure. Sexuality in women, as well as men, is recognized as a source of power, but when uncontrolled it is associated with evil and possible subversion.

Consequently, the virtuous, dutiful heroine who abjures sexual passion and its dangers is idealized as the protector of family, morality, and even the state (280).

Although Byron in his Oriental tales employs some of these same ingredients, his flawed heroes, contrary to prevailing conventions, are not threats to the heroines but rather their would-be liberators and lovers. His heroines were not the chaste maidens of Scott and Southey but victims of political and sexual oppression in feudal societies. Unlike other Regency heroines, Leila, Zuleikha, and Medora are passive victims of their own forbidden passions and are ultimately destroyed by patriarchal oppression. On the other hand, Gulnare and Kaled are shown to be active, passionate women who assume masculine virtues and role of liberator.[21] It was in the distinctive portrayal of the Byronic hero that set Byron apart from other Romantic poets at the time. The charisma of the Byronic hero coupled with his chivalrous nature and sensitivity towards women in the poems were highly appealing to female readers. It gave them hope and comfort that there are heroic men out there who were willing to fight against powerful enemies simply to uphold women's dignity and pride. The fact that the Byronic hero had flaws and weaknesses like everyone else and was not afraid to expose his vulnerability also endeared him to women readers who often sympathized with his suffering.

Among Lord Byron's best-selling poems, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* had sold very well but it was the Turkish Tales that brought Byron fame, money and accolades. The Turkish Tales were published when Byron was living in London and at the height of his fame. Each romance was immediately and astoundingly successful. *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) sold 6,000 copies in the first month, *The Corsair* (1814) sold 10,000 on the first day of publication, *Lara* (1814) and *The Siege of Corinth* (1816) each sold out first

editions of 6,000 within a few weeks. Kelvin Everest concedes "this degree of popularity enters significantly into the formation of the 'Byronic' Hero and personality as that of a man consciously in the glare of public gaze, and yet alienated, increasingly from the values and the moral approval of that public."[22]

Despite its best selling success, it is ironic that Byron himself did not think much of his Eastern Tales or any of his works written between 1811 – 1816 for that matter. Byron regarded his Eastern Tales as well as some of his shorter pieces to be inferior to his other works and dismissed their popularity as poor public taste. In Byron's own description, *The Giaour* was "foolish fragments" (*BLJ* 3:105), *The Bride of Abydos* was "horrible enough" *(BLJ* 3: 160) and *Lara* was "too little narrative and too metaphysical" (*BLJ* 4: 295). He also felt that they were not up to literary standard as these tales were hurriedly written, *The Bride of Abydos* was composed in four days and *The Corsair* in ten days, which Byron took to be proof of "my want of judgement in publishing" (*BLJ* 4: 77). Having said that however, Byron did eventually decide to cash in on the popularity of his Eastern tales after this huge success by exploiting the Eastern setting in his poems. As he wrote to Moore in his letter dated August 1813:

> Stick to the East;the oracle, Stael, told me it was only poetical policy. The North, South, and West, have all been exhausted; but from the East, we have nothing but Southey's unsaleables, - and these he has contrived to spoil, by adopting only their most outrageous fictions.
> (Moore, 255)

Although falling below his own standards of poetic excellence, The Turkish Tales were considered among his most notable achievements. Jerome McGann concedes that while these poems are "not consciously intellectual, they are intellectually compelling" and he says that in these narratives "the actual human issues with which poetry is

concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities."[23] In other words, they reflect the society in which Byron lived in and the variety of ideologies contained in that society.

Byron's first tale, *The Giaour* (a term which means 'infidel') tell the story of the hero's unsuccessful attempt to abduct his lover Leila from her husband Hassan. Her faithlessness to Hassan is discovered, and she is bound in a sack and tossed into the sea, and the Giaour avenges her death by ambushing and brutally murdering Hassan who has embarked on a journey to find a new wife. The Giaour sends word back to Hassan's mother of the murder, and then withdraws to spend his last days in a monastery – not, however, to seek atonement for his crime but to assure the solitude that his suffering demands.[24]

Marilyn Butler calls *The Giaour*: "...a love story, one of those classic late-Enlightenment triangles of the Werther type that oppose the free and intuitive behaviour of illicit lovers to the religious propriety of the legal husband..."(89). Following her suggestion, it is possible to see the central theme of the work as the opposition between individual needs and society's conventions. Leila's love for the Giaour is at complete odds with her prescribed role in society. From this perspective, the sanction imposed on her is symbolically significant; her escape from the stifling confines of the harem is punished with her imprisonment in the significantly more stifling sack. Once shut inside the sack, presumably gagged, Leila is definitely sealed off from the external world, denied the right to communicate and erased as an autonomous subject, the bearer of an independent perspective.[25] The irony is that as much as the British prided themselves on their enlightened view of women, it highlighted the limitations of women's rights in British

society. Byron described Leila as a 'female slave.' Leila became a symbol of the exploitation of women.

In punishing Leila, Byron is emphasizing society's total disregard for women's feelings and desire to assert her individuality. She is an unimportant, voiceless member of society created solely for the total submission to man. John S. Mill in *The Subjection of Women* draws a picture of woman's life in the nineteenth century:

> All women are brought up from the very earliest years, in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women ... that it is their nature to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (232)

Women's silence was cherished as a virtue in the past, it was considered to be women's rightful role at home and the accepted norm in society. Submission, docility, passivity and silence were virtues expected to be inscribed in a woman's being. It was the perceived ideal that woman was born to "suffer and be still," even to the point of martyrdom.[26] In portraying Leila as voiceless, passive, and an object of devotion for men, Byron is therefore acknowledging the social reality at that time.

The Giaour's anger and avenging of her death reveals his commitment to rescue her integrity and humanity from a social norm that victimizes women. His conviction is so strong that he even feels his brutal murder of Hassan is justified. For both Leila and the Giaour, society's sanctions strike effectively: Leila is destroyed materially, while the Giaour is destroyed psychologically. All that is left to him, after Leila's death is to incorporate the violence, the death principle that governs his world. He conforms to the horizon of possibility offered by his society, he exploits the rebels for his own private ends

and becomes the mirror image of the "tyrant" Hassan (Poole, 9). This specularity is clearly suggested by the text itself: "And o'er him bends that foe with brow/As dark as his that bled below" (672 – 4).

The Giaour's tenderness towards Leila and his fearless courage in championing for her cause won the approval of women readers who were also captivated with this passionate, romantic and somewhat mysterious, larger than life hero. As with all Byronic heroes, the Giaour was also physically attractive. He was a strikingly good-looking hero who had all the characteristics of the Gothic Villain, with his tell tale features, the bitter smile and his evil eye.

> Oft will his glance the gazer rue,
> For in it lurks that nameless spell,
> Which speaks, itself unspeakable,
> A spirit yet unquelled and high,
> That claims and keeps ascendancy;
> And like the bird whose pinions quake,
> But cannot fly the gazing snake,
> Will others quail beneath this look,
> Nor'scape the glance they scarce can brook. (837 – 845)

The idea of an attractive, romantic, brave hero fighting fearlessly for justice and women's honour appeals to women readers who fantasize about the existence of such a hero in their own lives. In spite of his heroic attributes, however, the Giaour as with all other Byronic Heroes is not without flaws and these flaws further endears him to readers. The Giaour has the qualities of a Noble Outlaw and is described as "having been wronged either by intimate personal friends, or by society in general, and his rebellion is thus always given a plausible motive" (Thorslev, 86). Thus, his remorse, defiance and gloom are all part of the "dark side" to his personality. In this poem, the Giaour's rebellion and

violent attack on Hassan is therefore justified by his need to avenge Leila's murder. In the fragment beginning "The Mind, that broods o'er guilty woes" (422), the Giaour's hate of Hassan and his desire for vengeance is presented as a desperate substitute for his love, a way of silencing the pain and guilt caused by Leila's death. The Giaour then retreats to a life of gloom and isolation. He becomes a recluse and half-mad character as this epilogue describes:

> Much in his visions mutters he
> Of maiden 'whelmed beneath the sea;
> Of sabres clashing-foemen flying,
> Wrongs aveng'd – and Moslem dying.
> On cliff he has been known to stand,
> And rave as to some bloody hand
> Fresh sever'd from its parent limb,
> Invisible to all but him,
> Which beckons onward to his grave,
> And lures to leap into the wave. (822-31)

Gloom and pessimism have always been a part of Byron's world. Ever since childhood, Byron has had insecurities due to the physical deformity of his left foot which was further aggravated by his temperamental relationship with his mother. Sir Walter Scott's recollections of Byron in his letter to Moore 1815 stated that while Byron was very animated during a conversation, he was often " melancholy, - almost gloomy" (Moore, 281). Remorse, gloom and melancholy are typical traits of the Byronic hero.

In the poem's long final scene, when he enters the monastery, the Giaour is described as alone even in company, possessed of a unique sensibility that is unfathomable, mysterious and superior to the general lot of humanity. Like Leila, the Giaour is condemned to utter isolation. No one in the monastery knows his past, his deeds,

his race, his feelings or beliefs and his confession. In fact, his sheer mysteriousness and distance adds to his aura and appeal. He remains a mystery even in death.

Bernard Blackstone stresses that one of the reasons for the popularity of the Tales is their authenticity.[27] Byron is able to convince his readers that what he is writing about is based on what he himself has seen and experienced. *The Giaour* relates the drowning of the Turkish girl in the opening lines, derived from a real life episode in which Byron was directly involved. In his letter to Moore dated December 5, 1813, he wrote: "But to describe the feelings of that situation were impossible – it is *icy* even to recollect them" (Moore, 211). In another instance, Byron asked his friend the Marquis of Sligo to furnish him with his recollections on the subject which Byron had narrated to him earlier. In the letter dated August 31, 1813 Sligo replied:

> You have requested me to tell you all that I heard at Athens about the affair of that girl who was so near being put an end to while you were there; you have asked me to mention every circumstance, in the remotest degree relating to it, which I heard. ...The new governer, unaccustomed to have the same intercourse with the Christians as his predecessor, had of course the barbarous Turkish ideas with regard to women. In consequence, and in compliance with the strict letter of the Mohammedan law, he ordered this girl to be sewed up in a sack, and thrown into the sea, - as is, indeed quite customary at Constaninople. As you were returning from bathing in the Piraeus, you met the procession going down to execute the sentence of the Waywode on this unfortunate girl... (Moore, 178)

According to Blackstone, this authencity factor was one of the main reasons that Byron's works overtook Walter Scott's in popularity and why Scott's verse romances, located mostly in the idealised Middle Ages and lacking that sense of passion, declined in popularity (118). Jeffrey in his review believes that the distinctive factor that sets Byron's poem apart from others is that they were not just figments of imagination but the

presentation of familiar surroundings based on actual occurrences of the time which readers could identify with. This authenticity factor allows readers to experience the passions and feelings of the characters by empathising with their sufferings and rejoicing at their happiness as if it were their own.[28]

Byron's next tale *The Corsair* was begun and completed in the last fortnight of December 1813. Conrad is the leader of pirates in an outlaw band. He anticipates a battle with the neighbouring Pacha of Coron and so decides to attack Coron while the Pacha and his host of warriors are having a celebration. Conrad and his band raid the palace but suddenly the palace catches fire. Conrad succeeds in saving the women, but the delay costs him the battle. He is captured and languishes in prison, awaiting execution. Gulnare, the Pacha's first wife whom Conrad saved in the fire arrives secretly to offer Conrad release. Conrad is not anxious to be saved but at last relents for Medora's sake. Gulnare then murders her husband in his sleep after he accuses her of infidelity. She then flees with Conrad to meet Medora but unfortunately they return too late. Medora, in fear of Conrad's death, has died. In his agony of grief, Conrad disappears from the island forever.[29]

The depiction of Conrad's leadership and his ability to command the undying loyalty of his comrades clearly embodies the traits of the Noble Outlaw in him. Readers are drawn to this swashbuckling, passionate romantic hero who possesses admirable courage and a fighting spirit. Beneath his tough exterior though, Conrad displays a soft and compassionate nature. In the poem, Conrad's chivalrous rescue of the women in his Moslem enemy's harem is evident when he risks his life to save the women in the palace during the battle with Pasha. He not only lost the battle by saving the women but his

actions almost cost him his life. Conrad's deep love for Medora also reflects his tender hearted nature which endears him to readers. Just as the Giaour professed his undying love for Leila, Conrad pledges his deep love for Medora as found in the lines "Yes, it was love – unchangeable – unchanged, / Felt but for one from whom he never ranged" (1. 287 – 288).

Conrad's sensitive and soft-hearted nature is further illustrated when he is confronted with Gulnare. Gulnare who does not have Conrad's honourable qualities offers to kill the Pacha while he sleeps and despite Conrad's protestations, goes ahead with her cold-blooded murder to the horror of Conrad who panics at the sight of blood on Gulnare's forehead. In a radical role-reversal in the Tales, Byron deliberately inserts a strong female character to mimic the actions of a traditional Byronic Hero. Gulnare assumes the role of a brave, heroic rescuer who single-handedly kills the Pacha and liberates herself and Conrad. Her bravery is in sharp contrast to Medora's voiceless, passive stereotypical character. The portrayal of strong, female characters such as Gulnare and Kaled in *Lara* are further attractions of the Turkish Tales. In fact, Gulnare has already been prepared for the role of potential heroine of the tales when the narrator calls her "that chief of womanhood" he uses the keyword "chief" employed almost invariably by Byron to designate a non-despotic heroic leader to be opposed to a "king" or "lord."[30]

Francis Jeffrey in his review of *The Corsair* commends Byron's use of female qualities in his poems.

> He has also made a fine use of the gentleness and submission of the females of these regions, as contrasted with the lordly pride and martial ferocity of the men: and though we suspect he has lent them more soul than of right belongs to them, as well as more delicacy and reflection; yet there is something so true to female nature in general, in his representations of this sort, and so much of the Oriental softness and acquiescence in his particular

> delineations, that it is scarcely possible to refuse the picture the praise of being characteristic and harmonious, as well as eminently sweet and beautiful in itself. (60)

Like the Giaour and all the other Byronic Heroes of the Turkish Tales, Conrad is physically appealing with striking features. The pale and gloomy forehead, the 'searching eye' which few dare to meet, and the proud and bitter expression of the mouth are elements of the Gothic Villain as described in the following lines:

> Sunburnt his cheek, his forehead high and pale
> The sable curls in wild profusion veil;
> And oft perforce his rising lip reveals
> The haughtier thought it curbs, but scarce conceals...
> There breathe but few whose aspect might defy
> The full encounter of his searching eye ... (1.9.203-206,215-216)

However, despite his larger than life projection, the hero is human and has weaknesses just like the Giaour and the other Byronic heroes. Remorse, gloom and melancholy are typical traits of the Byronic hero and Conrad is no exception. Conrad's bitterness and contempt towards his fellow men is evident in the following verse.

> He hated man too much to feel remorse,
> And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call,
> To pay the injuries of some on all.
> He knew himself a villain – but he deemed
> The rest no better than the thing he seemed:
> And scorned the best as the hypocrites who hid
> Those deeds the bolder spirit plainly did. (1.11.262 – 268)

He admonishes himself in regret for he feels that his very virtues toward women were the cause of his downfall. If he hadn't stopped to rescue the women in the harem, he would not have been delayed and eventually lost the battle and Medora would still be alive.

> Doomed by his very virtues for a dupe,
> He cursed those virtues as the cause of ill,
> And not the traitors who betrayed him still; (1.11.256 – 258)

Readers sympathise with Conrad's plight and are able to feel his deep melancholy and regret. Despite being a leader of the pirates with a strong and commanding presence, just like them, Byron is afflicted with a deep sense of insecurity, melancholy and remorse . Byron is not afraid to reveal the human side of his heroes and it is one reason why readers are so drawn to the heroes. In the prefatory letter to *The Corsair,* Byron refutes the tendency of readers to identify the poet with his creations, but even in this passage his deliberate ambiguity encourages the practice he professes to condemn and an entry in his journal shows that he pretended, even to himself, that he had experiences like those of Conrad:

> He [ Moore ] told me an odd report, - that I am the actual Conrad, the veritable Corsair, and that part of my travels are supposed to have passed in privacy. Um! – people sometimes hit near the truth; but never the whole truth. He don't know what I was about the year after he left the Levant; nor does any one – however, it is a lie – but, 'I doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies the truth. (Marchand, 83)

Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* explains this appeal of the passionate Byronic hero of the tales to the reading public.

> ...He has delineated, with unequalled force and fidelity, the workings of those deep and powerful emotions which alternately enchant and agonize the minds that are exposed to their inroads; and represented with a terrible energy, those struggles and sufferings and exaltations, by which the spirit is at once torn and transported, and traits of divine inspiration, or demoniacal possession, thrown across the tamer features of humanity. It is by this spell, think that he has fixed the admiration of the public and which other delight by their vivacity or enchant by their sweetness, he alone has to command the sympathy, even of reluctant readers, by the of his moral sublimity, and the terrors and attractions of these elings, the depths and the heights of which he seems to explored. (53)

Jeffrey also traces the historical development of poetry which goes through many phases beginning with the "rude ages" where men's passions were violent and their poetry therefore deals with strong emotions, and displaying powerful passions. However, he says that as civilization advanced, society began to regard display of emotions and strong passions as weaknesses regarding them as coarse and vulgar. They gradually learnt to subdue or conceal these emotions as "the first triumph of regulated society, is to be able to protect its members from actual violence and the first trait of refinement in manners, is to exclude the coarseness and offence of restrained and selfish emotions" which resulted in poetry that was first "pompous and stately then affectedly refined and ingenious" (Jeffrey, 54).

However as generations progressed, society became increasingly impatient and frustrated with the pretentious, so called "refined" ways of living where passions and emotions are repressed. The French Revolution brought about a change in society which became increasingly vocal in expressing political and visionary reform. There was therefore a need for poetry that was more passionate and dealing in more powerful emotion. He concedes that modern poets including Byron only borrowed situations and unrestrained passions of the state of society from which they had taken their characters and added their own sensibilities and interesting details based on their own experience. As he puts it aptly: "They have lent their knights and squires of the fifteenth century the deep reflection and considerate delicacy of the nineteenth, - and combined the desperate and reckless valour of a Buccaneer or Corsair of any age, with the refined gallantry and sentimental generosity of an English gentleman of the present day" (59). Byron's Turkish Tales with its larger than life heroes stands out in this.[31]

**The Oriental Appeal of the Turkish Tales**

In keeping with themes and characters of strong passionate men and grand exploits depicted by the earlier poets, nineteenth century poets resorted to travelling to other countries to create an exciting plot against the backdrop of an exotic setting. While Robert Southey goes in search of strong passions in America and the gods in India, Walter Scott focussed on European chivalry followed by Byron who exploited the exotic mystique of the Middle Eastern setting with a cast of Turks and the Arabs of the Mediterranean. Edward Said in *Orientalism* explains that *The Giaour* has traditionally been read as an allegory where Leila (from Circassia, then lying on the border between East and West) stands for Greece caught between two forms of imperialism. Ottoman (Hassan is Turkish) and European (the Giaour is a Venetian in exile).[32] Nigel Leask argues that these orientalist representations traditionally tended to view Asian societies as static and corrupt, ruled over since time immemorial by tyrannical Khans, pashas or maharajahs. Asian men were depicted as passionate, cruel and unreliable, lording it over their indolent, sensuous womenfolk, whom they locked up in their harems. Only the civilizing mission of European colonialism could help liberate these luckless oriental people from their tyrannical ruler. [33] Thus, the portrayal of the European Giaour rescuing his Oriental lover, Leila, against the tyrannical Hassan fits into this typical Western viewpoint.

The heroines of Byron's Turkish Tales namely Leila, Zuleikha and Medora are portrayed as beautiful, hopeless victims of a despot, for whose sake the Byronic hero, confronts his antagonist. The image of these women comes out with curious elements of romance; the 'veil' with the unfailing attraction of the hidden, and the 'harem' with that of the forbidden. Imaginary fantasies about Oriental women provided respite from Victorian

sexual repressiveness. It was used to express for the age the erotic longings that would have otherwise remained suppressed.[34] As Mary Ann Stevens argues:

> One of the preoccupations which profoundly affected the western understanding of the Near East was the belief that this region could satisfy the West's urge for exotic experience. Romanticism's celebration of the primacy of the imagination guaranteed a position for the Islamic lands as one of the most effective locations for western expressions of exoticism. [35]

In traditional European epics and romances, written with the Crusades as background and then with the threat of the Turkish military around them, Islam was seen as the enemy. A Moslem warrior might be honoured for his courage, but he must be defeated, or converted. The Islamic viewpoint could not be tolerated. The only dialectic possible was a military one, and Christians had to win it.[36] In his 1807 reading list, Byron makes the following entry: "Arabia Mohadet, whose Koran contains most sublime poetical passages far surpassing European Poetry." In a letter to Murray on 3rd. December 1813, he asks Murray to look out in the Encyclopaedia to find out whether it is *Mecca* or *Medina* that the Prophet is entombed. He followed this up with another note to Murray:

> Did you look out? Is it *Medin*a or *Mecca* that contains the *Holy* Sepulchre? Don't make me blaspheme by your negligence. I have no book of reference, or I would save you the trouble. I *blush*, as a good Mussulman, to have confused the point. (Marchand, 190)

*The Giaour* is told in part from an Islamic viewpoint and Byron seems to relate the details according to a Moslem's perspective. He knows that in killing Hassan, the Giaour has destroyed a fount of Islamic virtue, of which he, Byron, has had personal experience:[37]

Byron's knowledge of a religion and culture which is foreign and somewhat exotic is fascinating to readers previously not exposed to Eastern religion and cultural values. It is these portrayal of human sensibilities and powerful emotions in Byron's poetry

particularly through the Byronic heroes in the Turkish Tales that distinguishes Byron from the rest of the poets in his time as well as the poets before him. It is hardly difficult to understand then, Byron's phenomenal popularity among the public especially in his conceptualisation of the Byronic hero.

In comparison, other Orientalist poets like Robert Southey denied any value to Eastern poetry, religion or ethics and merely wrote the poem from a Westerner's point of view. Southey who had written poems about the East such as his Islamic epic *Thalaba the Destroyer*, did not have Byron's first-hand experience in mid-Eastern travel. Thus, his Eastern poems did not make as much of an impact on the reading public as Byron's Eastern tales did. Mary Hossain describes many Western scholars misconceptions that "women in Islam do not have souls and cannot enter paradise."[38] She observed that this misconception flourished again in the nineteenth century as part of the enchantment of mysterious oriental women. Byron makes a reference about this in *The Bride of Abydos:*

> And oft in youthful reverie
> She dream'd what Paradise might be:
> Where woman's parted soul shall go
> Her Prophet had disdain'd to show (2.7.104 – 107)

Far from resurrecting or reiterating this or any other mistaken view about Islam and Muslims, Byron, on the contrary, rectifies errors of perspective rife in Western literary Orientalism. In *The Giaour,* he deals with the very theme of the position of women in Islam in the lines:

> Oh! who young Leila's glance could read
> And keep that portion of his creed
> Which saith, that woman is but dust?
> A soulless toy for tyrant's lust? (487 – 90)

In this passage, the narrator's doubts on the tenets of the Koran, the implicit attack on the harem system ("soulless toy") and on Hassan ("tyrant") all serve to undermine the Muslim perspective. This passage is followed by his explanatory note, which strikes at the very root of the Western misconception about the soullessness of women in Islam: 'A vulgar error; the Koran allots at least a third of Paradise to well-behaved women'.[39] This statement not only shows Byron's knowledge on the subject but also depicts his sensitivity towards women and the Muslim religion. As portrayed in his poems, the Byronic hero's sensitivity towards eastern culture and women explains his popularity among female readers, further fuelling his popularity in English contemporary culture.

The heroic exploits of the characters in the Turkish Tales provided entertaining reading and captured the imagination of the reading public in Byron's time who craved for such excitement in their own lives. The growth of the literary market including the rise of publishers and booksellers as well as the development of new sources of media such as newspapers, periodicals and critical reviews had contributed to the emergence of an increasingly knowledgeable reading public. The upper and middle classes frequently demanded the latest and most fashionable texts in the market which included those of Lord Byron while the lower classes' disillusionment with the ideals of the French Revolution brought about the need for a sense of relief and escapism from the drudgery of their daily lives. The exploits of the Byronic hero helped lift their spirits at this time of confusion and uncertainty of the post-war period. Sir Walter Scott describes the appeal of the Byronic Hero:

> Almost all, have minds which seem at variance with their fortunes, and exhibit high and poignant feelings of pain and pleasure; a keen sense of what is noble and honourable: and an equally keen susceptibility of injustice or injury, under the garb of stoicism or contempt of mankind. The strength

> of early passion, and the glory of youthful feeling, are uniformly painted as chilled or subdued by a train of early impudences or of darker guilt, and the sense of enjoyment tarnished by too intimate an acquaintance with the vanity of human wishes. (Prothero, 24)

The Byronic hero's valour, sensitivity and honourable nature, contrasted to a gloomy, remorseful and mysterious demeanour and combined with brooding good looks result in his unique appeal. Readers were drawn to this passionate, rebellious but nevertheless endearingly human noble hero, one who is willing to die for the sake of honour and justice. Thus, the conceptualisation of the Byronic hero was indeed Byron's most significant literary achievement, affirming the figure's worthy position as a cultural icon in the Romantic period.

**Notes**

[1] Kelvin Everest, *English Romantic Poetry* (London: Open University Press, 1990) 9.

[2] John Brewer and Iain Mc Calman, "Publishing," *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776 – 1832* ed. Iain McCalman (London: Oxford University Press, 1999) 198.

[3] J.H. Plumb, "The Commercialization of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England," *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England* ed. Neil Mc Kendrick (London: Hutchinson, 1983) 284.

[4] James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750 – 1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 42.

[5] Sandra Dick, "Landing a literary legacy," *Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 March 2003. 2 June 2004 <http://www.nls/jma.htm>.

[6] Philip Martin, *Byron – A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 33.

[7] Raven, 44.

[8] John O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968) 39.

[9] Marilyn Butler, "Culture's medium: The role of the review," *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* ed.Stuart Curran (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 131.

[10] For more details on the high sales figures of the reviews, refer to Derek Roper's study of the journals of the 1790s in *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh 1788 – 1802* (London: Methuen Press, 1978) 24. Refer also to Joh P. Klancher's important study of journals in the Romantic period in *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 18 – 46.

[11] Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction & The Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932) 1932) 40.

[12] Martin, 32.

[13] Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977 ) 123 – 234.

[14] J.W. Saunders, *The Profession of English Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964) 158.

[15] Everest, 70.

[16] Richard D.Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800 – 1900* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 379 – 90.

[17] Everest, 71.

[18] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992) 12.

[19] Hannah More "Tracts for the Times: Social Fiction & Female Ideology," *Fetter'd or Free: British Women Novelists, 1670 – 1815* eds. Mary Schofield & Cecilia Macheshi (Athens & London: Ohio University Press, 1986) 264 – 84.

[20] Felicia Hemans was one of the few women in the history of English literature to have been able to support herself and her children by writing verse. Her work concentrates on giving the public what it wants, and has a wide range of interesting thematic range roughly comparable to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, focussing on

medieval, biblical and ancient history, or in the lives of Indian braves, chamois-hunters, crusaders, Italian maidens and other picturesque individuals. See *The Poetical Works of Felicia Dorothea Hemans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914) 396.

[21] Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 280.

[22] Everest, 71.

[23] Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago & London:The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 1.

[24] For a detailed account of *The Giaour*, refer to Daniel P.Watkins article, "Social Relations in Byron's *The Giaour*," 52.4 (1985): 873-892.

[25] Gabriele Poole, "Byron's Heroes and the Byronic hero," Diss., University of Notre Dame, 1998.

[26] Philippa Carr, *The Daughters of England* (New York: Putnam, 1995) 73.

[27] Bernard Blackstone, *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman Group, 1975) 118.

[28] Francis Jeffrey, "The Corsair: A Tale and The Bride of Abydos: A Turkish Tale," *Edinburgh Review* 23(1814) Rpt. in Andrew Rutherford, *Byron - The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1970) 58.

[29] Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types & Prototypes* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 157.

[30] C.W. Hart, *Fiction is the mask of history: contextual readings of Byron's poetry* diss., Cambridge University, 1996, 100.

[31] In his letter dated 3rd February 1814, Murray tells Byron of the phenomenal success of *The Corsair*; "I sold on the day of publication, a thing perfectly unprecedented, 10,000 copies – and I suppose Thirty people who were purchases (strangers) called to tell the people in the Shop how much they had been delighted and satisfied." *BLJ* Vol. 4: 44 .

[32] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) 327 – 28.

[33] Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and The East:Anxieties of Empire* (London : Cambridge University Press, 1992) 245.

[34] Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of the Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 36.

[35] Mary Ann Stevens, "Western Art and its Encounter with the Islamic World," *The Orientalists: Delocroix to Matisse* (London: Royal Academy and Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1984) 17-18.

[36] Abdul Raheem Kidwai, *Orientalism in Lord Byron's Turkish Tales* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995)

[37] In his note to Stanza 35 of *The Giaour*, Byron describes his knowledge on Islamic virtue: "I need hardly observe, that Charity and Hospitality are the first duties enjoined by Mohamet: and to say the truth, very generally practised by his disciples. The first praise that can be bestowed on a chief, is a panegyric on his bounty; the next, on his valour." (Mc Gann, 417 – 418).

[38] Mary Hossain, "Women and Paradise in Islam," *Journal of European Studies* 19 (1989): 293 – 310.

[39] Jerome J. McGann, ed., *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works* vol.3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1981) 55.