

The Redemption of Thalaba and the Enduring Influence of Oriental Discourse

Seyed Mohammad Marandi

University of Tehran, Faculty of Foreign Languages

e-mail: mmarandi@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

An important and recurring element of Oriental analysis is its constant confirmation of the thesis that the Oriental is primitive, barbaric, and incapable of rational self-government. Such a discursive regularity or persistence exists in the discursive processes of Orientalist writers and scholars and as shall be seen, contrary to the claims of critics, Robert Southey is no exception. In this article, an analysis of his two major Oriental works, *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *Roderick, Last of the Goths* will reveal that despite claims made by Sharafuddin, Southey is unable to move beyond the dominant discursive practices of his era. In Orientalist texts such as Southey's, while the relationship between East and West can assume highly dissimilar manifestations, the Westerner rarely loses the upper hand. This flexible positional superiority bolsters the assertion that Orientalism is an ideologically loaded discourse with severely bounded borders, which regularly influences contemporary critics. However, it is not the purpose of this article either to posit a single, objective West which constructs 'the Other', even though constructions of 'the Other' are in certain significant ways not notably heterogeneous. The concept that an Orient and Occident actually exist and divide humanity into two distinct oceans, however influential, seems clearly to be a fictitious ideological construct.

Key Words: Orientalism, Edward Said, Robert Southey, Thalaba, Roderick, comprador, Orient, Other.

According to Edward Said the construction of Europe's 'Other' has been institutionalized since the eighteenth century as a characteristic of its cultural dominance. Orientalism describes the various disciplines and methods of investigation by which Europeans came to 'know' the 'East' over the last few centuries. According to Said it was and still is through this discourse and its construction of knowledge that the West has been able to legitimize and maintain its hold over the 'uncivilized Other'. An important and repeated element of Oriental analysis is that it constantly confirms the thesis that the Oriental is primitive and incapable of rational self-government.

While Robert Southey is no longer considered to be one of the major poets of the Romantic Age, he was viewed as a major figure and his poetry was widely read in his own time. As a result of this shift in the literary canon, relatively little work or criticism has been done on this poet and his poetry. However, in the study of Orientalism he is significant because of his Oriental poems and their relative influence at that time and also because reviewing his poetry can help create a clearer picture of Oriental representations in the early nineteenth century. It is important to note that Southey presented his works as authentic

portrayals of Oriental life and literature.

One of the few contemporary scholars who has written extensively about Southey's orientalism is Mohammad Sharafuddin. According to Sharafuddin, Southey's purpose was to find the common ethical denominator of Islam and Christianity. In his view, Southey wished to liberate the West from a perspective, which was both self-regarding as well as tyrannical (Sharafuddin, 1994: 49). Hence, according to this view, unlike most of his contemporaries, Southey took an important step in an evolutionary move towards what Sharafuddin calls "realistic Orientalism", which he believes "found its fullest expression in Byron" (Sharafuddin, 1994: 49). Sharafuddin believes that Southey was genuinely sympathetic towards the Islamic perspective (Sharafuddin, 1994: 63) and that the poet saw the Islamic point of view "as part of a universal humanitarianism based on the idea of intuitive morality" (Sharafuddin, 1994: 50). He also states that Southey makes "an intelligent attempt to convey the spirit and principles of the Islamic faith as it really exists" (Sharafuddin, 1994: 131).

In order to better understand the essence of Southey's Orientalism, it is necessary to study *Thalaba the Destroyer* as well as *Roderick, the Last of the Goths*. The small and incomplete fragment *Mohammed* is too brief to provide significant insight in this regard. In the case of *Thalaba*, especially, it is also important to carefully consider what Gerard Genette names the paratext, which includes both the peritext as well as the epitext.

Southey's preface to *Thalaba*, stresses that he has carried out a great deal of research in order to produce this poem and that the poem is in fact "a Mahommedan tale" (Fitzgerald ed., 1909: 8). Later in the preface to *The Curse of Kehama*, while pointing out his intention to exhibit Islam, he again stresses that *Thalaba* is an "Arabian Tale" told from an Arabian perspective (Fitzgerald, 1909: 15). Here he states:

Every one who had read the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* possessed all the knowledge necessary for readily understanding and entering into the intent and spirit of the poem. Mr. Wilberforce thought that I had conveyed in it a very false impression of that religion, and that the moral sublimity which he admired in it was owing to this flattering misrepresentation. But *Thalaba the Destroyer* was professedly an Arabian Tale. The design required that I should bring into view the best features of that system of belief and worship which had been developed under the Covenant with Ishmail, placing in the most favourable light the morality of the Koran, and what the least corrupted of the Mahommedans retain of the patriarchal faith. It would have been altogether incongruous to have touched upon the abominations engrafted upon it; first by the false Prophet himself, who appears to have been far more remarkable for audacious profligacy than for any intellectual endowments, and afterwards by the spirit of Oriental despotism which accompanied Mahommedanism wherever it was established (Fitzgerald ed., 1909: 15).

It is evident that Southey sees himself to be in a position where he can produce an authentic Arabian Tale. His understanding of the Arab mind is evidently so complete that he can think and write like them, even though he has never been to any Eastern region nor understands any form of Arabic. Southey, like other Orientalists, viewed Orientals as inferior to the civilized, intelligent, and rational man of the West. He assumed that through careful

analysis he could quickly essentialize Oriental characteristics. Like many of our own contemporary critics, he saw his knowledge as non-political and unbiased in nature. As a result of his apparently thorough research Southey recognizes the “abominations” existing in Islam, the supposed “immoral” nature of the Holy Prophet’s personality, and the despotism of all Muslims. In both introductions he stresses that any seemingly sympathetic representation of Muslims and Islam in the poem was a necessity in order to reinforce the poem’s image as an authentic Arabian Tale. His attitude towards Islam is made even clearer through the highly critical and inaccurate representation of the Holy Prophet presented both here and elsewhere in the poem. Southey’s preface clearly contradicts Sharafuddin’s claim that Southey sees the Prophet “as an original Biblical prophet” (Sharafuddin, 1994: 90).

Southey’s belief that a close link exists between *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* and ‘the Orient’ is also significant. It reveals major shortcomings in his knowledge about the most basic facts regarding the tremendously diverse lands east and south of Europe and that he is not in a suitable position to write as an authority on ‘the East’. It also contradicts the idea that his Orientalism displays a more realistic approach towards ‘the Other’ than that of his contemporaries.

Excluding the peritext and the epitext, *Thalaba the Destroyer* presents relatively little information about Islam. However, even the little that is said about Islam and the homogeneous Oriental abounds with misconceptions. Unauthentic phrases such as “Allah’s glory throne” (Vol. I, 77), “In the name of God/ and of his Prophet” (Vol. II, 229), awkward translations such as “the friendly saluting of peace” (Vol. I, 90), “the due rites of holiness” (Vol. I, 229), and “the Holy Name” (Vol. I, 293), the usage of numerous words which he clearly does not understand such as “Al-Araf (Vol. II, 323), along with numerous other phrases that are both inaccurate as well as awkwardly used such as “The Cryer from the Minaret/ Proclaim’d the midnight hour” (Vol. II, 94 and 102), clearly show the enormous gap between the basic nature of the poet's representation and reality. Nevertheless, Sharafuddin claims that Southey was “a scholar of the Koran” (Sharafuddin, 1994: 49).

The use of Biblical rather than Islamic language (Vol. I, 3) in a supposedly authentic Arabian tale, on the other hand, helps reaffirm the existence of an unbridgeable cultural divide. The poet himself states, “I thought it better to express a feeling of religion in that language with which our religious ideas are connected” (Vol. I, 4). This is also true of the “wretched” (Vol. I, 227) Arabian desert with its unnatural harshness and sterility, which contrasts the English environment. Even the supposedly little beauty or richness existing in the Oriental landscape is presented through comparing it to the greater and unrivalled beauty dominating the whole of England:

But oh the joy! The blessed sight!
When in that burning waste the travellers
Saw a green meadow, fair with flowers besprent,
Azure and yellow, like the beautiful fields
Of England, when amid the growing grass
The blue-bell bends, the golden king-cup shines,

And the sweet cowslip scents the general air:
In the merry month of May!
(Vol. I, 227)

Thus, Sharafuddin's interpretation that the Middle Eastern environment is presented by the poet as another form of nature and naturalness (Sharafuddin, 107) does not seem to be plausible. It seems, instead that Southey is stressing the perverted essence of the Orient. The barren Oriental landscape reflects the barrenness of Oriental culture and civilization. The Orient in all its aspects is both abnormal and inferior. This can also be seen in the poet's remarks about Baghdad:

Thou too are fallen, Bagdad City of Peace,
Thou too hast had thy day;
And loathsome Ignorance and brute Servitude,
Pollute thy dwellings now,
Erst for the Mighty and the Wise renown'd.
O yet illustrious for remember'd fame,-
Thy founder the Victorious,- and the pomp
Of Haroun, for whose name by blood defiled,
Yahia's, and the blameless Barmecides'
Genius hath wrought salvation,- and the years
When Science with the good Al-Maimon dwelt:
So one day may the Crescent from thy Mosques
Be pluck'd by wisdom, when the enlighten'd arm
Of Europe conquers to redeem the East!
(Vol. I, 262-67)

Sharafuddin believes that Southey's essential concern in these lines "is the redemption of the East *as the East*, and not in the imposition of western ideology" (Sharafuddin, 1994: 66). However, it is difficult to understand how he can possibly reach such a conclusion. Obviously, in the eyes of the poet, the inferior and fallen Orient must be redeemed by European conquerors who can replace Islam with Christianity. Here the poet works well within the framework of the dominant discursive practices of the day and justifies imperialism and colonialism, as 'the Orient' is presented as primitive, exotic, and incapable of self-government or reform. Significantly, such sentiments presented in these lines contradict the poet's claim to have written an authentic Arabian Tale. Unless he means to say that Orientals are actually waiting for the "enlighten'd" Europeans to redeem them and that such calls even exist in their literature. In addition, the fact that an Oriental is supposedly presenting this particular viewpoint further strengthens the stereotype of the static and backward East.

The image of a barbaric, hostile, and inferior Orient is furthered later in the poem, where a redheaded Christian boy is tortured and then murdered in front of a cheering crowd of Turks. Men, women, and children rush to see this wonderful ceremony. Women clap their hands and lift their children in order for them to see and enjoy this horrific and bloody scene.

And lo! The executioners begin
And beat his belly with alternate blows
And these are humans that look on;
[...]
The very women that would shrink
And shudder if they saw a worm
Crushed by the careless tread,
They clap their hands for joy
And lift their children up
To see the Christian die.
(Vol. II, 195-99)

In the footnote to these lines this scene is effectively presented as being based upon actual events, as the reader is told how a redheaded Christian boy was tortured and killed by a Turkish doctor in order to make a special poison from his saliva (Vol. II, 193). This special piece of Oriental brutality and hostility was so unrelated and irrelevant to the story itself that it was removed in the later editions of the poem.

The relatively limited amount of information the poem itself presents about Islam and the Oriental, sharply contrasts the enormous amount of material presented in the paratext. The peritext of *Thalaba* seems to show that the author's motivations are quite different from what Sharafuddin sees them to be. They also lend support to the belief that his Oriental representations are not authentic or realistic. It is clear that the main aim of the introduction and the footnotes is to give background and reliable knowledge about the East. The footnotes also shows the extent to which Southey relies on the Orientalism of others, a point that once again contradicts the idea that he has taken significant steps towards a more realistic Orientalism. He is essentially using information and imagery that has already been made available by other scholars of the Orient.

In his footnotes the poet makes numerous and erroneous claims about many aspects of what he believes to be a largely monolithic East and Islam. Although Southey has no personal knowledge of the Arabic language, he states with confidence that "the tame language of the Koran" is difficult to remember even "by the few who have toiled through its dull tautology" (Vol. I, 4). Indeed, according to the poet the inferiority of the "Oriental" text is not an issue limited to the Holy Qu'ran, rather it includes all texts and even all forms of Eastern art. According to Southey:

A waste of ornament and labour characterises all the works of the Orientalists. I have seen illuminated Persian manuscripts that must each have been the toil of many years, every page printed, not with representations of life and manners, but usually like the curves and lines of a Turkey carpet, conveying no idea whatever, as absurd to the eye as nonsense-verses to the ear. The little of their literature that has reached us is equally worthless. Our *barbarian* scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer. We have a specimen of his poem; the translation is said to be bad, and certainly must be unfaithful, for it is in rhyme; but the vilest copy of a picture at least represents the subject and the composition. To make this Iliad of the East, as they have sacrilegiously stiled it, a good poem, would be realizing the dreams of

alchemy, and transmuting lead into gold. (Vol. I, 10)

He then goes on to explain that the only reason why the *Arabian Tales* (or *Arabian Nights*) are full of genius is because “they have lost their metaphorical rubbish in passing through the filter of a French translation” (Vol. I, 10). Otherwise, he believes that there is nothing in Oriental art and literature that is of great value or that can be compared to Western art and literature. He ridicules Persian poetry, which he cannot read and attacks what he sees as meaningless Persian art, which he does not understand. Elsewhere, he continues his attack and belittlement of Arabs and Arabic literature. He claims that Arabs have a childish love of rhyme (Vol. I, 198) and that there are no great poets among them (Vol. I, 157). The Turks and their literature receive an even harsher judgement than other Orientals (Vol. I, 161). It is significant that, as in the works of other Orientalists, different people of different races, cultures, and languages are all lumped together by one who has very little access to their works. One can clearly detect Southey’s sense of superiority towards what he sees as childlike and monolithic Orientals. The construction of a monolithic and inferior ‘Other’ is a further sign that Southey writes well within the bounds of the dominant discursive practices of his era.

Without having read the original Arabic text, he states that only through passing the filter of a language belonging to a ‘civilized’ nation can anything valuable be produced from the works of Orientals. However, he does not seem to realise the irresolvable paradox that has been created. On the one hand neither his Arabian Tale nor the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* is truly Arabian, as it has gone through a French filter, yet on the other hand they are both supposedly written from an authentic Arabic point of view. It has genius, but only because of the French influence, yet it is still an authentic Arabian Tale. Also significant is the fact that while Sharafuddin sees Southey as one who takes an important step towards “realistic Orientalism”, the poet himself is highly critical of those “barbarian scholars” who commit sacrilege and claim Ferdusi to be a good poet and even worse the Oriental Homer. Hence, his Orientalism is more critical of ‘the Other’ than that of some of his own contemporaries.

The footnotes to the poem are there to support and authenticate the poem. Their significance goes beyond simply the particular line which each footnote refers; rather each footnote gives a general sense of authenticity to the work and the images that it produces. However, throughout the work and its footnotes there are many instances where Oriental history, culture, and ideology are severely distorted or even completely fabricated. Also, contrary to what Sharafuddin states, the language used by the poet clearly shows that he has little respect for Islam or ‘the Orient’. In *Thalaba* the reader is misinformed that the Prophet transferred “To Mecca the respect and reverence which he had designed for Jerusalem” (Vol. I, 26), while elsewhere Southey incorrectly writes, “The Devil, whom Mohammad names Eblis” (Vol. I, 75). Also there is what the poet calls “the Balance of the Dead”, of which Southey writes “Mohammed borrowed it from the Persians” (Vol. II, 250). The poet assumes that Islam is a fabrication, and that the Prophet has borrowed different items from different creeds to create a new religion. Another claim made is that:

The Mohammedans believe that the decreed events of every mans life are impressed in divine characters on his forehead, tho' not to be seen by mortal eye [...] Most probably the idea was taken up by Mohammed from the sealing of the Elect, mentioned in the Revelations. (Vol. I, 296)

The poet fails to show even the slightest attempt to feign a superficial tone of objectivity when making these unsubstantiated claims about Islam as well as the Prophet.

Southey's belief in the existence of an "Islamic fatalism" which is also shared by Sharafuddin (Sharafuddin, 1994: 93), is just one of the many unsupported claims he makes about Islam as well as Oriental culture. Such statements are generally repetitions of observations made by other Western Orientalists. According to Southey, for example, at the beginning of each year the Angel Azrael gets a new "scroll of fate" which determines who is to die that year (Vol. II, 248). He also claims that resignation is an eastern vice that has been inculcated by the Prophet. However, he gives no Islamic sources for either of these claims, which, in fact, contradicts the Holy Qu'ran, which explicitly and repeatedly speaks of the decisive role living beings play in shaping their own fate (2, 175). In addition, Muslims are also deceitful (Vol. I, 116), materialistic (Vol. I, 307-08) pretentious (Vol. I, 198), irrational (Vol. II, 13), and they "invent" facts (Vol. I, 214). "The Mohammedans believe some mysterious meaning is contained in the lines upon the Locust's forehead" (Vol. I, 182) and they are also "immutably prepossessed that as the earth approaches its dissolution, its sons and daughters gradually decrease in their dimensions" until mankind dwindles into "diminutive pigmies" (Vol. I, 195).

Elsewhere, the poet claims that Arab women are "habituated to the sight of blood and massacre" (Vol. I, 169). Also, whenever the Arab man, "who according to the custom of his nation" has "many wives", gets fed up with one of them, he sends for another (Vol. I, 169). Arabs, the reader is told, are not industrious and they are clumsy in their work (Vol. I, 139). They are also quick to kill (Vol. I, 131) and hard hearted (Vol. I, 232). In addition, along with the Persians (Vol. I, 178) they are said to be extremely superstitious (Vol. I, 13-5). Superstition, according to Southey, is a quality that all Orientals share. According to the poet, it is "well known how much" Orientals are addicted to astrology (Vol. I, 232). In fact, "No nation in the world is so much given to superstition as the Arabs, or even the Mehometans in general" (Vol. I, 308). Elsewhere, however, he contradicts himself and claims that the Turks are even more superstitious than the others (Vol. I, 131). The reader is then informed of one such example:

The stupid superstition of the Turks with regard to hidden treasures is well known. It is difficult or even dangerous for a traveller to copy an inscription in sight of those barbarians (Vol. I, p. 285).

Other traditional Orientalist features predominant in the discursive practices in early nineteenth-century English society can also be found in the text and paratext, such as despotism (Vol. I, 160) as well as Oriental exoticism. In the East, the reader is told, women are supposedly both sensual and submissive:

Anan a troop of females formed the dance
Their ankles bound with bracelet-bells
That made the modulating harmony
Transparent garments to the greedy eye
Gave all their harlot limbs,
That writhed, in each immodest gesture skilled
(Vol. II, 41-3)

However, it could be claimed that a great deal more is revealed about the poet's own state of mind from these lines than about the Orient.

Oriental pomp and luxury are among the other stereotypical images that are regularly seen in the literary works of this era. This characteristic is a recurring feature of *Thalaba the Destroyer* as well. The spectacular display of Oriental wealth in the lines below, illustrate Thalaba's complicity with what is assumed to be the dominant social order:

With song, with music, and with dance,
The bridal pomp proceeds
Following the deep-veil'd Bride
Fifty female slaves attend
In costly robes that gleam
With interwoven gold,
And sparkle far with gems.
A hundred slaves behind them bear
Vessels of silver and vessels of gold,
And many a gorgeous garment gay,
The presents that the sultan gave.
On either hand the pagans go
With torches flaring through the gloom,
And trump and timbrel merriment
Accompanies their way;
And multitudes with loud acclaim
Shout blessings on the bride.
And now they reach the palace pile,
The palace home of Thalaba,
And now the marriage feast is spread,
And from the finish'd banquet now
The wedding guests are gone.
(Vol. II, 84-5)

Southey's assumption that polygamy is a central characteristic in "Oriental" life (Vol. I, 102), the poet's story about Irem (Vol. I, 15-6), his statements about Ali-Ibn-Abitaleb (Vol. I, 129), the Locust (Vol. I, 182), Haruth and Maruth (Vol. I, 197 and 280), the lock of science (Vol. I, p. 198-200), pre Ademite Solomons (Vol. I, 214), decreed events impressed on foreheads (Vol. I, 296), people turned into stone (Vol. I, 13), the Azan (Vol. I, 94-7), along with other such claims, clearly show his completely distorted picture of Islam and his monolithic conception of all Orientals and their supposed beliefs. Even his description and translation of the Azan is full of mistakes, let alone the facts surrounding its history.

It is difficult to understand the reason why scholars such as Sharafuddin see Southey as sympathetic towards ‘the Orient’ or Islam. Indeed, Sharafuddin’s own comments on Islam somehow being opposed to cities (Sharafuddin, 1994: 62) and the statement that the killing of a relative in revenge for the murder of a relative is “a perfect reply to the original crime” (Sharafuddin, 1994: 77), do not have a basis in any mainstream Islamic school of thought. The same can be said about other claims that Sharafuddin makes, such as when he states that:

Southey’s development of his hero’s career acquires distinctly Christian overtones. It takes the form of an evolution from vengeance to forgiveness [...] (Sharafuddin, 1994: 75)

It is true that, in the eyes of the poet, Thalaba slowly adopts a more Christian-like character. However, in reality this is true only if one accepts Southey’s claim that Islam views vengeance as being superior to, or having priority over, forgiveness. Either Sharafuddin, like Southey, deems this to be a true Oriental quality for some unknown reason or he is somehow trying to fit Southey into a category that he does not belong.

Little can be said of the short and incomplete poem *Muhammed*, except that it too reveals Southey’s limited and distorted knowledge of Islamic history. However, *Roderick, Last of the Goths*, like *Thalaba*, displays a great deal about the poet’s attitude towards Islam and Orientals. From the start of the poem, Southey presents a monolithic Other which is clearly both racially and culturally inferior. Orientals are described as “African dogs” (xxiv, 98) elsewhere they are likened to insects.

And like a cloud of locusts, whom the south
Wafts from the plains of wasted Africa,
The Musselmen upon Iberia’s shore
Descend, A countless multitude they came;
Syrian Moore, Saracen, Greek renegade,
Persian and Copt and tartar, in one bond
Of erring faith conjoin’d...strong in the youth
And neat of zeal, a dreadful brotherhood,
In whom all turbulence vices were let loose;
While Conscience, with their impious creed accurst,
Drunk, as with wine, had sanctified to them
All bloody, all abominable things
(i, 13-24)

Southey’s uniform description of this “faithless race” (xx, 147) includes even Greeks as well as the Christian Copts. The homogeneous East forms a single “dreadful brotherhood” of “erring faith”. They are:

Join’d in bond’s of faith
Accurs’d, the most flagitious of mankind
From all parts met are here; the apostate Greek
The vicious Syrian, and the sullen Copt,
The Persian cruel and corrupt of soul
The Arabian robber, and the prowling sons

Of Africa, who from their thirsty sands
Pray that the locusts on the peopled plain
May settle and prepare their way. Conjured
Beneath an impious faith, which sanctifies
To them all deeds of wickedness and blood
(xxv, 533-43)

Hence, when Roderick speaks of “the miscreant race” (xix, 83), he means all people who are not white, Christian, and European. These people are “lewd” and “barbarian” (v, 30) and they come from a land of waste to invade and occupy the fertile lands of Europe. This image of natural waste, of course, also reflects on the moral and cultural wasteland existing in the hearts of all Orientals. Meanwhile, all those Spaniards who have embraced Islam are severely attacked and it is said that “villainy makes honest men turn Moors” (xxi, 168), thus equating Islam with both the Moorish race as well as evilness. This monolithic and threatening ‘Other’ with its “strange laws, strange language, evil customs, and false faith” has imposed itself on Spain (xii, 68-70) and the “libidinous” (iii, 319) Muslims have, apparently, done nothing but rape, murder, and plunder (iii, 300-04) during their presence in the land.

The fall of Spain, according to the poem, was brought about by the treachery of Count Julian. Julian opened the way for the Moorish invasion and “renounced his outward faith in Christ” (ix, 95), because Roderick had violated and dishonoured his daughter Florinda. After being defeated and losing the throne, Roderick repents for his sins and assumes the name Father Macabee. He eventually achieves spiritual peace with himself and renounces power, wealth, fame, as well as glory for himself. He becomes a holy man with a “holy hatred” (vii, 117) directed towards the Moors. Unlike Thalaba who lost “All feelings of revenge” (Vol. II, 128), Roderick thinks of little else but “Vengeance” (xxiv, 160, xxv, 156, 419, 521). Roderick the aesthete and “man of God” (iii, 96) focused his attention on crushing the Muslim “vultures” (xx, 19) and “ruffians” (xx, 12), who were a threat to the “West” (xx, 19). His feelings for revenge ran so deep that even when seeing Muslims pray “Roderick’s heart / With indignation burnt (iii, 149-50). He obviously wishes to do more than just expel the Moors from Spain:

What ample vengeance on the Musselman.
Driven out with foul defeat, and made to feel
In Africa the wrongs he wrought to Spain
And still pursued by that relentless sword,
Even to the farthest Orient, where his power
Received its mortal wound.
(iii, 122-28)

This attitude towards Orientals and Islam persists throughout the poem. Even Count Julian who had converted to the religion of the “infidels” (iv, 293) and had joined forces with these “merciless misbelievers” (i, 179) eventually converts back to Christianity after being betrayed and mortally wounded by the Moors. On his deathbed he declares that “The impostor’s faith” had never truly found a place in his heart (xxiv, 184). This, of course, is

because no rational and decent white man would ever seriously contemplate converting to Islam.

As in *Thalaba the Destroyer*, this poem is full of inaccuracies about Islam and the Orient. Significantly, even the *Edinburgh Review* attacked Southey's fanatical tone and uniform representation of Muslims (*Edinburgh Review* 25, 1815: 3). This contradicts Sharafuddin's assertions and again shows that Southey's representations of the Oriental multitudes are not a move towards authenticity or realism, as even his contemporary critics often felt that he was too hostile towards 'the East'. His works, it can be concluded, are similar in essence if not even more hostile to Oriental constructions created by other Orientalists at the time.

The purpose of this article is not to invert the discursive process, reclaiming an objective East so it can be held up as the superior of the Western 'Other'. Nor is it about the moral status of the different cultures and ideologies of the peoples of the Orient. It is not the purpose of this work either, to posit a single, objective West which constructs 'the Other', given that constructions of 'the Other' are in certain significant ways not notably heterogeneous. The concept that an Orient and Occident actually exist and divide humanity into two distinct oceans seems to be a fictitious ideological construct. It is true, that to a certain extent visions of the East in English literature present the East as diverse in character and structure. Even a single poet often produces different and often conflicting images in their artistic creations. Stereotypes of the Indian and the African, for example, have been very different from each other, while the Persians are often depicted as having a comparatively more civilized history than the Ottomans.

Nevertheless, it seems that a certain discursive regularity or persistence exists in the discursive processes of Orientalist writers and scholars and that Robert Southey is no exception. While the relationship between East and West can assume highly dissimilar manifestations, the Westerner rarely loses the upper hand. This flexible positional superiority bolsters the assertion that Orientalism is an ideologically-loaded discourse with severely bounded borders. The major issue here, though, is not so much whether what is presented as objective is true, but the nature of the ideological construction itself.

Understanding the existence and essence of the dominant Orientalist discourse explains how and why a well-established and mainstream scholar, writing about Byron and Southey, can assert that:

As it happens, Edward Said has little to say about English Romantic poetry [...] The examples he gives are poems long considered of lesser importance, such as Southey's religious epics or Byron's Turkish tales, which Said feels no need to analyze. It is enough that works of their type, which he takes to be essentially private fantasy, bolster Western superiority by providing an Eastern *alter ego* – weak, sensuous, effeminate – where the West is strong, free and manly.

In fact this is an old-established misconception about the poems in question (Butler, 1994: 397).

'Objectivity' itself becomes a device for power, both in the discourse and in the individual/system that produces that discourse. One who works within this severely bounded

area of social knowledge, whether it is Southey, Sharafuddin, or Butler, assumes that the line separating 'us' from 'them' is objectively drawn. The views of 'the Other' are intolerant and derisory and it is assumed that there is no need to sustain this position with confirmation from local scholarship; it is deemed self-evident. Such discursive strategies are not simply autonomous or independent acts of cultural production. They occur within particular political and social contexts and, in turn, they reinforce and sometimes help shape those contexts.

There is merit in the argument that Romantic poets frequently used Eastern characters and settings to defamiliarize or allegorise individuals and situations closer to home. However, this does not suitably explain the fundamental and enormous differences in the depictions of the Westerner and the Oriental. If this is not recognised by some, then, perhaps, in their eyes, differing standards of expectations exist for different peoples.

Such discursive processes can be often found in the works of Western literary critics as well as in the works of what Appiah calls the "comprador intelligentsia" (Appiah, 1991: 348). It would have been surprising for the researcher to conclude otherwise about the persistent influence of Oriental discourse, as the material in this article fits in well with patterns existing within the more global and explicitly political Orientalist discourse. Policy making and media circles in many Western countries regularly demonstrate belligerent hostility and manufacture exaggerated stereotypes, which secular critics of Orientalism, such as Said and Chomsky, often fail to recognize. This dominant strategy of discourse and power does not merely produce 'West' or 'East', rather 'the Other' becomes the millions of people whose lives are reduced to caricatures and prejudices through this approach.

References

- 1- Appiah, A., "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Post-colonialism?", *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 1991.
- 2- Butler, M., "Orientalism" in David B. Pirie (ed.). *The Penguin History of Literature: the Romantic Period*. London: Penguin, 1994.
- 3- *Edinburgh Review* Vol. 25, 1815.
- 4- Fitzgerald, M.H., ed. *Poems of Robert Southey*. London: Oxford University Press, 1909.
- 5- Sharafuddin, M., *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient*, London: I.B.Tauris, 1994.
- 6- Southey, R., *Roderick, the Last of the Goths*, London: Longman, 1815.
- 7- ———, *Thalaba the Destroyer*. 2 Vols., London: Biggs and Cottle, 1801.