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FICTIONS OF PHANTASMAGORIA: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF WILLIAM BECKFORD'S *VATHEK*

Rasoul ALIAKBARI*

Abstract

Western colonization of the Orient has been well-endorsed by Eurocentrism, which regards the European culture as the standard against which all other cultures are negatively measured. Partly as a reaction to this otherizing, Postcolonial criticism endeavors to understand political, social, cultural, and psychological processes by which colonialist discourse works. More specifically, a major portion of Postcolonial criticism analyzes the various representations of the Orient carried out by the Westerners. In actuality, under the façade of Orientalism, western authors have more than often regarded the Middle-easterners as backward, dishonest, sexually promiscuous, and so forth, and have subsequently held them well inferior to the European counterparts. Among the pioneering texts in this spirit one may refer to William Beckford's *Vathek*, which also stands as the focal point of the present study. Composed under the influence of the *Arabian Nights* and following the Gothic tradition, the novel chronicles the fall from power of the Caliph Vathek. The research seeks to offer a postcolonial reading of this eighteenth century tale, and in doing so, it maps out the novel's various Orientalist topoi such as the way Beckford has fabricated a bizarre Orient, or generalized any negative attribute he has perceived in, or projected to the Oriental subjects.

Keywords: Orientalism, Other, Postcolonial, *Vathek*

Introduction

The eye of outward sense is as the palm of a hand,
The whole of the object is not grasped in the palm.
The sea itself is one thing, the foam another;
Neglect the foam, and regard the sea with your eyes.
Waves of foam rise from the sea night and day,
You look at the foam ripples and not the mighty sea.

(The Story of Elephant in the Dark Room, Rumi's *Masnavi Ma'navi*)

Foucault did a laborious job to illuminate how knowledge and power have cooperated in the West to culminate in exclusion of the minorities. He argues that the Western Enlightenment, for all its claims on universalism and progress, has excluded and thus suppressed many voices whose actuality has been more than often denied or debased as the machine of Modernity has been rolling down. To the poststructuralist thinker, the Western civilization has not paid justice to women,

* PhD Admitted Candidate, Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, Canada.

homosexuals, the insane and many more. Foucault cites the 1960s student revolt as calling into question the conventional treatment of such minorities (Gutting 30). Attacking the Western tradition from another angle by accusing it of logocentrism, Jacques Derrida challenges the long-held hope and belief of the Western metaphysics in the established origins and "logos" (Hill 22).

Poststructuralism manages to shackle the foundations of the Western system; nonetheless, the challenge it puts forward is merely from within. It takes the efforts of other thinkers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha along with Gayatri C. Spivak to defy the ethnocentric boundaries of the Western ideology and create a space for the voices beyond European borders. Edward Said takes the poststructuralist cue to argue that the bond between knowledge and *colonial* power has well managed to keep the Orient at bay. Said, for whom Orientalism is the partial knowledge of the West at the service of colonization, considers it "an inter-textual network of rules and procedures which regulate anything that maybe thought, written, or imagined about the Orient" (quoted in Gandhi 76). To Said, even Marxism, despite its critique of capitalism, fails to properly address the issues of the Orient. Marx asserts "England has to fulfill a double role in India; one destructive, the other regenerative - the annihilation of Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia" (Marx 320, quoted in Said 154). To shed more light on the colonial condition, Bhabha meditates "on the myths of Western power and knowledge which confine the colonized and dispossessed to a half-life of misrepresentation and migration" (Bhabha 149).

Predating the fact of colonialism and endorsing it are texts. Throughout centuries, the Westerners have come to fabricate an *Oriental* exotic and barbaric through Orientalism as they wished it to be. Dante notoriously enough relegates the Persian philosopher Avicenna to purgatory to cleanse him of sins, and also tarnishes Mohammed by putting him in Hell as a "Sower of Discord" (Canto 28). Orientalism has also generated such stereotypes of the East as the overloaded marketplace, the terrorist, the Asian despot, and the child-like native (Gandhi 77). It is then plausible to extend Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson's insight and argue that "Imperial relations ... were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality" (10). The biased knowledge the Westerners formed about the East well served to rationalize the civilizing mission they took in order to tame the "backward", "barbaric" natives. In a spirit similar to Said's, Elleke Boehmer offers a specific study on the British colonialism and finds it as a "textual takeover" of the non-Western world (19). Once done with fabricating the Orient they had come (or not come) to know only in parts, they felt dutiful to civilize the part of the world they had conceived of as depraved; hence the Western imperialist conviction to enter the native land in order to civilize them, yet ending up in the brutal practice of altering and overriding the Orient (Said 96).

As mentioned, Western colonialism has found much impetus in the way the Orient has been represented in the sphere of textuality. Distorted representation of the East has been an actuality ever since Homer and Aeschylus through Dante to later ages (Gandhi 76). Worse even, during the past centuries Orientalism has fully blossomed in such portrayals of the East as to be found in works by Goethe, Hugo, Lamartine, Scott, Byron, George Eliot among many more (Said 100). Along with them, the *Arabian Nights*, which was translated to French and subsequently to English in the early 18th century, captured the mind of the Orientalists and reinforced their stereotypical views of the East. Much in the vein of the *Arabian Nights* and composed in the same century is *Vathek* by William Beckford. Following the already established Orientalism, Beckford has entertained the Western audience by trying his hand at creating a bizarre Orient and has well accomplished in reinforcing the very Eurocentric tradition from which he was borrowing.

***Vathek*; the Empire of the Grotesque**

Harun-al Rashid and *Vathek* are related both through genealogy and fictional intertextuality. Much of the Orientalist impetus behind *Vathek* comes from the *Arabian Nights*, a tale

which is led by Harun, who is also the grandfather of the actual Vathek, the Abbasids ninth ruler and the central character of *Vathek*. The history of the text *Vathek* is complex to a degree. Beckford was no older than twenty one when he wrote the tale in French in 1782; it was translated and published in English by Samuel Henley without the authorial consent, and was soon translated back to English with some modifications.

Vathek chronicles the fall from power of the Caliph Vathek who has formed an unquenchable thirst for supernatural power and knowledge, and is readily beguiled by the devil Giaour who gives him such promises. Giaour concedes to grant him access to the underworld gates of Soliman provided that Vathek complies by the devil's commands. Giaour asks for worship and Vathek's renouncing of Islam so that he will bring Vathek to "the palace of the subterranean fire" (22). In compliance with Giaour's successive orders, Vathek mass-murders fifty young children of Samara, an offense which is soon followed by sacrificing a group of grown-ups all done to fulfill his pact with the devil. Carathis, Vathek's demanding mother, performs black magic in the same hope of gaining supernatural power through his son's contract with the evil agents. Upon Giaour's informing, Vathek, along with a harem of wives and some advisors sets out toward Istakhr in Shiraz, Persia, where the promised subterranean palace lies (43). On his journey toward Istakhr, Vathek was invited to dine by Emir Fakreddin, yet during the visit the Caliph fell in love with Emir's beautiful daughter, Nouronihar, (who was already betrothed to her cousin Gulchenrouz). After ups and downs, Nouronihar, dazzled by Vathek's possessions and beguiled by his promises, concedes to escape with the Caliph. By now his wrongdoings has made Vathek highly distinguished before the devil. Upon arriving at Istakhr, Vathek and Nouronihar step through the palace of gold only to learn, through Soliman, that they are damned to wander in the palace for eternity. Worse even, Vathek's brother, Motavakel, has started a revolt against the Caliph (93).

Along with the plot contrived to portray the downfall of an Oriental figure, Orientalism is equally conspicuous in other fictional spheres of the tale and especially in characterization. Beckford, much in the vein of Orientalism as he is, employs Orientalist tropes in characterization. In the first place, Beckford has characterized the Orientals not as individualized subjects; rather he has resorted to stereotypical imagery in constructing an Asian womanizing despot as Vathek:

His figure was pleasing and majestic; but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible, that no person could bear to behold it ... Being much addicted to women and the pleasures of the table, he sought by his affability, to produce agreeable companions ... He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. (1)

In the same way, Gulchenrouz is depicted as stereotypically effeminate to the point that he cannot keep his fiancée to himself, hence her subsequent elopement with the Caliph (85-86). Children, and more significantly women are put under a collective and thus pejorative framework: "...as his own *women* were secluded within the palace he inhabited himself" (18, emphasis added), "The subjects of the Caliph, like their Sovereign, being great admirers of *women* and apricots from Kirmith, felt their mouths water at these promises" (45, emphasis added), "... he, who thought the place infested rather by devils than *women*, resolved to cease groping" (93, emphasis added), or in amore revealing note "Vathek ... commanded Babalouk to collect the *women*, and other movables of his harem ..." (emphasis added 95). All extracts point to the fact how collective Orientalist discourse is in its view of the Oriental (women) and also show the inefficiency of the author in painting the particulars in the monolithic tableau he draws of them.

The extracts testify to the monolithic view Orientalism adopts, nonetheless, the Orientalists have gone beyond such typification and at times individualized the Orientals, albeit in eccentric ways. Vathek's terrible eye is juxtaposed to his extreme affability to provide a conspicuous example of queerness. More interestingly, Giaour turns himself to a ball and receives kicks from the courtiers

as he refuses to respond to the Caliph's questions: "The stranger afforded them no small entertainment; for, being both short and plump, he collected himself into a ball, and rolled round on all sides at the blows of his assailants ..." (21). Said has noted how capable the colonial discourse is in *otherizing* the non-European through *eccentricization*:

... the whole Orient can be made to serve as an illustration of a particular form of eccentricity. Although the individual Oriental cannot shake or disturb the general categories that make sense of his oddness, his oddness can nevertheless be enjoyed for its own sake. (241)

Even if not typified or represented as eccentric, the oriental subjects are more often than not demonized. They are characterized as evilworking toward bringing calamity to the community which was hitherto enjoying serenity. Carathis joins power with Eblis in an attempt to acquire ultra-human power only to culminate in the calamity she brought to herself, to her son and more importantly to the kingdom. To this end, she performs sorcery to attract the notice of Giaour along with other representatives of evil. In a ghastly scene:

Carathis, having stripped herself to her inmost garment, clapped her hands in an impulse of ecstasy and struck light with all her force ... Carathis whose presence of mind never forsook her, perceiving that she had carcasses sufficient to complete her oblation, commanded the chains to be stretched across the stair-case ... (34-5)

And by doing so, she takes the lives of many merited citizens only to satisfy the hungry appetite of Giaour. In connection to female Orientalism, Geert Hofstede illuminates the fact that Asian women have been depicted as aggressive or opportunistic sexual characters or even predatory gold diggers (533-546). Carathis, who dreams of endless treasures, is portrayed as collaborative with the Caliph and the devil. She even consults the stars to help Vathek to learn how to serve the evils. Similar to her in this sense, Nouronihar is the type of girl who loses faith in true love at the sight of Vathek's power and possessions; finishing her bath with the Caliph, she resumes as such: "Dear sovereign of my soul! I will follow thee, if it be thy will, beyond the Kaf ..." (94).

Western authors had no qualm about relegating the otherwise original Oriental characters into stereotypical caricatures, queer personages, or demonized agents. Nonetheless, they have been more apt in (mis)representing the Orient they thought of as a land overridden by violence. The Caliph is a main agent of violence in the tale. As if fixated in his psychosexual development, Vathek perceives no controls from society and behaves instinctively. He must be immediately granted what he desires; otherwise his eye (or mind) may turn terrible:

He was fond of engaging in disputes with the learned, but he did not allow them to push their opposition with warmth. He stopped with presents the mouths of those whose mouths could be stopped; whilst others, whom his liberty was unable to subdue, he sent to prison to cool their blood; a remedy that often succeeded. (3)

Putting his mass-murders aside, in the course of the novel Vathek numerously resorts to violence; even as he finds interest in Nouronihar, the Caliph gets Babalouk to kidnap Gulchenrouzin the hope of canceling the romantic rival (85). Yet the Caliph does all this and much more in order to meet his pact with devil, who is the prime mover of violence in the novel. Giaour's intense thirst for blood seems to be more stimulated as sacrifices are made one after the other. He seems well-determined to abuse a heedless king. As for the violence perceived in the Orient of the tale, one may also refer to burning the beards of those who fail in the deciphering contest (9), macabre scenes of black magic (32), as well as the presence of eunuchs and mutes in Vathek's palace.

The Westerners' positional superiority over the non-West (Said 8) has also been confirmed by merely attributing to the non-West the depravity they have not come to recognize in themselves. As a purveyor of this notion, *Vathek* features scenes of homoeroticism, by which Beckford has represented the Oriental males as pedophilic. Prior to their massacre through Vathek's intermediary, children are the object of the male gaze:

It was not long before a troop of these poor children made their appearance, all equipped by their fond mothers with such ornaments as might give the greatest relief to their beauty or most advantageously display the graces of their age. But whilst this brilliant assemblage attracted the eyes and hearts of every one besides, the Caliph scrutinized each in his turn with a malignant avidity that passed for attention, and selected from their number the fifty whom he judged the Giaour would prefer. (41)

Beckford has characterized the Oriental male as homoerotic, nevertheless a cursory glance at the author's life discloses his scandalous affair with the 10-year-old William Courtney in the boy's bedroom at Powderham Castle, and this was only one among several more cases like (Snodgrass 23-4); hence the projection in the novel. Beckford's partly suppressed homo-desires are projected to the Orient as a vent (, due to which the Orient replaces as a liberal alternative the oppressive Imperialism of the West; after all, this is a marginal trend), nevertheless, the projection better works to demote the "uncivilized" Orient for the felony they publicly commit and surprisingly take for granted. To further the sphere of personal projection on the part of the author, it is noteworthy that Beckford's Calvinist and demanding mother (Snodgrass *ibid*) is recast into the Oriental intrusive and "gold digger" mother of the Caliph, Carathis.

Said is highly suspicious of projection as an Orientalist device. In his *Orientalism*, he recommends "to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient," (96). Vathek is recounted to have fallen in an insane quest for knowledge and who has transgressed the human limits only to end up in doom and failure. Nonetheless, craving for and pursuing ultra-human knowledge can be observed to occur within any intellectual contexts - the West included. Faust and Dr Faustus are only few of the Western figures who in their pursuit of forbidden knowledge brought about downfall to themselves and at times to their companions alongside. The cultural and intellectual backdrop to which Beckford is raised is supplied with a lot of such figures, yet the author only manages to project the western leitmotif into the Orient and regenerate it in the figure of Vathek. Exerting such a psychological mechanism, by Beckford along with the other Western authors, effectively contributes to the already huge discourse of Orientalism.

Interestingly enough, Orientalists have often written about the Orient as authorities; they have fabricated a non-West which is at times bizarre and barbaric at other times. Beyond this, they have even projected onto the Orient the deviances they have denied to acknowledge in themselves. Yet, more interestingly, they have done all this and even much more with almost no first-hand experience of the Orient. In this connection, Beckford is no exception. As his career denotes, Beckford never visited the Orient either prior or posterior to the composition of *Vathek* (Snodgrass *ibid*) but wrote with such "veracity" about it that imprinted *his* Orient on the memory of a posterity of authors namely Byron, both Shellyes, and Poe all to become his admirers. Beckford, drawing on and adding to the Eurocentric discourse of Orientalism, has accomplished to build a bizarre icon of the East and has thereby corroborated Said's argument that the Western author "... whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the Description de l'Égypte called 'bizarre jouissance'. *The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness.*" (95, emphasis added). Himself being a wealthy colonial investor on Caribbean sugar and slaves, William Beckford deploys a phantasmagoric magic lantern to orientalize the East

and in doing so, prepares the land for the civic cultivation the Western colonialism was dreaming of.

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