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Orientalist Desires and Gothic Manifestations: A Study of William Beckford's 'Vathek'

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Article History



Abstract

This study offers a critical analysis of Gothic motifs and Orientalist themes in William Beckford's *Vathek* with a view of how the latter contributes to the construction and reproduction of the ideological boundaries between the East and the West which are underpinned by cultural and moral differentialism. This way, the research illustrates how fear, horror and the supernatural are mobilised by Beckford to represent the Oriental as a space that is inherently dangerous and spiritually degenerate. The focus is also made on how the settings of the novel the confusing, infernal halls of Eblis, the vast, mysterious landscapes are not just the background, but characters themselves who embody and intensify the main character's moral and spiritual degeneration. Furthermore, the penetration provided by the study gives insights as to how figures such as Nouronihar and Carathis exemplify yet disrupt the Orientalist stereotype of the fatal female. Due to this research, the interconnectivity between Gothic and Orientalist Studies has been presented, and it gives an insight into how socio-political imperialisms such as culture supremacy are perpetuated by *Vathek*. In other words, the findings enrich extant scholarly debate by offering an analytic of how the two architectonic styles weave together in the novel, to create cultural and moral ideologies.

Keywords

Orientalist Theories
Gothic Writing
Power Dynamics
Literary Theory
Multiculturalism
Capitalism
Postmodern Philosophy

Introduction

Anomalies and enigmas were widely favored in writing throughout the 18th century. At this juncture, a new literary movement arose, fusing gothic motifs with exotic elements influenced by the East. William Beckford's book "*Vathek*" (1786) explores the complex interaction between Gothic sensibility and Orientalist aspirations. Upon further examination, it becomes evident that "*Vathek*" combines the Gothic tradition's preoccupation with the macabre and terrifying with the mysterious charm of the East. William Beckford, a connoisseur of art and literature, authored "*Vathek*" during the late 18th century, when Europe was captivated by the

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allure of the East. "Vathek" depicts an Eastern tyrant's pursuit of forbidden knowledge and magical powers, illustrating the Western perception of the East as a captivating and exotic realm abundant with wealth and marvels, but also shrouded in mysterious mysteries and sinister forces. "According to Said's explanation of orientalism, it may be understood as a political vision that emphasizes the distinction between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the "other" (the Orient, the East, "them"). This vision shapes the structure of reality.

Vathek portrays an unappealing image of the Islamic caliphate and its culture by focusing on the autocratic rule of Al-Wathik (842-847), the ninth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. Despite the condemnation of "decadent" Catholicism and the glorification of Protestant morals by classic English gothicists like Beckford, he adopts a more universal tone and style. Beckford's tendency to Orientalize the area led to his contribution in creating a distorted portrayal of Muslims, Islam, and the East. Gothic tales include enigmatic and macabre occurrences deliberately crafted by the writers to evoke a sense of revulsion in the reader. The presence of monster spectres and curses intensifies the sense of imminent catastrophe (Melmed & Santiago, 2022; Huft, 2022; Skott & Bengston, 2022). Furthermore, the stories have protagonists who withstand dreadful circumstances, alongside malevolent rulers, sorceresses, and maleficent beings with indescribably grotesque visages.

The use of reenactment in historical investigation reaches absurd thresholds, as shown by Vathek. Vathek exemplifies the phenomenon of English Orientalism, which masquerades as an Oriental screen, mocking English country life and sports culture. It provides a sanctuary from the undesirable aspects of society while simultaneously delving into the possibilities of imitation (Hobbs & Friesem, 2019; López, 2019; Xi et al., 2023). Orientalism, as popularized by Edward Said, characterizes the East as "the other," and it is within this conceptual framework that the word "vathek" is most effectively comprehended. Orientalism originated throughout the twentieth century. The adoption of a 'othering' viewpoint enabled Westerners to project their aspirations, anxieties, and imaginations onto Eastern cultures and civilizations, so influencing the depiction of these realms in European literature. The inclusion of creepy, occult, and macabre motifs in "Vathek" enhances the story's gothic elements, so heightening the contrast between the vivid Orient and the mysterious Gothic universe.

The objective of this research is to provide a postcolonial analysis of the 18th century plot by examining the novel's many Orientalist themes. The primary aim of this research is to examine how Beckford's "Vathek" integrates Gothic sensibilities with Orientalist principles. The objective of the critical inquiry is to have a profound and perceptive understanding of Gothic portrayals of the Eastern (Leaf, 2022; Joyce & Joyce, 2019). To get a deeper understanding of how Westerners depict the East in literature, we might analyze the "Vathek" story type, which explores the complex interplay of intrigue, anxieties, and influences. Analyzing "Vathek" is part of a broader scholarly endeavor to understand the complex artistic connection between Orientalist and Gothic ideas.

Problem Statement

William Beckford's "Vathek" exemplifies the Orientalist intellectuals' belief in the East as a unique entity apart from the West throughout the eighteenth century. Due to the influence of European ideals and power dynamics, Western languages have largely neglected Eastern cultures, fostering biases and misconceptions. Vathek's amalgamation of Orientalist and Gothic elements perpetuates the fallacious notion that the Orient is intrinsically linked to occultism and mortality. Hence, it is imperative to inquire about the novel's portrayal of the East and its role in the broader conversation of cultural hegemony, power dynamics, and the marginalization of non-Western societies in Western literary works (Altwaiji, 2023; Zeiny,

2021). This research seeks to shed insight on the social and historical factors that lead to Orientalist prejudices and the Western literary canon's exclusion of the Orient by analyzing the intricate connection between Gothicism and Orientalism in "Vathek".

This study seeks to explore several critical questions related to the intersection of Orientalist and Gothic elements in William Beckford's *Vathek* and broader European literature. Firstly, it investigates how *Vathek*'s fusion of Orientalist and Gothic motifs influences power relations and cultural representation, examining the ways in which the text uses these literary traditions to construct and reinforce cultural hierarchies between the East and the West. Secondly, the research delves into how Orientalist literature, as exemplified in *Vathek*, portrays the Orient in line with prevailing Western stereotypes, particularly through the depiction of the East as an exotic, dangerous, and morally corrupt space. Finally, the study addresses how European literature engages with themes of imperialism, cultural hegemony, and the subjugation of non-Western cultures, analyzing the extent to which these narratives reflect and perpetuate the ideologies of Western dominance and control over the East. Through these questions, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between literature, culture, and power.

Research Methods

In the present research, the method chosen is qualitative, namely a textual analysis of William Beckford's *Vathek* to reveal the complex interaction between the Gothic motifs and the Orientalist goals. Considering the multilayered nature of the analyzed novel and the flexibility of the concepts which compete at the base of its plot, qualitative analysis seems to be more justified for the detailed examination of the relationships between the studied literary traditions.

Data Accumulation and Textual Acquisition

The analysis in this study therefore stems from a technical and skeptical reading of *Vathek*, with emphasis on searching and choosing brilliantly, fragments that represent a direct intertextuality between Gothic and Orientalism. The criteria for selection were therefore informed by the central research questions which are how does Beckford's narrative reconstruct and maintain prevailing Western binary and Orientalist imagination through the Gothic?

The first activity of data collection consisted of a global skim reading of the text to get familiar with its topics and story arc. During initial reading, passages are annotated according to the visibility of Gothic totems haunted settings, supernatural occurrences, and compromised ethical terrain as well as intersections of such features with Orientalist tropes of place, figures, and forms of power.

And then, such passages were read again in order to pay more attention to the abundance of the themes and the role of these passages in the narratives. This included focusing on particular scenes which characterise the Gothic representation of the orient: dark Venician palaces, secret ceremonial practices, and interactions with the supernatural. Thus, analysing the dialogues and actions of characters like *Vathek*, who was built in accordance with the Orientalist stereotype of the 'Other,' it was possible to establish how these aspects fit into the framework of the novel and its main plot of the moral and cultural degeneration.

Much attention was also given to the selection of passages, which describe, in detail, the combination of Gothic horror with Oriental exoticism. These passages were selected in order to present the common ambivalent attitude of the Western peoples to the East as to something

at once dreadful and intriguing. The selected texts were then analysed according to their thematic interest and made the basis of data analysis for the following phases of the study.

Analytical Framework

This study uses a sound theoretical lens with postcolonial theory as the overarching theory and Orientalism, advanced by Said combined with Gothic literary theory. This double focus cuts across the complex ways in which *Vathek* weaves together Gothic elements alongside and ultimately in service to Orientalist tropes to build a vision the East as the irrational 'Other.'

The first analytical layer is based on the theory of Gothic literature. This layer thus concerns a closer look at the text with a view to analyzing and interpreting Gothic features, including features such as haunting, supernatural beings, and the gloom that seems to surround the story. These motifs are discussed in the context of the Gothic imagery and the representations of the supposed degeneration of the characters, sin, the concepts of the forbidden wisdom, and the other world. Through the identification of these motifs the analysis reveals how gothic horror is employed to heighten the presentation of the East as mysterious and ominous.

The second analytical layer brings back these Gothic motifs of the play and analyzes them through Orientalism. This entails a performative evaluation of how the viewed Gothic features help to establish the East as the 'Other,' as held tenet in Said's Orientalism. This reconsideration exposes, though, how Gothic terror is underwritten by Orientalist preconceptions, situating the East at once as otherworldly, immoral, and dangerous. The paper also goes further to discuss how these portrayals recapitulate the Western imperialist outlook by portraying the East as the uncivilized other to the imperialist west.

To build on the findings, the study contextualises these in the light of the socio-political culture of late eighteenth century. This contextualization requires melding historical findings on imperialism within Europe and the effects on culture. In this way, the study shows that *Vathek* not only replicates the Orientalist discourses of the authors, they also construct them. In this respect, the critical understanding presented here points to how Beckford's narrative conforms to the imperialist agenda of depicting the East as a space that requires the colonising intervention of the West, hence upholding cultural imperialism.

Interpretive Techniques

The study uses thematic analysis as well as discourse analysis in order to systematically analyse the text and critically reveal the power relations and cultural assumptions in Beckford's construction of the East.

The first of such processes was thematic analysis. As part of this approach, there was an analysis and classification of motifs, symbols, and patterns of narratives repeatedly used in *Vathek*. Valid critical themes were chosen based on the identification of themes that broadly concern Gothic and Orientalist discourse: the representation of the Orient nation as the alien 'Other', the elements of supernatural that induce fear, the dual character of Oriental/Gothic characters, etc. These themes were then overlaid onto the text in order to understand how it is that Beckford combines elements of gothic and orientalism in order to tell a story that embodies and enacts the fears and desires of the West vis a vis the East.

After conducting the thematic analysis, the researcher opted for the use of discourse analysis and used it to revisit the language, tone, and narrative style that Beckford used to portray the eastern characters and backgrounds. This technique entailed paying attention to the language choices that underpin the process of constructing the Orient as the 'other', as evil. For example, the study looked at the ways in which Beckford build up the orient as alien, erotic, fantastic:

how, through hyperbole and sexuality, he renders the East otherworldly. Closely related, the discourse analysis also focused on how dialogues and character interactions recover Orientalist tropes, whether sexualized representation of Eastern woman as if they are both seductive and conforming, or the Oriental despots and other rulers as despotic and corrupt.

Results and Discussion

Gothic Construction of the East

In the halls of Eblis, Vathek beheld a scene of terror: he described a place in Hell where flames gave out a stinking sulfur hue, and where walls groaned with the damned's screams: the shade cast by the fire revealed the damned's twisted, suffering forms: their faces invincible.

This passage paints the East in terms of gothic imagery of the natural geography of the East in terms of horror and damnation. The 'sulphurous smell' and the 'cries of the damned' are stereotypically associated with Christian hell, which means that the East is a realm where everyone has rotted and where the rot will continue indefinitely. By thus employing Gothic horror to represent the East it will also serve Orientalist take on the East as inherently threatening and vile.

Said's Orientalism outlines how the East was created as the complete 'other' the space where Western concerns were mapped (Said, 1978). This projection is best exemplified by Eblis's halls which is depicted as a place of endless suffering in an elaborate use of Gothic features that asserts the superiority of the West over the immorality and degenerate spirituality of the East. In Gothic landscape, landscape becomes the projection of inwardness, of morality and psychological states as David Punter remarks as well (Punter, 2014). In Vathek again, the East is depicted as an everlasting fire, the fantasy of the West about the Orient and a sign that it has something immoral about it. Daniel J. Vitkus is among the scholars who have pointed out that Gothic literature often uses the figure of the 'damned other' in construction of the morality and culture degeneration non-Occidental spaces become depicted as evil spaces. It not only ideologically supports Orientalism but also generates the Western entitlement for the superior morality. In this sense, Beckford relied on the Gothic horrors to represent the orient thus contributing to the reification of the cultural and moral 'Othering' between the two regions.

"The ground seemed to open up beneath their feet and in the shadows the gigantic silhouettes appeared their shapes were unclear but they looked menacing and vicious as if they were East curses come alive."

To wit, the imagery of 'monstrous shapes' that rises out of the ground depicts the East as being linked to the primordial and evil. These shadows, represented as "vague and terribly realised" are illustration of the Gothic's primary concept of the 'uncanny', or the frightening functionality of the familiar and the world of the domestic. That these shapes are considered to be "the bearing [of the] ancient curses", inherent to the East, paints the latter as a region which is haunted by its history and its monstrosities.

Animosity towards the East is expressed through the idea that the latter is cursed the Orient is an arena of timeless sin and hidden vices (Khairallah et al., 2022; Ricci, 2019). Marina Warner tackles the question of the Gothic sublime in relation to how the motifs that it has been fashioned from repeat the anxiety of the unknown where the prospects of a curse or doom is present (Ross et al., 2020; Levay et al., 2019). As in few other works, the East in Vathek is not only geographical but also spiritual region that offers no safety, as the divide between the natural and the supernatural is almost irrelevant. This representation fits perfectly within the

Orientalist framework where the east is represented as the backward and immoral territory, unlike the progressive west, a concept widely covered by authors like Rana Kabbani (Brahim, 2023; Abbas & Abbas, 2021; Ashton & Mittermeier, 2023). The portrayal of the East as cursed dramatizes the belief in Asian spirituality as a state of sinfulness and putrefaction, which ensures that those who find themselves in this part of the world are doomed. Apart from causing such a breakdown, it also contributes to an exclusion of the East by the West and provides the Western world with a rationale for intervening in ‘the decadent’ Middle Eastern region with the intention of ‘saving it’ from its immorality.

“Vathek’s journey was done with the dim light of the crescent that casting a terrible evil shades like ideas in his head which stained with greed and wickedness.”

This fabulous city illuminated by the ‘pale light of the crescent moon’ is a symbol of the Islamic world that is usually referred to as the East in the Orientalist texts. These shadows are ominously presented as equivalent to sin and evil, meaning ‘even the natural world of the East is not clean’ as far as this text goes. These shadows are compared to Vathek’s own thoughts ‘vain, full of covetousness, and conscious of unholy desires,’ which associate the terrain with the signs of Vathek’s moral degeneration, and present the East as the iniquity’s source.

Even here, the familiar reference to Muslim culture in the shape of the crescent moon is employed to suggest evil and moral turpitude. Meyda Yeğenoğlu is speaking of how Orientalist narratives constantly signal signs of the ‘Orient’ to give an aura of fear and suspicion that the ‘Orient’ as such is really Other (Özselçuk, 2022; Ghumkhor & Ghumkhor, 2020). The fact that Beckford portrays the moon as casting ‘sinister shadows’ over the landscape situates Vathek’s characterisation of the East as a landscape of sin. This representation can also be attributed to the gothic tradition on using the plants to symbolise the protagonist’s inward disposition, which is discussed widely by Timothy Morton regarding the environmental representation within the gothic literature (Wagstaffe, 2019; Haber, 2024). Thus, the East in this case is simply a dark mirror of Vathek’s soul, and once again, we are presented with the classical Orientalist view of the region as a place that corrupts the Western traveller.

“The palace lay in front of us, a large and ominous building that looked as if it was made up of many towers and domes with a height that stretched above the clouds to the very sky, as if it wanted to question the very divinity of the universe”.

This imagery of the palace looming that spires like claws, searching for the sky is another element taken from Gothic and has its roots in one of its major motifs pride where characters or buildings go against the order prescribed by the creation. The standing in this account paints the palace as the epitome of the East’s arrogance and hubris ambition is punished with moral and spiritual decay. Through the royal palace’s act of rebelliousness against the divine, Anderson communicates that, in the East, morality and religion are subverted and played with.

David Punter points out that the Gothic really does ‘map’ the psychological and moral state of the characters who inhabit it or more accurately, it represents the characters’ aspirations and phobias (Punter, 2014; Darowski, 2024). In Vathek the palace can mean about the East as a place of malevolent desire, or that the quest for power will come at the expense of one’s own soul. This conforms to the Orientalist mentality that Arab or any Eastern society societies are intrinsically incorrect in rejecting ‘Western’ values and are pre-ordained to fail. Said’s Orientalism also emphasizes how Oriental societies are portrayed as sinfully and spiritually inclined and their aim as a menace to the primacy of the west (Said, 1978). In the same vein, Beckford’s description of the palace as ‘challenging the divine’ captures this uneasiness and in the same breath implies that the East’s thirst for ascendancy is sinful and unnatural. This serve

to reinforce the cultural and moral dualisms that informs the west's right to intervene and govern.

“The air was heavy with the smell of stagnation, corruption – as if the East itself exhaled the odour of sin that dated back to the time of Abraham.”

The notion of ‘stench of decay’ is used as an allegory to the East signifying that it is a region that is intrinsically rotten to the core. Even the air that one is to breathe known as the ‘breath of the East’ has become synonymous with the rot of ancient sins thus signifying that the East is a region where sins are committed without cessation a region whereby once you sin, there is no chance of redemption but to remain in a state of perpetual sinning. This fits into Aldana Reyes (2020) and Pickard (2020) definition of abjection that represents the decomposition and stench of the body or the social and moral order in this case. In *Vathek* the East stands for horror, for dementia, and for moral and temporal decay the past contaminates the present. This accords with the Orientalist discourse of the eastern civilization as a locus of original sin, static and incapable of change.

Consequently, Rana Kabbani's Orientalist reading of literature shows the Oriental nation as a terrain of backward time in which, unlike the Greek conception of history as a repository of knowledge, history is the site of depravity (Aljahdali, 2021). Beckford's deployment of Gothic imagery, for example, the ‘stink of putrefaction’, does precisely this the East is depicted as a degenerate region in need of ‘purging’ or ‘saving’ by the West.

Stereotypes of Orientalist Nature in Character Development

“Nouronihar, the beauty and mystery of her figure surpassed that of the most beautiful woman, and the grace of her movements resembled the slithering of a serpent, and her eyes sparkled with sinful pleasures... However, inside this bewitching beauty there was greed for power and a mind controlled by vicious vices.”

Nouronihar can be interpreted as an example of the most stereotypically Orientalist construction of woman a femme fatale. The use of the word ‘serpent’ invokes thoughts of the biblical story of temptation hence associating her with the idea of sin. Her sparkling eyes revealing the ‘ladle of forbidden fruits’ means she is not only beautiful but deadly a symbol of the stereotype that Oriental women are provocative and loose. The portrayal of Nouronihar focuses on the Orientalist literary tradition that has been specified by Edward Said where oriental women are portrayed as sexually tempting but also sinful to uphold the belief of orient as a land of moral eclipse which is true for Nouronihar as the film shows her as a temptress who takes advantage of Rankin. This portrayal is a representation of the orientalized woman where they are at once constructed as the ‘Bad Girl’ and the ‘Exotic Femme Fatale’ that is a common feature in discourses produced by Western societies.

According to Gorelick (2019) and Osmond (2020) it is common for Orientalist representations to use that of the alluring veiled oriental women as an embodiment of western ambivalence towards the orient. Nouronihar's physical beauty in *Vathek* is as a magnet and a menace, which is line with what the East represents, and more specifically, the women of the East who pose a danger to the moral and spiritual standards of the West.

As for Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, in which attraction and repulsion coalesce, Nouronihar's portrayal can also be included (Kristeva, 1982). She is sexy, which is sexually appealing, but is wicked, is sexually repugnant. The interest and fear are here two sides of one coin, which express the West's attitude to the East: attraction and repulsion.

“Carathis, the Caliph’s mother was in black dress, with a veil covering her face leaving us to see only her greedy eyes, she was a very knowledgeable woman, partial to witchcraft in most cases.”

Carathis is drawn as a strong and vindictive woman the Orientalist vision of an Eastern woman seen as magical and deadly. Her description as having ‘cold calculating eyes’ and ‘Mastery of the dark arts’ make her a figure to fear and control, who uses her knowledge in negative ways. The veil that covers her face contributes to her allure and confirms all the stereotype conceptions about Eastern women as beings who are mysterious and potentially lethal. Carathis’s looks corresponds to the stereotype of a witch or sorceress, a Gothic protagonist who possesses supernatural abilities that she employs solely for evil. However, when applied to Orientalism this reification assumes a new signification, setting Carathis as the signifier of the Oriental degeneration of the moral and the spiritual. Ahmed notes that Orientalist discourses have a paradox of the active and dangerous female subject southern woman as all-knowing and immoral and bearing her knowledge in ways that menace western ways of life (Ahmed et al., 1992).

Veil is prominent in Orientalist discourses and it symbolises that the Orient is a place which is hiding its face and thus attractive and menacing to the Western subject (Edwards & Edwards, 2021; Ahmed, 2023). Consequently, in Vathek, Carathis’s veiled face and her connection with the forbidden knowledge contribute to this unchanging narrative and pose the Oriental as a master of disguise and deception the other that is always coupled with the fear that it brings closer to the self.

It is for this reason that Carathis’s portrayal fits Homi Bhabha’s brilliant idea of mimicry: the colonized subject is both the same as and different from the colonizer. Her education and authority transform her into a character that is worthy of people’s respect at the same time, her evilness and cunningness turn her into a dangerous woman. This is because, in the context of the West’s perception of the East, the unfamiliar is both revered and despised.

“Nouronihar a beauty was a weapon, she used men the way one uses instruments and her laughter was simply the honey that attracted the bees.”

It is interesting to note that Nouronihar’s beauty is described this way as a ‘weapon’ which clearly, reasserts that she is a predatory female character who seduces men. Her laughter described as ‘sweet and melodious’ contradicts the ‘cruelty of her intentions’ which coincides with the fight all the Oriental women depicted in Orientalist narratives as external beauty conceals internal evil. Thus, it is the Orientalist stereotype of a dangerous beauty, which proved popular in Western literature and art at the time (Nour, 2021; Kalmar, 2019). Beckford’s depiction of Nouronihar as a beauty which is a weapon points to the fact that, like the women of the east, what is east is dangerous at least from a Western perspective.

Fatema Mernissi discusses how Orientalist image present the Eastern women as using their super natural beauty to dominate men and the construction of the East as a territory of sin and depravity (El Nossery, 2023; Al Olaimy, 2019). In Vathek Nouronihar’s beauty is not the passive signifier it comes across as in Boulton’s representation which is not only a manipulative tool but a dangerous one, which is in line with the West’s perception of the East as a threat to its moralistic and spiritual superiority.

Same way, this portrayal also fits into Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject, where it becomes difficult to distinguish between love and hate, pleasure and pain, known and unknown everything becomes charged with danger (Kristeva, 1982). Nouronihar is beautiful, so men

want her as a woman but her plans are evil, so she is a threat. This kind of binaries simply lie in the tendency of the West to exoticise the East, namely, to find it both appealing and repulsive.

“Consequently, Vathek foresaw nothing evil in the enticing and attractive Nouronihar, as far as he saw pleasure and throne.”

Literally, Vathek’s “entrancement” in Nouronihar’s beauty can be seen as an example of how Orientalist imaginations emerge from seeing eastern women as ‘femme fatales’. His inability to see the ‘sharks that lurked beneath’ the attractive veneer of her personality offers a message about the moral and spiritual perils of succumbing to the allure of the ‘Orient’. Nouronihar’s beauty, therefore, is not just an ornament, but a sign of wickedness that takes Vathek astray from reason and into evil.

In Orientalist discourse the East is considered dangerous and tempting the European men and here where the Osman’s attractive eastern bride might be considered a sign of the supposedly dangerous potential of the east (Wilson et al., 2024). A pair of moral beauties: Nouronihar is a woman who can bewitch any man, but at the same time, she becomes a source of moral decay in the frame of the Orientalist paradigm.

This is in line with Julia Kristeva’s explanation of the abject, which is where the distinction between the drives that attract and repel can also be evidenced when it comes to Vathek and Nouronihar (Kristeva, 1982). She is beautiful but she is also ‘bad’, and this is what makes her compelling and dangerous to him. This duality is typical to the presentation of the West in relation to the East the latter is attractive and repulsive at the same time. Edward Said strongly complements this argument of Orientalism by demonstrating how the Orient is portrayed as temptation and perverse in the eyes of the West and at the same time presenting the proposition that the engagement with the Orient is invariably risky (Said, 1978). In this regard, and mainly through Nouronihar, Vathek descends into depravity and debauchery to symbolize the possibility of the Western’s decline if corrupted by the Orient.

Supernatural Elements as Representations of Eastern Mysticism

“One day, the Giaour with fiery eyes and a deep voice with a diabolical resonance told secrets of the elder powers to Vathek: ‘Thus spoke Zarathustra!’ Giaour’s words resonated in the young man’s heart like the call of the elders, which opened the door to other dimensions to Vathek.”

The Giaour is portrayed as a man of the night, wisdom and knowledge, and his eyes ‘burn with coal’ and voice is from the belly of the earth’ which makes him a supernatural evil figure. Here the paradigm of “whispering secrets of ancient power” points to the Oriental dangerous otherness because it implies that seeking the Oriental wisdom is predestined to turn the seeker into a spiritual sinner. By presenting the Giaour in this manner, Hell is made synonymous with a Faustian figure which links with the Gothic genre as the allegory of knowledge, which comes at a cost of the soul.

The Giaour’s function of the bearer of the forbidden information corresponds to the Orientalist image of the East as the exhaustive source of the captivating and dangerous mystical knowledge (Sardar, 1999). This characterization differentiates the film from the get go from other Gothic tales that have the dangerous mentor character that leads the protagonist into moral and spiritual peril. In Vathek, the Giaour’s knowledge is not constructive but destructive that is, the East is the opposite of the enlightening and moralizing West.

From the various Orientalist books that Robert Irwin has presented in his work, he explains how the East represents enigmatic knowledge and strength at the detriment of the spirit. In this

regard, Giaour's stated 'dark incantation' must be seen as the symbol of the sickness of the East which means that through gaining the Eastern knowledge one will inevitably turn into a perverted reprobate. David Punter has described the nature of Gothic literature in terms of the idea that one gets all the knowledge forbidden and self-destructing activity inherent in over ambition leading to the knowledge of disaster (Punter, 2014). In *Vathek*, the Giaour offers him hegemonic power of the ancient orient where distinctions between virtue and vice are less clear cut and it is actually perilous to be virtuous.

"Vathek also felt the earth moving from under his feet when the Giaour began to loose powers from the unseen realm the air between them electric with an evil power that was forbidden by the laws of physics."

The shaking of ground and the 'sinister energy' felt around Giaour summoning dark powers is the subplot of the Gothic, particular the idea of the eerie or the unnatural, with the interference of supernatural forces in the natural world. This imagery indicates that the 'East' is otherworldly in the literal sense of the word where reality and fable intermingles putting man in an unpredictable and dangerous environment. The presented vision of the East as the country where the laws of nature are infringed corresponds to the Orientalist vision of the East as the magical and mystical territory where the rules common for the rest of the world do not function. In Gothic literature, this blurring of boundaries is used to exaggerate the dread that exists in the novel and which represents the West's fears of the unknown and those things over which it is powerless in the East.

Stephen Arata in his study of Gothic literature argues that the use of the supernatural in the literature of the Gothic tradition helps to create a symbolic representation of otherness and especially a cultural otherness which positions the East as a realm of ontological menace (Arata, 1990). In *Vathek*, the supernatural powers of the Giaour are to signify that the East is really not just 'other,' but is the 'other within' the disturbing, the incongruous, the menacing which challenges the hegemonic Western order. According to Edward Said's Orientalism, the East is conceived as a place that defies the regular logic of the world and is altogether enticing and perilous. In this respect, the Giaour invocation of powers from the other world signifies the East as the realm of the incredible where the distinctions between the earthly and other worldly are erased adding to the sense of the horrifying.

"Only one sentence was left sounding in the Vathek's mind of the music that seemed to tell him the key to the whole universe was his if only he would surrender his spirit to the East."

The Cold dark is symbolic to the darkness of the oriental religion, making an attractive offer to *Vathek* of the mysteries of the universe in return of his soul. This imagery is related to Gothic because of the Faustian element of the plot of the story which has the character succumb to temptation and gain knowledge at the cost of eternal suffering. This plan of seeing 'Vathek abandoned his soul to the powers of the East' make it very clear that even when Linden has an appeal to the orient wisdom, it involves the appalling surrender of Western ethics and spirituality. The idea of the Orient as a repository of forbidden and sinful knowledge constitutes a characteristic of Orientalist discourse, and where the Orient is introduced as seductive and perverting (El-Beshti, 1989). The incantation 'the secrets of the universe' in *Vathek* symbolizes the westerner's desire for eastern mysticism but at the same time, narrates a story of how disastrous it might be to pursue this knowledge.

When it comes to Orientalism, which was analyzed by Edward Said, Oriental world is viewed by Western European culture as a place of temptation and danger, thus it is supposed that

contact with the Eastern wisdom equals moral and spiritual degeneration (Said, 1978). In this regard, when Vathek decides to leave his soul to the powers of the East, the Oriental knowledge is bought solely at the price of the total perversion of the character.

Similarly, thus Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry where the colonial subject at one and the same is similar to and different from the colonial master can also be applied to Vathek's endeavor to acquire the Oriental learning (Bhabha & Clifford, 2004). The concept of universal secrets is a veiled imperialist desire, and thus, the chimerical quest for the supernatural secrets of the East is one's own demise. This duality is inherently Western, in which the 'oriental' stimulates interest and, simultaneously, repulsion.

"When Vathek was enraptured by the Giaour's stories he felt the emptiness of his own heart growing and the only desire that could contain it was the thirst for the Orient's secrets."

The image of the slipping soul which is Vathek when he falls under the power of Giaour's incantation reflects the essential elements of the Gothic, especially possession where the main character is overwhelmed by evil forces that destroy his or her character and integrity. The 'void' that takes the place of his soul is an indication of spiritual bankruptcy that comes from searching for the East as a source of wisdom the end of which is fatal, meaning that the wisdom that is found in the East is destructive and vane. This portrayal of the East to be a place that saps one's spirit is consistent with the Orientalist view of Eastern knowledge as while appearing authoritative, is in truth, demoralising and sterile (Sardar, 1999). Gothic horror in Vathek is clearly present when it comes to the way the quest for Oriental wisdom leads to the loss of a soul and a personal identity, which is the expression of how the Gothic imagination associates oneself being entirely devoured from the outside as a reflection of the West's anxieties of engaging with the East.

Said in his Orientalism also notes how the East was constructed as a place of spiritual and moral peril, with contacts with Eastern knowledge that incapacitates, disorients and erases identity (Said, 1978). In this context, the absence that takes the place of Vathek's soul epitomises the East as the realm of original and existential menace, the quest for knowledge ending in the spiritual and moral degradation. Kristeva points out that again the concept of 'abjection' as regards the loss of self, identity and boundaries is tied to the sociology of the unknown and foreign, those elements in the modern West that are culturally and morally different (Kristeva 1982). In Vathek, a void that stands for the loss of the soul signifies the complete carnage that results from the endeavor for the Eastern knowledge.

The Disdain of Culture: Vathek.

"When Vathek found himself at the gates of the palace, his soul was filled with arrogant desires to rule over the whole world, but when the gates of the palace opened before him and he saw the very hell inside it, the price that he has to pay was much too high, and he realized it too late."

The "palace of fire" signify the final sin of the East to acquire power at the price of one's soul. The realization, by protagonist Vathek, that he has traded his soul for 'a fleeting taste of power' thus becomes a criticism of the acquisition of Oriental wisdom and power, as being inherently self-annihilating. This imagery is typical for the Gothic genre, which narrates about the inevitable fate of a person who becomes proud the protagonist is punished for his pride and faces spiritual and moral death. It also represents the Orientalist ethic where any contact with the East is damaging jeopardizing the protagonist's morality and soul (Wilcox, 2018). Therefore, the infernal palace in Vathek signifies the ultimate affirmation of Oriental

despotism, the edifice where offer is made for empire and where only decay is proffered. This representation helps to give a widespread signal about the risks for Europeans to look for this Oriental wisdom and might, which simply confirms that the East is the realm of mirages and deceptions.

David Punter's work on Gothicism points to how the sin of hubris, whereby a character or individual seeks knowledge that is forbidden at his or her peril is used to satirize the folly of ambition (Punter, 2014). In 'Vathek', the infidel palace is the symbol of the east as the area of temptation that leads to spiritual and moral degradation when one tries to attain power.

In his book Orientalism, Edward Said analyses the representation of the East as a sphere of sin and vice, which perverts those who interact with oriental knowledge and authority (Said, 1978). In such sense, when Vathek awakens to see that he has bartered his soul for 'a whiff of fame,' it becomes a commentary on the West's quest for the exotic and the unknown, as a useless endeavor and a distinctly self-annihilating mode.

"The walls of the palace surrounded him, his own desire burning him to ashes, he screamed for a mercy that he had so seldom had the kindness to give."

The tome descends in submission to outline the effects of his rebellion and megalomania, employment by closing walls and consuming flames. His subsequent shrieks for leniency because he alone deprived others underlining the justice retribution aspect of Gothic which he gets because of his pursuit of Eastern mastery. He portrays the palace as gradually closing in on him, which means that the paranoia, or the acts that stemmed from it, have caught up with Vathek.

This depiction of Vathek's fall can also be regarded as keeping to the Orientalist vision of the East as the domain of sin where the search for might results in individuals' perdition. The closing walls and the body consuming fire can be interpreted as an interlocutor with the thought that the East means entrapment, and the main character's aspirations are his epitaph. This is a manifestation of the Gothic Mode of the self being ensnared by the very passion which is in compliance with the west's paranoia about the east as a malicious entity.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is a way of explaining how the process of the collapse of the social self is linked to the encounters with the Otherness, which has been a prominent concern in the Western culture (Kristeva, 1982). An enlightening fantasia that closes with oppressive walls and consuming flames: this is the message of Vathek, which sees the search for Eastern knowledges as the annihilation of the self and the destruction of its integrity. According to Edward Said in Orientalism, the orient is constructed as a place of the spiritual and moral threat and the encounter with the Oriental knowledge results in the loss of self and personal honor (Said, 1978). In this respect, the cries for mercy which Vathek had previously denied to others are a parable of the fallacy of Western self-righteousness which has been depicted as collapsing together with Eastern spirituality as soon as the two worlds intermingled.

"Vathek only became a bolder commander in the hope of gaining this power, but the more he tried to close it in his hands, the further it eluded him. so, in the end, all he had left were the ashes of his illusions and the bitter truth that he was a fool to have put faith in fairy tales of the East."

These two phrases, namely power 'slipping through his fingers' and being left with 'ashes', portray futile attempts of Vathek. His understanding that he was 'a fool to believe in the promises of the East,' corresponds to the Orientalist portrayal of the East as the world of false hopes and vain rewards. This painting seems to inform us that the Mid Eastern power is an

unattainable goal which, if sought after and achieved, leads inevitably to confusion and its consequent end destruction.

This stereotype lies in the Orientalist principle according to which the East promises more than it delivers, as Oriental wisdom and Oriental power are forever beyond grasp. It is a striking vision of the inevitable: the pursuit of Oriental might is destructive, and Vathek's lost dreams are now only ashes. This is true since, according to the Gothic genre, the protagonist is destroyed by his lust and is in harmony with the West's concerns regarding the risks of communicating with the East.

Similarly, analysing Gothic literature, David Punter has found that one of the major concerns of the kind the theme of futility, where the quest for forbidden knowledge promises only disillusionment and destruction, is meant to castigate overweening aspiration (Punter 2014). In Vathek, the ashes of Vathek's dreams symbolically indicate the East as the ground of total/polite futility where the quest for power is a sure route to spiritual moral decay. Orientalism by Edward Said describes the creation of the East as a temptation and a dangerous place; anyone who gets acquainted with the Orient and with Oriental knowledge and power becomes corrupt and loses his morality and soul (Said, 1978). In this respect, Vathek's insight that he was "a fool to believe in the promises of the East" can be seen as a critique of the Orientalism of the West: such adventurous quests are shown to be a form of self-destruction.

The Exoticization of Eastern Landscapes

"The gardens of the palace were like nothing Vathek had ever seen: (this scene was painted with large expanses of greenery there were fountains that spouted pure water high into the air the smell of jasmine and incense pervaded the place, and musicians hidden somewhere performed distant, enchanting music)."

I think that the representation of the gardens right as "vast stretches of green", "there were fountains", "perfumed with the sweet and spicy smell of jasmine and incense" paints the Eastern world as a picture of eden. However, the otherworldly atmosphere of the scene points only to this beauty as something alien and maybe lethal, which is characteristic of the Orientalist attitude to the landscapes of Eastern countries as dangerously beautiful and equally mysterious and attractive. In Gothic, the familiar is made strange and there is a fascination of the East as a beautiful place that is, nevertheless, dangerous.

I consider the presentation of the Eastern landscape as beautiful yet perilous is the result of the Orientalist point of view that the Orient is a land of sex appeal, where the beauty conceals the vices (Sasso, 2020, Alkabani, 2020). The gardens in 'Vathek' represent a kind of intellect, which is very characteristic for the Oriental image a mixture of enticing interest and deadly danger.

In Orientalism, women and the Orient are depicted as a combination of an object of desire and fascination, and the unknown and therefore frightening (Pennington, 2020; Dardir, 2022). On this basis, the portrayal of the gardens as both aesthetically pleasing and 'alien' helps to perpetuate the stereotypical story of the East as a dark and exotic realm of essential otherness, even where that otherness is encased in a pretty exterior. Another theoretical assumption that can be applied to the gardens is Julia Kristeva's notion of 'the uncanny', which means making the familiar foreign or threatening (Kristeva, 1982). The attractiveness is in the opportunity to view the beauty of the gardens, but the ethereal ambiance is deadly. This duality represents the attraction and the fear toward the Orient or in general the unknown the other.

“Vathek fixed his stare ahead of him and saw the mountains of snow in the horizon and their upper parts wrapped in a veil of mystery that hoor was wrong to be unbarred.”

The ‘mountains that are far off and dimly seen’ are meant to signify the mystery of the east and it is therefore interpreted to mean that the east is dangerous. That these mountains contain things which “no man should ever seek” echoes the Gothic mode of taboo knowledge the acquisition of which is a fatal enterprise. This portrayal fixes the Eastern landscape to the idea of the Freudian uncanny fascinating, yet threatening due to what is repressed but known, what is secret but simultaneously prominent.

Similarly, the portrayal of the mountains as holding ‘secrets that no man should ever uncover’ is a clear representation of Orientalism for it enshrines the perception that the East is a region whose mysteries are destructive to anyone who wishes to unravel them (Irwin, 2006). Thus, in Vathek the mountains represent an oriental viewpoint which presupposes that what is concealed is always fascinating and potentially evil. The interest of the foregoing analysis of Gothic literature as managed by Stephen Arata is how the unknown or the unknown employs the antithesis of cultural difference and existential abuse of the East as the realm of ontological and authentic threat (Fergus, 2019). In this regard, the conjuring of mysteries and perils lurking in the mountains as a muse of this narrative, builds a pipeline of depicting the orient as a region of primordial and existential menace that warrants extermination.

The remaining two features the identification of the natural world as a direct object of fear and fascination, and the attribution of the sublime can also be captured within David Punter’s broad rubric of the Gothic (Punter, 2014). The appearance of the mountains is spectacular that is why they are fascinating, but their concealed nature is lethal. Such a split is typical of the Western attitude towards the East: the fascination is accompanied by fear.

“The rivers moved with a sort of languid, monotonous undulation that was new to him: their waters were richer, more intense than any he had known at home.”

The imagery of the rivers as having a ‘strange, almost hypnotic, rhythm’ and the waters being ‘darker and deeper’ is nothing other than the portrayal of the East as a mysterious place that hides many secrets, some of which may dangerous. Such imagery is symbolic of Gothic based on the general meaning of the term, ‘uncanny’, or ‘other’, where things that are normally familiar become repulsive. That the rivers are darker and deeper than what is to be found in all of Vathek’s own lands signifies that the East as a realm of otherness that reverses the known for the unknown and the familiar for the perilous. That the rivers are depicted as being blacker and deeper than anything in Vathek’s own countries is an Orientalist construction of the East as inherently Other, and the replacement of the familiar with the alien and the threatening (Said, 1978). The use of the rivers as a symbolic object in Vathek illustrates the show’s belief in the notion elaborating the East as a mysterious territory which, substituting the familiar with the unfamiliar, is alarming.

Another scholarly concept that fits into the here discussed handling of the rivers is Julia Kristeva’s description of the uncanny where the familiar is rendered strange and thereby menacing (Kristeva, 1982). The Rivers are beautiful this makes people want them however, the peculiar and incessant rhythm of the rivers makes them deadly. This is because the West has a love hate relationship with the East, as the objects of the exotic are simultaneously alluring and repulsive. According to David Punter the Gothic literature theme applied in the chase of the hidden depths whereby seeking for information often cause havoc is used to demonstrate the risks of hubris (Punter, 2014). Rivers in Vathek: As for symbolizing the East, the fact is that what is hidden beneath the water surface is the darkness and the price one has

to pay when acquiring more knowledge to be a wiser person: in this tale, the knowledge equals death.

“Drooping coconuts and palm trees swayed with the wind and their intense shadows that were more lifelike and moved independently of the objects that created them, making even the foreground haunted by spirits of time.”

That the palms are mentioned to have ‘long, sinuous shadows’ that appear to crawl as if endowed with a life of their own presents the Eastern physical environment as a realm of the supernatural, where the antiquities of the natural world are peopled by spirits. These images are gothic constructs of the haunting where past is always present and alive, and in a way, controlling the present. That the landscape is ‘alive through the spirits of anthropological ages’ meant that the East was an historical and supernatural region, beautiful but also perilous.

The words ‘long, sinuous shadows flexing like living’ show how, as per the Orientalist representation, the art and life of the Orient imply supernatural existence where even the palm trees have shadows that move all on their own, thus making the place beautiful but deadly. In *Vathek*, the palms represent the notion of Orientalist narratives that the East is the seat of the past which constantly impinges on the present in a spectral and dark manner.

Drawing on the work of David Punter, it becomes possible to note that the concept of the haunted topography in which history is alive, serves as a primary axis for analysing the Gothic’s concern with history and memory (Punter, 2014). In *Vathek* the palms symbolise the East as a region that has a rich historical past and is also dominated by supernatural forces hence being a region of beauty and death. It is also possible to see in the palms an application of Julia Kristeva’s concept where the mundane is made strange and eerie (Kristeva, 1982). The palms are beautiful to have but since they have another worldly appearance they are deadly or at least deadly to Lin, who represent the human element of the tale. This dualism corresponds to the West’s orientalism paradigm, which entails attraction and loathing.

“While Vathek roamed in the desert the ebon sea of sand seemed to merge with the dark blue heavens above so that the line between the two were a mere vain.”

The description of the desert as the ‘large/large’ that ‘goes on and on,’ as ‘endless’ and which ‘stretches out into infinity’ makes the aspects of the Eastern aesthetic landscape alienating and ominous in their beauty. As it becomes hot the horizon becomes tilted and one cannot know where the earth stopped and the sky started, this is a Gothic feature of terrible uncertainty between reality and mirage. Here the idea of the desert as an endless and undifferentiated plain means that the East must be a place deeply apart, where the familiar is replaced by the unfamiliar and the strange.

Describing the desert as an ‘eternal flat and endless surface’ that is devoid of any clear boundaries, where ‘the horizon is elusive and fades out to the horizon,’ the film replicates the Orientalist discursive construction of the East as a place of boundless and unrelatable terrains, of otherness replacing the known by the mysterious and the disturbing (Said, 1978). The desert of *Vathek* represents the Oriental as otherness as far as values two major principles of Orientalist discourse regarding Orientalism: Otherness is principally a matter of space, and Orientalist discourse is principally one of vision.

In his work about Gothic literature, Stephen Arata has pointed out that the Gothic often dichotomizes the theme of the ‘uncanny’ which lies in the boundary between the real and the illusory to interpret the social and existential other. In *Vathek*, the desert is a symbol of the East as a realm where clarity is exchanged for obscurity and comfort for the eerie this portrayal

reflects the European culture's dread of the unfamiliar. According to Julia Kristeva's theory of the 'uncanny', where an ordinary object is presented in a manner that makes it seem extraordinary and alien, a similar treatment can be applied to the portrayal of the desert. The beauty that is presented in the desert in a sense can bring great awe for the majesty of nature, but because of the endless amount of desert and the blurry line between the desert and sands, the desert becomes dangerous. This duality is due to the fact that the West is interested in the East as neither as familiar nor wholly other.

Relocating Gothic parameters within Orientalist tropes the study shows how the text employs fear, horror, and the supernatural to stage moral relativism as much as oriental Otherness as a region of innate sin and spiritual defilement. The research also looks at another level of settings in *Vathek*, how infernal halls, deserts and rivers create a stage, a socially charged one as well as a deadly one. This paper aims at shedding some light on the manner in which Eastern femininity is represented through the characters of Nouronihar and Carathis. Thus, analysing Gothic elements in the representation of oriental women we come to understand that they are depicted in sexualized manner and are viewed as being both seductive and deadly. Further, the study also presents a closer link between Gothic and Orientalist studies by showing in which way *Vathek* connects them instead of presenting them as completely separate fields. This paper also looks at how authority functions in the text and that makes literature to be a powerful tool that can either reflect socio political hierarchies or assist in upholding imperialism. In sum, the present investigation provides a complex view of how *Vathek* engages with Gothic and Orientalist tropes to mediate conceptions of culture and moral in the area, which expanding the debate in both fields.

Conclusion

This present study has also been able to show, paralleled by the descriptions of the specific passages, that Beckford employs motifs of Gothic in order to induce a sensation of horror, and at the same time reiterates Orientalist cliché, which portrays the Orient as a region of inherent sin and spiritual degradation. The locations in *Vathek* like the infernal halls of Eblis and the vast deserts, mysterious rivers, and so on are not the locales to the plot but serve as the construction of cultural and moral otherness, which can be linked with otherness that is being feared and threatened, which has become a theme associated with the East by the Western world. These landscapes are a gothic signifying system, and are not passive backdrops but part of the drama that symbolically reinforce and intensify the protagonist's ethical and religious degeneration.

Another example of Arabian Gothic That Beckford revealed is through the characterizations of Nouronihar and Carathis, which contributes to the aspect of Orientalism in the representation of Eastern women. These characters can be viewed as constructed in terms of the 'femme fatale', who figures as the dangerous and dubious seductress, which maintains the Western constructed perception of Eastern women as both desirable and potentially degrading. This study has therefore found that such depiction is not unique to the particular sequence but is part and parcel of a larger discourse that seeks to package and justify the cultural and moral differences in the West and the East using Gothic horror.

Besides, it has also shown how the realms of Gothic literature and Orientalism have always complemented each other in shaping and perpetuating the existing frameworks of knowledge. Thus, placing *Vathek* into the framework of both approaches, the present study aims to enrich the existing body of knowledge on the role of literary narratives as vessels for ideologies,

including imperialism and cultural subjugation. From what has been presented in the paper, it may be concluded that it is not only the novel that reproduces contemporary concerns and fears, but it also performs the role of their reproduction in representation of the East as the dangerous area in terms of moral and spiritual depravities.

In method of approach of this examination, it brings a critical and significant addition to Gothic and Orientalism analyses as it employs a complex and perceptive analysis of *Vathek*. This can only serve to stress the need to scrutinise the manner in which literature may represent and help to form cultural and moral sensibilities within the Western tradition with regard to the East. In line with this, the findings of the study imply that the investigation of similar cross overs in other literary texts may give rise to a better understanding of the residual colonial Gothic and Orientalist discursive formations. Such investigations might help expand knowledge of how these literary traditions remain relevant to modern concepts of cultural and moral 'otherness,' and how they can be reinscribed or resisted in the present.

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