

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

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Romantic Literature: Empire and Orientalism 5 Felicia Hemans

Hello everybody, as we come to the conclusion of the NPTEL course on the English Romantic writer 1798 to 1832 we have spent the last few sessions talking about Empire and Orientalism, we have looked at as a way of dealing with it romantic orientalism, we have looked at the individual authors Thomas De Quincey and George Gordon Lord Byron, we have made passing reference to several other authors of the themes, stereotypes, methods of representation that the Romantic orientalist texts such as the Turkish tales the in fact the confessions of an English opium eater, LaLa (0:49) and other texts demonstrate.

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Romantic Literature: Empire and Orientalism 5
Felicia Hemans



Today we turn to Felicia Hemans one of the poets of the period as we continue to explore Empire and Orientalism.

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In Felicia Hemans' 'The Traveller at the Source of the Nile' (1826), there is the triumphalism of the conqueror/discoverer :

Slide



Felicia Hemans is the traveller of the source of the Nile 1826, demonstrates and exhibits the triumphalism of the Conqueror of the European Conqueror and Discoverer, here coming up on your slide is an excerpt from Hemans's poem.

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In sunset's light, o'er Afric thrown,
A wanderer proudly stood
Beside the well-spring, deep and lone,
Of Egypt's awful flood;
The cradle of that mighty birth,
So long a hidden thing to earth!
He heard its life's first murmuring sound,
A low mysterious tone;
A music sought, but never found,
By kings and warriors gone;
He listen'd - and his heart beat high -
That was the song of victory!
The rapture of a conqueror's mood
Rush'd burning through his frame, -



In sunset's light or Africa throne, a wanderer proudly stood beside the wellspring, deep and lone of Egypt's awful flood the cradle of that mighty birth so long a hidden thing to earth, he heard its life's first murmuring sound hello mysterious tone a music soft but never found by (war) by kings and warriors gone, he listened and in his heart and his heart beat high that was a song of victory the rapture of a conquerors mood rushed burning through his frame, what Hemans doing here?

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Hemans here employs the classic trope of discovery – of the African lands, by the European.

However, in the process of mapping this triumphalist geography, which is characteristic of imperial discourse, she also presents another imperial trope: of the heroic European.

The discoverer is a national hero, he discovers other lands on behalf of his sovereign, and in the process also finds himself.

The Orient or Africa is the space where Europe finds itself, establishes its identity – as Edward Said argued, Europe cannot imagine its identity without this racial and cultural Other.



Hemans is employing the classic trope of discovery of African lands specifically in this case by the European the very idea of discovery presupposes a Discoverer and a discovery shall we say somebody was discovered and the very idea of discovery has been associated for a very long time with the English or European travellers, most famously discussed by Stephen Greenblatt by the Shakespeare scholar in marvellous possessions the wonder of the new world, we see as Greenblatt argues that the Europeans discovered within quotes America but the people who are in America Native Americans have always known they were there. So it is not that they discovered themselves they knew that they were living in this particular piece of land or they may not have known the extent of that land.

But the idea of discovery suggests that for the American continent history begins with the arrival of the European and that is the point that for many tropes of discovery that you see throughout triumphalist European writings history of Africa or Asia begins with the arrival of the European and the discovery of these lands by the Europeans. So this is actually prime fullest geography of the European who has gone out there discovered these bits of land, these people and has established himself his right by planting a flag or putting together a document.

However in the process of mapping this triumphalist geography which is characteristic of Imperial discourse, Hemans also presents another imperial trope of the heroic European, the discoverer is a national hero, he discovers other lands on behalf of a sovereign in the process he also finds himself, you need to keep this in mind for another reason this notion stereotype trope of the heroic European in Africa or interior Asia is precisely the one that will be reversed to such a devastating effect in the very well-known text heart of darkness by Joseph

Conrad the European in Conrad who goes out there to establish the outstation, the outpost the trading unit or whatever it might be is no longer a hero.

So this triumphalist geography that you see occurring through the European Romantic Age the English European age finds its literal and figurative opposite in the Conrad novels so I want you to keep that in mind as an inversion of the cannon from within the cannon itself. So to get back to the point I was making the Orient or Africa is a space where Europe finds itself, it establishes identity as Edward Said famously argued Europe cannot imagine its identity without the racial and cultural other.

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Continuing her stereotyping of the Other, Felicia Hemans describes the feminine spaces of the Moorish palace thus in *England and Spain* (1808):



Continuing a stereotyping of the other, Felicia Hemans describes the feminine spaces of the Moorish palace in *England and Spain* like this.

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Its fairy-palace and enchanted bowers;
There all Arabian fiction e'er could tell,
Of potent genii or of wizards spell.



Its fairy palaces and enchanted bowers they are all Arabian fiction e'er could tell, Of potent genii or of wizards spell.

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Diego Saglia points out that in poems such as Felicia Hemans' England and Spain (1808), the 'Moors and their royal palace are turned into the symbols of a historical tyranny that the Spaniards had to defeat in order to regain full territorial possession'




Diego Saglia points out that in poems such as Felicia Hemans' England and Spain the Moors and their royal palace are turned into the symbols of a historical tyranny that the Spaniards had to defeat in order to regain full territorial position that is the Arabs home or palace is symbolic of the degenerate Islamic culture of the tyrannical Arab world. So you have a stereotype of a building, of a home transformed into the stereotype of a civilization itself. So you associate the building with a civilization and you argue that this might look like a

glorious gorgeous palace to you but it is actually a prison, it is a prison because of the various horrible things that go on in there.

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Felicia Hemans' 'The Indian City' alters, partially the stereotype of the vulnerable native woman in the figure of Maimuna.

The Muslim woman protagonist of the poem is portrayed as an angry, vengeful Military leader.




Let us move to another Hemans poem the Indian City, the Indian city alters atleast partially the stereotype of the vulnerable native woman in the figure of Maimuna and here you have a martial Muslim woman, the Muslim woman protagonist of this poem is portrayed as an angry, vengeful and a military leader coming up on your slide a little excerpt from this particular text, it is a long narrative poem.

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She rose
Like a prophetess from dark repose!

And said – 'Not yet – not yet I weep,
Not yet my spirit shall sink or sleep,
Not till yon city, in ruins rent,
Be piled for its victim's monument.
– Cover his dust! bear it on before!
It shall visit those temple-gates once more.



She rose like a prophetess from dark repose and said not yet, not yet I weep, not yet my spirit shall sink or sleep, not till yon city, in ruins rent, we piled for its victims monument, cover his dust, bear it on before, it shall visit those temple gates once more, what happens is Maimuna's young son is killed when he goes for a walk and she attributes the killing to the local people there and she vows vengeance. So she turns upon the city and she collects various Arabs around her and they form a little military organization and they charge upon the city.

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The stereotype of the predatory, violent Muslim is in place, reduced to an animal imagery:

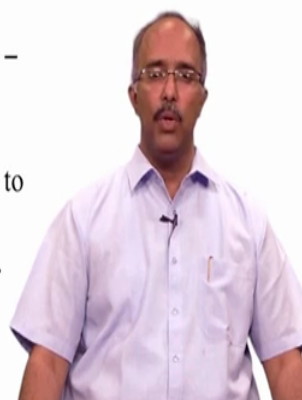


And this is the image of the violent the predatory Muslim, here is a description from Hemans poem and please note the description of the violent Muslim coming up on your slide.

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Hark! a wild sound of the desert's horn
Thro' the woods round the Indian city
borne,
A peal of the cymbal and tambour afar –
War! 'tis the gathering of Moslem war!

And the sword of the Moslem, let loose to
slay,
Like the panther leapt on its flying prey.



Hark! a wild sound of the desert's horn through the woods round the Indian City borne, a peal of the symbol and tambour afar tambour of course is this Turkish musical instrument, war it is the gathering of Muslim war and the sword of the Muslim let loose to slay like the Panther lip left on its flying prey, what is going on here? For those of you who are aware of the demonization of the Muslim in India, other parts of the world, post to 9/11 United States anywhere, the angry vengeful revengeful treacherous Muslim is a stereotype (())(7:42). So post 9/11 as you know as all of us have understood media representations are full of all Muslims as being versions of Osama bin Laden the traditional Islamic terrorists and all terrors are invariably Muslim.

The roots of those trope that that trope of the vengeful Muslim or the angry Muslim is far back in antiquity and goes back to the Crusades we are not going that far back in time but as you have just seen in the description of Felicia Hemans, the angry Muslim woman the vengeful Muslim woman is a category by herself and it is part of the stereotype of saying oh! the monstrous Muslim. So if you were to understand this as a precedent as an antecedent to present a context, you would have understood romantic orientalism fairly well, but that is not all.

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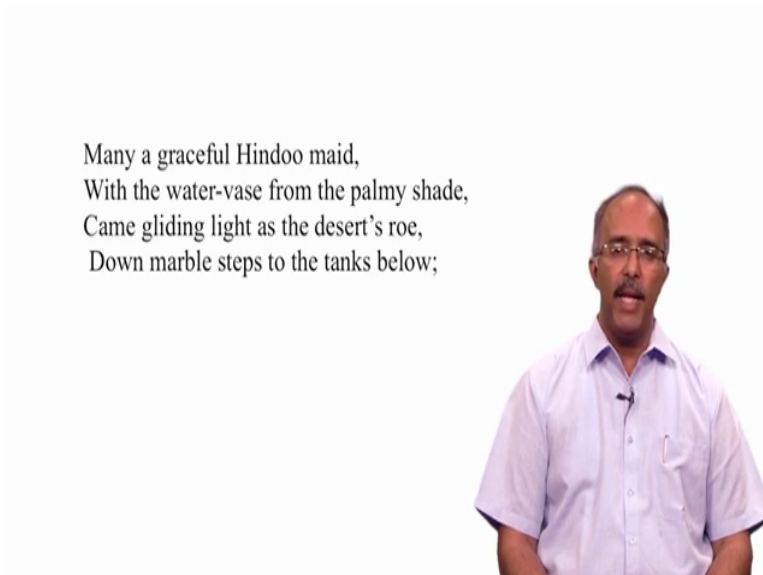
The natural picturesque of the non-European space is feminized through the presence of native women:



The natural picturesque of the European (con) European countries that is feminized to the presence of native women and I urge you to recall here I have mentioned this in passing William Hodges's representation of Native women, the docile, quiet meek and submissive Native women are acceptable Native women, not the martial one. So you see what Hemans is

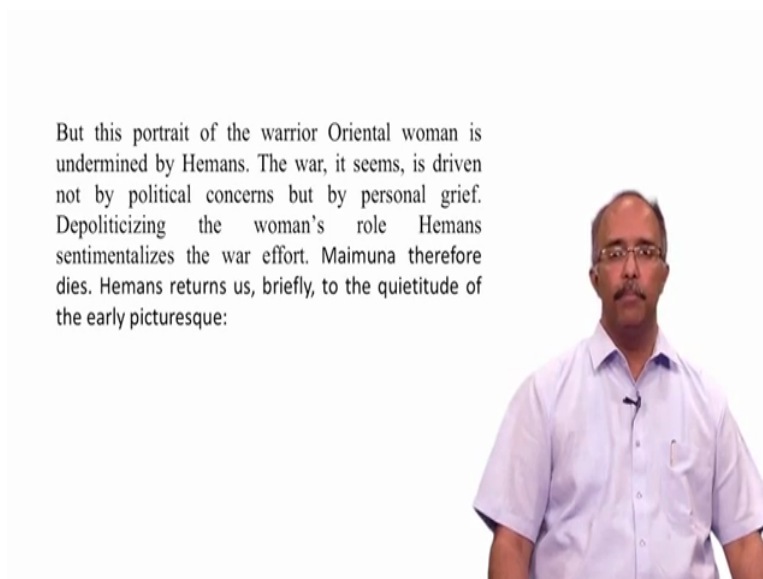
doing is very interesting, there is the image of the quiet Hindu woman and let me read it out for you.

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Many a graceful Hindu made with the water-vase from this palmy shade, came gliding light as the desert's roe, down marble steps to the tank below. So there is the quiet Hindu woman and then there is a martial Muslim woman, however it is not so simple Hemans as one of those anxious culturally anxious about the racial cultural other cannot afford to have a martial woman figure, she cannot retain this.

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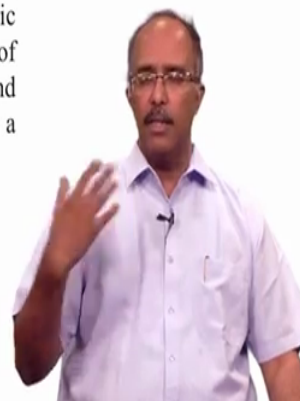
So what she does is to undermine the warrior oriental woman, how does she do this? She proposes that the war is not driven by political concerns but by a personal grief which is why I mentioned in at the beginning of this session that Maimuna's son has been killed and she vows vengeance, so it is not a political necessity that drives Maimuna to war, it is actually a deeply sentimental war effort and Hemans returns us briefly to the quietude of this and all of it is about the cradle song and things like that, this is how Hemans puts it.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:14)

She spoke, and her voice, in its dying tone
Had an echo of feelings that long seem'd flown.
She murmur'd a low sweet cradle song,
Strange midst the din of a warrior throng.



Hemans' poem opened with the *harmony* of the civic and the natural picturesque, after the battle, the city is ruined and the civic picturesque is literally wiped out as a result of inter-religious battles, between Hindus and Muslims. It effectively portrays the Indian as a cruel and battle-ridden landscape



She spoke, she refers to Maimuna and a wise in its dying tone had an echo of feelings that long seemed flown, she murmured a low sweet cradle song, strange midst the din of a warrior throng, Maimuna the quietude of the place, the child all of it (oppa) is the opening of the poem which says his harmony of the civic picturesque, after the battle the city is ruined so

what Hemans does is to transform the countryside the country the the inter landscape from a picturesque to a ruin and what is this cause of ruin?

The cause of ruin is a battle between the Hindus and the Muslims and some of you who are alerted to the construction of historical tensions between Hindus and Muslims studied so admirably by Gyan Pandey you will see this the rise of communalism in colonial India which is Gyan Pandey's work traces the history of representations where the European would say that oh! the Hindus and Muslims in India are always been at war with each other, have always been contesting for space, for national identity or whatever it might be.

In short you see every instance in such cases as a repetition of a historical kind, so as Gyan Pandey would argue there are convulsions of Hindu-Muslim encounters, they occur repeatedly. So this is Felicia Hemans writing in 1820s arguing pretty much the same thing that everywhere everywhere the Hindus and Muslims have been at odds with each other. So you cannot do much with this place because everything has been destroyed, when the poem ends this is how it ends.

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Palace and tower on that plain were left,
Like fallen trees by the lightning cleft;
The wild vine mantled the stately square,
The Rajah's throne was the serpent's lair,
And the jungle grass o'er the altar sprung—
This was the work of one deep heart wrung



I quote Palace and tower on that plane were left, like fallen trees by the lightning cleft, the wild wine the wild wine metal mantled the stately square, the Rajas throne was a Serpent's lair and the jungle grass o'er the altar sprung this was the work of one deep heart rung. So this set of lines from the conclusion of the poem upon your slide is an instance of what has happened to India itself, what Hemans does is to say that oh! these Hindus and Muslims can never get along, she stereotypes the confrontation as something that has always happened and

that everything about India is destroyed because these two do not get along, these two communities these two religions do not get along.

She in fact is actually putting together the clash of civilizations, thesis which Samuel Huntington would notoriously put forward in the 20th century and she is suggesting that India is ruined, it is always likely to be like this, its civilization will collapse because these two large communities the Hindus and the Muslims will not get along.

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Additional/Recommended Reading

Diego Saglia. 'The Exotic Politics of the Domestic: The Alhambra as Symbolic Place in British Romantic Poetry', *Comparative Literature Studies* 34.3 (1997): 197–225.



What we need to understand about such texts as Hemans says is that by stereotyping India as a place already divided by caste and religion you reduce the threat that India poses, you transform India into a decrepit civilization one or you transform it into a civilization which is on its last legs because of infighting and bad kings and I have not even explored that angle there is a whole range of stereotypes of the native Raja of the native King as dissolute, tyrannical, a wastrel and and other negative stereotypes.

All of which contributes to the overall romantic Orientalist trope of the East as a place where everything has either collapsed or is in the verge of collapse. This representation of the east as collapsing or already collapsed is an expression of a cultural anxiety that the East should never pose a threat to the European Empire itself, thank you.