

## Byron's Exile and the Poetics of Alienation: A Romantic Critique of Nationalism

Dr. Afroza Banu<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Md. Shahidul Islam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Afroza Banu, Associate Professor, Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia,  
Email: [afrozaiu83@gmail.com](mailto:afrozaiu83@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Md. Shahidul Islam, Associate Professor, Department of English, Lalon University of  
Science and Arts, Kushtia-7000, Email: [shahidphd92@gmail.com](mailto:shahidphd92@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*This qualitative study describes Lord Byron as a self-exile who made a deliberate literary and ideological protest against the limitations of national identity in addition to being in a state of personal disobedience. Lord Byron shows a Romantic critique of newly emerging nationalist discourses in the early nineteenth century. The aim of this study was to examine how following his poetry and specifically the Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Don Juan and some of the letters issued by Byron alienation and lack of a nation are all subjects with his poetry expressing an anti-nationalist sentiment that crosses beyond Eurocentric Romanticism archetypes. Based on the use of primary textual material, such as the poems and letters by Byron, this study worked through a close textual study and situational reading. Secondary sources included explanatory studies on Romanticism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Historical and philosophical contexts were also used to position the ideological exile of Byron in the context of general disillusionment of Romanticism. The empirical research was carried out using the textual analysis and archival research. It is found that Byron has created exile as a poetic and personal identity who defies the definite ways of nationhood by giving way to a pre-cosmopolitan vision of human morality and humanity (individual as well as universal). The work is part of the attempt to reconsider Romanticism outside of the domestic and re-contextualize Byron into a new environment of world intellectualism.*

**Keywords:** Byron, exile, Romanticism, nationalism cosmopolitanism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The poetic legacy of Lord Byron has been long bound up with the mythology of rebellion, individualism and romantic excess. Viewed through the prism of personal scandal and political passion, Byron self-exiled himself in 1816 in classical mode of departure into a life apart leaving at home scandal and disgrace. Yet a closer look at his exile from a literary and ideological standpoint shows that his exile was more of a poetic and philosophical address to the upsurge in the then unfamiliar notion of nationalism in Europe during the early nineteenth century than his own individual response to it. The fact that Byron was physically and symbolically dislocated in relation to Britain also enabled him to assemble a poetics of alienation that questions strict national delimitations and provides a cosmopolitan Romantic vision based on moral and ethical independence and human brotherhood (Leask, 2004; Franklin, 2010). Even though a great deal of critical emphasis has been thrown to rebellious man behind Byron and his political radicalism, less work has ever enquired into his exile as realization of some form of deliberate commentary on the formation of national identity in the Romantic era. Majority of the literature that are available are still restricted to Eurocentric context either regarding the Britishness of Byron or the influence of Byron in creating English Romanticism (McGann, 2002). This research paper fills the gap by examining the transnational imaginations of Byron, as well as his literature in opposition to the nationalists ideologies being one of the early thinkers of the anti-nationalists.

The relevance of this study is that it contributes to the current development of the field of global Romanticism, a field that aims at decentering national canonical literary traditions and contextualizing texts within Romanticism in extended geopolitical and philosophic contexts. This is how this study helps to give a detailed picture of a different aspect of Romantic alienation, not as the solipsistic withdrawal, but as the engagement with the whole human being in the global affairs, as the ethical and political agency on the cosmopolitan scale, an aspect that can be defined as proto-cosmopolitanism to Byron (Thompson, 2016). In addition, the paper revises Byron exilic consciousness as the key to his poetic breaking-through, sheds light upon the fact that alienation in itself is one of the forms of rebellion and condemnation. This has the ability to subvert nationalist recuperations of Romantic authors and new conversations about the identity, belonging, and international citizenship in literary works.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this study was to review Byron in a context of exile as a literary response to the concept of nationalism displaying a form of anti-nationalism within the global Romanticism environment early in history.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have provided different inferences about the exile of lord Byron, but there have been few approaches that place it in a different perspective as a conscious literary rebellion against nationalism. Studying the activities of Byron, Leask (2004) focuses attention on his interest in the East and how his journeys developed the orientalist version of Romanticism in him. Though Leask observes that Byron is ambivalent in his attitude toward nationalism, his argument puts most emphasis on otherness as a cultural category and fails to present exile as a critical approach to ideology. In the same regard, Franklin (2010) in Byron: A Literary Life describes that the exile of Byron came through being politically and personally disillusioned especially with the hypocrisy of British society. Nonetheless, Franklin does not make a direct correlation between Byron leaving and some sort of literary

response in general to nationalism or the cosmopolitan consequences of this move. McGann (2002) examines Byron as a subverter of Romantic ideals and conventions. But he concerns himself with aesthetic subversion not with consistent ideological renouncement of the national identity. In *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, Bone (1995) typifies Byrons self-fashioning as confounding the definition of nation and even suggesting an anti-nationalist tone, without expounding on the same much. In its turn, Thompson (2016) is closer to a global Romantic than Fouz-Hernandez because it implies that Byron being exiled breaks Eurocentric discourses. As indispensable as it is, the exile in the analysis of Thompson is handled thematically, which fails to recognize the possible political stimulus to the situation. Roe (2005) provides a comparison because he contrasts the detachment of Byron with English nationalism of Leigh Hunt. He reads the politics of Byron not as ideological but as personal and in so doing arouses a lesser criticism of how involved Byron was in the overall politics of his surroundings.

In *Romanticism and the Politics of Displacement*, Bainbridge (1995) views exile as an important mode of writing Romantics and acknowledges the status of Byron in such tradition. But she ends up instrumentalizing alienation as a concept more and more as an existential or narrative concept than as a means of anti-nationalistic discourse. Fulford and Kitson (1998) consider the influence of travel writings of Byron on the issue of Romantic-era colonialism with particular regard to his stand on imperialist aggression. However, the very idea of nationalism is rather unexplored in their work. According to Chatterjee (2012), the study of Romantic nationalism is more extensive as she recognizes an ambivalence concerning national loyalties of Byron, but she fails to discuss the possible ideological rejection of the nationalist structure in Byron. Saglia (2000) is also centered on Byron and his travel in the Mediterranean region, and the detachment is identified as regional cosmopolitanism and the location of the poet. Though the work by Saglia can be helpful in the process of recontextualization of geographical dislocation of Byron, it fails to relate this lack of attachment with an overall criterium against nationalism. In a similar fashion, Cronin (2015) reflects on the Byronic hero as an agent of transgressive alienation, viewing resistance mainly through the psychological and symbolic characteristics instead of political ones. Sisman (2013) juxtaposes the solitary exile of Byron and nationalist Romanticism of Wordsworth, suggesting the contrast, though, not explicitly explaining this opposition as the conceptualization of the literary critique of the national identity is deeply rooted in the literary language.

Although the scope of inquiries into the exile, cosmopolitanism, and alienation in the Romantics in general, and Byron in particular, is rather wide, there is still a matter of missing interpretative and contextualizational gaps of the Byron self-imposed exile as a matter of ideological defiance with regard to the new discourses of nationalism. Much of the literature that already exists relates exile as a biographical or stylistic impulse, paying much attention to the personal scandals of Byron, aesthetic innovation, or the psychological depth associated with him. Even as the study of global Romanticism has become ever-more vibrant, Byronic termini in early anti-imperialist thinking have been done little by way of theory, outside an orientalist or imperial context. This research is seeking to fill that gap by locating the alienation of Byron as not solely of personal withdrawing, and as a poem or an ethical standpoint towards nationalism, and re-defining exile as an intellectual and imaginative location of political critique. It thereby revises Byron as proto-cosmopolitan writer, whose exile in letters provided a counter-discourse to the logic of nationhood at the beginning of Romantic Era.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

This qualitative study has the textual and contextual study methodology that explores how Lord Byron exiled himself to be a literary and ideology critique of nationalism within the world system of Romanticism. The study is based on close reading of some chosen primary texts, among which are *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*, *letters* and journals of Byron. Such readings were applied to find repetitive themes of exile, alienation, statelessness and cosmopolitan identity. The use of irony, satire and self-invention by Byron were closely studied to see how the writer builds the concept of poetic alienation as the position in opposition to the strict views of the national identity. Along with textual interpretation, the research method used historical-contextual analysis to contextualize the writing of Byron within the socio-political context of early nineteenth century, involving especially nationalism emersion, post-Napoleonic politics of Europe and Romantic disillusionment. The theoretical background was based on important theories of Romanticism literature, nationalism theory and cosmopolitanism and points at Leask (2004), McGann (2002) and Thompson (2016). The triangulation of themes is articulated and confirmed by secondary materials, such as literary criticism, historical and philosophical writings on nationalism along with their interdisciplinary rigor. The information was retrieved by archival means and library research, including the consideration of not only well-known books about Byron but also of less-researched ones. Keeping the Eurocentric assumptions of the Romantic studies in critical lens, the study highlighted the transnational and global aspects of the Byron poetics.

#### V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

This paper discovers that the self-imposed exile of Byron was more of a reaction to both personal scandal and political apathy but a premeditated piece of poetic and political protest against the budding nationalist ideologies of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. By applying micro-textual approaches to reading *Childe Harold s Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan*, and some of *Byrons letters*, the poetry of alienation that Byron writes is revealed the form of cosmopolitan protest, the Romantic discontentment with nationalism as a kind of philosophical autonomy and the refusal of identification with the nation-state. In order to build on the concept of exile, Byron has first created an exiled character, the Byronic hero, whose nature is to be out of touch with nation, tradition and home. In the first canto of *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*, he says: "He had no country, none he knew or own'd" (I.13). The line is common of the speaker as he fashions himself a man beyond national loyalty hinting at what can be called voluntary stateless-ness. This conflict with the part of a national writer is highlighted in identification of Byron with Harold as a kind of exile that wanders.

Not that Byron does not express in his letters as well as poetry, his distaste of Britain. In a note to Thomas Moore (1816) he states: "I leave England without regret, I shall return to it without pleasure" (March 25, 1816). This feeling of emotional and political dismissal is reflected further with *Don Juan*, who derides British hypocrisy and jingoism in the book: "What men call gallantry, and gods adultery / Is much more common where the climate's sultry" (Canto I, stanza 63). In this case, Byron resorts to satire in order to reveal moral paradoxes of imperial colonialist and nationalist ideologies. In the poetics of Byron alienation is the instrument of criticism. He tends to set identity not as an acquired commodity on the basis of nationality, but as a chosen principle against the nationality. In *Childe Harold Canto III*, written during exile at Lake Geneva he writes: "I have not loved the world, nor the world me" (III.113). This confession is an act of outside-statement, and intentional alienation. It is a response to the affective and political displacement which was going on according to Bainbridge (1995) as Romantic.

Byron interaction with other cultures is not a way of affirming the ownership of the colonial power, but the decentralizing of the European dominance. In *Don Juan*, he satirizes the British chauvinism through comparing with delicate and unimpeachable human life in foreign countries. As such, the meeting between Juan and Haidee in the second canto is not only characterized by delicacy and vulnerability between both lovers but also makes it more difficult to portray imperialism of the East. According to what he writes: "Her eyes were black and lustrous as the night" (II.111), Byron, on the contrary, includes but invites an aesthetic approbation which resists Orientalist caricature. His private letters also prove his ideological distancing from national identity. Writing from Venice 1819 he writes: "I have no wish to return to England, I am where I ought to be, in a place whose people at least know how to live and feel" (Letter to Hobhouse, September 1819). This quote signifies how Byron adopts cultural cosmopolitanism preferring the association with affective communities rather than belonging to a nation.

The poetic voice of Byron frequently stresses the disappearing and changes, but not persistence and foundation. Then in the fourth book of *Childe Harold* he bemoans: "Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow / Such as Creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now" (IV.178). This transcendent meditation on nature represents some kind of longing to get rid of temporal and national limits. The ocean takes the form of a symbol gaining fluidity of identity, unrestricted by the geopolitical boundary. In *Don Juan Canto III*, in one of his most critical passages, Byron mocks Congress of Vienna and the retrograde nationalism: "There's not a law of God or man runs counter / To all the statutes of the realm / But what you may find a precedent for" (III.30). His contempt of legalistic nationalism shows even a more fundamental criticism of the way in which law and nations do the work of hegemony in the name of order.

By contrast to Wordsworth or Scott, whose poetry is highly nationalistic, Byron always pulls back in order to avoid a patriotic explanation. Byron went into self-exile as Franklin (2010) observes: "less an escape from scandal than a statement of imaginative freedom." The latter can be seen in his appropriation of the Mediterranean cultures as ethics of another landscape. In *Childe Harold II* he mentions Greece as a nation of noble ruin: "Ancient of days! August Athena! Where / Where are thy men of might?" (II.73). In this case, the nostalgia of a pre-national past is opposed to the homogenizing element of the European nationalism. Byron is also critical in his approach to nationalism where he brings out the irony within it and in the *Don Juan Canto XI*, he has written: "I want a hero: an uncommon want, / When every year and month sends forth a new one" (XI.1). This satirical air explodes the nationalist hero concept, displaying how these kinds of characters can be created out of thin air. Byron exploits poetic irony so that it interferes with the authenticity that people have come to treat with Romantic nationalism (McGann 2002).

Additionally, the body of Byron turns into an exile itself. In letters he terms himself as "a citizen of the world" (Letter to Murray, 1820), echoing Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. His last trip to Greece where he is killed fighting as a patriot was romanticized at least. Nevertheless, this paper does not represent the deed of Byron as nationalist heroism but rather his last show of cosmopolitan brotherhood not to a nation but to a people against imperial domination. These retrospective thoughts upon the folly of national honor are expressed by him in *Don Juan Canto VII*: "What is the end of Fame? 'tis but to fill / A certain portion of uncertain paper" (VII.5). This denial of glory or national feelings repeats his scepticism about patriotic values that are handed down.

As Thompson (2016) notes, Byron poetics challenges the opposition of homeland and exile through the formation of the space of critique that is not rooted in one specific place. It can be seen by *Childe Harold Canto IV* in which he writes: "I live not in myself, but I



become / Portion of that around me” (IV.175). Here, Byron expresses a kind of Romantic cosmopolitanism that depends on the idea of immersion and empathy instead of a concept of national loyalty. The alienation of Byron finally develops into the creative power. According to Roe, Byron poetry exile is not a vacuum but an area of extreme creation (Roe, 2005). The dislocation opens up the possibility of reimagining of identity that is beyond borders. Existing interpretations of the Byronic hero as solipsistic are rendered difficult to sustain where the hero is instead interpreted as ethically detached and anti-nationalist. Lastly, the poetic and personal mergence of Byron in exile reflects what Chattersjee (2012) calls as a Romantic distrust of the nation as myth. The alienation experienced by Byron is not existentialist but ideological and his writings run counter to the claims of territory by the empire as well as to the moral certainties of nationalism.

## VI. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

The findings of the present study very much confirm that the self-exile of Lord Byron was a thought-through political move of literary rebellion against the emerging nationalist rhetoric of the early nineteenth century rather than the spontaneous act of personal escapade away of his individual scandal. Unlike the critics like Franklin (2010), who consider exile of Byron as part of his political and personal disappointment, the research reveals that Byron has reinterpreted meaning of exile to offer an ethical and poetic discourse with which he has criticized national identity and defined his vision on cosmopolitan Romanticism. Those systematic disidentifications of Byron with the British nation-state, which are expressed both in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, support the statement by Thompson (2016) who claims that in fact, Byron develops his own concept of nation-state “mobile, transnational space of critique.” His poetic voice, particularly in passages like “He had no country, none he knew or own’d” (*Childe Harold I.13*), other members of his family is seen as a voluntary identity, which erases the perceptions of fixed homeland, which is similar to Bainbridge (1995) idea of Romantic displacement as a kind of affective and political alienation.

This renouncement of national loyalty is not just expressed in the literature created by Byron but also in his personal correspondence instead of showing any love to Britain and liking to alien cultural surroundings. Then, as a case in point, his Venice commentator has said (and there can be but few who have not said it also) that the Jupiters were originally an armed band, “I have no wish to return to England”, resonates Enlightenment cosmopolitanist ideals, since Chatterjee (2012) locates the ideology of Byron within the context of a Romantic disenchantment with the nation as myth. However, contrary to Chatterjee, whose allusion to Byron as an ideological critic of nationalism is isolated, here, it is established as the key factor in his poetic. The article also expounds the views of Fulford and Kitson (1998), which discuss the fact that Byron repudiates the violence of colonialism, by discussing the constraints on Orientalist discourse imposed by the sympathetic treatment of non-European women in Byron such as Haidee (*Don Juan II.111*), extensive role played by Orientalist discourse in undercutting British imperial superiority. Such reading is unlike Leask (2004) who focuses on Romantic orientalism of Byron but fails to contextualise it in a specific anti-nationalist polemic.

McGann (2002) focuses on the irony that Byron has used to put Romantic conventions to test. It may be seen in Byron who satirizes the nationalist heroes in the *Don Juan XI.1*: I want a hero: an uncommon want/ which satirizes the creation of patriotic mythology. Where McGann discusses the ways of subversion through aesthetics, this work relates the issue of irony to the political stand of Byron against nationalism in the sense that an ideological dimension is introduced to McGann. Significantly, Roe (2005) posits that Byron's exile serves as a locus of radical innovation, a claim substantiated by the analysis of Byron's letters and poems as vehicles of global identity, as demonstrated in this study. Byron

was a poet who rediscovered himself by traveling in the other lands as much as he was a poet of national insularity (as he had once been a poet of Romantic self-absorption). Despite Bone (1995) alluding to the complication of national identity on the part of Byron, he fails to transform it into an ideological challenge. It is that gap, and its absence, that this paper seeks to address, by discussing Byronic alienation not as a sign of individual displacement or ontological angst, but part of a congruent poetic philosophy, one that criticized nationalistic versions of individual and community identity formation.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the exile of Byron was not accidental and apolitical. Instead, it appears as a primary lyrical and political position as a result of which the cultural essentialism, nationalism, and imperialism of the hegemonic discourses are challenged by Byron. His literary and personal alienation is the kind of cosmopolitan opposition that can make him fit much better in a global Romantic context that is beyond the Euro-centric interpretation. The analysis of Byron as a poet is not only a redefining of his identity as a poet but also an intellectual contribution to the wider front of global Romanticism in explaining the ethical and political context of Romantic exile.

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