

## Robert Byron: An Iconoclast on the Road to Appreciation of Islamic Architecture

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**Abstract:** England in 1933 was a claustrophobic, desolate, and enervating country generating a generation of discontents like Robert Byron. Unsatisfied with the received ideas of Western aestheticism, he aligned himself with Islamic aestheticism and departed for Oxiana to study Islamic architecture resulting in his *The Road to Oxiana*, a masterpiece in travel writing. This study contends that Byron is an iconoclast who undermines the rhetoric of colonialism and imperialism in his travel book. To elaborate its analysis, the study employs Holland's and Huggan's idea of countertravel writing along with psychoanalysis. It argues that Byron's countertravel writing in his narrative manifests in two ways. Firstly, when he critiques the reductive picture of Islamic architecture by exalting and appreciating its beauty, especially its Kufic inscriptions. Secondly, when he extols Gohar Shad, a renowned patroness of architecture by acquitting her of the orientalist charge and acknowledging her contributions to Islamic architecture. In doing so, he reveals that she is his 'anima' and archetypal mother.

**Keywords:** anima, architecture, countertravel writing, Gohar Shad, orientalism

### 1. Introduction

Robert Byron belongs to the interwar cultural milieu when travel writing witnessed its heyday thanks to the contribution of great literary talents such as D.H. Lawrence, W.H. Auden, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. In this era, British travel writers were disillusioned by the horrors of the First World War, skeptical about the cultural credentials of the West, and felt exhausted and entrapped in its claustrophobic space. Thus, they were restless to escape their humdrum existence, critique their inherited belief system, and find new alliances elsewhere (Dodd 1982: 128). Byron in this cultural environment aligned himself with the world of Islamic aestheticism and viewed his journey as a spiritual necessity (Coyle 1998: 14). He recorded his rhapsodic response to Islamic architecture in his letter to his friend: "I am at last on the track of a really fine and untouched aesthetic theme" (Fleming 2022: ch. 15). His passionate fascination with Islamic art confirms Felski's thesis: aesthetic experiences can break old bonds and build new ones (2020: 27). Byron's love of Islamic architecture was morally rewarding; it separated him from aesthetically insensitive colonial travel writers whose treks were characterized by practical and imperial agendas (Duff 2005:97), and rendered him "ahead of his time in his appreciation of Islamic culture" (Rennison 2009:68). It was the photo of the

lonely and melancholy Kabus tower in the northeast of the Caspian Sea that stirred up his interest in Islamic architecture (Byron 1994: 261). Felski notes photos can spark a sense of astonishment and surprise in their beholder (2020: 57). For Byron, the origin of Islamic architectural ingenuity went back to Oxiana, a region between Turkestan and Afghanistan, flourishing in the Timurid period in the fifteenth century when its art-loving Muslim rulers brought about an artistic renaissance (1994: 105-107) and commanded the construction of many mosques, madrasas, mausoleums, shrines, and tomb towers decorated with graceful Kufic calligraphy, arabesque designs, and colorful tiles and mosaics in Herat, Samarkand, and various cities in Persia. This is why the title of his travel book is *The Road to Oxiana*. To his chagrin, he could not visit his desired geography due to the ubiquitous presence of Russian imperial soldiers in the North of Afghanistan suspecting British subjects of espionage and map-making (333 & 369).

During his voyage, Byron wakes up to the fact that Islam is a civilizing power and the wellspring of aesthetic sensibility since it has never ceased encouraging its followers to build mosques, colleges, and structures beneficial to public use (like hospices and caravanserais) after its establishment. An authentic saying from the prophet of Islam illustrates the importance of constructing mosques in Islam: "Whosoever builds a mosque seeking Allah's pleasure, Allah will build him a similar place in paradise." (Al-Bukhari 1997: vol. 1 p.287). One should seek the roots of Islamic aestheticism and architecture in the Glorious Quran in which God introduces himself as the best [*ahssan*] of creators (Pickthall 2003:244) and the adorer [*zienna*] of heavens (p. 369). It is worth noting that in the Arabic language, '*Ahssan*' is derived from '*Husn*' which means beauty which is synonymous with '*zeienna*' (Alzahrani 2021:60). Also, the Quranic allusion to King Solomon's crystal palace (by which he impresses Queen Sheba) provides an ideal model for Islamic architecture (Gonzalez 2001: 31).

Naturally, Islam with its emphasis on beauty, art, and architecture works like alchemy and transforms the plain Turkish nomads of Central Asia into passionate patrons and promoters of arts and architecture. Thanks to journeying through the world of Islamic beauty, Byron learned to distance himself from the barbarity of colonialism and became the champion of Islamic art and culture (Coyle 1998: 9). According to Musgrove, "The traveling subject is by no means the self-assured colonist' rather, he is a subject who is poised to split and unravel' " (1999: 39). In his travelogue, Byron in his encounter with Islamic aestheticism acted like a follower of phenomenology because he practiced epoche by bracketing and suspending his prejudgement and prejudice. In doing so, he was nurtured by the sublimity and beauty of its architecture. Chatwin compares him with John Ruskin (1994: xiv). If Ruskin immortalized medieval Venetian Gothic architecture, Byron immortalized Islamic architecture. Indeed, it is not illogical to argue that Robert Byron's travelogue exemplifies countertravel writing, to borrow Hollan and Huggan, since Byron pits his travel text against the prevailing colonial and orientalist traditions of travel writing (1998: 64). Accordingly, the current study seeks to bring to light those moments in which Robert Byron detaches himself from the colonial and orientalist mindset. To elaborate on its discussion, the current study

will concentrate on his two unorthodox responses: firstly, by defending and appreciating Islamic architecture. Secondly, by extolling and acknowledging Gohard Shad, a Muslim patroness of art and architecture who functions as an anima for him in his travel book.

## 2. Byron's life and works

A distant relative of Lord Byron, Robert Byron was born into a middle-class family in Middlesex in 1905. He attended Eton and Oxford, obtaining his degree in history. Then, travel, art, and architecture became his consuming passions. Hence, he traveled with his friends to Italy, Hungary, and Greece soon after his graduation. The account of this journey appeared in his *Europe in Looking the Glass: Reflections of a Motor Drive From Grimsby to Athens* (1926). Then, he made a journey to Greece and visited Mount Athos, a politically independent site, where Orthodox monks lead a life based on ancient customs that have been unchanged for centuries. The narrative of his encounter with this monastic space culminated in *The Station: Travels to the Holy Mountain of Greece* (1928). His next destination was India where he studied Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian architecture. In India, he critically evaluated the inefficient administration of India by his countrymen resulting in *An Essay on India* (1931). After that, he departed for Russia and Tibet. For Byron, Russia demonstrated the cult of machines, and he naturally was critical of its modern architecture but he delighted in the pre-industrial humanistic architecture of Tibet. He recorded this voyage in *First Russia, Then Tibet* (1933). Byron's passion, sympathy, love, talent, and connoisseurship in art and architecture reached their zenith in his *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) regarded as the best travel book of the twentieth century. It inspired eminent travel writers like Bruce Chatwin, William Dalrymple, and Jason Elliot. Robert Byron died when he was only thirty-five years old in 1941 while he was departing for Egypt. A Nazi submarine on the coast of Scotland attacked and sank the ship which he was aboard.

## 3. The Summary of *The Road to Oxiana* and its reception

Enframed as a quest myth, Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* relates his eleven-month journey with Christopher Sykes, his friend, from England to Afghanistan in 1933. At the outset, they travel from England to Venice. The palaces of Venice do not attract him, designating one of them as a "stifling labyrinth" (1994: 3). Their next destination is Cyprus. Then they head to Palestine. They briefly sojourn in Jerusalem where Byron like an ethnographer touches on its Arab residents' dress and appearance: "Here comes the desert Arab by his robe of gold-worked camel hair, the Arab woman with their tattooed face and her dress embroidered, bearing a basket on her head and a priest of Islam with trim[med] beard" (18-19). He also points to the Holy Dome. Then, they depart for Lebanon where Baalbek captures his attention. Thus he enthuses about it: "Baalbek is the triumph of stone [...]; it dwarfs New York into ants [...]. Drinks its high air. Stroke the stone with your soft hand. Say goodbye to the West if you own it. And then turn to the East" (36-37). Then they return to Syria. Byron in Syria attests to Syrians' anti-imperial sentiments and validates the legitimacy of their perspective. Despite their critical stance,

Syrians, in Byron's eyes, are polite to Europeans, and "this makes Damascus a pleasant city from the visitor's point of view" (40). Then from Syria, they depart for Iraq.

Afterward, they head for Persia. To Byron's disappointment, the police arrest his travel companion for espionage and he travels without his companion. In Persia, Byron visits different cities to study, photograph, and immerse himself in eminent Islamic monuments. His encounter with them results in his warm and rapturous response. In Byron's estimation, they are superior to their Western counterparts. For instance, he notes: "The Brickwork of [Sultan Cheilabi] monument [...] excels the best work of those masters of European brick: the Dutch " (p. 252). A travel writer with a romantic inclination, Byron never tires of celebrating natural beauties in the course of his journey: "The sun was warm, the larks were singing up above. Behind us rose the misty Alpine blue of the wooded Elburz" (p. 262). It would be false to think he does not exercise social criticism in his contact zone. As an individual traveler, Byron in Persia reproaches rampant modernization (151) and authorities' paranoia and xenophobia concerning a travel writer like him who is a lover of Islamic arts (p. 169). Byron's biting criticism targets the Westerners, especially the British as well. He ridicules their sense of superiority and incivility (169). In the same vein, it would be fallacious to think that his account lacks humor in his contact with his travelees. Indeed the strength of Byron's travelogue lies in its superb comic dialogues (Jarvis 2023:8). In Persia, he dwells on politics, history, culture, archeological excavations, nomads, trades like lambing, horsemanship, ethnic tribes, dervishes, pilgrims, the hospitality of local people, wind towers in its desert cities, and the underground water system in arid lands.

Byron's and Christopher's next destination is Afghanistan wherein they travel by car, lorry, and horse encountering many hardships. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not diminish Byron's love for his desired geography and its residents. For him, 'rose-loving' Afghans (369) are "erect and manly" (335) and people "without an inferiority complex" (104). Impressed by Afghanistan's landscape and cultural beauty, he wishes to stay in its northern cities for a long time (330). He feels Afghanistan "has hypnotized him" under the influence of reading Marcel Proust during his journey (310). He lauds Afghanistan for preserving the heritage of Islamic architecture and holding the key to its mysteries. Since his chief object of interest is Islamic architecture, pre-Islamic architecture does not interest him in Afghanistan; he, thus, equates it with "monstrous antiquity [which] bruises the eyes" (327). Similarly, he views Buddha statues as unfresh art (362). He sympathizes with the insipid feelings of Early Arab conquerors of Afghanistan after beholding the statues in the seventh century: "One can imagine how the Arabs felt about [these] idols in the valley [of Bamiyan]" (ibid.). Indeed, for Byron, Afghanistan does not embody the violent Islamic world most frequently pictured by Victorian travel writers.

Byron's itinerary in Afghanistan includes Herat, Moghor, Bala Murghab, Maimena, Ankhooi, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Khanabad, Bamiyan, Shibar, Charikar, Kabul, and Ghazni. Besides his fascination with Islamic architecture, he presents nuggets of information about a variety of ethnic groups (319), partridge

fight (316) and wrestling matches (320), nomadic women, and their agility in dismantling their tents (324-325), diseases (333), the rivalry of Russia and Britain in Afghanistan (348), the modernization (161), the expulsion of Jews due to monopolizing lambskin trade and excluding Afghan merchants from its profitable trade (321-322), local people's hospitality (315), elaborate local dishes (317), caravanserais (319), local music (320), and its poets, painters, historians, historical personages, and architects (108-109). It would be erroneous to think that Byron presents only the rosy picture of his destination. He is critical of political nationalism (329) and he at times compares his destination to Ireland suggesting its underdevelopment (308) which indicates his Anglo-centrism albeit mildly. However, his attitude is generally respectful and appreciative.

It took three years for Byron to write and polish his travelogue. In composing his travel book, Byron abandoned a coherent and chronologically flowing narration in favor of structuring it according to his travel diaries "written in white heat, in the back of lorries and trucks, in front of monuments" (Youngs 2010:56) giving it fragmentary flavor and a sense of immediacy and spontaneity (Knox 2003: 359 & Hopkins 2003:159). His experimental innovation ironically resulted in its poor reception and sale since mainstream British readers preferred rigidly chronological and linear accounts pandering to their prejudices and presuppositions (Blanton 2020: 462). Nevertheless, travel scholars and travel writers attested to its literary power. For Bruce Chatwin, Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* is a work of genius with readable prose that carries its readers to the pitch of excitement (1994: p.xiv). Likewise, William Dalrymple (2003) admires the influential prose of his book: "He is the writer of breath-taking prose whose sensuous and chiseled beauty has cast its spell on English travel writing ever since".

#### 4. Review of literature

Three groups of critics have examined Byron's *The Road to Oxiana*. The first group associates him with colonialism, orientalism, and imperialism while the second group disassociates him from these negative ties by acknowledging his humanism and tolerant and sympathetic perspectives toward his encountered people and culture. Unlike previous groups, the third group has confined themselves to this question: Is Byron's work a modernist travelogue or not?

Mark Graham (2010) reads his travel book in light of Lisle's two coined terms: a colonial traveler and a cosmopolitan traveler. He compares him with travel writers like Jasen Elliot, Åsne Seierstad, and Ann Jones. For him, Byron is a colonial travel writer like Åsne Seierstad, the author of *The Book Seller of Kabul*, since he romanticizes Afghanistan, deplores its present condition, and lambasts its people for not following Western ways (38-39). Graham contends that Byron lacks a compassionate vision, empathy, and ethics of caring and dialogue (55-56). In the same vein, Whitfield in passing associates Byron with British imperialism and compares him with Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* due to his cynicism about his travelees (2011: 259). Likewise, Ghaderi and Habibzadeh view Byron's travel book as an orientalist text for feminizing Persians, devaluing their

religious beliefs, and adopting an imperial gaze while he surveys potential archeological sites (2019: 122-123).

In contradiction with the abovementioned critics, other scholars evaluate Byron's travel book in a positive light. Booth remarks that Byron's response to his encountered people differs from the British's attitude toward the colonized people; if the British are intolerant towards the colonized people, he is receptive and respectful (2002:167). This is why an anonymous reviewer in *Nature* notes that in "Afghanistan and among its people Mr. Byron is much more at home" (1937: 788). Likewise, Bissell states that Byron celebrates the emotional independence of Afghanistan instead of denigrating his encountered territory (2004:105). Dismissing Byron's link to orientalism and imperialism, Blanton believes Byron is an example of a liberal humanist-cum-aesthete who opens himself to Islamic art and acknowledges and appreciates its beauty and overwhelming power (2020:454).

Other scholars do not devote their attention to Byron's ideological affiliation and his attitude toward his travelers. Instead, they argue whether Byron's travel book is a modernist book or not. For Fussell, *The Road to Oxiana* is a modernist work like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* due to its obsession with frontiers and fragmentations as well as the arrangement of its contents by the collage style resulting from the incorporation of a wide variety of materials such as news clippings, letters, diary entries, public notices, official documents, and comic dialogues in his travel book (1980: 108). In contrast with Fussell, Pfister believes, Byron's travelogue is not a modernist text despite employing formal devices of modernism; however, it contributes to the process of modernization in travel writing (1999:467) by showcasing the features of high modernism: literary self-consciousness, the disruption of generic traditions and discourses, its openness to heterogeneity, and the demonstration of the paradox of modernism, that is, seeking to settle the crisis of modernization by fleeing from the modern world (487).

The problem with these studies lies in their lack of nuanced attention to the bigger picture of Byron's travel book, that is, his passionate love for Islamic aestheticism and architecture and the way he employs Islamic architecture to critique the Western world and emphasize the superiority of the Islamic world. Moreover, these scholars are silent about the character of Gohar Shad, a Muslim patroness of architecture and art, to whom Byron is attracted. Also, Byron's scholars have not paid enough attention to his critical attitude toward Western travelers whom he encounters in the course of his journey. One can attribute their critical negligence to their Western background making them less interested in Islamic culture and a female Muslim patron. To fill this research vacuum, the present study attempts to address these critically unexplored terrains.

## 5. Theoretical framework

The current study will capitalize on Holland's and Huggan's idea of countertravel writing which they introduce in their *Tourists with Typewriters*. According to them, this type of travel writing is relativistic in its orientation, reverses the imperialistic gaze, and directs its sympathies toward local people. It refrains from fostering the myths of Western power by virtue of critiquing its imperial legacy and presenting

an alternative picture of encountered terrains (2000: 47-48). To advance their argument, they study travelogues written by postcolonial travel writers: Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe*, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Small Place*, and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. Holland's and Huggan's critical perspective is relevant to this study even though Byron does not hail from a postcolonial nation. Like the aforementioned travel writers, Byron denounces British racism, deeply sympathizes with Gohar Shad, explores a pre-colonial world, highlights the destructive impact of British colonialism on Islamic architecture, and seeks to present an alternative and respectful picture of the Islamic world unpolluted by prejudice, colonial fantasy, and exoticism.

To complement and enrich Holland's and Huggan's insight, the present study will benefit from the ideas of Freud, Jung, and postcolonial scholars as well.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6. 1. Defending and appreciating Islamic architecture**

As a salient sign of Islamic identity, ethos, and technical ingenuity, Islamic architecture appears as a conspicuous component in travel accounts that concentrate on Islamic terrains. In the nineteenth century when the imperial West perceived itself as the propagator of progress in allegedly benighted lands of Islam, its travelers began to discredit the uniqueness, beauty, and centrality of Islamic architecture. For them, their encountered architecture was emblematic of the stagnant and ruined East that needed to be revived and renewed. (Andreeva 2010:118). In their eyes, it was viable only by adopting their advanced architectural techniques. Richard Burton's travelogue lavishly illustrates this sense of cultural superiority.

Before making a pilgrimage as a disguised Muslim to Mecca and Medina forbidden to non-Muslims in the nineteenth century, Burton sojourns in Cairo and writes about its mosques. It merits attention that Cairo prides itself on being the mother of the world and epicenter of Islamic art and architecture. However, Burton is blind to her architectural marvels. Instead, he presents a depressing and desolate image of her mosques: "Modern mosques must be visited to see Egyptian architecture in its decline and fall" (Vol.1, 1874: 95-96). Burton also does not shy away from associating the minarets of a mosque in Cairo with the spindles of hags: "They look like spindles of crouching crones" (96). His simile conjures up the alleged vision of the feminine Orient. Undoubtedly, he employs Islamic architecture to reinforce the supposed decrepitude of the Islamic world: "Not a line is straight, the tall dead walls of the mosques slope over their massy buttresses, and the thin minarets seem about to fall across your path" (87). Burton's description of Islamic architecture in Egypt reflects his implicit petition for the introduction of Western architectural models on the soil of Islam because Islamic architecture for him is tantamount to "architectural lawlessness" (88). According to Omer (2021), Burton plays a prominent part in perpetuating major misconceptions about Islamic architecture.

In contradiction to Burton, when Byron writes about the architecture in the land of Islam, the pleasant breeze of sympathy and love drifts in his narrative

because Islamic architecture overwhelms him with joy and ecstasy. As an ardent lover, Byron not only combats inherited racist vantage points about Islamic architecture but also fiercely opposes any attempt aimed at degrading its architectural charms. The following incident points to his partiality for the Islamic art. While in Kabul, Byron meets a British colonel who inquires about his career. Byron replies that he studies “Mohammedan architecture” (1994: 376). As soon as he finds that Byron is an Islamic art scholar, the colonel –as the voice of British colonialism– arrogantly claims that he knows the fundamental problem of Islamic architecture since he has seen a great deal of its architecture in Egypt, Palestine, and Persia (ibid.). Curious to know, Byron asks his opinion: “‘The whole thing is phallic,’ he uttered in a *ghoulish* whisper” (emphasis added, 377). To insinuate his anger, Byron associates the colonel with the ‘ghoul’ by employing synecdoche when he compares his voice to a “ghoulish whisper”. Etymologically, ‘ghoul’ is derived from ‘*ghūl*’ which is an Arabic word. According to Arabs’ folk belief, ghouls are devilish and deceitful entities that are bent on harming and deluding travelers (Al-Rawi 2009:47). Hence, akin to ghouls in the Arabic folk tales, the colonel wants to delude a keen traveler like Byron by misinterpreting and eroticizing Islamic architecture. In the eyes of Byron, the colonel here perpetuates Freudian vulgarism by decontextualizing the architecture of Islam, especially mosques. Freud rejects such a vulgar interpretation because he believes “any correct interpretation must be mediated by the context” (Wright 2003: 25). By ‘phallic’, the colonel most likely means minarets. In the context of Islam, they are interpreted as symbolic gates from heaven to the earth due to their resemblance to the Koranic letter ‘*alif*’ which is vertically straight and points to heaven (Lintz 2013: 87). Moreover, they sociologically signify the presence of mosques and practically provide an elevated space for muezzins to make *adhan*, a call for the prayer, albeit before the emergence of loudspeakers (Campo 2009: 474). Thus, the colonel’s interpretation is inaccurate, revealing his pathological perspective. Startled by his vulgar comment, Byron subtly satirizes the colonel’s bizarre and irrelevant idea in the context of Afghanistan “I am surprised at first to note the influence of Freud on the North-West Frontier” (ibid.). What offends Byron is that Colonel Porter finds ugly meanings in the majestic and beautiful mosques of Islam. Byron’s critical stance is in sync with Fanon’s observation: colonialism tends to oversimplify the cultures of colonized nations (Leitch 2018:1361).

Byron attributes the colonel’s misunderstanding to his neurotic psyche since he projects the same vulgar image on the world as well: “Soon I have discovered that for Colonel Porter the universe is phallic” (1994: 377). For Byron, this way of conceptualizing the world is endemic in British colonialism. This explains why he describes the act of stealing the doors of Sultan Masoud’s and Ibrahim’s tombs by the British army as rape even though they justify their robbery by claiming that the gates belong to Hindu Temples. Nonetheless, Byron strongly dismisses it because the carvings of the doors bear testimony to their connections to Islamic art: “Their rape has never even been justified by a published description of the carvings, which are unique in Mohammadan art” (373).



In the eyes of Byron, the British presence in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century conjures images of savagery and barbarity. Far from developing its infrastructures and introducing the supposed blessings of the modern world, they have demolished splendid mosques in Herat that have resisted the ravages of times for centuries: "In any case, the most glorious productions of Mohammadan architecture in the fifteenth century, having survived four centuries, are now razed to the ground under the eyes, and with the approval, of the English Commissioners" (115). Their main motive for this cultural insensitivity and devastation was the defense of their rights against the potential invasion of imperial Russia (Dupree 1980:318). In fact, Byron exposes the narcissism of colonialism and the hollowness of the British civilizing mission through Islamic architecture. This is why Byron equates British presence in the Orient with artistic blight (Knox 2003:192). According to Byron, the savagery of the British in colonized zones springs from their sense of cultural superiority and arrogance as well as their intolerance and misunderstanding of native people's customs and manners (1931: 27 &138). Here Byron's point of view is akin to Amitav Gosh's *In an Antique Land* in which he testifies to the destructive nature of Western imperialism.

Unlike Colonel Porter, the aesthetically attuned eyes of Byron marvel at the beauty of Islamic architecture and strive to capture it and share its elegance and power with his readership. One architectural element that enamors Byron in the course of his journeys is the Kufic inscriptions carved on monuments and mosques. Arab conquerors introduced the Kufic script into present-day Persia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia in the seventh century (Baimatowa 2013: 379). By virtue of their geometrically appealing shape, graceful and slender Kufic letters are ideally suited to be cut on baked bricks which are widely utilized in the architecture of the Timurid and Seljuk eras. Schimmel observes that "minarets in Central Asia and Afghanistan show the earliest form of this [Kufic] style" (1990: 11). She also adds that architects in the Timurid period make the best of '*shatranj*' [rectangular] Kufi in mosques, tombs, and shrines (ibid.) since kufi is "the liturgic script par excellence" (4). Byron refers to the word 'Kufic' sixteen times in his travel book which suggests its importance and aesthetic appeal to him. Seeking to do justice to the seminal character of Kufic letters, he meticulously refers to their various application of Kufic texts in a variety of colors in different parts of mosques such as niches, tiles, panels, arches, minarets, cornices, friezes, and domes. James Knox, Byron's biographer, states that Byron during his journey desperately feels the absence of a Kufic epigraphist in his journey to assist him so that he can fully appreciate and understand its visual beauty (2003: 292). However, the epigraphist's absence does not deter him from perceiving the beauty and ornamental necessity of Kufic carvings. His description of Kabous Tower, the object of his quest, attests to his affirmative response: "The lateral embrace of the Kufic rings gives the building its character, a character unlike anything else in architecture" (1994: 256). Indeed, Byron means that without ornamental Kufic carvings, the tower will lose its uniqueness and visual appeal. Here by "rings", Byron refers to Kufic inscriptions inscribed around the tower.

In contrast to Richard Burton's orientalist gaze that embodies Islamic architecture as a senile old woman to accentuate its supposed inertia and stagnation, Byron deploys the image of Kufic carvings to exorcise the unsightly phantom of orientalism from his Islamic destination as the following description demonstrates: "Kufic [inscriptions in the Islamic monument] are taller and more graceful, standing out from a maze of pattern like soldiers from a crowd" (372). Here Byron envisions Kufic letters as erect and lofty soldiers with imposing physiques who exude an air of self-confidence, energy, and power among the ordinary folk. This explains why he describes Kufic inscriptions as "bold" three times in his travel narrative (157, 253, 372). Equally, this explains why he describes the tower in which the Kufic inscriptions are employed as the "heroic monument" (266). In doing so, Byron not only draws attention to the pride, vitality, and magnetism of Islamic architecture but also questions the validity of the orientalist picture of Islamic art. If a colonial agent makes "every effort to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture" (Fanon 1963: 236), Byron through Kufic calligraphy leaves no stone unturned to highlight the radiant glory of Islamic architecture and liberates his readers from their colonialist perceptions. Interestingly, Baimatowa maintains that Kufic letters in the Early-Islamic architecture of Khurasan are conceived as "the nimbus [radiant light] of glory" (2013: 383).

Felski believes that attending to the aesthetic qualities of an artistic work can bring into play a sense of delight, insight, and rapture (2020:14). For Byron, Kufic lettering provides this aesthetic joy, and his sheer delight at beholding a unique example of Kufic carvings in the shrine of Sultan Mahmoud in Ghazni at the end of his journey testifies to it:

Kufic lettering has a functional beauty; regarded as pure design, its extraordinary emphasis seems in itself a form of oratory, a transposition of speech from the audible to the visible. I have enjoyed many examples of it in the last ten months. But none can compare with these tall rhythmic ciphers [referring to dots in Arabic script], involved with dancing foliage (1994: 374).

Byron in the above passage reflects the Islamic belief about architecture when he states that 'Kufic lettering has a functional beauty'. According to Omer, in Islamic architecture form and function complement and support each other; therefore, "the form divorced from the function is inconsequential" (2008:485). The chief role of Islamic calligraphy is to exalt Islam and exhibit His divine beauty. Kufic inscription achieves this artistic object through its visual eloquence. In other words, it creates a picturesque oratory by mingling vision and sound. One should not forget that Islam places great emphasis on oratory and eloquence; as the prophet of Islam asserts: "I have been given the keys of eloquent speech" (qtd. In Jones 2012: 1). Kermani maintains that in Islamic aestheticism hearing and seeing often overlap; thus, vision can be perceived as an acoustic process (2015:300). Indeed, Byron like a Muslim aesthete, detects these beautiful melodies (*'lahn tayyib'* or *'sawt hasan'*) in Kufic inscriptions. For Byron, this visual eloquence is enhanced by the tactile imagery of the Kufic letters. With their cursive posture and geometric forms, the letters written in Kufic style produce an impression of graceful motion which is in

harmony with dancing flowers and ornamental plants around them adding to its elegance.

Felski remarks that in the encounter with the objects of beauty “affinity can be registered suddenly or slowly and attraction can be instantaneous or built over time” (2020:59). In the case of Byron, his affinity and attraction are instantaneous but the passage of time augments and consolidates them. This is why Byron states that he has enjoyed the beauty of Kufic inscriptions for ten months. Byron’s sense of aesthetic happiness at the end of his journey chimes with Plato’s observation: “It is something beautiful and wondrous that awaits the lover of beauty at the end of the path” (qtd. In Kermani 2015: 344). One can appreciate Byron’s affirmative response toward the power of Kufic carvings if one reads Bruce Chatwin’s preface in Byron’s *The Road To Oxiana* in which he refers to the healing effect of Kufic inscription. Chatwin, who travels in Byron’s footsteps in Afghanistan, notes how an insane and restless woman gets cured after kissing Kufic inscriptions that are carved on the same tomb: “She kissed the [Kufic] inscriptions as if each marble letter contain the cure for her sickness” (1994: xix). No doubt, these inscriptions are verses from the Glorious Quran which is regarded as healing [*Shifa*] by Muslims.

Blanton believes that Byron destabilizes the orientalist worldview in his dealing with Islamic architecture (2020:454) and this takes place when he puts into question the orientalist perspective of a Frenchman. While visiting a splendid mosque in Persia, Byron overhears the Frenchman claiming that “Islam! Iran! Asia! [are] mystic, languid, [and] inscrutable!!” (277). Before quoting the Frenchman’s fallacious statement, Byron depicts him as an unsavory character with linguistic dexterity: “A sound of chanting was heard from the sanctuary, where a single tiny figure could be seen abased in the dimness, at the foot of its lustered mihrab” (ibid). In the above sentence, Byron deliberately employs words such as ‘tiny’, ‘abased’, and ‘dimness’ which have negative connotations to imply that the Frenchman is unsuitable for commenting on Islamic architecture because he is entrapped in the darkness and dimness of his biased mind. Byron deliberately juxtaposes the lustrous quality of the mihrab (the symbol of Islam) located above with the dimness of the Frenchman located below to suggest how unenlightened he is about the glory and light of Islamic architecture.

The Frenchman’s orientalist mindset is strikingly similar to his countryman, Elie Faure whose essentialist opinion Edward Said records in his *Orientalism*. Faure believes the Orientals are essentially lethargic, mystical, and illogical (1979: 253). Dissatisfied with these simplistic dichotomies, Byron parodies the Frenchman’s vulgar orientalism. Byron believes that the Frenchman suffers from cultural confusion since he mistakes the opium den in Marseilles for the mosque: “[For] the silly fool as if it [mosque] was an opium den in Marseilles” (1994: 277). In doing so, Byron undermines the pillars of orientalism by equating the lethargy of opium smokers in the opium den with France, the supposed capital of Western culture and refinement.

Moreover, Byron takes issue with the alleged irrationality and unintelligibility of intricate designs, arabesques, and inscriptions in Islamic

architecture as suggested by the Frenchman when he associates Islam (by extension Islamic architecture) with 'inscrutable' and 'mystic'. For Byron, the art in Islamic architecture finds its way out of shadows [by] deploying intelligence and insisting on structure, proportion, and superlative quality: "A work of art forces its way out of the shadows, insisting on structure and proportion, on the impress of superlative quality, and on the intellect behind them" (ibid.). This is why he notes that the shrine of Bayazid demonstrates "intricacy without incoherence" (155). In other words, Byron assumes that Islamic architecture is rational and intelligible; it is founded on a logical and systematic plan. But a Frenchman whose eyes and mind are blocked with the smokescreen of orientalism cannot perceive its harmony, balance, proportion, and logic. Encountering a shallow traveler like the Frenchman convinces Byron that some travelers travel blind (234).

## 6.2. Redeeming Gohar Shad from orientalist representation

Robert Byron also displays his countertravel writing through his passionate, insightful, and sympathetic portraiture of Gohar Shad, the renowned patroness of architecture in the Timurid period. He knows that Gohar Shad has not received enough attention in English travelogues before him. Therefore, he single-handedly decides to bolster and salvage her sterling prominence: "It remains for us to crown [her name] with the laurels of a Medici." (qtd. In Knox 2003: 238). He refers to her sixty-six times, bearing testimony to his curiosity and attraction towards her. Coyle notes that Byron is swept away by Gohar Shad's character and career; thus, he writes seventeen pages about her (1998:17). In Byron's travelogue, Gohar Shad is neither a licentious temptress nor a wounded caged bird in the harem as a Muslim woman is normally represented in Western travel accounts. Interestingly, Byron is aware of such a denigrative depiction of Muslim women which he identifies in Clavijo's travel account. Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador, visited the court of Emir Timur (Tamerlane) in Samarkand in the early 15th century. He registered his observations and impressions in his travel diary: *Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy González de Clavijo to the court of Timour, at Samarcand, A.D. 1403–6*. In his travel book, Clavijo claims that Emir Timur's wives and daughters-in-law throw "parties independently of their husbands, at which their chief amusement is to make the men drunk" (qtd. in Byron 1994: 291). Clavijo here represents his encountered female courtiers as lascivious hedonists who relieve their ennui with drunken orgies. Interestingly, his description strikingly resembles the erotic opening tale of *The Arabian Nights*. Philips contends that medieval Western travelers adopt Orientalist attitudes towards Asian people (2014:147). If one acknowledges the veracity of Clavijo's words, then Gohar Shad, Emir Timur's daughter-of-in-law, could be presented as a wanton woman, but Byron does not enforce this erotic rhetoric. Instead, he acquits Gohar Shar of such pernicious and groundless generalization. For Byron, she is a versatile personality (1994:290) who spends her life in the pursuit of "serious tastes" (291); that is, constructing splendid mosques and madrasas.

In the eyes of Byron, Gohar Shad is not the putative organizer of orgies, but the incarnation of piety and chastity. To prove his view, he draws on Mohan Lal's

travel book. A Kashmiri traveler, Lal accompanied Alexander Burns, the agent of East India Company, as his secretary and interpreter on his journey to Afghanistan and Central Asia in the early nineteenth century. In Herat, Lal encounters the architectural masterpieces built with Gohar Shad's patronship. Impressed by Gohar Shad's exemplary character and service to Islam, he waxes eloquent about her. For Lal, Gohar Shad is an 'incomparable lady' who devotes her life to Islamic ideals and teaching the Quran (1846:237). Then, Lal relates an anecdote in which Gohar Shad arranges the weddings of her two hundred maids with theology students when she realizes one of her maids has fallen in love with one of the theology students while she and her maids visit the mosque which is being built within a madrassa. Lal states that Gohar Shad seeks to preserve chastity in the community by celebrating their marriages (238). Byron not only reproduces Lal's words but also adds that Gohar Shad provides newly married couples with pensions, accommodation, and clothes so that they can pursue their studies without interruption (1994: 292). By incorporating Lal's words and his non-Western gaze into the texture of his narrative, Byron takes distance from his Western cultural baggage, bestows on his text an Islamic ambience and renders it intertextual, authentic, unorientalist, and refreshing.

Unsatisfied with the historical description, Byron pays a visit to her mausoleum where her tombstone is. There, he records her epitaph: "[Gohar Shad] is the Bilkis [Queen Shaba] of the Time" (296). In doing so, Byron enriches his travel text in terms of Quranic and literary allusions. Referring to the 'Bilkis' gives a Quranic touch to his travel book because the Quran points to her in sura *Al-Naml*. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the encounter between Bilkis and the Prophet Solomon provides Muslim artists with a plausible reason to develop their architectural idioms and identity. Thus, comparing Gohar Shad with her is apt. Given the literary allusion, Schimmel observes that Bilkis in Islamic literature is the "model of a rich, intelligent ruler and [thus] panegyric poems are fond of mentioning her" (1997:57). Byron, who is cognizant of Gohar Shad's cardinal role in politics, maintains that she is a powerful politician on par with Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria (290). Therefore, Bilkis is an accurate personage to convey not only Gohar Shad's contribution to Islamic architecture but also her politically influential life and charismatic personality. Indeed, Byron looks at Gohar Shad from an Islamic angle, enabling him to transcend the Orientalist vision.

### 6.3. Gohar Shad: Byron's anima

Considering Gohar Shad's importance to Byron, she stands for him as a Jungian anima, the spiritual side of one's self, in the quest for human totality. She was a creator of wonderfully spiritual art that embodies what is missing in his own culture, "a culture whose joint worth is now in dispute; for his journey to the East seeks "ideas, if those of the West be inadequate which can guide the world and to know in the language of [his] own senses, in whom and what the world consists" (qtd. in Booth 2002:166). This is the meaning of his pilgrimage to Oxiana which Sykes calls "a quest for the origins of Islamic art" (ibid. 167).

Jung maintains that “the anima of a man has a strongly historical character” (1989: 286) and it kindles the sense of interest and curiosity in men (187). As a result, while in Persia Byron is impatient and curious to visit Gohar Shad’s majestic mosque: “I shall have found out more about Gohar Shad” (1994: 154). Mention of this aim is a leitmotif throughout the narrative. However, there is a serious impediment to his desire. As a non-Muslim, Byron is not permitted to enter her mosque’s court. Despite potential risks and perils, Byron disguises himself as a local native and manages to go inside her mosque (287) where he immerses himself in its architectural delights. Jung observes that the lady “for whom the knight [by extension travel writer] performs the heroic deed is the personification of the anima” (1964:187). Observing her mosque, Byron concludes that the mosque of Gohar Shad is “the greatest monument of the [Timurid] period” (282). Byron also believes that her mosque displays “the finest example of color in the whole Mohammedan architecture” (274). Indeed, as the mediator between the ego and the inner world, anima enables ego/self [Byron] to pour out his inner emotions (Dobie 2012:65). This is why Byron employs the superlative adjectives “greatest” and “finest” when he describes her mosque. Carr maintains that in Byron’s travelogue, one encounters the “emotions that are rarely in evidence in other travel writings” (2002:85). Here Byron’s aesthetic appreciation of Gohar Shad’s Mosque (which functions as a metonymy for her) testifies to Byron’s immense pleasure in being close to his anima. Indeed, he finds the female and aesthetic side of his psyche, expressed in a glorious spirituality.

When Byron first enters “the great court of the Mosque of Gohar Shad, he experiences the “opposite” of the “opium dens of Marseilles”:

The message of a work of art forced its way out of the shadows, insisting on structure and proportion, on the impress of superlative quality, and the intellect behind them [...]. Glimpses of arabesques so liquid, so delicately interlaced, that they looked no more like a mosaic than a carpet looks like stitches; [...] of vaults and friezes alive with calligraphy.[...]. An epoch, the Timurids, Gohar Shah herself, and her architect Kavan-ad-Din, ruled the night (1994:278 ).

When he returns in daylight to view the dome of Gohar Shad’s mausoleum he sees the work as a symbolic source of light: “I hastened down the dark bazaar, found the dome [...] and was greeted, on coming out into the court, by such a fanfare of color and light that I stopped for a moment, half-blinded. It was as if someone had switched on another sun” (280).

In placing the story of Gohar Shad as a “personality” in the history of the Timurid Renaissance, Byron demonstrates sensitivity towards the filial relationship between Gohar Shad and Baisanghor, her son. Byron notes that “Baisanghor [who is a consummate calligrapher] celebrates his mother’s munificence with an inscription [that] explains the [eternal] joy felt by Islam in writing on the face of architecture” (1994:281). Baisanghor inscribes these words in eloquent and elegant Arabic on his mother’s mosque: “Her highness, the sun of heaven of chastity, Gohar Shad with the pious intent of fulfilling and accomplishing her hopes in Allah, from her private property with a desire to please Allah builds this great Masjidi Jami”

(qtd. in P. M. Sykes 1910: 1146-1147). If Baisanghor celebrates his mother's architecture with his enviable calligraphy, Byron textually exalts and glorifies Gohar Shad by highlighting her sterling moral virtue and her invaluable contribution to Islamic architecture and community which is rare in the tradition of English travel writing.

Jung in his book: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* writes about his journey to Ravenna, a city in Italy, in 1913. There he visits his mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Like Gohar Shad, Galla Placidia was the patron of constructing churches in ancient Rome. Jung appreciates her unique character and marvels at the beauty of her constructed church (1989: 284-285). Then, standing near Galla Placidia's tomb (which symbolizes the unconscious realm), Jung states that Galla Placidia is his anima: "Her tomb seemed to me a final legacy through which I might reach her personality [...]. She was a suitable embodiment for my anima" (86). Like Jung, Byron visits the mausoleum of Gohar Shad. Unlike Jung, Byron does not directly articulate that Gohar Shad is his anima. Instead, Byron unconsciously reveals the fact that Gohar Shad is the anima by registering his sad farewell:

It is cold. The sun has gone down [...]. The luster has gone from the blue towers [of Gohar Shad's mausoleum] and the green corn. The magic scent has gone. The summer has gone, and the twilight brings back the cold and uncertainty. I must go. Goodbye, Gohar Shad and Baisanghor. Sleep on there under your dome [...]. Goodbye, Herat (1994:297).

At the narrative level, the above passage simply records Byron's sad departure from Herat and relates his last visit to Gohar Shad's mausoleum. However, the passage is unconsciously loaded. It provides a subtle insight into Robert Byron's unconscious response. He describes the site as a source of compensatory spiritual light. And now the text implicitly testifies that it is hard for Byron to tear himself away from his anima/archetypal mother, thus he expresses his separation from his object of desire through the words imbued with the implication of lack and deprivation: the loss of sun, summer, scent, and luster. Here, his sad farewell evokes the idea of the anxiety of separation. In this passage, Byron intuitively senses that being away from mother/anima means being away from a source of warmth, beauty, and light as well as fertility (symbolized by green corn). Thus, it would not be farfetched to assert that the travel writer at the unconscious level feels the security and warmth of the maternal womb (which is symbolized by Gohar Shad's mausoleum and its tower) while in Herat.

According to Jung the tower (which is a synecdoche for her mausoleum) stands for "the place of a maternal womb or a maternal figure" (1989: 224). Hence, Byron equates his separation from Gohar Shad's tomb/womb with twilight, coldness, and uncertainty. Indeed, Byron indirectly associates his departure with fear and insecurity. If the traveler is a hero/knight and his object of the quest is finding the lost mother/anima (Gibson & Faxon 1998:438), then Byron finds this lost object in the character of Gohar Shad who nurtures him with the warmth of architectural light. Significantly, however, while Jung finds his anima among the mosaics representing images from his own Christian religion, Byron finds his anima

among the architecture, mosaics, calligraphy, and history of Islam. His quest is an intercultural, anti-Orientalist quest for spiritual, and also communal, wholeness.

### **Conclusion**

In the eyes of postcolonial critics travel writing is inextricably interwoven with the machinations of orientalism and imperialism. Their suspicions are grounded on its role in gathering colonial knowledge, validating, and perpetuating unfounded myths about non-Western others, paving the path for the birth and persistence of undesired imperial hegemony. However, Holland and Huggan hold that countertravel writing undermines simplistic dichotomies endemic in travel writing. They locate this counter-imperial quality in travelogues written by postcolonial subjects such as Amitav Gosh, Jamaica Kincaid, and Caryl Phillips. Though Robert Byron is not a postcolonial subject like Gosh, Kincaid, and Phillips, his travel book registers their critical perspective. Byron's countertravel writing evinces itself when he dwells on Islamic architecture and Gohar Shad.

As a passionate lover of Islamic architecture, Byron is intolerant of the reductive picture of Islamic architecture. This is why he chastises an arrogant British colonel who interprets Islamic architecture in vulgar Freudian terms. For Byron, his inaccurate and erotic understanding of Islamic architecture is symptomatic of the savagery of British colonialism which is accountable for the destruction of historical mosques in Herat. He also lambasts the orientalist mindset of French tourists that equates Islamic architecture with unintelligibility and irrationality and Muslims with lethargy.

In visiting Islamic architecture, Byron perceives the centrality of Kufic inscriptions and calligraphy employed by Muslim architects, artists, and calligraphers to capture the divine beauty and instill God's love and messages. He envisions this style of calligraphy as proud, robust, and imposing soldiers among the masses to convey the confidence, charisma, and power of Islamic architecture. In Kufic inscriptions, Byron perceives visual oratory. This sensual combination overwhelms him with joy.

Finally, in contrast to previous Western travelers, Byron does not tarnish the profile of Muslim women by envisaging them as libertines or prisoners in harems. Instead, he sets the record straight on this issue. To do so, he takes Gohar Shad from the leaves of olden history and parades her distinguished contribution to Islamic architecture by patronizing the construction of majestic mosques, madrassas, and mausoleums. In Gohar Shad's charismatic personage and patronship of Islamic architecture, Byron finds his 'anima' or a mother who nurtures him with the abundant beauty of Islamic architecture in the course of his journey.



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