

Portrayal of Kashmir and Kashmiris in European Literature: A Study of Thomas Moore's *Laala Rookh*

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ABSTRACT

Cashmere (Kashmir) has remained the subject of discussion and debate out rightly because of its scenic beauty and conflict over centuries. In order to explore Kashmir, European travel writers to Kashmir have depicted the picture of Kashmir and Kashmiris in their travelogues in their own ways. Thomas Moore's Oriental romance *Laala Rookh* has been an influential source of inspiration for historians and travelers to discover Kashmir. Although, Moore as a poet was stimulated by the travelers like Francois Bernier (1620-1688) and George Forster (1754-1794) to portray the striking picture of Kashmir that in a way was an invitation for Europeans to Kashmir. Without visiting Kashmir, Moore fantasizes and romanticizes Kashmir as a tourist resort. It is surprising that Moore has nowhere mentioned anything about the people of Kashmir but has praised only its beauty. The paper attempts to uncover, how the Valley of Kashmir and Kashmiris is portrayed in the Western canon with reference to Moore's *Laala Rookh*.

Laala Rookh by Thomas Moore is an Oriental Romance composed of four poems with an enchanting imagery. Highly influenced by the Romantic poets especially Lord Byron, Thomas Moore in order to re-energize romanticism in his poetry, put on pedestal the people of the east (Kashmir) and came up with a long poem *Laala Rookh* way back in 1811, later published in 1817. The book of poems sold like hot cakes in Europe during that time and became an inspiration for painters, musicians, songsters etc. Being a poet, he has never travelled to Kashmir ever and had composed a poem which became a fascination for the future travelers of Europe to explore Kashmir. The story of the poem rounds about ritual procession of the daughter of Emperor Aurangzeb called Laala Rookh, supposed to marry a ruler of Bukhara and planned to celebrate nuptials in Kashmir. The bride is described as; ... "a princess described by the poets of her time as more beautiful than Leila, Shirine, Dewilde, or any of those heroines whose names and loves embellish the songs of Persia and Hindustan" (*Laala Rookh* 7).

Since times immemorial, Kashmir has remained a center of political doldrums and instability. It is not a recent phenomenon as it dates us back to the invasion of Akbar in the 16th century. After Mughuls, Kashmir turned out to be an easy attraction for European travelers and other invaders from Afghanistan and the Sub-Continent. When *Laala Rookh* was included in the literary arena, it became an academic discussion and paved the way for the tourists of the world to practically explore the Kashmir valley, till then only idealized by the poet with few exceptions through admired imagination collaging the mesmerizing scenes and beautiful imagery.

...Its temples and grottos, and fountain as clear
As the love-lighted eyes that hang over their wave?
Oh! It at sunset,-when warm o'er the Lake
Its splendor at parting a summer eve throws,
Like a bride, full of blushes, when ling 'ring to take...
(*Laala Rookh* 185)

Undoubtedly, the book may have remained an important tool of inspiration and encouragement for other writers to delineate most of their stories. But it in a way paved a way for other European travellers, who started to write travelogues on Kashmir and Kashmiris. Moore's depiction of Kashmir may have fascinated the Europeans to visit the wonderland only known through literature. Mridhu Rai in her book *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects* in this context says that:

Thomas Moore had never actually set eyes on either Kashmir or Kashmiris, but he was quite right: the fame of the beautiful valley had spread well beyond its mountain walls, evoked in countless travelogues and histories, and in the memoirs of vacating Europeans. His unobserved account slid easily into becoming banal stock-in-trade; a convenient substitute for thinking- based on actual observation- characteristic of many accounts of Kashmir produced by non- Kashmiris. (Rai 1)

The travelers who visited Kashmir were biased in their writings about the people of Kashmir after portraying their picture as mean creatures lacking logic and sanity without taking cognizance of the fact that they been reduced to commodities by the unscrupulous rulers from time to time. They even left no stone unturned by justifying that Kashmiris have been responsible for the entire muddle to their culture, environment and their surroundings. Thomas Moore joins the chorus of the travel writers without ever mentioning the plight of the common Kashmiris but merely focused on the beauty and landscape of Kashmir:

It was the hour of evening came
Upon the lake, serene and cool,
When day had his sultry flame
Behind the palms of BARAMOULE... (*Laala Rookh*
186)

Moore's *Laala Rookh* and the European travelogues created a discourse of their own by presenting the image of Kashmiris in a distorted way and praised Kashmir as the ultimate tourist destination. In this regard, As Edward Said says; "Orientalism offered itself as 'a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 2). They took little interest or hardly cared about the ground realities of Kashmiris but were totally obsessed with the natural beauty of Kashmir. By creating multiple negative discourses about Kashmiris, they wanted to create binaries between East/West, Superior/Inferior, Rich/ Poor, Cultured/ Uncultured etc. This is evident from K.I. McDonald, who believes that:

...Kashmiri is selfish, superstitious, ignorant, supple, supple, intriguing, dishonest and false: he has great ingenuity as a mechanic, and a decided genius for manufactures and commerce, but his transactions are always conducted in a fraudulent spirit, equaled only by the effrontery with which he faces detection. The vices of the Kashmirian I cannot help considering, however, as the effects of his political condition, rather than his nature...difficult to transform him into a very different being" (McDonald 2).

Thomas Moore depicts the image of Sultana Nurmahal (Also called Nurjahan, wife of Jahangir) as roses and fishes. He says:

Who in the moonlight and music thus sweetly may glide?
O'er the Lake of CASHMERE, with that one by his side!
If Woman can make the worst wilderness dear,
Think; think what a Heav'n she must make of CASHMERE
... (Laala Rookh 295)

Moore only imagines the beauty and the marriage ceremony of Sultana Nurmahal. It is not only in *Laala Rookh* but it is astonishing that the writings from other European travel writers had only two images of Kashmir and Kashmiris that was either to praise the natural beauty or to castigate the Kashmiri people in their writings. Depicting the valley as Heaven, it became a fodder for the European travelers to visit Kashmir. Later, these things helped them to scrutinize the local populace in Orientalist way, detrimental to the real identity of Kashmir. The Orientalist writers exposed the Orient through their own canon without providing any type of an opportunity to the Orient to reveal his true self. Edward Said says that "the Orient designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally. One could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood" (Said 31-32). The Orient came to be designated as 'Other', 'barbaric', 'uncivilized', 'un-cultured' etc. It provided an opportunity to the artists to manufacture novels, dramas, poetry, travelogues and fiction. Thomas Moore too managed to paint a picture of Kashmir through the earlier writings of Francois Bernier and George Forster. It is interesting to note that the Kashmir was not a land for merry making and a picnic spot to Europeans but

was an important destination for them to relieve themselves during summers in the rest of India. Rafiq Ahmad says:

The mid-1850s marked the emergence of Kashmir as the Happy Vale replete with the imagery of Moore's verse. Kashmir was not simply a respite from life on the plains but became a place of romance, and for displaced Europeans, the 'Eastern' equivalent of 'Western' places of leisure: 'Venice of the East', 'Playground of the East', and the 'Switzerland of the East' (Rafiq 173)

It is often seen that the travelogues written on Kashmir, start with the un-daunting praise for its natural beauty. The writers start their writings with extolling the mountains, seasons, springs, lakes, meadows, Morning breeze and Kashmiri Shawls. It is hardly seen that such type of texts ever start with the mentioning of its inhabitants. The fourth part of the Thomas Moore's *Laala Rookh The Light of the Haram* besides other three parts deal mostly with Kashmir and has started the lines by praising the beauty of the Valley.

Who has not heard of the Vale of CASHMERE?
With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave...
(Laala Rookh 185)

Francis Youngusband in his travelogue *Kashmir* starts the lines with these words, "Bernier, the first European to enter Kashmir, writing in 1665, says: In truth the kingdom surpasses in beauty all that my warmest imagination has anticipated" (Youngusband 1). Similarly, in travelogue *Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab*, B. C. Hugel starts "Which beyond all controversy, was the earthly Paradise was the half muttered reply of my Brahmin..." (Hugel 13). In her collection of poems *Chenar Leaves, Poems of Kashmir* by Percy Brown, the first poem of the Collection *A Kashmiri Shawl* begins with these lines;

Rich web of woven dreams! A Kashmir Shawl,
Its warp and woof of silk, pliant hair
From choice Pashmina goats, beyond the wall
Of far Himalaya brought, with toil and care,
Then dyed in all the subtlest hues which art
For eastern looms could cunningly devise,
And spun in threads so fine, the great world's mart...
...(Brown 1)

The discourse created by these writers in their travelogues further discusses the way of life, tradition, past and society and surprisingly these were looked down upon by them. Moore idealizes the Kashmir as the paradise on Earth and a land of Chinars, but the people of the land had to face the marginalization after being stereotyped. Nirupuma Rao says, "These then, were images enshrined in the Western imagination throughout the period of the 'Raj'. Travelers to Kashmir throughout the nineteenth century writers like Vigne-referring to Lalla Rookh said that 'there is a great justice in the ideas of scenery to be collected from the poem' (Rao 19). The discourses created by the European writers had an over bearing impact on the populace of Europe. It is also because of the fact that the climate, atmosphere and season closely resembled with that of the Europe and it provided them an

ample material to create literary artifacts to woo the European people to Kashmir. Rafiq Ahmad has quoted a story from Financial Times of 2005 by Fiona Dunlop in which a British tourist is given a choice to visit Madrid or Kashmir. The story reads, "Given the choice of a holiday in Madrid or in Srinagar in Kashmir, northern India, Which would you go for? In the next line, we get the expected answer; "Quite probably you would be tempted by the latter for its scenic splendor,' because, 'Madrid is a perennial favourite for northern Europeans and Americans of all ages. But somehow the image of Kashmir and its legendary lake lingers" (Rafiq 174). Interestingly, it is not only the Europeans but before them, the Mughuls and their successors too were very much enthusiastic and mad after Kashmir. For their own pleasure and merry making, Mughuls created parks, resorts namely Mughul Gardens (1526), Pari Mahal (1650), Chashme Shahi (1632), Shalimar Gardens (1619) etc.

Feisal Alkazi highlights the lavishness of Mughul Emperor's in Kashmir in his book, *Srinagar: An Architectural Legacy*:

Jahangir spent much of his leisure in travelling about his empire, enjoying the gardens he had built, visiting various historical localities in the plains, and feasting his eyes on mountains. He returned to many of these places repeatedly, often erecting sumptuous summer-houses... It was Kashmir that had the greatest appeal for this aesthete and where he spent his happiest days... Shah Jahan was also enamoured by Kashmir... Shah Jahan was given the task of designing and building the Shalimar gardens... (Alkazi, Chap. 5)

The imaginary setting of Kashmir in *Laala Rookh* runs contrary with the description of the people of Kashmir and Kashmiris in other travelogues or literary pieces. Whenever,

the local residents of Kashmir are discussed in these books, they were either neglected or discussed with much revulsion. They were reduced to untouchable pariahs and outcasts. One of the travelogue writer describes Kashmiris in these words;

As a rule, an Englishman coming for the first time to this country takes a great fancy to these plausible, handsome Kashmiris, finding them clever, cheery, and civil, and it is not until he has been some time in the country that he discovers that these are the most despicable creatures on earth, incorrigible cheats and liars, and cowardly to an inconceivable degree. (Knight 26)

They stereotyped the inhabitants of valley to create an opportunity for themselves to moralize people in the name of civilization and culture by sending missionaries. Undoubtedly, to a large extent, they have done some influential work by opening missionary schools like Tyndale Biscoe and New Convent in Srinagar and St. Joseph in Baramullah and many others. The students admitted in the schools were described as; "...to speak the truth, disgust also: surprise, to see these bundles of human beings squatting on the floor, most of them with their mouths open, as different from the class called boys as I had never imagined; amusement, on account of their ungainly costumes, for everyone seemed to be wearing a very dirty nightgown..." (Biscoe 263).

In conclusion, it can be said that Thomas Moore's *Laala Rookh* had a pivotal role to play to woo the European tourists and travel writers to visit Kashmir. Thomas Moore had only imagined about Kashmir, which makes it obvious that he would have been impressed by the writing of Francois Bernier and others. Their writings would have influenced him about Kashmir and its scenery. His poem startled the people from the west to visit and explore the valley, which had remained unknown to most of the travel writers.

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