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ORIENTALISM IN “THE TALISMAN ”BY SIR WALTER SCOTT

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Title: Orientalist Perspectives in Sir Walter Scott’s *The Talisman*: A Literary Reflection of the East through the Romantic Imagination

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Abstract: This article explores the manifestation of Orientalism in Sir Walter Scott’s historical novel *The Talisman* (1825). Drawing on Edward Said’s framework of Orientalism, the study examines how Scott constructs the East as both exotic and inferior, romanticizing the Crusades while reinforcing Western superiority. The paper argues that *The Talisman* reflects the 19th-century European imagination of the East, not merely as a setting for adventure, but as a vehicle for ideological expression and cultural dominance.

Introduction

Sir Walter Scott, a pioneer of the historical novel, engages with the East in *The Talisman* through a romanticized narrative of the Third Crusade. Written in the early 19th century—a period marked by expanding British imperialism—*The Talisman* is not simply a historical tale but a literary text deeply embedded with Orientalist ideologies. This article investigates how Scott’s portrayal of the East mirrors the colonial gaze and contributes to the broader Western literary tradition of constructing the Orient as an “othered” space.

Orientalism and the Literary Imagination

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) provides a critical lens through which *The Talisman* can be analyzed. Said argues that Western representations of the East are less about accurate depiction and more about the projection of Western desires, fears, and ideologies. In Scott’s novel, the East becomes a backdrop against which Western heroism, chivalry, and moral superiority are staged. The character of Saladin, although noble and wise, is rendered through a European imagination that both admires and domesticates him, presenting him as the “noble savage”—intelligent and admirable, yet never equal to the Christian knights. The central narrative of *The Talisman* revolves around the legendary Richard the Lionheart and his encounters with Saladin during the Crusades. Scott romanticizes this historical conflict, turning it into a chivalric romance. While Saladin is portrayed with a degree of respect, the novel ultimately centers on Christian characters and values, reinforcing a dichotomy between civilized Christendom and the mysterious, exotic Orient. This framing aligns with Romantic ideals of heroism but also reflects Orientalist assumptions about the East’s role as a stage for Western exploits.



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Scott's depiction of the Eastern landscape—its architecture, customs, and people—illustrates a fascination with the exotic. Yet, this fascination is tinged with condescension. The East is portrayed as timeless, mystical, and stagnant, contrasting with the progressive, rational West. These portrayals do not serve to authentically represent Eastern culture but rather to highlight Western virtues. Such literary strategies mirror the imperial rhetoric of the 19th century, which justified colonization through narratives of civilizational superiority.

Conclusion

The Talisman is a quintessential example of literary Orientalism in the Romantic period. While Scott attempts to offer a balanced portrayal of East and West, his narrative ultimately reinforces Western cultural dominance. Through the use of exoticism, moral dichotomies, and historical revisionism, Scott participates in the ideological construction of the Orient that would underpin British imperialism for decades.

This analysis reaffirms the significance of revisiting canonical literature through postcolonial perspectives, revealing how cultural narratives are shaped by and contribute to imperial power structures.

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