"Kubla Khan": A Poem of Sexual Ambiguity

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Abstract

The poem "Kubla Khan" is quite inexplicable. It is full of ambiguity and seemingly bizarre implications. Many critics have seen it as a poem full of ethereal music, but, I find it a mysterious reflection on human sexuality. In it Coleridge makes reference to what Freud would have called "dream work," basically thoughts surfacing as things and thinking being dramatized: the thoughts being pulled from the subconscious and made significant. Had it not been for the opium, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" would have remained a fantasy, dreamt and lost. Certainly, the poem is a most intricate work, full of the poet's desire to portray grandeur synaesthetically. "Kubla Khan" is, also, among other things, a poem full of ironic reflections on the legendary architectural feat of the Mughals.

Coleridge's poem meanders between the objective and subjective worlds. We can say that Coleridge's verse is most notably aimed at portraying a defined image rather than the aura of sensation itself. Romantic attitudes are apparent in the poem as well. Coleridge presents a solipsistic work full of wonder, in contrast to his counterparts - Blake, for example, who strongly sought a lost innocence of vision, and Wordsworth, who wanted to reunite with the natural world.

The poem, a great lyrical masterpiece, presents a spectacular vision of the grandeur and majesty that Kubla Khan enjoyed in his secluded world. It is as mystical and interesting as the story behind its creation. It does not tell a story; rather, it displays the splendor of the place where the palace was built. Highly

romantic images have been interwoven in the poem to suggest the stateliness of the historic Mongol Emperor Kubla Khan (now spelled as Kublai Khan) and to understand his powerful decree, which perhaps, without premeditated aim, resonates with the most erotic and sensual overtone. But, the true power of the poem is felt only because of its combination of both 'holiness' and tranquil beauty and at the same time its wild turbulence and intense emotions.

The opening stanza presents a peaceful and a beautiful setting where Kubla Khan wanted to build a palace with a vault forming its roof. Coleridge tells us that Kubla Khan had ordained that his palace be built in 'Xanadu', a place that in its vagueness and fancifulness becomes almost mystical. Careful study of the poem shows that 'Xanadu' is based on the imaginary city in the book titled *Pilgrimage* by Samuel Purchas, which Coleridge was reading while inebriated because of his opium addiction. Hence, in the very opening of the poem there is an element of romanticism which is reinforced through the dreamlike expressions. 'Dome' used in concert with 'Decree' not only beautifies the line but focuses on the grandeur of the stately command that has been passed. The effect of the line, of course, depends a lot on the hard consonantal sound of 'D'.

'Dome' in the Mughal period was an architectural design, which reflected the traditional Muslim architectural generosity of spirit. However, the word can be interpreted in many other ways, because of the ambiguity of the poem's subject. 'Dome' as defined in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is a mansion and a round vault forming the roof of a building and having an elliptical or polygonal base. This definition of 'Dome' and the structure of the poem direct us to the mysterious depth of the poem, and make us encounter the convoluted sexual aspect of the poem. One is reminded here of the fact that the word 'Dome' used to be associated with the elliptical shape of woman's breasts in the 18th century. Some critics indeed note the connotation of the image but, intentionally or perhaps unintentionally they have missed the profound mockery of the Mughal architectural feats in the poem.

To gain an insight into the element of mockery in "Kubla Khan", some background on the evolution of the Mughal Empire is needed. Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, ruled from 1260-294. In the 1250s, Genghis's grandson Hulegu Khan, operating from the Mongol base in Persia, destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. Destroying the cult of the Assassins, he moved into Palestine and headed towards Egypt. The Great Khan Mongke having died, however, he hastened to return for the election, while the force that remained in Palestine was destroyed by the Mamluks

under Saif ad-Din Qutuz in 1261 at Ayn Jalut. Ultimately, South Asia was able to withstand the advance of the Mongols. At that period, Northern India was under the rule of the Delhi sultanate. Though the Mongol raids took them to the Punjab and though they invaded Delhi itself (unsuccessfully), the Sultans, mostly notably Ghiyasuddin Balban, were able to keep them at bay and roll them back. The English journalist and historian John Keay, in his book *India: A History* credited the successful combination of the Indian elephant phalanx and maneuverable central Asian cavalry operated by the rulers of Northern India with the success of Indian resistance. Ironically, and 300 years later, Babar, a Timurid scion who claimed descent from Genghis Khan, would go on to conquer northern India and found the Mughal Empire. This embryonic empire quickly established its office with grandeur and style by building magnificent edifices that not only stood tall but were also distinguished from their counterparts aesthetically. It is their aesthetic beauty that received objective ridicule from Coleridge through this poem Kubla Khan.

Following John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* scholars have usually identified 'Alph' the sacred river mentioned coleridges poems with a conflation of the Alpheus and the Nile. However, in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essayes in Memory of Pete Laver,* John Beer (220-2) believes that the shortening to 'Alph' by Coleridge was not accidental. This river ran down through canyons and 'caverns' to the sea and the walls of the palace wall enclosed ten miles of 'fertile ground'. The title of the river is from the imagination of the poet, since such a river did not exist in real life. Notice the process of the river running:

> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.

A mysterious journey, indeed, undetermined by most of mankind. The phrase 'sunless sea', suggests two differing meanings. One could be the 'red sea' which has no life in it and can not bear any either. Second, it could have a sexual implication. It could imply the female genital which too runs occasional rivulets, where no life can be found and no sun would rise. The metaphors, imageries and nouns, adjectives, and the alliterative emphasis lead the reader to the mystical core of the poem.

Coleridge has also used botanical imagery to convey his ideas. In his much talked about preface to this poem, he indicated the exact page in Purchas's book

Pilgrimage which he was reading before sinking into that dream in which he claimed to have composed 'Kubla Khan'. Like so many critics before and after him, Geoffrey Yarlott quotes the relevant sentence from Purchas:

> "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, & in the middest there of a 'sumptuous house of pleasure', which may be removed from place to place." (147)

Yarlott comments that Coleridge appears to have intentionally customized the attractiveness implicit in Purchas's original description. The substitution of 'bright' and 'sinuous' for 'pleasure' and 'delight' produces sinister, almost reptilian associations, recalling perhaps *The Ancient Mariner* or this description of the 'thing unblest' from *Christabel*, where snake joins 'bright' and 'green' (the only color details found in Kubla's garden) in a cluster of positive malignancy:

> When Lo! I saw a *bright green snake*
> *Coiled* around its wings and neck
> Green as the herbs on which it couched."
> (Yarlott, 1967, 135, emphasis added).

> Coleridge presents thoughts which are scarcely acceptable for people with a critical attitude towards the Quest for Certitude. The 'sunny spots of greenery', for example, must in any unprejudiced reading of the poem form an attractive feature of the garden, even though, at the time the poem was written, it seemed like a deliberate echo of Coleridge's description of the gratification opium affords (a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees) (Yarlott, 136).

Coleridge strings thoughts that one might dread to interpret because they are too sexual to be inferred overtly or because they are linked with the consequence of opium. Images such as 'fertile ground', 'towers', 'girdled round', 'sinuous rills', 'incense bearing trees', 'hills / Enfolding', and 'sunny spots of greenery', all connote sexuality, which one might overlook, if not careful and focused. 'Fertile ground' suggests two meanings; one could be the fruitfulness and productiveness of the vast space of earth or soil on which Kubla Khan ordained his palace to be built. The second, on the other hand, could make us to think of the woman's genital as a source of birth, where the 'towers', like figures we know of, could be the hairs that protect (girdle/d) the genital from exposure. The word 'girdle' also suggests a round barrier or ring but also something to offer protection, and this could well be associated with

the secret place of a woman. The association becomes even stronger as one begins to discuss the poem in depth. 'Caverns' means an underground hollow; now is he referring to a cave or the 'hill/s' that are 'enfold/ing'? Has anyone seen any hill enfolding when 'forest' stand tall protruding the thicket of density? Surely, no one has because it is not there in the very nature or surface of the earth. What Coleridge was trying to suggest was something very clandestine, and he was gesturing at places where our mind cannot easily reach in wanting to create an ambiguous dreamscape. By the word 'sunless' he perhaps meant a place where the sun never sets. Where could such a place possibly be? Perhaps, it is the place where the very elements of romanticism and erotic glamour are directing us to.

For sure, he was talking of a place where the river called 'Alph' ran which is sacred, deserving veneration or respect, and something holy. It runs through the caves and underground hollows which are immeasurable to man and exists without the benefit of the sun. In other words, he is talking of caves that are never lit by any sunrays. The references could also be to a volcano that has deep hollows in it from where lava runs down. Often, they make us wonder whether Coleridge was portraying Mother Nature in its original form or if he was talking about a woman and her genitals. When he talks of a 'sunless sea' the idea does not really end with that image but carries us back. So it is something else to which Coleridge is referring here. Note that the 'gardens' are 'bright' and wanting to be cultivated and there is much hope in them as the 'incense bearing trees' keep guard round the productive zone. What could these 'incense bearing trees' refer to? The answer is the aromatic gum producing a sweet smell as the burning lava flood the trees nearby. I am calling the hot fluid lava, but it could have two other implications too, one in the case of volcanic eruption, and the second in the case of a woman's discharge when in deep sexual orgasm.

In the second stanza, when Coleridge refers to and describes the cave as 'savage' as well as 'holy and enchanted' he is seemingly mixing contrasting adjectives. The question may come up in one's mind as to what he meant by 'savage', 'holy' and 'enchanted'. It is not what one might think them to be; volcanic discharge streaming down the curving hills slanting on its run. Then what else could it be? Is it the discharge from the abyss (deep romantic chasm) genital of the woman slave kept by Kubla Khan? Don't forget that whatever Coleridge referred to was also thought of to be 'holy and enchanted'. Could 'holy' and 'enchanted' at the same time be a virgin slave's menstrual discharge? Now it is 'savage' because it is hot. Here, the pleasure and agitation of the

narrator finds expression as it is his perception that the fluid slanting down the hills is 'savage' and 'enchanting'. He was perhaps carried away by the excitement of the sort of eroticism he was or had been experiencing in his half-conscious state, which if Freud was to call anything would certainly call a 'dream work'. A psychoanalytic investigation of Coleridge's description leads me to conclude that besides the pleasure felt in the organ, another factor is at work (often unconscious) namely a memory - the picture of sexual intercourse observed in human beings or animals, which he had dreamt in a subliminal state. The immediate next line is erotic as it suggests Khan's sexual organ paying visits to the slave's genital while she wails and utters faint sounds of moaning.

> As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
> By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

Notice the word 'haunting' is associated with Kubla Khan's genital. 'Haunted' has a gothic connotation and gestures at another romantic element in this poem. The picture portrayed is that of Kubla Khan's royal grandeur evidenced in his command to build a palace with a vault and his sexual predilections as indicated in the picture of the sexual act between him and his slave. The resulting effect is a sexual orgasm that has been described in a beautiful analogy presented through ornamenting lines that can be said to be among English Literature's richest metaphoric semblance. One wonders why Coleridge used savage imagery to describe Kubla Khan as her 'demon-lover'. It is suggestive of forcible action-- as if Kubla Khan is raping the slave. But on the contrary it also gives the feeling that the slave is craving for her lover (Kubla Khan). It should be pointed out here that the surface meaning of the poem does not make much sense. Can anyone, for example tell of any woman 'wailing for her demon lover'? If yes, who is the lover? What thing would possibly pay short visits into its abyss like a 'demon'? Surely, nothing can delve into volcano, unless the 'waning moon' is seen as the forefront of Kubla Khan's genital, as in the later lines it is quite clear that what we have is highly erotic description of its to-and-fro motion and the bursting with orgasm. Because of this to-and-fro motion and uninterrupted hard labor a deep interest has developed as 'something' got soaked in liquid. Now that 'something' is mysterious because no clue whatsoever is provided here. Indeed, we don't quite know what got soaked when the poet writes the following lines:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething

However, this mysterious 'something' has been able to produce viscous gasping on the part of the 'earth'. Again, this 'earth' is referred to the 'garden'. It is described as 'bright' (wanting cultivation), and also like a slave's genital, an inference which does not seem to be unwarranted.

It must be that she has reached her pinnacle of tolerance and can't seem to take anymore of the pleasure and hence she is trying to get her breath back. Soon a powerful 'fountain' spouts, but only for a brief time albeit with great force and 'half intermitted burst'. What does this scene suggest? It certainly doesn't link with the lava because the lava bursts out with great force and flows unhindered. Everything that falls in its way gets soaked and burnt. So, it must be a coded reference to the slave's genital where Kubla Khan has sowed the seeds:

Huge fragments of vaulted like rebounding hails,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail.

Notice carefully the clause 'the thresher's flail' which is a deliberate attempt to compare Kubla Khan with a person who beats the corn or seed just to fit the idea of the sexual act in an image taken from agriculture.

To this point of the poem, the turbulence initiated by Kubla Khan has come to a climax and this is provided with exceptional mastery by applying the smooth sound of the consonant 'm'. Because of this 'm' sound it may seem that poet is in a rush to end the poem, but that is not the case. The intertwined themes itself demands the rush and speed, since the sacred river is running with a giddy motion through the woods and valley and this reaches the caves where no life could be found. It took a great deal of effort and agitation to reach there, and while this agitation is still going on in Kubla's mind, he came to hear the voices of his Ancestors who were prophesying war! This is the end of that 'tumult' and the start of the conclusion to the poem.

Now the poem shifts to the palace and its 'dome' that reflects on the river surface and the waves that are on the rise, coming off the 'fountain'. This 'fountain' as indicated earlier could be a reference to the coming of Kubla Khan from sexual intercourse with the concubine. Coleridge is perhaps claiming the poem to be a marvelous event not ascribable to human elements and as an uncommon arrangement:

It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

Now this couplet sums up the argument of this paper - whatever the poem is about, it certainly wears a miraculous disguise. Look at the change from 'stately pleasure-dome' to 'sunny pleasure-dome' for this is where the camouflage is most evident, since the 'caves' are filled with 'ice'. If one thinks of 'ice' intently, one sees it as a cryptic reference to the discharge of Kubla Khan. Coleridge, however, is not only taking pride in having written an ambiguous poem in fits of half conscious sleep, but also claiming his poem to be a 'miracle of rare device'.

In the last stanza, Coleridge laments at not being able to recall the tangible vision that he had when inebriated. Scholars know that Coleridge subtitled *Kubla Khan* "A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment" and added to it a prefatory note explaining its uncommon basis. Atypical indeed, for no other poet has abruptly admitted of his or her addiction to opium except Coleridge, who took opium for meditation. In his inebriated state, he read a passage from Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage* - concerning the court of Kubla Khan, till he had fallen asleep. In his dream, he had composed a few hundred lines and immediately after waking up he had begun to write what he had seen in his dream, but a visitor interrupted him and by the time he got a chance to return to writing, his vision fled, his images blurred, and he could hardly recollect anything. He is as much apoplectic with himself as with the answer. He asks himself if he could revive within him the *damsel*'s lost symphony and song; and wonders if he could recapture the whole of the original vision instead of just a portion of it, for then he would build 'in air' (i.e. find verbal music to express) the vision he had experienced. He laments his inability to recollect the vision because at some point in his half-conscious sleep a friend had interrupted him.

However, Coleridge is quickly able to replace the vision of Kubla's 'Xanadu' by that of 'damsel' (the dulcimer playing Abyssinian maiden) singing of 'Mount Abora' - an experience more auditory than visual and therefore less at risk of description by mere words. Moreover, it involves in an equivocal way a vision within a vision, since the remembered reverie of Abyssinian maid is the cortex of the lost vision of the content of her song, such as the maiden of Wordsworth's *The Solitary Reaper*.

Coleridge's Kubla Khan raises at least as many questions as it answers. What, for example, ought we to make of Kubla Khan and his enclosed garden?

According to Kathleen Coburn's *The Self-Conscious Imagination* 'Xanadu' is Paradise Regained and Kubla Khan symbolizes the inventive performer who gives tangible expression to the idyllic forms of precision and splendor. But, an analytic reading of the poem 'Kubla Khan' suggests that Kubla Khan is a self-indulgent materialist, a demonic figure, who imposes his oppressive will upon the ordinary world and so produces a forged paradise of contrived artifice cut off from the realm of Nature by man-made walls and towers. The images of Abyssinian maid and the inspired poet in the closing section of the poem also present a formidable difficulty in interpretation. The predicament is not so much that of the conjectured recognition of these figures (though this is often attempted) as of the overall meaning and intention of the passage. Should we deem that this concluding section is an "anticipation of poetic triumph"? – or that "Kubla Khan" is a symbolic expression of Coleridge's inability to comprehend frustration? Scholarly disagreements such as these can be multiplied almost eternally. In fact, the symbolic valence of practically every image in the poem – the 'sacred river Alph', the essence and shadow of Kubla Khan's 'pleasure-dome', the 'ancestral voices prophesying' hostilities, and so on – has proved a basis of vague (and irresolvable) question; and it is most likely no hyperbole to say that no single analysis of "Kubla Khan" has ever wholly satisfied anyone excluding the person who anticipated it. Despite the reputation of the view that "Kubla Khan" is a poem about poetry, then, there is no agreement about just what is being said about the poetic process.

Therefore, it may be concluded that Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan", though nothing more than a remnant of a half-recollected reverie, raises as many questions as it answers. Certainly, there are in it tacit semblances of Freudian sexuality, 'dream-work' and Dante's conflict of heaven and hell. The simple lyric style of the poem cannot hide an element of the Gothic in it and implies a bizarre mockery of Mughal architectural accomplishments such as the pleasure-dome, which is 'breast-like, full to touch and eye, rounded and complete' (N. Fruman, *Coleridge the Damaged Archangel,* London 1972). Indeed, the poem includes in it a description of the sexual act that is daring and atypical.

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