

A Study of the “Orient”ation of Hinduism in British Romantic Literature

Diptishree Gupta

Department: English, Institution: St. Xavier’s University, Kolkata City, Country: Kolkata, India

Received: 11 Jun 2026; Received in revised form: 05 Jul 2026; Accepted: 09 Jul 2026; Available online: 13 Jul 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper examines the works of Sir William Jones, the British Orientalist figure, and establishes him as a “Bard of the East”. This research situates itself within the theoretical framework of Edward Said’s Orientalism. Through a close reading of literary compositions, especially two specific “hymns” (Durga and Bhavani) composed by Sir Jones. It also explores how the circulation of Western depictions of “Hindooism”, by Jones, influenced one of the celebrated Romantic poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and his poetic composition, “Kubla Khan”. Employing the practice of close reading, this paper identifies recurring motifs in these compositions and debates whether certain aspects of Hinduism were recomposed to make it suitable for Western readership. It concludes by stating that Sir William Jones, although celebrated as an Orientalist figure of merit, can be considered a Romantic poet, as his “hymns” not only influenced the West but also acted as a reservoir of compositions dedicated to the deities of “Hindooism”.



Keywords— British Romantic poetry, Colonial studies, Hinduism, India, Orientalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The long eighteenth century marked a watershed moment with a number of reputed translations of Indian religious texts, particularly attributing to the religion that Charles Grant termed “Hindooism”ⁱ. This paper argues that Sir William Jones’ work on the “nine hymns”, published in 1785, had a formative effect on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”, composed in 1816. It traces recurring motifs in Hindu iconography present in the verses. The paper explores the identification of recurrence through a close analysis of the primary texts.

Although several scholarly works attribute to Jones the role of an Orientalist figure, recent scholarship explores Sir William Jones as a literary, linguistic, and imperial propagator of Hinduism. While S. N. Mukherjee (1964) explores the influence of Jones’ works on British imperial attitudes toward India, Nandini Das (2006) and Kurt A. Johnson (2010) examine his literary representations of Hinduism and their influence on eighteenth-century poets. Jessica Patterson (2025) further establishes Jones’s engagement with Hinduism within the contexts of colonial

rule and religious philosophy. However, unlike these historical and contextual scholarly works, the present research undertakes an in-depth textual analysis of Jones’s Hymns (Durga and Bhavani) alongside Coleridge’s poetic work (“Kubla Khan”) by tracing how poetic diction and narrative strategies construct iconographical representations of Hindu deities and Hindu philosophy. This approach foregrounds the literary texture of the poems rather than their broader historical or ideological influence.

II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Year 1783: Sir William Jones set foot on Indian soil at Calcutta in the month of September. During this journey he planned the founding of the Asiatic Society, which he envisioned the whole world would gain intense and intimate knowledge. His interests ranged from religion and literature to philosophy and jurisprudence. His translations from Sanskrit were intended to support his research on Hindu culture, which was read to the Asiatic Society, which postulated his influential works *On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India* (1784) and *On the Hindus* (1786)

as an Indo-European tree of culture and language, known and formed the basis for modern religious studies and philology.

His proficiency in Sanskrit opened up a sanctuary of unexplored Indian scholarship and theology for Jones. His fascination with this ancient language made him develop a personal relationship with Hinduism. In a 1784 letter to Sir Charles Wilkins (his friend, colleague and Sanskrit mentor), he writes that he was in love with the Gopia and was charmed by "Crishna" and an ardent admirer of "Ram" and a devoted lover of "Brahmha". He also states that the characters from the Indian epic, The *Mahabharata*, such as "Yudhishtir", "Arjoon" and "Korno", were greater than Greek heroic figures in his eyes.

Sir William Jones should be acknowledged as an independent English poet. The "Nine Hymns" to Hindu Mythology, his most outstanding and important piece of poetry, were composed when he was travelling in India. an outcome of his extensive study of Hindu literature and mythology. The remaining three were composed after the publication of six of the nine in a book named *The Asiatic Miscellany* (1785). These "hymns" aren't merely translations because they draw on a variety of Indian sources. The two specific "Hymns", I intend to deal with in this paper are The "Hymns To Durga" and "To Bhavani" (collectively known as "Hymns to Pracriti"). In the prose preface to these "Hymns", Jones explains his source and later makes his readers aware of the various incarnations of the Goddess, such as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Bhawani*, *Parvati*, and finds strong resemblance with Homer's Juno, Hecate, armed Pallas and Lucretius' Venus.

The "wild poetical fiction" is where the name Parvati came from. Jones claims that the Himalayas, a range of mountains encircling the Indian peninsula with its eastern and western extremities and enclosing India to the north, were given the name "The Mansion of Snow" by the Hindus. The numerous mountain summits are named after Hindu religious rituals described in the *Parvati* myth.

Parvati, the "mountain born" princess, daughter to King *Himavat*, also known as the Himalayas (personified as a monarch) and his wife Queen *Meena*, fell in love with Lord *Shiva* or *Bhootnath* (Lord of Demons) or *Pashupati* (Lord of Animals) and performed severe penance in order to receive *Shiva's* love. Lord *Shiva*, an ash-coated male deity with a tiger skin tied around his waist, residing on one of the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, Kailas, was delighted with *Parvati's* devotion. Jones, in his prose preface, calls *Durga*, also known as *Sherawali*ⁱⁱ, a deity "of Difficult access"; the manifestation of this deity in the ode is distinguishable from that of the *puranas* and *kavyas*. According to him, a detailed account of the entire action in

which *Durga* defeats the demon (*Mahishasura*), who takes the form of a buffalo, would disrupt the unity of the ode. *Durga*, in Hindu mythology, is the warrior goddess who mounts a tiger. The tiger is not only *Durga's vahana*, or vehicle, but also an integral part of Lord *Shiva's* attire. Aside from being associated with gods and goddesses, the beastly creature has been worshipped in India since the Vedic ages. The indomitable spirit of *Durga* is symbolised by the tiger.

III. COMPARATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Sacred Landscape and Oriental Space

Both the "Hymn" and Coleridge's poem begin with the "holy" and "sacred" river, respectively. While the hymn refers to the river *Ganga*, "Kubla Khan" records the movement of the river Alph. Eventually, with time, the topography surrounding "a miracle of rare device", may that be Jones' "palace, where their monarch reigned / on the frost impearled seat" or Coleridge's "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice" is revealed. The fountains resemble the "secret" and "sacred" water bodies' birth from Mother Earth's womb. Such a rigorous description of reproduction is strongly present in "Kubla Khan".

"And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,/As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,/ A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:" (lines 17-19). Sir Jones' "hymn", documents the origin of the river *Ganga* from the knotted matted hair of Lord *Shiva*.

"(Him, from whose red clust'ring hair /A new born crescent sheds propitious rays,/For as *Ganga's* curling foam)" (Jones, 1.1.3-5).

I would like to lay emphasis on the "miracle of rare device" at this point and its very presence. The Amaranth cavesⁱⁱⁱ is a non-fictional version of such a phantasm. A Hindu shrine located in India (Jammu and Kashmir). Due to the immense height and bitter cold inside the cave, an immense stalagmite forms from the accumulation of frozen water droplets. This stalagmite is considered to be the *Shiva* Linga, representing Lord *Shiva*. This cave stands amidst the snow-capped mountain ranges. However in the poetic world of fiction Jones writes;

Rock above Rock they ride sublime,
And wreath their giant heads in snows eternal
Gilt by the revolving sun
Though neither morning beam, nor noontide glare
In wintry sign or vernal,
Their adamant strength impair;
Nor even the fiercest summer heat

Could thrill the palace where their monarch reign'd
 On his frost impearled seat
 (Such height had unremitted virtue gained) (Jones stanza 1.2-1.3)

And Coleridge influenced by the "Hymn" shares a similar construct:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure Floated midway
 on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure From the
 fountain and the caves.
 It was a miracle of rare device,
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! (Coleridge lines 31-36)

3.2 Feminine Divine: Durga, Parvati and the Damsel Motif

The portrait of the damsel longing for her lover is vividly present in both the works, while Sir William Jones, in his "Hymn to *Durga*" indites,

Rare object of a damsels love
 (the wizard bold replied) who, rude and wild,
 Leaves eternal bliss above, (Jones stanza 5.2)

Jones also writes

All arts her sorrowing damsel tried...
 Nor even her sacred parent's tender chiding ...

The mountain drear she sought, in mantling shade Her tears and transports hiding,

And oft to her adorer prayed. (Jones stanza 4.2)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge reverberates the image of the sorrow-stricken "damsel" of Jones' "Hymn" in his "Kubla Khan" when he speaks of

A savage place! as holy and enchanted /As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted /By woman wailing for her demon-lover! (Coleridge lines 14-16). Or of

A damsel with a dulcimer In a vision once I saw:
 It was an Abyssinian maid
 And on her dulcimer she played,
 Singing of Mount Abora^{iv}. (Coleridge lines 37-41)

These images remind us of Goddess *Parvati* and Lord *Shiva* (Bhoothnath), mentioned previously, where the Goddess wails for Lord *Shiva* (who has rejected her love).

The "damsel" singing of "Mount Abora" in "Kubla Khan" stands parallel to Goddess *Parvati* singing of *Kailasha*, where her Lord reigns.

3.3 Reconstructing Shiva: The Romantic Demon-Lover

Jones and Coleridge share a similar perspective regarding the persona of Lord *Shiva*, distinctly visible in their literary works. For instance, in Jones' "Hymn to *Durga*", the lord is depicted as

The keenest lightings were but idle flashes, Which in the front of wrathful Hara rolls And soon to silver ashes

Reduced the inflamer of our souls (Jones stanza 3.2, lines 6-10)

But spurn that sullen wayward God,
 That three eyed monster, hideous, fierce, untamed.

Unattired, ill girt, unshod ---

Such feel impiety (the nymph exclaimed)

Who speaks must agonize, who hears must die; (Jones 5.3)

And in Coleridge, the "demon – lover" takes a fearsome shape, identical to that of Jones.

And all who heard should see them there, And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair! Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Coleridge lines 48-54)

Lord *Shiva*, attributed as the creator, preserver and destroyer by Hinduism, is feared and loved at the same time. On the auspicious occasion of *Shiv Ratri*, in order to please the Lord, the women, irrespective of their marital status, are expected to weave three circles around the holy shrine (*Pradakshina*), and then present him with offerings. The idol of the God is bathed in a mixture of milk and honey, which is considered to calm the rage of the supremely ferocious deity, powerful enough to ruin his own creation.

3.4 The Tiger as a Symbol of Divine Power

Goddess *Durga* is the warrior Goddess, the protective mother willing to unleash the force within her, to combat the evil. There are 108 incarnations of her such as; *Kali*, *Bhavani*, *Gauri*, *Parvati*, *Sati*. She mounts the tiger, a symbol of undying power, protecting "good" against "evil". *Bhavani* is the manifestation of the powers present in the three supreme Gods, namely *Brahma* (Creator), *Vishnu* (Preserver) and *Shiva/ Maheshwar* (destroyer). The Tiger was gifted to her as a vehicle by the Mountain God.

"The Tyger" (1794), one of William Blake's most celebrated "Songs of Experience" admires and celebrates the bestial energy of a dreadful beast

Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?(Blake lines 1-4)

In what distant deeps or skies. Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand, dare seize the fire? (Blake lines 5-8)

We find a similar trait in Sir William Jones' treatment of the Goddess in his "Hymn to Bhavani", as the Tyger embodies the spirit of the Goddess's rage.

When time was drowned in sacred sleep

And raven darkness brooded over the deep ----

From heaven's dun concave shot a golden ray.

Mother of Gods, rich natures' Queen,

Thy genial fire emblazed the bursting scene

For on the expanded blossom sitting,

With Sunbeams knitting

That mystic veil forever unremoved, Thou badest the softly kindling flame

Pervade this peopled frame, (Jones lines 1-23)

Blake and Jones undeniably shared the same pen to inscribe the description of the Tiger, and the Tiger-mounted Goddess's ferocity respectively, especially the remarkable innate depiction of the blazing fire and the structure within which it burns.

And what shoulder, & what art, Could twist the sinews of thy heart? And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? What the chain,

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? What dread grasp,

Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee? (Blake lines 9-20)

3.5 Myth, Creation and Romantic Imagination

Jones in his "Hymn to Durga" evokes an equivalent image to that of Coleridge's, as quoted above, in order to recount the supernatural birth of the Goddess, born for a specific purpose.

With desolation wide had spread: How, when the Gods to Brahma flew.

In routed squadrons, and his help deplored;
'Sons!' (He said) from vengeance due

The fiend must wield secure his fiery sword. (Thus the unerring will ordains)

Till from the Great Destroyer's pure embraces, Knit in loves mysterious chains

With her, who, daughter to the mountain King, Yon snowy Mansion graces,

... Warrior child shall spring;

...shall rush

Against the dragon of deep;

With shouts of boundless mansion rang; And, in sublime accord, the radiant quire Strains of Bridal rapture sang,

Hell's future dread, and heavens eternal wonder!
Healm and flaming habergeon

For thee, behold, immortal artists weave,

O *Durga* thou has deign'd to shield

Man's feeble virtue with celestial might,

... For when the demon vice thy realms defied,

And armed with death each arched horn,

Thy golden lance Oh goddess, mountain – borne,

Touch'd but the pest ---He roared and died. (Jones stanzas 7.1-9.3)

IV. CONCLUSION

I would hereby like to conclude by saying that Sir William Jones carried out the poetic act of composing these "Hymns" which, when published in the Asiatic Society, dispersed as seeds to the Occidental world. These germinated on the fertile minds of the western romantic poets; Sir William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The seeds soon blossomed into wondrous verse compositions, reverberating the essence of the eastern myths, as encapsulated in Sir Jones' oriental bardic voice, manifested through his Hymns, and translations of Vedic texts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agrawal, C. P. (1984). The hymns of Sir William Jones. *South Asian Review*, 8(2), 55–64.
- [2] Bernier, F. (1891). *Travels in the Mogul Empire*. Edinburgh.

- [3] Blake, W., & Johnson, M. L. (1980). *Blake's poetry and designs: Authoritative texts, illuminations in color and monochrome, related prose, criticism*. W. W. Norton.
- [4] Cannon, G. (1971). Sir William Jones's Indian studies. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 91(2), 255–271.
- [5] Cannon, G. (1982). Sir William Jones and the British discovery of ancient Sanskrit culture. *Mankind Quarterly*, 22(3), 241–257.
- [6] Cannon, G. (1990). *The life and mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the father of modern linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Coleridge, S. T., Foakes, R. A., & Perkins, D. (Eds.). (2004). *Coleridge's poetry and prose: Authoritative texts, criticism*. W. W. Norton.
- [8] Das, N. (2006). “[A] Place among the Hindu poets”: Orientalism and the poetry of Sir William Jones (1746–1794). *Literature Compass*, 3(6), 1235–1252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00388.x>
- [9] Johnson, K. A. (2010). *Sir William Jones and representations of Hinduism in British poetry, 1784–1812* (Doctoral dissertation, University of York).
- [10] Jones, W. (1881). *The Hindu wife and the hymns by Sir W. J.* (2nd ed.).
- [11] Jones, W. (1807). On the Hindus. In Lord Teignmouth (Ed.), *The works of Sir William Jones* (Vol. 1). J. Stockdale. (Original work published 1786)
- [12] Mukherjee, S. N. (1964). Sir William Jones and the British attitudes towards India. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 96(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00122683>
- [13] Patterson, J. (2021). *Religion, Enlightenment and empire: British interpretations of Hinduism in the eighteenth century*. Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Patterson, J. (2025). William Jones and the study of Hinduism. *Global Intellectual History*, 10(2), 109–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2023.2184408>
- [15] Riem, A. (2005). *The one life: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Hinduism*. Rawat Publications.
- [16] Vallins, D., Oishi, K., & Perry, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient: Cultural negotiations*. Bloomsbury Academic.

ⁱ In the year 1787 Grant wrote a letter to one Mr. Wilberforce Where the words “Hindoo religion” and “Hindoo creed” appeared.

ⁱⁱ *Sherawali* literally translates to the one mounted on a *sher* (tiger) in the Hindu Pantheon

ⁱⁱⁱ In his chapter entitled *Journey to Kachamiere* in his book *Travels in the Mogul Empire* (1656-1668), originally written in French by the physician Francois Bernier and later translated into English, he speaks of the *Amarnath* Cave. According to Bernier's commentary on the Amarnath cave is home to several “Hindoos” who visit the shrine to worship the Shiva-like stalagmites and ice

blocks that were created by water falling from the roof. This location, which lies a good deal to the southeast of Gungabal, is surrounded by glaciers.

^{iv} A close association can be made with Goddess Saraswati and her Vina here. Since Samuel Taylor Coleridge was reading Oriental texts, especially Sir William Jones. Jones' “Hymn to Sereswaty”. The dulcimer is a symbolic representation of the Vina and the damsel who has been called “Abyssinian maid” is an Oriental reconstruction .