

ARAB WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE TALES OF *ARABIAN NIGHTS***Hasna'a Saeed Ali AL-Hemyari**, Research Scholar; Department of English,

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Abstract:

The present research is a modest attempt to discuss the role of women in the Arab-Islamic societies with special reference to the tales of Arabian Nights. Arab tales depict Arab Muslim women as rebellious against male dominated society. They denied to play roles of beautiful mistress, slaves and enthralled to men, and as detained prisoners secluded from the outside world. Shahrazad, as a woman, determines to help the other women get rid of the bondage of their abusive husbands. In "Merchant Trader and Wife" and "The Porter and the Three Sisters", the women are brutally beaten and exploited. In "Three Apple Stories", they are beaten and even killed. For the modern reader, it may seem that women have no rights in these stories. Women are housed in the harem and the husband can divorce or take another wife at any time. The following pages is an attempt to show the reality of Arab women's role and examine how the women are represented in the Arabian Nights in a wrong and despicable way, compared to their role in other societies. Although Arab women play various roles in social life, these tales despise their contributions by portraying them as backward. The paper argues that Arab women have authority and power within their families. They supervise domestic affairs in the household. They also enjoy many rights and power. Mother could help to choose husbands or wives for their children, some of whom take over the financial affairs for family businesses. Wealthy women have reached the highest levels, participating in politics and having the leading roles in cultural business. The woman is not just a housewife, but a teacher, a doctor, a politician, an engineer, etc. Arab women enjoy many rights. The Quran helped to support the status of women in Arab societies. Arab women could legally inherit property. They have the right to divorce their husbands if they wish, and they can start businesses. In the past, Arab women were given more authority and power than women in Ancient China and Roman times. In addition, Queen Balkees ruled Yemen after her father's death, the King of Sheba, and followed the Kings of 'Humier'. Her armies defeated and invaded Babylon, Persia and Iraq, and they assigned rulers in these regions. She went back to Yemen to declare it as the 'Kingdom of Sheba. In short Muslim women played very important roles in past and continue to enjoy the high position in society. The present paper attempts to study the status of Arabian women in Arabian Nights.

Keywords: Arab women, exploitation, image and status of woman, recognition.

The tales of *Alf Laila Wa-Laila* or *Arabian Nights*, as known in popular culture, were provided to the West in the 18th century. *The Arabian Nights Reader* is part of the larger series of fairy tales. Many of the stories in *Arabian Nights* describe women as being oblivious: they are harassed by their husbands and deceived. At the time when the tales were written, it was thought that women were more inclined to sin. Thus, Prophet Mohammad said, 'I stood at the gates of Paradise, and most of those who entered there were poor and stood in most of the neighbors who went there were women'. Moreover, in his sermon to the Muslims in the Farewell Pilgrimage, he warned them to preserve the values, which he feared they would neglect after him. He referred to women as one of the important issues and said, 'Observe your duty to

Allah concerning women and treat them well'.

The story of "al-Mu'tadid" and the other stories from *Arabian Nights* describe women as slave musicians who entertain khaliphs and wealthy men of high classes in society. The trafficking of female slaves was common among Arabs in the Middle Ages. Teaching female slave the music and using them as vocal and instrumental performers were popular. Most of those girl-singers possessed sufficient literary knowledge to quote from esteemed poems or even to compose verses. Women had taken a significant part in music. Besides performing at the houses of rich men, female slaves were also found of singing in the places where people were amusing themselves: feasts and celebrations.

The "Tale of Sympathy the Learned" is an exceptional part of *Arabian Nights*. This story is about a young slave girl who is well educated in different ways. Though most Muslim women are only educated in the works of The Quran, Sympathy has investigated syntax, poetry, civil and canon law, music, astronomy, geometry, and arithmetic. She memorizes The Quran by heart and is able to recite it in seven different ways. She pursues the talk of the different aspects about herself, including her knowledge of architecture, logic, and philosophy. Sympathy is used by Shahrazad to show that the king of women can be trustworthy, intelligent, and virtuous. Since *Arabian Nights* is a well-known and influential book in the Arabic and Islamic culture, this particular story has been read by women in the Muslim world for centuries. It gives an opportunity to know that women can be knowledgeable about the same things as men, including education.

Although the tales of *Arabian Nights* form a plot of imagination and fantasy, the readers can still learn a great deal about the Muslim society and women's role in it. It is crucial to look at the juxtaposition between the women's roles at first glance and the strength demonstrated deeper within. The very idea that women in the stories could maintain their dignity through Shahrazad's retelling is amazing. Despite the fact that Muslim women are supposed to be 'back seat' in daily life, we cannot ignore the intelligence and power they display. Women are thought to be the possessions of men. Therefore, the idea of a woman like Shahrazad is liberating for oppressed women, and it continues to be inspiring for future generations of women.

In *Arabian Nights* and throughout the oral tradition of the Middle East, Shahrazad is not only a storyteller, but also a teacher. *Arabian Nights* is linked to ideas about violence, jealousy and hatred of women in hope of exposing these errors to Shahryar. While *Arabian Nights* does not seem to have played a formal role, because it remains an entertainment, many valuable lessons have been adopted. Although the king is clearly comfortable, it is hoped that the messages behind Shahrazad's stories are not ignored.

Shahrazad has a clearly visible theme she wishes to express (i.e. feminism, religion, the corruption of power). She addresses a number of issues through short articles in *Arabian Nights*, which aim to instruct as they are for entertainment. The modern reader of *Arabian Nights* may wish to reveal a feminist agenda for the tales, but this would be a fallacy because many of the tales contain drawings, descriptions and messages offensive to women. However, Shahrazad shows a balanced picture of the human error in *Arabian Nights* and tries to discover the mistakes of both sexes equally. Shahrazad tries throughout her nights with the king to make him know some of the errors of his behavior. However, he reader must not forget that in *Arabian Nights*, "Shahrazad's role as a teacher is neither declared, nor predefined, nor articulated in the process, but hidden behind her role as storyteller and entertainer" (Naithani 277). Armed with this way of reading the text as something of a "mirror for princes", it becomes possible to view Shahrazad's tales as lessons on certain social ills and moreover, defining her as a heroine.

When the reader is introduced to Shahrazad in *Arabian Nights*, it is learned that she "pursued books, annals, and legends of preceding Kings... She had pursued the works of poets and memorized them by heart... studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments (Burton 15). In stark contrast to the previous portrayals of women in *the Nights*, this description immediately sets the reader up for expecting something more from this woman. Unlike the women mentioned in *Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad

is actually granted a name. After learning about her education, which is implied to come from self-teaching and a personal love of learning, it is noticed that she is strong-willed woman unwilling to relent to male pressure. For example, her father tells her the story of the man who could speak the language of animals and how he "dealt with" his wife. He says that after the man beat his wife,

she kissed his hand and feet and he led her out of the room, submissive, as a wife should be. Her parents and all the company rejoiced and sadness and mourning were changed into joy and gladness. Thus, the merchant learnt family discipline from his Cock and he and his wife lived together the happiest of lives until death (Burton 14).

Although this is the case of a wife and husband, the fact remains that a father's control over a daughter is much the same. Her father threatens her with equal treatment (being beaten into submission). But instead of bending under his will, Shahrazad responds in true heroic fashion: "I wish thou wouldst give me in marriage to this King Shahryar; either I shall live or I shall be a ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems and the cause of their deliverance" (Burton 15). What is perhaps most striking about this statement is that she is implying that there is a feminist motivation to her potentially deadly altruistic action. Strangely however, while one might expect this set-up to lead into a series of feminist tales, her first few stories are about the typical evil and unfaithful wife. While it has been mentioned that her tales are meant to serve as entertaining instruction, one must wonder why Shahrazad, with these feminist underpinnings spurring her action, does not engage in less misogynistic tales at the beginning.

Shahrazad is quite the fearless hero throughout the course of *Arabian Nights*. While this may extend to her refusal to submit to male authority, it does not encompass her choices of tales to tell the clearly misogynistic king. If her aim is to teach the king lessons, given her previous behavior, one might expect her tales to have a more recognizable feminist motivation. She relates tales about women, who do wrong to their husbands and use magic to trick men. Like the woman who threatens to awake the genie if the two kings don't have sex with her, she engages in sexual power-plays. Enderwitz pointed out the potential foolishness of Shahrazad's choice of tales. He states that "even the very first story, "The Merchant and the Jinni", introduces the theme of wicked wives, which renders it an unsuitable or, in the case of a wife having intercourse with a black slave, even tactless choice by a woman in such a dangerous situation as Shahrazad's (188). While Enderwitz may be correct in assuming that this is a dangerous choice, it has been overlooked that Shahrazad rejects the idea that men pose a threat to her. If that is not quite the case then at least she has some feeling of her ability to soothe their anger with words rather than sexual appeals. Perhaps by mirroring the king's interactions with women in her tales, there are still some displaced lessons being taught, even if it is merely that there are some women deserving of punishment while there are also others who should have the right to fair treatment.

In the first days of *Arabian Nights*, there is a multitude of cases of unfaithful and evil women, but there are equally several tales regarding the idiocy of men to balance the message. Considering that the frame-story is based on a completely misogynistic pretext (a king determined to sleep with and then kill a woman every night) some of the "bite" of this is taken out of the story by the strong-willed heroine Shahrazad, who uses her wit and vast stores of knowledge to gain her desire instead of her sexuality. Through her tales, Shahrazad presents a number of representations of women and does not rely on the stereotype presented at the beginning of the book when all women are viewed as harlots sleeping with any man as soon as the husband has left. While there are, of course, many examples of the traitorous and unfaithful woman stereotype her royal listener might be expecting, there are also examples of ingenious women who are capable of using their wits and proving themselves to be more than one-dimensional sex-objects.

One of the strangest cases of dubious female representation occurs before Shahrazad is introduced and concerns the idea of the cuckold Jenni and his seductress, who forces the two kings, already wandering the countryside due to their hatred of women, to have sex with her near her giant lover. The men are hesitant

for several reasons. The most important reason is that the genie could kill them at any moment. Eventually they concede to her demands. In some ways, the narrator telling this story is acting as a sort of precursor to Shahrazad because there is the attempt to teach a lesson (not to be the sleeping giant nears a lying female) and to foreshadow the theme of violent reactions to jealousy. As illustrated in the text, "the Jinni seated her under the tree by his side and looking at her said, 'O choicest love of this heart of mine! O dame of noblest line, whom I snatched away on thy bride night that none might prevent me taking thy maidenhead or tumble thee before I did, and whom none save myself hath loved or hath enjoyed: O my sweetheart! I would fief sleep a little while'" (Burton 7). The genie had taken her away from her life in order to have her virginity, and thus she was kept captive due to her gender. Her pleasure was to collect the rings of men she had seduced so that she would be able to count her victories. In many ways, this counting of the rings a sign of female power over male domination foreshadows the countdown of days throughout the text. We are constantly reminded as the days pass, and as they do, Shahrazad adds more "rings" to her collection. This story serves to prepare the reader for the introduction of Shahrazad and gives a cursory introduction as well to themes of the cuckold (male weakness) the desiring woman (female weakness) and the more important theme the presentation of one of many ways in which women will be shown to have authority over men.

In her "lessons" in *Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad's message becomes a bit less feminist when she tells single-gender stories (those in which women are not involved). There are a number of tales, which she tells about kings and princes, not involving feminine. In most of these cases, the men are able to think clearly and resolve the conflict through wits and ingenuity. Unlike many of the earlier stories, in the story of "The Fisherman and the Genie", there are no women present and the fisherman is able to argue with the genie and eventually trick him back into his hiding place. It would seem that when women are involved, nothing but trouble can result, thus calling to mind how feminist the motivations behind Shahrazad's stories (lessons) are.

In her stories of *Arabian Nights*, the character of Shahrazad often represents the men as helpless to the will of a beloved female, thus indicating that women are the cause of men's downfall. In the story of the man who could communicate with animals mentioned above, the man is admittedly helplessly in love with his wife and unable to refuse her request that he divulges the secret that would bring him death. It is not until other male voice intervenes (since the voice of the Cock is attributed to a male pronoun) convinces him to "snap out of it" and give his wife a sound beating. Since the man listened to his wife, he said, in one of the important quotes in *Arabian Nights*, "neither sense nor judgment" (14), which indicates that women destroy this characteristic in men. While one could speculate what the ultimate lesson inherent in stories such as this would be, the truth remains that there are still some feminist undertones at play. With so much emphasis put on the fact that women do have say in their husband's lives, even if they are beaten, it seems to be more in fear of losing control over "male faculties" than because of women's natural evil.

As the stories of *Arabian Nights* grow increasingly littered with misogynistic undertones, one has to wonder what Shahrazad's position is supposed to be. The king will grow to love her and keep her. Armed with this knowledge, it almost seems fair to assume that the final message concerns females winning power through intelligence and independence balanced with (rather than dominated by) a culturally coded submission to males. If that is true, then the final message of *Arabian Nights* is hopeful. One should remember that Shahrazad's main purpose with this strategy [of daily storytelling] is not procrastination. This could not be so: even she would eventually run out of stories. On the contrary, Shahrazad is narrating tales primarily to instruct the king (Heath 18). Through her stories in *Arabian Nights*, particularly those narrated in the first eight days, there is a clear distinction between what the king considers to be female based on his hatred and what Shahrazad considers it to be. Ultimately, through her lessons in the form of stories, she depicts women as not simply whores and tricksters, but as capable of wit, intelligence, and much more beyond sex and infidelity.

This paper shows that the role of Arab women is not as described in the tales of *Arabian Nights*.

Reality contradicts the representation of Arab women as slaves in Arab societies, because the role of Arab women is not limited to caring for the family. They participate with men in many of life's work. For example, Arwa al-Sulayhi has an almost unique position in history. Despite the presence of many female monarchs in the Islamic world, Arwa al-Sulayhi and Asma Bint Shehab were the only female monarchs in the Muslim Arab world to have had the khutba, the ultimate recognition of Muslim monarchical status, proclaimed in their name in the mosques. Arwa al-Sulayhi constructed several mosques, the most notable of which is Queen Arwa Mosque. Queen Balqees also ruled Yemen and followed the Kings of 'Humier'. Her armies defeated and invaded Babylon, Persia and Iraq, and she assigned rulers in these regions. She declared Yemen as the 'Kingdom of Sheba'.

In the *Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad gives a general impression of the role of women in some societies where women were not valued. As shown in the introduction of the tales, women were treated badly. The Sultan loves his wife, but finding that she has been unfaithfully, he executes her. The Sultan's behavior states that women are deceitful.

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