



The Reception of *The Arabian Nights* in World Literature

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Abstract

Through the last three centuries, *The Arabian Nights* has contributed to various literary styles in the field of the oriental tale. Being so, *The Arabian Nights* has been a subject of utilization, reversal, reformulation, parody, pastiche, and adaptation for many writers. In this paper, my focus will be on the direct and indirect influence of *The Arabian Nights* on diverse literary genres. Therefore, the study deals with the influence of *The Arabian Nights* on in world literature. It is literature review on a theoretical introduction of the importance of *The Arabian Nights* in world literature. It emphasizes its transformation into literary genres, namely, poetry, drama, novel, and the short story. It will also show some comparative critical theories on *The Arabian Nights*, especially concerning the oriental tale, narration techniques, and the socio-political continuum. Therefore, it introduces the outstanding literary aspects of *The Arabian Nights* which inspired different literary genres of different cultural backgrounds. Apparently, a number of poets, playwrights, and novelists pay indebtedness to the forms as well as the thematic styles of *The Arabian Nights*.

Key words: Direct influence; Indirect influence; *The Arabian Nights*; The oriental tale; Narration techniques; The socio-political continuum

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1. THE RECEPTION OF *THE ARABIAN NIGHTS* IN WORLD LITERATURE

The Arabian Nights, also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, is one of the most famous collections of stories in the world. At first, this Oriental work has been received in world literature since the eighteenth century through Antoine Galland's 1704 French translation of the work. It has been inspiring different world literary genres in its Oriental milieu and other foreign cultures since then.

In *Scheherazade Through the Looking Glass*, Eva Sallis talks about the early reception of *The Arabian Nights* in the west through Galland's translation. This reception had been characterized by different literary responses caused by its vague authorial identity. Consequently, the primary "ignorance" of the book's production had led to controversial judgment of its real author; Sallis comments:

The *Nights* was received in the absence of any such understanding, and the culture of its origin was subjected to extremes of prejudice and ignorance; indeed, for much of the first one hundred years of its popularity, prejudice and ignorance encouraged many to believe that Galland had invented the tales. (6)

As a result of this translation, *The Arabian Nights* has been influencing many world literary writers. Critics, therefore, have identified the utilization of its literary techniques, such as repetitive designation (foreshadowing), frame-story, and dramatic visualization, in the works of a wide variety of world writers. Repetitive designation technique, for example, appears in the tale of "The Three Apples," where a man mistakenly kills his wife suspecting her fidelity. Her corpse is accidentally found by a fisherman in a chest caught by his net. The chest is first disregarded by the fisherman. When he opens it, and finding the dead woman, he tells the Caliph Harun al-Rashid of the crime. After investigations, it comes true that the crime is plotted by the vizier's slave. The object

of the repetitive designation is the presenting an object, like the chest, as first unimportant, but through the events consequence, it gradually gets significance. Here, the importance of the chest foreshadows the crime-proof later on.

In "Magic and Transformation in Contemporary Literature and Culture," Marina Warner discusses the transformation of *The Arabian Nights*' gothic aspects in the present day "culture" and how such aspects correspond to the styles of contemporary literature. Warner says that "*The Arabian Nights* is one of the richest sources for the magical turn in contemporary cultures, where ghosts, jinns, vampires abound, ubiquity, shape-shifting, possession, and spellbinding are the order of the day" (8).

In *Nocturnal Poetics*, Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul discusses the manipulation of *The Arabian Nights*' styles by some world writers and poets in order to invent appropriate literary "sequels" to *The Arabian Nights*. For example, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Edgar Allan Poe perceived *The Arabian Nights* as a book of exceptional literary values, and the book's tales appealed to the ways of their writing styles; Ghazoul writes: "Adding, dropping, and reshuffling stories seem to be a temptation to any transmitter of *The Arabian Nights*. A number of writers indulged in writing sequels to *The Arabian Nights*, notably Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote a sardonic tale of the one thousand and second nights" (4).

Additionally, the literary quality of *The Arabian Nights* has appealed to a number of world literary adaptations. After Galland's translation, *The Arabian Nights* has been adapted into fictional and poetic genres. Frequently, different cultures show various responses to the literary legacy of *The Arabian Nights*. In "*The Arabian Nights* in Historical Context," Thomas Paul Bonfiglio argues that the reception of *The Arabian Nights* in the world paves the way to better understanding of Arabic literature among the world's arts. In this sense, *The Arabian Nights* functions as a means of cultural "language" between east and west; Bonfiglio argues that "the presence of *The Arabian Nights* in recent Arabic fiction circulates internationally and dialogues with many national literatures" (209).

The Arabian Nights has been exerting direct and indirect influence on literary genres. In *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, Newton Stallknecht and Horst Frenz argue that any comparative study usually observes the issue of "direct" and "indirect" influence. Literary works, Stallknecht and Frenz maintain, produce each other in a successive influence. This influence may result in shaping another work's characteristics: "One of the most complex problems in the study of literary influence is that of direct and indirect influence. An author may introduce the influence of a foreign author into a literary tradition" (94).

In their discussion of the concept of influence, Stallknecht and Frenz say that the "direct" influence

occurs through "unconscious" adoption. Influence, nevertheless, leads to new distinctive work via previous canonical works; Stallknecht and Frenz comment:

Influence shows the influenced author producing work which is essentially his own. Influence is not confined to individual details or images or borrowings or even sources—though it may include them— but is something pervasive, something organically involved in and presented through artistic works. (91)

2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS INTO LITERARY GENRES

As mentioned before, *The Arabian Nights* stands out as one of the extra-ordinary achievements in literature. A number of poets and writers contribute to their literary forms new artistic spirits influenced by *The Arabian Nights*. In this introduction, I will show the "direct" and "indirect" influence of *The Arabian Nights* on different literary genres of different cultures. In some cases, it has direct influence upon literary writers, like Naguib Mahfouz (Abu Jweid 92)

In England, *The Arabian Nights* has been exerting "direct" influence on Romantic poetry. *The Arabian Nights* was an inspiring book especially for the Romantic poets. In "On the Tale of Scheherazade," Antonia Susan Byatt says that *The Arabian Nights* influenced the works of some English Romantic poets. Moreover, these poets experimented with the "imaginative" literary styles of *The Arabian Nights* which enabled them to discontinue with the enlightenment's monotonous dependence on "rational" conventions; Byatt observes: "*The Arabian nights* stood for the wonderful against the mundane, the imaginative against the prosaically and reductively rational" (3).

Such canonical work also influences the authorial autobiographies (Abu Jweid 7). The influence of *The Arabian Nights* also appears in the Romantic poetry. Notably, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude. Book V*, and Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* are examples of the influence of *The Arabian Nights* on English Romantic poetry. David Parker *et al*, in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*, discuss the traces of *The Arabian Nights* in Wordsworth's *The Prelude. Book V*. *The Arabian Nights* is one of the richest literary sources on which Wordsworth relies: "The particular book to which Wordsworth gives most attention is *The Arabian Nights*" (52).

Southey, on the other hand, reflects his admiration of *The Arabian Nights* in his poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*. In "Robert Southey and English Interest in the Near East," Wallace Cable Brown maintains that Southey's purpose of writing such a poem portrays the English interest in the Near East during the eighteenth century. Southey does not resort to *The Arabian Nights* for artistic purposes. Instead, he depends on its textual depiction of life in the

“Near East.” Brown comments: “Although Southey was only indirectly interested in the Near East, his use of that region in one of his major poems, *Thalaba*, shows that he was by no means indifferent to its appeal” (218). The *Arabian Nights* also appears in the ambivalent aspects of literature works (Abu Jweid 14).

Additionally, *The Arabian Nights* influenced the English novel. Angela Carter is one of the postmodern novelists who have experimented with *The Arabian Nights*. Carter assigns *The Arabian Nights*’ stories a different representation in her novel *Nights at the Circus*. In “The Scheherazade Complex: the Importance of the Storyteller in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*,” Kevin Smith discusses the way in which Carter deconstructs the archetypal stories of *The Arabian Nights*. Smith contrasts between Scheherazade’s stories in *The Arabian Nights* and Fevvers’ stories in Carter’s novel; Smith argues:

Unlike *The Thousands and One Nights*, the stories embedded within Fevvers’ narrative are presented as actual events narrated by others, whereas in *The Thousands and One Nights* the stories told by Scheherazade are just stories and make no pretence as historical verifiability. (21)

In America, *The Arabian Nights* notably inspired short story writers. The American writer Edgar Allan Poe tried his hands to parody *The Arabian Nights*’ stories in his story “The Thousand-And-Second Tale of Scheherazade.” David Tomlinson, in “The Thousand-And-Second Tale of Scheherazade,” argues that Poe’s story “satirically” retells *The Arabian Nights*: “Edgar Allan Poe’s story is a satirical variation of the popular *Arabian Nights*” (1). Here, *The Arabian Nights* entails psychological attributes (Abu Jweid).

The American novelist Benjamin Buchholz is another writer who was influenced by *The Arabian Nights*. His novel *One Hundred and One Nights* pursues the distinctive storytelling style of *The Arabian Nights*. Being so, it imitates Scheherazade’s frame-tale technique. It recounts the story of Safwan -an Iraqi town- in the American war. In “Soldier Echoes *Arabian Nights* with Iraq Novel,” Elaine Lies argues that “The book’s [*One Hundred and One Nights*] echo of the great Middle Eastern epic, *The One Thousand and One Nights*, is deliberate, working with traditions of oral storytelling programmed into mankind through generations” (1).

In Australia, *The Arabian Nights* has stimulated the novelist David Foster, who attempts to follow *The Arabian Nights*’ narrative technique. His novel *Sons of the Rumour* imitates *The Arabian Nights*’ frame-tale. James Ley supports the idea of narrative techniques in Foster’s novel in his article “A Town Called Merv Brilliant Writing from the Quixotic David Foster.”

Ley argues that Foster’s novel utilizes some original technical characteristics, such as the frame narrative from *The Arabian Nights* and adapts them into his writing style; Ley maintains: “*Sons of the Rumour* bases itself on two

literary models. The first... is indeed *Arabian Nights*. The framing narrative, ‘Iranian Days,’ assumes the point of view of the Shahrban -more familiarly the Shahrayar- to whom Shahrazad tells her tales” (15). Furthermore, Ley scrutinizes the idea that narratives provide themes on the “spiritual” and material relationships in human life; Ley continues: “It is also very much an extension of the themes that have driven his [Foster’s] remarkable fiction for more than four decades. The novel is explicitly concerned with the interaction between the ‘Two Worlds’ of spirit and flesh” (15). *The Arabian Nights*, in this manner, has fantastic manners that influenced works, like Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (Abu Jweid and GhadaSasa 338)

In France, François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire represents the influence of *The Arabian Nights* on French literature. His *Candide* contains a number of allusions to the story of “Sinbad the Seaman.” In “Narrative Form and Style in *Candide*,” Honora Finkelstein argues that the influence of *The Arabian Nights* on Voltaire’s novel appears especially in its technical narratives; Finkelstein asserts that: “some models for the narrative structure of *Candide* probably include such early erotic narratives as Apulius’ “Golden Ass” and “Petronius Satyricon,” from second century Rome, and such Oriental narratives as *The Arabian Nights*” (1).

In Spain, the Spanish dramatist Calderon de la Barca is one of the world dramatists who were influenced by *The Arabian Nights*. Barca’s play *Life Is a Dream* represents an ideal “indirect” influence of *The Arabian Nights* on Spanish drama. This play is “directly” influenced by Shakespeare’s play *The Taming of the Shrew*. Accordingly, it takes its thematic aspects from *The Arabian Nights* through the Shakespearean play. Furthermore, this play is generally considered as an example of the Baroque age that accentuates the philosophical motif of the dichotomy between dream and reality. Furthermore, John Barth’s “Dunyazadiad” is explored as a parody of *The Arabian Nights* (Abu Jweid and Sasa 165).

Additionally, *The Arabian Nights* represents the reality/dream philosophical dichotomy in different tales like “**Nur Al-Din Ali and His Son Badr Al-Din Hasan.**” By adapting *The Arabian Nights*, Barca attempts to find the right solution to the skeptical nature of the Baroque age about life’s shortness. In “Pedro Calderon de la Barca’s play *Life Is a Dream*,” Guillermo Maynez supports the above-mentioned argument on the borrowing of this thematic concern with life and dream from Shakespeare, who celebrates the same thematic aspects; Maynez comments: “Combined with this in the plot is the tale of about Hassan from *The Arabian Nights*, the main situation in which are turned to farcical purposes in the Induction to the Shakespearean *Taming of the Shrew*” (1).

In addition, *The Arabian Nights* contributes to the great works of Latin American literature. Jorge Luis Borges is one of the outstanding writers who respond to the literary

styles of *The Arabian Nights*. He alludes to it in many works. In *The South*, for example, he refers directly to *The Arabian Nights*. In *Seven Nights*, he considers the “dream” world as a representation of “eternal” life’s experience. The themes of dreams and nightmares form essential parts of *The Arabian Nights*’ tales. *The Arabian Nights*, moreover, contributes to the regional characteristics of fictional writings (Abu Jweid 207).

In “Traces of *The Thousands and One Nights* in Borges,” Evelyn Fishburn says that Borges’s works are abundant with “explicit” allusions to *The Arabian Nights*: “The *Nights* are mentioned explicitly in several Borges stories: in “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “The Zahir,” “The Man on the Threshold,” “Brodie’s Report” and “The Book of Sand” while particular tales from the *Nights* are alluded to in others” (2).

The Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez has directly appreciated *The Arabian Nights*. As a result, *The Arabian Nights* inspired Marquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which exemplifies the magical realism genre. In “The Living Manuscript: The Reader as a Character in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,” Gustavo Arango discusses the influence of *The Arabian Nights* on Marquez’s novel. The literary construction of *The Arabian Nights*, like its “labyrinthine” structure, can be implicitly inferred in Marquez’s novel; Arango writes: “He [Marquez] had read the same book that three generations of his family had read before, ‘a crumbling book’ with fantastic legends whose title is never mentioned, but which we can infer was *The Arabian Nights*” (4). This is because *The Arabian Nights* reflects the fictional characters’ identity (Abu Jweid 230).

3. THE ORIENTAL TALE

The Arabian Nights has contributed to the field of the oriental tale. The oriental tale has stimulated the world’s literary productions. Many critical studies tackle the issue of *The Arabian Nights*’ oriental influence on different literary techniques. The frame-narrative technique is one of the technical features of *The Arabian Nights*. This technique predominates the textual structure of *Arabian Nights*. In “*The Arabian Nights* in English and Chinese Translations: Differing Patterns of Cultural Encounter,” Wen-chin Ouyang says that *The Arabian Nights*’ frame-tale has been adapted into the story genre: “The frame-within-frame narrative structure of the original Arabic *Nights* has given way to discreet stories organized in a linear fashion but in no particular order” (1).

Through employing literary elements, such as characterization, setting, and narrative, the oriental tale has been a depiction of man’s life. In “Flaubert: From Dervish to Saint,” Ghazoul argues that the “European” version of the oriental tale is a “pretext,” a “preface,” for

deconstructing stable artistic conventions. In this sense, the oriental tale functions as an innovative literary writing to represent the oriental world. Therefore, the “oriental tale” comprises any writing utilizing “eastern” features. Ghazoul comments: “What succeeds the ‘Oriental tale’ in Europe is a far richer narrative conflated with the eastern elements that goes beyond an Oriental varnish, coloring European motifs and fantasies, to embody the depth and profundity of the Orient” (230).

As a result, *The Arabian Nights* motivated a number of world authors to write in an oriental style. For example, Samuel Johnson’s *History of Rasselas* and Frances Sheridan’s *Nourjahad* directly utilize the oriental literary elements. These works, for example, exemplify the adaptation of the oriental tale into the eighteenth century fiction. In “Life After Pseudodeath: William Beckford’s *Vathek*,” Lawton Brewer discusses the influence of the oriental tale on the “gothic” aspects in the works of such eighteenth-century writers as Johnson and Sheridan; Brewer observes:

Like the gothic novel, the Oriental tale used foreign setting and situations that allowed the author to address familiar issues and locations directly. The early tales of this kind, such as Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Frances Sheridan’s *Nourjahad*, thinly disguised Western and even Christian concepts and attitudes in Middle Eastern Islamic attire. (171)

4. NARRATION TECHNIQUE

The great significance of *The Arabian Nights* in literature is indebted to the distinctive use of the narration technique. It employs different narrative devices that are still utilized in creating fictional works. Accordingly, authors of fiction imitated these devices in their works. In “Comparative Literature in the Arab World,” Ghazoul tackles the issue of the narrative “tradition” in the Arab world stimulated by the oral history of *The Arabian Nights*’ narrative technique; Ghazoul maintains:

The narrative tradition in the Arab world...is not as insular or self-contained. Whether formal narration recognized by the literary establishment [such as *Kalila wa-Dimna* by Ibn al-Muqafa’] or folktales which circulated orally and were recorded at a later stage [such as *The Thousand and One Nights*] the imprint of foreign and earlier cultures is incontestable. The manifold contributions of other narrative traditions [Indian, Persian, ancient Middle Eastern, Byzantine and Hellenistic] are recognized in Arabic story-telling. But narration as a literary phenomenon only rarely engaged the analytical and reflective minds of medieval Arabs. (114-15)

In *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation*, Richard Van Leeuwen talks about the “real” and “metaphorical” elements of *The Arabian Nights*. Narrative structures, such as “embedded” narratives and frame-tale, form the whole structure of *The Arabian Nights*’ stories; Leeuwen argues:

The work is constructed as a frame with a series of embedded stories, it describes a process of initiation, it contains the 'sense of an ending' with all its implications, it contains a death-threat, an alteration of 'real' and metaphorical episodes, and techniques aimed at the 'delay of gratification.' (9)

In *Story-Telling Techniques in The Arabian Nights*, David Pinault tackles the narrative techniques of *The Arabian Nights*. Pinault focuses on the dramatic visualization technique as one of the "leitmotifs" which *The Arabian Nights* celebrates. Pinault defines this technique as "the representing of an object or character with abundance of descriptive detail, or the mimetic rendering of gestures and dialogues in such a way as to make the given scene 'visual' or imaginatively present to an audience" (25). Furthermore, Pinault argues that dramatic visualization appears in most *Arabian Nights*' tales to "motivate the sense of impression" in the reader; Pinault further contends: "Throughout the *Alf Laylah* dramatic visualization is reserved especially for scenes which form the heart of a given narrative" (28). The narrative technique of *The Arabian Nights* contributes to the metafictional peculiarities of fictional writings (Abu Jweid, Termizi, and Majeed 73)

5. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTINUUM

Moreover, *The Arabian Nights* has a number of socio-political implications. This thematic feature has been treated seriously in literary studies regarding its influence on literary works. This is due to the fact that it has allegorical political features (Abu Jweid and Kaur 10). In "Political Thought in *The Thousand and One Nights*," Robert Irwin argues that the political figures of *The Arabian Nights* are utilized as an incarnation of the real political systems to elude the direct criticism of "authority." Such political figures are exemplified, for example, in Harun al-Rashid's character; Irwin writes:

The emblem of this terrible power is the black executioner who, in the *Nights*, is shown to be in constant attendance on Harun al-Rashid. Nearness to supreme power is perilous. The constant care of the ordinary subjects is to avoid the attention of authority. (5)

In "The Utility of Islamic Imagery in the West," J. A. Proglar argues that the passive political Muslim "images" badly affects the Muslim socio-political life. This problem can be avoided by strengthening the connection between the "imagery" and "action" and fortifying the active political practices: "Often, there are tragic consequences for Muslims resulting from the socio-political climate fostered by images. Focusing on the dimension of utility can help to reveal some ties between imagery and action" (1). *The Arabian Nights*, in some other cases, includes dystopian political themes (Abu Jweid 102).

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