

INTRODUCTION

THE COLLECTION OF TALES OF ALF LAYLA WA LAYLA, LITERALLY translated as ‘A Thousand Nights and a Night’, or ‘The Thousand and One Nights’, also known as ‘The Arabian Nights’, is one of the great and most celebrated world literatures. The *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 1: xxiii) states that no other work of fiction of non-Western origin has had a greater impact on Western culture than the Arabian Nights. Irwin (1994: 290–1) comments that it is perhaps easier to name the few writers who have not been influenced by the Arabian Nights in Western literature than the ones who have; because the list is almost all. In fact, this literature was an inspiration to Goethe in his conceptualization of world literature. Measured by its ability to move beyond its culture of origin, across time and space, the Thousand and One Nights is one of the quintessential examples of world literature, by becoming one of the most globalized and circulated literary texts. Stories from this work have influenced medieval European literature, long before its first translation into French in 1704 by Galland (Amer 2008; Marzolph 2007).

The success of *Alf Layla wa Layla* as a world literature rests on at least two criteria: the orientalist adoption of the narrative and the greatness of the literary text itself. Malti-Douglas (1997: 41) affirms that ‘It can justifiably be said that the Thousand and One Nights to be as much a part of Western literary and cultural traditions as it is of the Eastern ones. The European language translations helped provide the *Nights* with a permanent position in world literature.’ The orientalist enterprise in this regard is hardly surprising, considering that the text itself is a product of several literary and cultural interactions and, therefore, the European interest in these tales signifies a natural continuity to an inevitable, and quite desirable, intertextuality and interculturality. These modes of literary interactions are better

represented by popular culture and literature than by canonical literature that often put resistance to foreign influences.

Moreover, the *Thousand and One Nights* is fortunate that the European literary elites are working in an environment with an increasingly global and cross-cultural curiosity, outlook, and perceptions. Within this context, and in a process of establishing a more inclusive canonical literature, space is created for folk tales, not only for the Western but also non-Western traditions. Hence, the concept of world literature is born and established. Yet, *Alf Layla wa Layla* did not benefit from similar orientations by the established elites of the medieval Middle East. Perhaps one should not expect a contrary outcome here, considering the differences in outlooks between modern and medieval society.

Discernibly, the elites of the modern Middle East who live in a modern and global world do not necessarily benefit from any historical gap of outlook. The region continues to disregard this literature either as a collection of trivial stories for children, or an obscene text disseminating pornography that should be banned. Apart from the literary disdain, either this work is banned or constantly confronting attempts of banning it with excuses of being ‘offensive to public decency’ or destroying the youth and spreading vice. Ironically, the region is forbidding a literary text that has been produced by the same culture and widely considered as an important part of world literature. Yet, this is hardly surprising considering that how a society or a culture regards, appreciates, and interacts with its literature is a function of whether democratic and inclusive social values are cherished or affronted. Hence, the destiny of the *Thousand and One Nights* is contingent on the road the Middle East is taking. Appreciating this literary work would undoubtedly be an indication of the right direction.

However, the European adoption of the *Arabian Nights* has proved to be mutually beneficial. Apart from enriching literary achievements and influencing almost all writers in the Western world, this literature has made a valuable contribution to advancing issues of gender and sexuality in the West. The role of *Shahrazad* as a symbol of gender resistance to patriarchy has inspired women and feminist tendencies in the West. No similar impact has been witnessed in the Middle East where patriarchal values are still prevalent, yet with little resistance. The European translations, particularly the role of Burton and his unexpurgated version of the *Arabian Nights*, have contributed to the creation of a new and more inclusive sexual discourse, including homosexuality and pornography, against a Victorian background of social conservatism and sexual rigidity. Burton’s translation of these tales and other sexual manuals was one the most visible and widely controversial

forms of obscenity in the later nineteenth century because it was produced and consumed by the intellectual, economic, and political elites (Colligan 2006: 57). These translations were cultural magnets for early discussions on pornography and homosexuality (87). Burton's subversive use of the Arabian Nights against strict sexual morality could be an inspiration for Middle Easterners who still live in a sexual and gender reality not very different from nineteenth-century Europe.

The other benchmark for the popularity of this literature is the greatness of its literary styles and the variety of themes and motifs integrated into these tales. Obviously, the work must have appealed to the artistic sensibilities of medieval Arabs and modern Europeans to gain such wide circulation (Ghazoul 1996: 12). It is remarkable that a text, which is neither sacred nor canonical, can overpower and interpenetrate so many cultural and literary systems (150). The strength and spirit of this work is the constant reversion from myth to the real and from the real to myth (Matarasso 1982: 28). Originating during the Islamic Golden Age, this work was second to the Qur'an in being the most influential body of work in the Islamic world (Damrosch 2011: 606).

One of the great merits of this literature is that it reflected its social environment visibly. These fascinating, powerful, and complex tales address questions of social existence in its complexity. Miquel (1997: 6) contends that the Arabian Nights shows a glimpse of culture and society in the medieval Arab world. All social classes are represented, from the Bedouin to the caliph, including scholars, poets, merchants, fishermen, bandits, and the idle. It is a witness, a reflection of its society and not a deliberate act of the storyteller (10). Naithani (2004: 278) concurs by saying that these are tales of human characters and society – be they king or beggar, master or slave, man or woman, virtuous or vile, realistic or magical, thief or saint. They are stories about human beings and their relationships, their capabilities, their desires, their true and false sense of value, their power, and their weaknesses. Abbott (1949: 133) affirms that the narrative eloquently expresses the complexity of the human character and the dynamism of social life and its diluted, fluid, mercurial boundaries between different opposites and orientations. Indeed, Dunyazad tells her sister Shahrazad, 'If you are not asleep, relate to me the tale which you promised me and quote striking examples of the excellencies and shortcomings, the cunning and stupidity, the generosity and avarice, and the courage and cowardice that are in man, instinctive or acquired or pertaining to his distinctive characteristics or to courtly manners.'

Finke (1996: 353) debates that literary texts, like any other ideological texts, exist in a complex relation both to other texts and to the social conditions

of their creation. They reflect, but also in turn shape, those social conditions in a process that is, finally, dialogic. The Thousand and One Nights is indeed a mirror that reflects the social aspects of the Middle Ages (Farag 1976: 202). The tales are a testimony to the movement and navigation among religious, regions, ethnicities, and nations, demonstrating its universal appeal (Musawi 2009: 21). Grossman (1980: 114) argues that the story of Shahryar and Shahrazad presents in an early form the problem that the recognition of female subjectivity has set for male-dominated cultures. While the *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 II: 535) states that this work is among the most important texts for our knowledge about jinn.

One of the many merits of this literature is that it captures the dynamism of social changes as society develops. The Arabian Nights is a product of the Golden Age of Arabic and Islamic civilization, witnessing great territorial expansions, expanding trade, economic prosperity, higher wealth and incomes, impressive process of urbanization, intellectual refinement, and scholarship. Grossman (1980: 114–15) establishes, ‘It has been widely recognized that prose fiction as a genre is historically associated with the development and fortunes of the differentiated (or detribalized) individual consciousness. Typically, fiction has first risen in urban environments where individual mobility and social freedom were expanded and where interchange between different cultures enabled a new perspective on traditional cultural imperatives.’ Irwin (1994: 121) specifies that the Arabian Nights are urban stories, written for the most part by people in the cities about people in the cities for people in the cities.

One of the great emerging and rapidly developing urban centres was Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic civilization in its apogee, where Alf Layla wa Layla was born. Founded in 762, it rapidly became a big, prosperous, and cosmopolitan city. It became one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the world (Lapidus 2002: 56). The seat of the great Abbasid empire, it developed into a centre of politics and international trade accompanied by an advanced banking system, and extensive systems of hospitals, schools, libraries, and a thriving scholarship and religious, intellectual, and literary expressions. Urban expansion and the influx of people increased its population to reach a level of one million in the ninth century (Clot 1986: 152). It is suggested that Baghdad contained 60,000 mosques, where the storytellers, *qasass*, who played an important role in medieval life, practised their skills in their courtyards. It also contained 60,000 bathhouses, *hammam*, playing an important social role (168). Baghdad, the centre of the vast Muslim empire, is ‘mythical in its very reality’ (Bencheikh 1997: 24). The *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 II: 486) mentions

that Baghdad is among the most characteristic settings for the stories of the Arabian Nights, particularly the anecdotes about the Abbasid caliphs and their boon companions, giving a vivid picture of the life and manners of the capital's elite. They show a sophisticated court culture that is supported by wealthy patrons fostering literature, learning, and music, and dedicated to luxurious pastimes. In these stories, the depiction of Baghdad is sufficiently detailed to suggest that the stories originated in Baghdad itself. Other great urban cities appearing in the narrative include Basra, Cairo, and Damascus.

Opulence connected to expanding empire and trade has resulted in a rich intellectual life in the urban centres of the Middle East, particularly the capital of the empire. The golden age was characterized by the expansion of higher learning and intellectual culture, and the caliphs often relied on and sought the counsel of men of science and arts. This wonderful age is often associated with the legendary Caliph Harun al-Rashid (ruled 786–809), who is often mentioned in the Arabian Nights as a good and enlightened ruler. His equally open-minded son Caliph al-Ma'mun (ruled 813–33), who was a great patron of philosophy and science, established an academy in Baghdad, *Bayt al-Hikma*, House of Wisdom, a library and translation centre, employing many scholars. Scholars enjoyed a privileged status, and many rulers fostered in their courts circles of scholars who assembled occasionally to hold debates and discussions (Talmon 1999: 120). Not only had the caliphs been patronizing learned men but also the notables and viziers, like the Barmakides family (Clot 1986: 140; Lane 1987: 115). A distinctive court culture in Baghdad emerged in the ninth century (H. Kennedy 2008: 176). This development has led to a flourishing and refined urban culture, fostering the development of arts, literature, the sciences, theology, and other intellectual pursuits (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 II: 466). Libraries and bookshops were important intellectual meeting-places, for residents and travellers. The bookdealers' market, *Suq al-Warraqin*, in tenth-century Baghdad contained 100 booksellers. Some of these shops doubled as subscription libraries or as literary salons and many branched out into the manufacture of paper and the copying of manuscripts. Literary salons flourished, playing a crucial role in the transmission of literary and historical knowledge (Irwin 1999: 150).

It is this intellectual environment that has produced the *Alf Layla wa Layla* as well as other literary literature. Much of this literature falls under the category of erotica, addressing various sexual issues. During the medieval period, two quite distinct types of texts about sexuality flourished in the Arabo-Islamic textual tradition: anecdotal collections containing sections about sexual activities, and erotic manuals replete with sexual information (Malt-Douglas 2001: 125). Apart from mentioning the work of the Thousand and

One Nights, the tenth-century bookseller and cataloguist Ibn al-Nadim (d. 990) also mentions in his *Catalogue of Books*, *kitab al-fihrist*, several erotological literary sources. This catalogue reveals a remarkable interest in all aspects of sexual activity in earliest Arabic writings. Al-Saymari and al-Tahiri wrote treatises about different sexual matters (Roth 1996: 320).

Flourishing medieval erotic literature included works by Nasr al-Katib, al-Tusi, al-Tifashi, al-Nafzawi, ibn Fatila, and ibn Kamal-Pasha (Reynolds 2006b: 252). Ibn Daniyal wrote a shadow play discussing sex, drinking, and hashish (Rowson 2008: 215). Erotic literature also included works by al-Suyuti, ibn Tayfur, al-Qazwini, and al-Sanaw'al al-Maghribi (Hämeen-Anttila 2014). The Abbasid secretary Rashid al-Katib wrote his poetry of *ayriyat*, a collection of poems on the penis, in the early ninth century (Papoutsakis 2014: 101). Most of ibn Tayfur's ninth-century treatise on women's eloquence is devoted to what women have had to say in prose or verse about the merits and inadequacies of their husbands, containing either the erotic or the obscene (Hammond 2014: 255). Al-Baghdadi wrote an erotic treatise exclusively regarding women (Irwin 1994: 165). Another collection of anecdotes with a strong sexual content and highly erotic tales appeared in the tenth century, *al-Hikayat al-Ajiba*, *Tales of the Marvellous* (163). Thus, the Arabian Nights had to compete with books dedicated to pornography, in the form either of sex manuals or of collections of exclusively erotic tales (164). It is a truism that sex usually makes a good story, particularly when the sexual encounter is illicit (Marzolph 2015: 190).

During the medieval time, erotic themes were discussed with ease and erotic anecdotes were told in respectable, learned sources. Likewise, manuals of Islamic law seem to discuss sexual behaviour as dispassionately as any other subject (Hämeen-Anttila 2014: 14). Medieval Arabic erotic manuals remained within the sphere of court literature and were written by competent authors and read by cultured readers (21). The *Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 II: 700) mentions that the aim of this genre of books is to stimulate a healthy sexual life between partners that will secure matrimonial harmony and regulate passions and desires. The texts contain information on the physical aspects of the sexual organs, coitus, pregnancy, instruction for sexual satisfaction, aphrodisiacs, cosmetics, and methods of abortion. They discuss homosexuality, prostitution, and the respective advantages of young men and women. This permissiveness reflects the life of the urban elite under the Abbasid caliphs, whose luxury, refinement, and pleasures are elaborately described in literary sources.

It is this medieval libertine environment where the Thousand and One Nights was born. The narrative went into an extensive literary interaction

and intertextuality with a flourishing erotic literature, in both directions. There is an overlap in content in anecdotes included in erotic literature and the Arabian Nights (Marzolph and Leeuwen 2004 II: 468). There is a great deal of borrowing between the Thousand and One Nights and Arabic folk romances (Irwin 1994: 88–9). The Thousand and One Nights may be viewed as a microcosm of medieval Arabic and, to some degree, Islamic popular literature (Heath 1987–8 I: 4).

The magnificent and outstanding medieval Islamic-Arabic literature of the wonderful tales collection of the Thousand and One Nights did not attain the academic attention that it indubitably deserves. The 300 years anniversary of the first European translation of this work has triggered some academic interest in this collection. However, most of the research on this narrative has focused on the genesis, sources of these tales, and the merit or demerit of its translations to other languages. Undoubtedly, these issues are important, yet it is time to take a further step into studying other, equally important aspects of the narrative. A profound and comprehensive exploration of the complexity of sexual life and the intricacies of gender relations, roles, and constructs is utterly lacking in the literature. This is a hapless outcome considering that sexual and gender topics are overwhelmingly dominant in the entire collection of tales. The narrative is a treasure for studies of sexuality and gender and an excellent text for exploring various facets of perceptions of sexual and gender interactions as well as the relationship between literature and gender. While the narrative is about medieval sexual life, many of the themes and motifs addressed are stupendously pertinent to modern society. Sexuality and gender in the Arabian Nights is highly relevant to the Middle East, a region still struggling with violent and unpleasant gender construct, engulfed in many sexual taboos and a culture of the forbidden.

By consciously circumventing engaging in the contentious and still unsettled debate about the genesis of the stories, which story originally belongs, or does not belong, to the Arabian Nights and the merit of their various translations, this work provides a comprehensive mapping of the entire sexual narrative in this collection of tales. It delivers a thorough exploration of the rich, dynamic, and complex sexual life in the medieval Middle East as represented in the marvellous tales of the Thousand and One Nights. This examination is enriched by employing a comparative perspective with medieval canonical and folktale literature from the Middle East, Europe, and Africa.

Studying sexuality, a fundamental facet of human existence, furnishes knowledge about cultural and social beliefs and outlooks. This narrative communicates a rather rich sexual life in the medieval era and more relaxed

and open-minded sexual and gender outlooks and perceptions where sexual pleasure is highly cherished and coveted. Perceptibly, this sexual awareness and attitude are what the modern Middle East needs to re-indigenize, or re-internalize in an overdue drive to humanize and normalize sexual life and to enjoy sexual pleasure like the people of the *Alf Layla wa Layla* once did.

Structure of the Book

This book contains twelve chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1, 'Alluring Sexuality', highlights the significance of sexuality in social life and how curiosity, positive outlook, and active participation of women are pertinent to sexuality. It looks at various sources of sexual outlet, including gender mixing, slave-girls, eunuchs, and prostitution. It also pinpoints risks associated with sexual life. Chapter 2, 'Inexorable Sexuality', illustrates how enthralling sexuality is destined to be inescapable in social life, and that to fulfil their sexual desires, people overcome many obstacles, including distance, gender tension, and various barriers.

Chapter 3, 'Insatiable Lust', discusses the perceived unquenchable and voracious sexual yearning of women, extending to promiscuity, desire for large penises, and practices of bestiality, and how this perception is related to concerns about male sexuality. Chapter 4, 'Demonic Sexuality', sketches the sexual and romantic interaction between humans and jinn in both its forms of voluntary and violent relations, and the contrast between the bad and good jinn, as well as the rationalization of the world of jinn. Chapter 5, 'Rape and Incest', describes violent and taboo aspects of sexuality, including cases of rape, rape as politics, and incestuous relationships.

Chapter 6, 'Promiscuous Life', maps the promiscuity of sexual life in forms of both polygamy and polyandry, including multiple sexual bonding, the harem, and having intermediary husbands. Chapter 7, 'Transgressive Adultery', observes the misdemeanours of attempts of adultery, including royal adulteries, in conjunction with a culture of suspicion of women and hasty accusations of women. Chapter 8, 'Sexual Perfidy', scans various modalities of punishing sexual transgression, including femicide. It elucidates that infidelity is also linked to fortune as well as the significance of testing fidelity in amorous and sexual liaisons. Chapter 9, 'Tales of Cuckoldry', examines the intricate duplicity life of having husbands and lovers simultaneously, and the sophisticated levels of cunning and deceitfulness used in treacherous affairs.

Chapter 10, 'Lesbian Encounter', scrutinizes lesbian experiences and their relatedness to heterosexuality, stigmatization of lesbian tendencies particularly in a context of otherness, transsexuality and cross-gender

dressing and their relationship to homosexual intimacy. Chapter 11, ‘Tempting Pederasty’, investigates the complex world of pederasty, its distinction from male homosexuality, its relative excellence compared to heterosexuality, and the involvement of women in pederastic tendencies. It considers pederasty in relation to the economic activity of trade, and the admiration of male beauty in conjunction with Sufi mysticism, wine drinking, and obscene poetry, particularly the influential role of Abu Nuwas. Chapter 12, ‘Hedonistic Narrative’, presents the unequivocally explicit sexual accounts involving homoerotic games, sexual verbal games, and stories of sexual intercourse, fun, and pleasure.