

## **The Changing Value of *The Thousand and one Nights* and its Influence on Modern and Contemporary Arabic Literature\***

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There are few pieces of literature that have achieved such great international fame as *The Thousand and One Nights* or, in Arabic, *Alf layla wa layla*. Since its first appearance in the European environment in 1704, it has never ceased to inspire writers, poets, composers, painters and film makers all over the world. We will hardly find any other literary work that has contributed to the creation of so many masterpieces like those of Wordsworth, Shelley, Pushkin, Balzac, Goethe, Poe, Joyce, Márquez, Korsakov, Matisse or Chagall, to name only a few. It is not only by coincidence that around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the collection was called “the fairy godmother of the English novel”<sup>1</sup>.

Unfortunately, the first appearance of the collection in twelve volumes in Europe under the name *Les Mille et Une Nuits, contes arabes traduits en français*, (vol. I–X, 1704–1712; vol. XI, XII, 1717), which we owe to French Orientalist Antoine Galland (1646–1715), turned out to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has shaped world literature and arts, so its cultural contribution for humankind is immense. It gave rise to various new styles of writing; for example, embedding has become one of the favourite narrative instruments of many contemporary writers. Gothic novels, magical realism, science fiction, detective stories, and many more genres partially owe their existence to *The Thousand and One Nights*.

On the other hand, Galland’s translation is not a proper one; rather we can call it an adaptation of the Syrian manuscript from the 15<sup>th</sup> century that was

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<sup>1</sup> AL-MUSAWI, *Scheherazade’s Nonverbal Narrative*, pp. 338–339.

then at his disposal. Galland, playing the role of “his own Shahrazād”<sup>2</sup>, took the original stories from the manuscript, abridged them, paraphrased them and adjusted them to European tastes. The French translation also contained some other stories from different manuscripts or various oral sources, like the ones about *Sindibād the Sailor*, *Alā’ ad-Dīn and a Wonderlamp*, or *Alī Bābā and Forty Thieves*, that had nothing to do with the original text of *The Thousand and One Nights*<sup>3</sup>.

The collection was a tremendous success. Galland’s approach showed the way for many other translators and editors, who marginalized the content of the original stories and disregarded the qualities of the text. They were constantly modifying, simplifying and reshaping them over and over again. This is perhaps the main reason why most people know the stories as nothing more than fairy tales for children.

It is disputable whether we are to criticize Galland for this approach, for it was not for the first time that the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* had been modified, shortened, excluded or added to the already existing volume. The character of the collection is highly multicultural; its origin is probably Persian, although the type of the frame-narrative is Indian and there are also many Jewish, Greek, and of course, Arabic stories from different regions<sup>4</sup> and historical periods<sup>5</sup>. As Baghdadi bookseller Ibn an-Nadīm (died 995/998) put it in 987 in his book *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (The Catalogue), at that time it was very common to translate stories from foreign sources into Arabic. Afterwards, if the translated story was good enough, it was the professional storytellers’ turn to rework it, polish it and to transmit it to their audience in an Arabized way<sup>6</sup>. Editors of the manuscripts were later doing the very same thing – they were adding stories they considered interesting, removing tiresome details and lengthy dialogues, changing the sequence of the stories and improving the narrative techniques. It was often the editor’s tale-telling talent that mattered in

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<sup>2</sup> KABBANI, *The Arabian Nights as an Orientalist Text*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> CHRAÏBI, *Texts of The Arabian Nights and Ideological Variation*, pp. 149–150.

<sup>4</sup> We distinguish between several “layers” of the collection; the oldest one is “Indo-Persian” and another is “Baghdadi”, which mainly contains stories about Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd and his vizier Ja‘far al-Barmakī. The most recent layer is called “Cairene” and it mostly comprises stories from the period of the rule of the Ayyūbid dynasty (1171–1250) and stories from the Mamlūk era (1250–1517).

<sup>5</sup> YAMANAKA – NISHIO, *Arabian Nights and Orientalism*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> EL-SHAMY, *The Oral Connections of the Arabian Nights*, p. 10.

the end and not the stories *per se*<sup>7</sup>. This is primarily why we can find several printed editions of the manuscripts, each of them being slightly different<sup>8</sup>.

However, there could be no doubt that all those frequent modifications have deformed fundamental features of Oriental folk literature and led to the distorted view of not only the collection itself, but of the whole Arabic culture as well. Sadly, the image of *The Thousand and One Nights*, as it has remained in our minds, is often just sort of a shiny but tawdry hybrid<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, most people are simply unaware of the importance of the collection as well as of the tremendous impact on the literature it has had. Were not for *The Thousand and One Nights*, world literature in all its shapes and forms, including all the styles and tendencies, would probably never exist.

#### POPULAR AND YET UNPOPULAR?

The popularity of the collection of *The Thousand and One Nights* among Western writers is undeniable. But as far as the Arabic countries are concerned, the situation was completely different. Arabic intellectuals neither paid much attention to the collection, nor did they attach great importance to it. To them it was simply a book of bizarre folk stories circulating among common people; amusing as they may seem, there was no artistic value to them. Never did they consider the collection to be their cultural heritage. As proof of this, we might recall Ibn an-Nadīm's mention of the collection in his *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, who deemed it "truly a coarse book, without any warmth in the telling"<sup>10</sup>.

As early as in pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a long tradition of the refined and polished literary style, with poetry being the most exalted form of art. The works of the best poets, like those of Imru' al-Qays, were often imitated. The structure of poems, metre and figurative language were all very strict and invariable for a long time. Even the emergence of Islam did not change much of the fixed system. Furthermore, artists started copying the style of the holy *Qur'ān*, which is even today considered one of the most exquisite ones. Poetry with its

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<sup>7</sup> PINAULT, *Bulaq, Macnaghten, and the New Leiden Edition Compared*, pp. 129–130.

<sup>8</sup> The most reliable ones are the Būlāq edition from 1835, printed in Cairo and the "Calcutta I" and "Calcutta II" editions from 1839–1842, edited by W. Macnaghten. The already mentioned Syrian manuscript that served as a model for Galland's translation was edited by Muḥsin Mahdī and published in 1984 in Leiden. There are also other editions, but they are considered to be less reliable.

<sup>9</sup> PAULINY, *Tisíc a jedna noc*, I, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> AL-NADĪM, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm*, pp. 713–714.

“high” literary genres like *ghazal*, *muwashshah* or *qaṣīda* ruled the Arabic world for centuries, while prose played only a minor role. When we think about the position of *The Thousand and One Nights* in Arabic literature in this context, taking into account its simple and often faulty language full of colloquialisms, the attitude of the intellectuals makes more sense. After all, there was a similar tendency in the West, since the value of folk literature had long been belittled in Europe as well, as writers and scholars did not pay it the proper attention it certainly deserved.

Despite the common Western and Eastern tendency to marginalize folk literature, the turning point in the Arabic world came much later than in Europe. As far as it goes, this change was preceded by a lot of phenomena like the beginnings of colonialism, commercial and educational development, technical progress and Western literary influence. A breakthrough came with the modernistic rule of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha (1805–1848), who in his effort to transform Egypt into an autonomous and powerful state instituted radical reforms in the military, economic and cultural spheres. He restored commercial and cultural contacts with European countries and started sending promising students abroad to study technical sciences and foreign languages so that they could translate various scientific, military and other practical texts into Arabic. Later, they also began translating European *belles lettres* and these translations had a crucial influence on further Arabic literary development. The period of dramatic modernization of Egypt resulted in what is called *an-Nahḍa* or the Arabic cultural and literary renaissance<sup>11</sup>.

There were two major literary tendencies visible during the *an-Nahḍa* period. Both of them were caused by exogenous factors, but the results were totally opposite. The main driving force concerning the first tendency was an inspiration by Western literature and culture. Since the forms of Western literary tradition were penetrating deeper and deeper into the Arabic world via intellectuals and scholars studying abroad, we can call it a centripetal tendency. All those factors originated outside the Arabic world and influenced the development of Arabic literary genres and literature as such. Arabic literary tradition has not known dramatic genres, short stories, novellas or novels. They all came from the West. And if we take into account that by that time the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* had already conquered all Europe and its literature had been strongly affected by them, the penetrating of Western literature into

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<sup>11</sup> OLIVERIUS, *Moderní literatury arabského východu*, pp. 7–13.

the Arabic world paradoxically brought the collection of the folk stories back to the cradle of its birth. Arabic writers recognized the impact of folk literature on modern European authors. One of the most prominent personalities of Arabic literature, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, found it highly significant that the works of the most important classical and modern European writers like Euripides, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Corneille, Molière, Voltaire, Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Sartre, Camus and Ionesco were inspired by folk literature, myths and legends, not only by European or Ancient Greek ones, but by the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* as well<sup>12</sup>.

The second tendency, although caused by exogenous factors as well, led to a very different result. The influence of Western culture was day by day growing stronger and people were afraid of losing their cultural identity and they strived to preserve their religious, linguistic, literary and cultural heritage – *turāṭ*<sup>13</sup>. Thus, authors were trying to find inspiration in classical “high” Arabic genres like *qaṣīda*, *maqāma*, or *adab*. Although the tendency somehow tried to be centrifugal (or at least a reversal of the centripetal influence of Western literature), it simply would not work. Authors finally realized that they could not forever recycle classical pieces of literature and try to stick to the old aesthetic values when the reality around them had changed dramatically. What once held was not valid anymore. Literature had to be transformed; there was no other way of being true to oneself. Finally, some of the writers turned to their oral tradition and were surprised to find really valuable heterogeneous material, suitable for further literary utilization. Anyway, the first impulse towards a modernistic and scientific approach to the folk literary heritage in the *an-Nahḍa* period happened no sooner than in the 1920s. One of the first pioneers in this field was without any doubt Suhayr al-Qalamāwī (1911–1997), who wrote the first dissertation about *The Thousand and One Nights* under the supervision of the prominent Arabic writer and scholar Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973). The origin of the collection was researched scientifically for the first time in Arabic history<sup>14</sup>.

#### A THOUSAND AND ONE WAYS TO REWRITE THE STORIES

The motifs, themes and elements that have been distilled from *The Thousand and One Nights* into writers’ works are of a different character. One of the

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<sup>12</sup> AN-NAJĀR, *Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm wa al-adab ash-sha‘bī*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> ZEMÁNEK, *Vývoj arabštiny*, pp. 161–174.

<sup>14</sup> MARZOLPH – VAN LEEUWEN – WASSOUF, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, pp. 683–687.

reasons for this could be that the collection itself contains miscellaneous material. We can find there both short and long stories, spiritual and erotic ones, simple fairy tales for children and elaborate philosophical narratives, comedies and tragedies. As far as the narrative techniques are concerned, they are also manifold (e.g. embedding, perspectivization, self-reflection, a complicated relationship between poetry and prose, interior monologue, etc.)<sup>15</sup>, and it is solely up to authors to choose the theme or narration that suits them best.

Different authors use different techniques and follow different objectives in their works, so we differentiate several types of intertextuality concerning the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*. The first typology of intertextuality is based on the opposition between explicit vs. implicit intertextuality, though their overlapping is nothing unusual. Explicit intertextuality encompasses any direct connection with the collection of folk stories, including the characters, their names, fragments of plot and parts of the individual episodes as well as a direct reference to the name of the collection in the title of the work.

Implicit intertextuality is a more complicated phenomenon. It is not expressed directly; it is not that obvious and its elements might be more difficult to identify in a text. We are talking mainly about a specific type of narrator, an embedded narrative, and sort of a labyrinthine story with innumerable characters whose lives overlap and they often travel through time and space. The elements and motives are sometimes obscure and would often remain unnoticed, so an in-depth analysis and careful comparative techniques are required to reveal them.

The second opposition is based on the objective of the intertextuality used. In other words, we differentiate between whether the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* are used for primary purposes or just a secondary or metaphorical function. Some authors use the wide range of topics from the collection and simply rewrite them in order to amuse their readers or to raise emotions. Thus, their aim is mainly aesthetic. Writers often choose one or more stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* and simply transform them into dramatic, novelistic or poetic form. This interpretation of the stories was characteristic of the early works of Arabic writers, like Mārūn an-Naqqāsh's comedy *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Muǧaffal aw Hārūn ar-Rashīd*

On the contrary, authors often use the collection of the folk stories as their primary source in their own work, but by doing so they are pursuing their own

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<sup>15</sup> GHAZOU, *Nocturnal Poetics*, p. 151.

objectives. Writers often try to point out certain social phenomena or problems. They criticize the political regime in the country, or parodize various institutions, subjects and topics; sometimes they do not spare even the primary source of their work itself – i. e. their cultural heritage and oral tradition.

Of course, authors frequently use the combination of two or more types of intertextuality, but it has to be said that intertextuality with a secondary function occurs more than other types. This trend to use elements from *The Thousand and One Nights* in a symbolic or allegorical way seems to be strongly connected with the censorship that has long prevailed in many countries.

#### SHAHRAZĀD: A MYTHOLOGICAL WOMAN OR AN EARLY FEMINIST?

When analyzing the themes, motives and elements from the *Alf layla wa layla*, it is the character of Shahrazād that has inspired writers the most. Her literary character has been formed and shaped by various political, economic, social and cultural influences, like the European power struggle with the Ottoman Empire, colonialism, anti-colonialism and fights for autonomy and freedom or globalization. Her character has been constantly changing over the course of time. Once a paragon of chastity, she has evolved into an alluring seducer. A prisoner turned into a liberator and an oppressed woman suddenly becoming a symbol of the freedom of speech<sup>16</sup>.

A founding father of modern Egyptian drama, the prominent Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm was one of the first Arabic writers to be inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights*. Although his literary *oeuvre* is quite extensive (besides drama he wrote novels, short stories and literary critiques as well), he is known mostly as a dramatist. His influence on both modern Arabic theatre and the reception of the folk stories among the Arabic intellectual elite is undeniable. Firstly, he tried hard to establish a real dramatic genre as it was known in Europe. It was not an easy task at all, for if he wished his plays to be taken seriously, he had to write them in the formal language of Arabic tradition. However, the language sounded artificial and strange in the dialogues and was not the right device to express the urgency of problems of that age. Thus, he started using a flexible syntax and experimented a lot with the form and genre of his plays<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> GAUCH, *Liberating Shahrazad*, p. xi.

<sup>17</sup> CODY – SPRINCHORN, *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, p. 34.

Secondly, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm tried to break down the barriers between “high” and “popular” literature by his attempt to transform a folkloric model into an intellectually valued work<sup>18</sup>. Both his efforts were united in 1934 when *Shahrazād*, one of his most famous plays, was published. The play bears traces of French symbolism, which became familiar to Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm during his studies in France in the 1920s.

The play seems to be a sequel to *The Thousand and One Nights*. Actually, it begins where Shahriyār and Shahrazād’s story ended. By means of her stories, Shahrazād succeeded in preventing Shahriyār from putting innocent women to death with the whole city then celebrating. Shahriyār’s sanguinary whim has ceased and so has Shahrazād’s narrative. Here we have Shahriyār haunted by his indomitable desire to discover the very essence of his beloved wife. His yearning to find answers to his questions has now turned into an obsession and he is gradually losing his mind. Their relationship is crumbling as Shahrazād is left alone in her chamber and Shahriyār sets out for a journey, trying to find all the wonders Shahrazād once told him about. He seems to have completely lost his senses, talking about the mythical bird Rukhkh and the Wāq-Wāq islands as if they were real. But for him, Shahrazād still remains an eternal enigma. He compares her to the Ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, to Mother Nature and to the flame that attracts fire worshippers. The slave is attracted to her physically, and Qamar the vizier is in love with her because of her good heart and intelligence, but Shahrazād refuses both of them; she is just a mirror reflecting their own souls. Neither of them can win her because they do not see her as a complex human being – a beautiful, wise and kind woman of flesh and blood, longing to be loved.

Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm’s Shahriyār is no longer the bloodthirsty tyrant he used to be; he becomes an anxious intellectual trying to find the eternal truth. Suddenly, he comes to the conclusion that he can never succeed unless he frees himself of the main obstacle which is his human body. His spiritual self is not able to reconcile with the physical one and thus he is irrevocably doomed. The equilibrium between his body and spirit is disrupted and the whole story leads to the tragedy of man. According to al-Ḥakīm, the character of Shahriyār “symbolizes man’s struggle against space and body, as limiting his need for a higher purpose in life”<sup>19</sup>. Al-Ḥakīm was inspired by the Ancient Egyptian world view

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<sup>18</sup> VAN LEEUWEN, *The Narrative Sources of Tawfiq al-Hakim’s Shahrazad*, p. 347.

<sup>19</sup> WALTHER, *Modern Arabic Literature and The Arabian Nights*, p. 56.



and that is why the crucial theme of his play deals with the human endeavour to overcome the boundaries of space and time. The harmony established by Shahrazād's narrative that enabled Shahriyār to escape from these space-time boundaries is broken and the helpless king tries to find another way out.

Apart from Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's philosophical concept of *The Thousand and One Nights*, with Shahrazād as an embodiment of the mythological essence of a woman that man could never understand, in recent years the character of Shahrazād has become extremely popular among feminist writers, where she is depicted as a symbol of the intelligent, educated and creative woman, who is not afraid of raising her voice to fight for her own emancipation and freedom and to save the whole female gender from perdition.

In 1987, the prominent Egyptian writer, doctor, activist and feminist Nawāl as-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī (1931) published a highly controversial novel called *Suqūṭ al-Imām*. The novel is full of postmodern tendencies and its connection with *The Thousand and One Nights* could evade us at first, for the intertextuality in the novel is mainly implicit and its function is secondary. The leitmotif of the novel is the death of the Imām, who rules as an autocrat in a mythical environment strikingly reminding us of the Middle East. The character of the Imām represents a combination of the secular regime of the Egyptian president Anwar as-Sādāt (1970–1981), during which as-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī was imprisoned, with the theocratic rule of the famous Iranian religious leader, Imam Khomeinī (1979–1989)<sup>20</sup>. The parallel between the Imām and King Shahriyār is not very clear at first, but it comes up in the chapter *Ihyā' at-turāṭ* (Reviving Our Cultural Heritage), where the Imām actually becomes King Shahriyār and amazed people start to believe that “this must be the spirit of Shahriyār which has come to inhabit the body of the Imām, or else the spirit of the Imām which has lived in the body of Shahriyār”<sup>21</sup>.

The Imām in Shahriyār's body epitomizes the age-long oppression of women by men. His description of an ideal woman, which is based on pictures from the book of *The Thousand and One Nights*, has solely a physical character. Not only does the author criticize here the situation in the contemporary society, where a woman is in the eyes of men often reduced only to a physical object, but she indirectly ironizes the “cultural heritage” and “tradition” of *The Thousand and One Nights*, where women are depicted only as empty beautiful bodies which

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<sup>20</sup> MALTI-DOUGLAS, *Men, Women, and God(s)*, pp. 93–117.

<sup>21</sup> AS-SA<sup>c</sup> DĀWĪ, *Suqūṭ al-Imām: Riwāya*, p. 94, Hetata's Translation in EL-SAADAWI, *The Fall of the Imam*, p. 154.

inspired Imām-Shahriyār to look for a woman exactly the same as described in the book of that “cultural heritage”. The only exception to the stereotypes of women is the character of the wise and witty Shahrazād, but unfortunately, she is the one missing in the novel. The harmony is disturbed again and instead of a world where the male principle is balanced with the female one, we have a kind of a feminist dystopia. In her novel, as-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī sharply criticizes the status of women in patriarchal Muslim society and the autocratic regimes in the Middle East and thus she links the struggle for political freedom and democracy with the fight for the emancipation of women.

#### TALKING POLITICS IN DISGUISE

The central theme of the frame story about a capricious ruler who terrorizes his own people, instead of protecting them offers authors perfect material for further writing because its resemblance to political situations in many countries of the world is more than obvious. Moreover, *Alf layla wa layla* has its roots in *Panchatantra*, which probably served as a model for the collections of stories like the Persian *Hazār afsāne*. This classic of Indian literature was a kind of educational manual of proper moral conduct in the form of a narrative that should teach rulers how to reign wisely, fairly and honestly. In addition to that, there has been almost a thousand-year tradition in Arabic literature to comment on current political issues via allegory<sup>22</sup>.

There are many literary works making use of this hidden aspect of *The Thousand and One Nights*. We may for instance recall the already mentioned *Suqūṭ al-Imām* written by Nawāl as-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī, for it is not only a feminist piece of writing, but a fierce and biting critique and ridicule of the autocratic religious regimes in which the denial of basic human rights leads to the barbaric victimization of the citizens. In 1942–1943, the prominent Egyptian writer Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wrote a short novel *Aḥlām Shahrazād* (Shahrazād’s Dreams), where he criticized ruthless rulers who use their defenceless subjects to fulfil their power ambitions<sup>23</sup> (particularly King Fārūq of Egypt)<sup>24</sup>.

Politics is undeniably also part and parcel of *Layālī alf layla* (Arabian Nights and Days), which is the work of another Egyptian writer and Nobel Prize laureate, Najīb Maḥfūz (1911–2006). Although it is possible to read and

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<sup>22</sup> See GHAZOUL, *Nocturnal Poetics*, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> GHAZOUL, ref. 15, pp. 134–137.

<sup>24</sup> WALTHER, pp. 54–56.

analyze it on several levels, first and foremost it can be considered a disguised political treatise in which the author expressed his attitude towards the ideological problems of that age. Maḥfūz himself once said: “In all my writing you will find politics. You may find a story that ignores love or any other subject, but not politics; it is the very axis of our thinking.”<sup>25</sup> In his novel, he depicted the moral decay of a society, where the daily occurrence of ravishment, murder for wealth, theft, sexual affairs, corruption, and hashish as well as alcohol consumption is nothing unusual. He tried to portray his characters in a realistic way with all their flaws and faults and at the same time tries to point out the alarming political situation during the as-Sādāt regime, including the rise of militant Islam in Egypt. Not only did Maḥfūz show us a wide range of human shortcomings, his depiction is also concrete and veritable. He got inspired by contemporary newspaper stories or by minor scandals, whose publication was officially forbidden because of censorship but which were circulating among Egyptians anyway<sup>26</sup>. The author’s aim of such a portrait of society in decline is unequivocal and it is presented openly by the character of a madman who says: “If the head was sound, the whole body was sound, for soundness and corruptness come down from above,”<sup>27</sup> and “... [i]t is for the ruler to dispense justice from the beginning, so that genies don’t intrude on our lives”<sup>28</sup>. According to Maḥfūz, the solution lies in the gradual, not radical, transformation of society. As many as six governors had to change in the novel, so that the last one, Maʿrūf the cobbler, a simple but honest man, would finally break the chain of the corrupt high officials and succeed in establishing justice in the city.

However, the allegory in Maḥfūz’s work is much less transparent than in Husayn’s *Aḥlām Shahrzād*. Although the author uses here both explicit and implicit intertextuality, the function of *The Thousand and One Nights* does not remain minor or secondary at all. It does not serve as a sheer instrument to express the author’s socio-political ideas, for Maḥfūz has reworked the folk material into a full-fledged story that can be well read regardless of its political aspect. It is evident that he knew the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* very well and managed to distil their characters and episodes into the novel

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<sup>25</sup> EL-ENANY, *Naguib Mahfouz*, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> GHAZOUL, ref. 15, pp. 135–139.

<sup>27</sup> MAHFŪZ, *Layālī alf layla*, p. 172, Johnson-Davies’s translation in MAHFOUZ, *Arabian Nights and Days*, p. 131.

<sup>28</sup> MAHFŪZ, *Layālī alf layla*, p. 86, Johnson-Davies’s translation in MAHFOUZ, *Arabian Nights and Days*, p. 64.

ingeniously. For example, a chapter called *Anīs al-Jalīs* would definitely evoke the story of *Nūr ad-Dīn °Alī and the Damsel Anīs al-Jalīs*. The characters bear the same names but their personalities are often completely different. Anīs al-Jalīs from *The Thousand and One Nights* is a beautiful, educated and modest slave girl while Nūr ad-Dīn is a careless debauchee who seduces the innocent heroine and squanders all the money he inherited after his father's death. But their roles in the episode of *Layālī alf layla* are reversed; here we have a wicked and wily jinni, pretending to be the chaste Anīs al-Jalīs, who is trying to infatuate and ruin every single man in the town. Nūr ad-Dīn plays here only a minor role, but he is a devout and good-hearted young man, unlike his original character in *Alf layla wa layla*. The plot, however, reminds us of another story from *The Thousand and One Nights*, which is called *The Lady and Her Five Suitors*. The technique Maḥfūz used in the novel is highly effective, but still, it works best in the original and not in the translational environment. Readers who are familiar with the stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* would find the novel much more amusing than those who do not know them. Firstly, it is entertaining for them to see the characters and elements from the collection in the different environment and different stories. Secondly, the reader is anxious to know whether the personality of the characters in *Alf layla wa layla* will decide their fate in Maḥfūz's novel or not and so the readers remain enthralled and the author is able to draw even sharper contrasts or parallels and to emphasize some of his ideas or attitudes.

Considering the troubled political situation in many Middle East countries, it is not surprising at all that there are many more literary works dealing with this subject in a more or less explicit way. According to some critics, there is a complementary relationship between literature and history, because one of the functions of literature is to reveal some of the hidden aspects of the particular historical period, so that people could better understand the society of that age and to learn from its mistakes<sup>29</sup>.

#### BECOMING SHAHRAZĀD: NARRATE OR DIE

There could be no doubt that the collection of *The Thousand and One Nights* has been a true repository of inspiration for many authors all over the world. In fact, it is the frame story about Shahriyār and Shahrazād that is most popular among writers. Paradoxically, scholars did not attach much importance

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<sup>29</sup> CROSS, *A Critique of Arabic Literature and Society*, pp. 17–34.

to it for a long time. According to them, it was just a formal frame of the collection and it was only the core that was worth studying. But the fact is that the frame story contains everything that contemporary authors need: politics, gender issues, death, and last but not least a creative narrator. And they are all united in the character of Shahrazād. Not only is she the heroine of the frame story, but a narrator of the whole collection as well. Therefore, we will hardly find it surprising that for many writers she is the most significant element of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Shahrazād's narrative techniques have influenced countless Western and Arabic literary works. The narrators are often in a literal sense "becoming Shahrazād"; they are creating a mosaic of mutually interconnected characters and stories, where one episode flows into another, thus reminding us of the embedded narratives in the *Thousand and One Nights*. One of such narrators can be found in a postcolonial, magical-realistic novel written by Lebanese author Ilyās Khūrī, which is called *Riḥlat Ġāndī aṣ-Ṣaġīr* (The Journey of Little Gandhi). In Khūrī's novel, a prostitute called Alice tells the stories of the characters who died or disappeared during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). She is a postmodern Shahrazād who was narrating the stories to postpone her death. As long as the stories of the characters are kept in the memory of people, they will not die. When the story is over, life is over, too. Wendy B. Faris call the narrators of such magical-realistic works "Shahrazād's children" because they were "born in the death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction, but able to somehow pass beyond it"<sup>30</sup>. The act of narration is the only ray of hope in the ravaging war and creativity is the only source of life in an environment where death lurks everywhere. The war has deprived people of everything; there is nothing left but the gift of words. However, people who lived through the traumatizing experience of war are unable to communicate the way they did before. As Khūrī says several times in the novel, "We no longer know how to tell stories, we don't know anything anymore"<sup>31</sup>. They have to invoke Shahrazād, the most skilful narrator of all, to help them. For, as long as we have words, we can survive. But if all the stories are forgotten, we will be lost forever.

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<sup>30</sup> FARIS, *Scheherazade's Children*, p. 163.

<sup>31</sup> KHOURY, *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, p. 19.

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## R e s u m é

### **Zmeny v nazeraní na *Tisíc a jednu noc* a jej vplyv na modernú a súčasnú arabskú literatúru**

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*Tisíc a jedna noc* sa do európskeho prostredia sa dostala začiatkom 18. storočia a jej prvý preklad do francúzštiny spôsobil nevídaný rozruch. Skreslený obraz, ktorý podával tento preklad vtedajšej Európe, i ďalšie romantizovanie a prispôbovanie si tohto materiálu však často viedlo k mylným predstavám o obyvateľoch východných krajín, ich zvykoch a živote. Zatiaľ čo v Európe je zbierka už tri storočia studnicou umeleckej inšpirácie, v arabskom svete bola dlho zaznávaná a neprikladal sa jej význam. Považovala sa za akýsi podradný druh literatúry, a nie za materiál vhodný na ďalšie literárne spracovanie. Zlom prišiel až v 19. storočí v období arabského kultúrneho obrodenia (arab. *an-nahḍa*), kedy sa nazeranie na jej význam a hodnotu v intelektuálnych kruhoch začalo výrazne meniť. Cieľom tejto práce je poukázať na fakt, ako veľmi ovplyvňovala a ešte stále ovplyvňuje táto dlho zaznávaná zbierka ľudových príbehov modernú a súčasnú arabskú literatúru, a aké podoby môže tento vplyv mať. Zameriava sa predovšetkým na rozdielny prístup jednotlivých autorov a analyzuje najčastejšie preberané témy a motívy u vybraných moderných i súčasných arabských spisovateľov, akými sú Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, Nadžīb Maḥfúz, Nawál as-Saʿdāwí, či Iljás Chúrí.