JALAL UDDIN KHAN

THE ARABIAN NIGHTS: A MODERN INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT: Noting its postcolonial influence as a hybrid oriental (Indo-Persian and Arab) text of universal appeal, this article discusses the modern legacy of one of the masterpieces of world literature—the Arabian Nights (or The Thousand and One Nights), its modern English translations and its fine arts illustrations and transformations, with the conclusion that the collection of tales continues to exercise an entertaining and expansive influence on the horizon of human knowledge and understanding regardless of national borders and boundaries. Instead of dividing and/or walling them out, the storehouse of tales accommodates and brings together peoples, cultures, traditions and nations by charmingly speaking to a wide variety of audience and their dreams and views, whims and impulses, and fantasies and peculiarities, both realistic and imaginative.

KEYWORDS: universal appeal of the Arabian Nights, its translations, adaptations, reproductions, and influence.

0. INTRODUCTION: MODERN RECEPTION OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AS AN ORIENTAL TEXT

Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights by Marina Warner (2012) begins by querying the attraction of what is arguably one of the world’s greatest works of literature, and also a strong cultural link between East and West. Warner finds that the magical qualities of the tales of genies/geniis and flying carpets have their perennial appeal in stimulating, inspiring and transporting readers from the plane of reality to the creative, the imaginative, and the fantastic. On the other hand, Srinivas Aravamudan (2012) argues in Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel that despite its many virtues, the Arabian Nights stood in the way of the growth and development of the novel as we understand it today in its social, collective, and realistic sense.
In a review of the latest translation of the Arabian Nights by Malcolm & Ursula Lyons (2008), Oxford professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst stresses the non-Arab character of the work and its explicitness in some parts: “From nursery tales to pornography, the Arabian Nights have been all things to all readers” (The Telegraph, 20 December 2008). Reviewing the Lyons’ translation to which they gave the interesting title of The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights, combining the two names that the work is known by to the world, another Oxford professor – a professor of Arabic, Geert Jan van Gelder – comments:

So which Nights are they, the Arabian, or the Thousand and One? … The dual title neatly illustrates the hybrid nature of the work: it is part of Arabic and European literature, it contains stories and motifs that may be traced to Sanskrit, Persian and Greek literature, it hovers between the oral and the written, the popular and the highbrow, the pious and the scabrous, realism and fantasy. (TLS 21 January 2009; my emphasis)

All this gives us an idea of the variety, richness, and diversity – the range and dimensions – of the text under discussion (see also Makdisi & Nussbaum, 2009; Robert Irwin, 2008; Ferial Ghazoul, 1996). Since its first European translation into French by Antoine Galland in the early eighteenth century, immediately followed by what is known as its “Grub Street” English translation, The Arabian Nights has been one of the earliest and most famous oriental texts to attract the West to the East (the Arab lands, Turkey, Persia, India, and Central Asia) as it appeared in the stories therein, fictional or realistic, and, to thereby influence Western Orientalism.

Historically, the West knew about the East since the time of the encounters between the Egyptians and the Persians on the one hand, and on the other, the Greeks, primarily through Alexander’s conquests in the 5th-4th centuries BCE, chronicled by the Greek historian Herodotus. Throughout history similar encounters followed.1 However, the major

1 For example, Romans and Carthaginians/Tunisians during the Punic Wars of the 3rd and 2nd centuries (BC) – given epic expression in Virgil’s Aenied; Romans (Pompey/ Caesar/Mark Antony/Augustus) and Syrians/Egyptians in the years before and after
literary and historical oriental sources to acquaint the West with the East.—prior to the Arabian Nights,—were Richard Knolles’ General History of the Turks (1603) much admired by Dr. Johnson, Southey, Coleridge, and Byron; Samuel Purchas’ Pilgrimage (1613), the immediate source of Coleridge’s Kubla Khan; and French D’Herbelot’s encyclopedic Bibliotheque Orientale (1697), itself translated from Ottoman sources, and upon which Thomas Moore and Leigh Hunt would draw heavily in their creative encounters with the Muslim East.

Nonetheless, it was Galland’s Arabian Nights Entertainment (1704-12 which visibly attracted popular Western attention to Eastern culture and customs. A 1710 English translation of the Portuguese Manuel de Almeida’s History of High Ethiopia or Abyssinia (1645) roughly coincided with the publication of the Arabian Nights translation, which exercised a formative influence on many writers of the Romantic bent of mind. From that time, the postcolonial Romanticist critic Nigel Leask says,

Chinese, Arabian, Persian, Indian, and Abyssinian ‘costume’ had been popular with European writers, who played on the demand for exotic and transgressive settings. Often such writings burlesqued oriental cultures themselves, but could also serve as vehicles for satire or moral critique of European manners...from Dr Johnson’s ‘Abyssinian’ Rasselas (1759) and Frances Sheridan’s ‘Arabian’ History of Nourjahad (1767) to Goldsmith’s ‘Chinese’ Citizen of the World (1762) and William Beckford’s ‘Arabian’ quest Romance Caliph

the Common/Christian Era, spread of the oriental-originated monotheistic religions, Crusades during the 12th and 13th centuries, medieval trade and commerce between the Arabs and the Venetians, medieval contacts between the Arabo-Islamic Spain and the rest of Europe, and the 15th century Ottoman conquest of Christian/Byzantine Constantinople (1453), today’s Istanbul. In literature – imaginative, travel or otherwise – scattered presence of the Orient and Orientalism can be found as long back as the 12th century in the works of Abelard of Bath, Thomas of England, and Marie de France, followed by Dante (early 14th century), the Gawain-poet and Chaucer (late 14th), some 15th century medieval plays, Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, John Dee, Henry Timberlake, Robert Boyle and William Bedwell (early 17th century), Andrew Marvell, Oliver Cromwell, Edmund Waller, John Dryden and other Restoration playwrights, Alexander Ross and French Du Ryer (mid-to-late 17th century).
In general an earlier eighteenth-century fascination for China was replaced by Indian or Arabian settings in Romantic orientalism, symptomized by William Hazlitt’s criticism of the millionaire Beckford’s collection of tacky chinoiserie seen at Fonthill Abbey (2005:140).

Deirdre Coleman (2008) supports and elaborates Leask’s position, claiming that the *Arabian Nights* stories, together with their endless imitations, “feature those negative stereotypes of the Orient which, according to Said, make up a purely ‘imaginative geography’ of all those values which the West seeks to expel or disavow, such as irrationality, superstition, cruelty, sexual perversion, and effeminacy” (p.247). Coleman goes on to say that Western orientalism as a “distorting medium” seized upon the fictional *Nights* stories’ tendencies to xenophobia and racism and developed a sense of grotesque fantasy about Eastern otherness as in Beckford’s *Vathek*. She also argues that Orientalism fortunately “provided a critical vantage point from which to criticize Western social and sexual arrangements,” didactically exploiting, as in Sheridan’s *Nourjahad*, Eastern settings and motifs “for the purposes of satire and critique.” She continues to say:

> Others, such as the Eastern poetic utopias of Shelley and Thomas Moore offer more complex projections of European fantasies onto orientalism. In other words, eighteenth-century orientalism mirrors the *Arabian Nights* themselves, tales which paradoxically deliver surprisingly feisty heroines alongside predictable stereotypes of cruel, irrational, and oversexed Sultans (p.247).

History tells us Alexander the Great fought his last great battle in India when he crossed the Hydaspes River by outwitting the forces of Raja Porus in 326 BC. Now, Yuriko Yamanaka traces the origins of an Alexander story in the *Arabian Nights* to a historical event that took place when he reached India (Yamanaka & Nishio 2006). The direct source for the story in the *Nights* may of course be the one recounted originally in the Persian al-Ghazali’s early 12th century *Nasihat al-Muluk* (“Book of Counsel for Kings”). In the preface to the jointly authored book, Robert Irwin, a Middle East historian, argues how the *Arabian Nights* fits into the “Orientalist” mindset, characterized by a tendency
to dominate, control, distort and pervert, as defined by Edward Said and others. But Irwin also argues that while Said’s Orientalist theory can be applied to the British or the French for whom the Orient was the Middle East, Africa, and South and South East Asia, it cannot be applied to the Japanese for whom the people to dominate and control were the Chinese. As the other author, Tetsuo Nishio, points out in an article, “Japan accepted the Arabian Nights as a constituent part of European civilization.” Europe’s “Orient” was the Middle East while that of Japan was China. Japan was not linked to the Middle East by economics, history and geopolitics. That is why the tales, though no doubt compelling, did not have the same grip/spell on the Japanese as they did on Europeans, and Japanese illustrations of them in the late 19th century sometimes showed the Arab characters dressed like Victorian Europeans.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE PERENNIAL APPEAL

This article explores the continued appeal of the Arabian Nights from a number of perspectives. One, of course, is the feminine mystique and power represented by Queen Scheherezade, whose fate, courage, skill and resourcefulness resonate with those of other heroines of Biblical, legendary or historical origins. Other perspectives include the creative art of framing stories within a story; the multiplicity of themes, narrative voices and audiences; and the overall cultural hybridity that the work displays.

Like the ancient Aesop’s Fables, the Buddhist Jataka Tales, the Sanskrit Panchatantra, the Arabic Kalila wa Dimnah, the Persian Hazar Afsaneh

2 Such as Eve and Judith, the Sumerian Lady Pu-abi, Dido of Carthage, the Egyptian female pharaohs Hatsheput and Nefertiti, the last Ptolemites Queen Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, and the Old Irish Deirdre.

3 “Five Principles/ Discourses,” based on an older oral tradition, is an inter-related collection of animal fables in verse and prose within a frame story, containing practical wisdom for young princes.

4 Kalila and Dimna, translated into Arabic (from the Old Persian version of the Sanskrit Panchatantra) by Abdullah ibn al-Mukaffa (1972), was so called after the two jackals who are the main characters.
(“A Thousand Tales”), Boccaccio’s Decameron, the Arthurian legends and the tales of Robin Hood, and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the anonymous Arabian Nights is one of the most influential masterpieces of literature the world has ever known. As popular as the pre-Islamic epic tales of Antara or Bani Hilal or the great odes of the Muallakat (suspended on the walls of the holy Ka’aba in Makkah), the Arabian Nights is an exotic, fairy-tale world of myth and legend, dream and vision, and illusion and mirage. It offers an Eastern paradise of faraway places, genies in bottles, domes and minarets, crescent moons and flying horses, and magic carpets and magic lamps, in place of Western mountain castles and knightly adventures. Had there been no Arabian Nights, we would not have known animal fables such as “The Donkey, the Ox and the Laborer” and “The Birds, the Beasts and the Carpenter,” folk tales, such as “The Porter and the Three Ladies,” and the highly comic “The Barber of Baghdad.”

At one time the collection was known as only “One Thousand Nights.” Another night was later added (perhaps because odd numbers were considered lucky in Arab/Muslim tradition); Edgar Allan Poe would add yet one more tale and night in his The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade. Here it is interesting to note that although the title suggests that there are as many as one thousand tales, the number of tales is actually less than three hundred. So the nomenclature “thousand and one” is actually a colorful attraction and catchy exaggeration in the folk-tale and fairytale tradition meaning many in number. Without the stories of those nights, we would have missed out on the heroic tales of adventure and lofty themes generically called the maqamat. For example, there is the story of Nizam al-Mulk celebrating the Turkish conqueror Alp Arslan; that of “The City of Brass” in which the story of King Shaddad’s lost city of Ubar is fancifully woven; or the very just and wise ruler in the great Harun al-Rashid, who intervenes, in “The Three Apples,” to save the life of a poor man wrongfully accused of murder. These stories, unlike those for the popular taste of the masses on the street, were intended for an aristocratic or courtly audience, exploiting

5 Also known as Irem or Iram, the so-called “Atlantis of Arabia,” Shaddad’s city is referred to in the Qur’anic passage of “The Dawn,” to which William Jones, Robert Southey, and Coleridge would later refer.
narrative or rhyme schemes of different literary forms to befit the noble sentiments they expressed. Delightful and entertaining to children and adults alike, the tales in the collection are full of magical surprises, suspenseful curiosities and improbable coincidences. Yet they are not without a harvest of moral and practical lessons of wisdom and experience; for example, passions are not to be trusted (“Nur al-Din and His Son”) and one should learn from the consequences of one’s acts (“The Fisherman and the Jinni”).

Without the Arabian Nights, we would not have known the unforgettable characters of Scheherazade, Sindbad, Aladdin, Ali Baba, Lokman and, above all, the competent and compassionate Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who, together with his splendid capital of Baghdad, achieved a legendary status of his own. “Though old,” they are “perpetually new.” Scheherazade is the epitome of storytelling art; Sindbad is the embodiment of seafaring zeal; Aladdin makes dreams come true with the help of his magic lamp, which takes him on the road to riches; and Ali Baba, simple-minded though he is, finds himself in trouble when he robs the robbers and is luckily saved from their revenge by the “open sesame” trick of his clever housemaid. “These characters,” as one critic says,

are the most illustrious of the concourse of humanity swarming the streets of Baghdad and Cairo and Bukhara, not as these cities ever were, but as they eternally are in the wonderful realm of Scheherazade’s imagination. It is a realm of gorgeous palaces, of opulent underground hideaways, of wooden horses that fly, of benevolent dogs that present beggars with objects of gold. It is a realm where sorcery conjures up wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, where inscrutable providence turns a stranger into a sultan in the twinkling of an eye. (Saudi Aramco World, 1962: 8-9)

The Arabian Nights stories grew and developed over hundreds of years since the time of the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid in Baghdad in the 9th century, who is frequently mentioned during the entire course of the collection. Just as the Grimm brothers (Jakob and Wilhelm) would collect their fairy tales from German peasants in the 19th century, the folk tales of the Nights, which originated in places as diverse as India,
Persia, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Egypt, extending from pre-historic times and pre-Islamic Arabia to the sixteenth century, were initially transmitted through oral tradition by Arab coffeehouse storytellers (hakawati) and street entertainers, and collected later by the Arabs with a literary interest. The storytelling art demonstrated by the charming variety of stories-within-stories and their immortal first-person narrator-heroine Scheherazade with her simple yet timelessly appealing and disarming four- or six-word introduction, “Once upon a time, there was a …” has attracted the popular readership of all ages over the centuries. Folk in nature as most of the stories are, they took shape by word of mouth through generations and vary from delightful to realistic, comic to clownish, action to fantasy, and adventure tale to animal fable. The courtly and aristocratic tradition also is represented in some stories.

The principal character Scheherazade, who symbolizes powerful womanly charm, attraction and inventiveness, is described as “an intelligent woman, schooled in literature, philosophy, and history,” revered as a heroine for distracting the sultan Shahrayar from his murderous rampage with intriguing stories … (she) saved the kingdom from a tyrannical monarch by weaving together her dazzling stories; in doing so, she also helped save the sultan himself, helping him see the evil of his actions and restoring his faith in humanity…Many find her to be a common ancestor, the storyteller who saved a nation and healed its king. (Darraj, 2004:2-3)

Earlier, another writer describes her as

wise, witty, occasionally a trifle wicked. She beguiles from the moment she tells her father she wishes to marry King Schahriar, whose habit it is to wed a different young woman each day and obtain a divorce the next by having her executed. Scheherazade promises to halt the holocaust and save her own head… Scheherazade teases the king, and through him the reader, into wanting to hear more. Like Schahriar, we can hardly wait for the next tale to begin. No wonder he kept postponing the decapitation of his latest wife and, after a thousand and one nights, finally forgot about it! (Saudi Aramco World, 1962: 8)
Sindbad the Sailor, the second major character of the Arabian Nights, “possesses all the attributes expected of men who go down to the sea in ships—daring, energy, passion, a tendency to become involved in tight corners and hairbreadth escapes, an ability to draw a fine line between adventure and romance. And he tells us his story with all the solemnity of a sailor telling a tall tale of the sea” (Saudi Aramco World 1962). Sindbad’s adventures giving us a vivid picture of the perilous journeys undertaken by the early mariners who sailed the seven seas probably date from the 9th or 10th century. According to Akhbar al-Sin wa’l-Hind (“Notes on China and India”), dating from 851 C.E., the oldest firsthand Arabic account of India by al-Yaqubi, the seven seas that one must cross to go to China were those sailed by Sindbad. It describes a voyage from the known to the unknown, from the familiar Arabian Gulf to the strange Sea of Larwi and the Sea of Harqand extending through the dangerous monster-infested waters around the equally strange coral islands of Maldives and Laccadives, not far from the southern tip of India, later described by Ibn Batutta as “one of the wonders of the world.”

The 10th century Ajaib al-Hind (“The Wonders of India”) by Buzurgh ibn Shahriyar consists of seafaring tales remarkably similar to the adventures of Sindbad. The collection suggests long and direct journeys made by many traders (as opposed to the later better organized trade networks consisting of a chain of trips with stops in different parts of the region). It also tells of a ship from Siraf that made seven voyages to Canton and back, all before the middle of the 10th century.

---

6 Another similar source of about the same time, either preceding or succeeding the Sindbad stories, was the 9th century Kitab al-Masalik wa l-Mamalik (“The Book of Roads and Kingdoms”) by Ibn Khurrah-dadh-bih, from Baghdad. This is still considered one of the most important surviving documents of the Abbasid time, a brief account of medieval trade routes, both by land and sea, taken both by Arabs and Europeans, on their challenging journey to India, Malaya, Indonesia, and China long before the days of Marco Polo. Khurrah-dadh-bih’s story of the “Radhaniyya” suggests that a group of Jewish merchants from Germanic lands were criss-crossing through the Rhine, the Mediterranean, the Isthmus of Suez, the Red Sea, the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Sind.

7 Iraqi/Abbasid historian al-Masudi of the same century tells us about Huang Chao’s sack of Canton in his Muruj al-Dhahab (“Meadows of Gold”).
2. MODERN USES: TRANSLATIONS

The Arabian Nights Entertainments is the title of the first but anonymous English edition, also called the “Grub Street” version, which came out in 1706. It was translated from the first European version in French by Galland, whose Les Mille et Une Nuits (The Thousand and One Nights) was published in twelve small volumes between 1704 and 1717.8 Preceded by Charles Perrault’s entertaining fairy-tale stories Tales of Mother Goose (1697) and Galland’s seven tales of Sindbad the Sailor (1701), to be later included in his Volume 3, the popularity of the Grub Street Nights, based on the work of the Hakawati of Paris (that is, Galland), was so huge in England that, between 1713 and 1800, more than 40 editions/imitations appeared. Beginning in 1723, the London News printed the collection as a serial in 445 installments over 3 years, the second such serial in England after Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Later, Edward Lane’s translation also would appear in monthly installments between 1838 and 1840 before being collected and published in 3 volumes.

Apart from the (1806) Grub Street version from Galland’s French translation, mention may be made of other major translations into English, rendered from Arabic originals, by a number of well-known translators.9 Galland had made his translation directly from several Arabic

8 Galland (1646-1715) made a number of trips to the Middle East and Turkey and came to know several languages such as Turkish, Greek, Arabic and Persian. He was a student of the great orientalist scholar Barthelemy d’Herbelot, after whose death he completed and published his teacher’s monumental Bibliotheque Orientale (1697), itself translated from Ottoman sources and regarded as the standard European reference work on the Orient for about a century and a half. Galland’s other works include The Indian Tales and Fables of Bidpai and Lokman. He considered the Arabian stories on which he worked after dinner as a relaxing diversion after a long day’s work and described them as “idle tales” that brought him, by his own admission, “more honor in the world than the most beautiful work I can compose about coins, full of erudite remarks on Greek and Roman antiquities,” referring to his position as a curator of the royal collection of coins and medals in Paris. See Saudi Aramco World, January/February 2008, p. 36.

9 These include translations by Ambrose Philips (1714), Jonathan Scott (1811), Henry Weber (1812), Edward William Lane (1838-40), John Payne (1882-84), Sir Richard Francis Burton (1885-1888), Andrew Lang (1898), N. J. Dawood (1950s), Husain Haddawy (1990s), E. Powys Mathers (1996), and Malcolm & Ursula Lyons (2008), and a host of poetical, audio-visual, and musical versions. Of them, Lane and Burton
manuscript sources, especially the fourteenth-century Syrian text, considered to be the most reliable and least embellished. Edward Lane also used for his source different Arabic translations such as the first Calcutta edition (in two vols.; 1814 & 1818), the eight-volume Breslau edition (1824-43), and the Egyptian ZER/Bulaq edition (1835). He was the first not to have used Galland for his source and he is regarded to have been more accurate than Galland. His translation of selected stories, which, as mentioned above, first appeared in installments and then was collected in 3 volumes, was highly readable and enjoyable. It “reigned supreme as the leading English translation for most of the 19th century,” to be “eventually displaced from its preeminent position by other translations.” However, the annotations Lane provided were somewhat heavy and erudite containing too much of guiding details about the Arabian life and society and their religious, political and material culture.

are the most famous. Considered Britain’s most renowned scholar of the Middle East, Lane’s other works include An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836), the dictionary Arabic-English Lexicon, in 8 vols (1863-78) and his first and most favorite Description of Egypt (2000), a book of about 300,000 words and 200 illustrations. To him, Egypt was “the most interesting country” of antiquities where he came, at the young age of 24, in 1825 when the Greek War of Independence (1821-26) was still going on. Egypt was then an Ottoman province but only nominally since it was enjoying a great degree of sovereignty under the firm control of its Pasha Muhammad Ali. First time Lane was in Egypt from 1825-28 (when he brought to England the 8-year old little Greek-born slave girl Nafeeseh only to marry her later), then again from 1833-35, then with family from 1842-49). In Egypt, Lane grew beard, used to dress like an upper-class native and even adopted an Eastern Muslim name—Mansur Effendi. Other contemporary European Egyptologists such as Sir Gardner Wilkinson and Joseph Bonomi also adopted Eastern lifestyles and identities with the former coming to be known as Ismail and the latter as Abu Nom. Among others were J. L. Burckhardt, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, Robert Hay, James Burton and Frederick Catherwood. On the other hand, Burton, who also translated Indian Kama Sutra, journeyed to Islam’s holy sites in disguise and searched for the source of the White Nile. He was an apologist for the British Empire in India; a civil servant who used his family connections to find jobs; and a “racist” who, however, felt that the customs and practices of many native peoples in the East were often preferable to those of his homeland. See Dane Kennedy, The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World, Harvard U P, 2005.

10 For a history of the text of the Arabian Nights and the differences in its translations, see Frost (2001), available online. Also see Wikipedia entries under the Arabian Nights or The Thousand and One Nights.
He thought the classic collection presented “most admirable pictures of the manners and customs of the Arabs, and particularly of those of the Egyptians” (Thomson 2008:36). Lane’s rendition is considered “more prudish than Burton’s later no-holds-barred version” (Frost 2001:41). Perhaps the greatest value of his translation lies in the abundant expilcatory anthropological materials he provides that scholars find very useful till today. It is this very erudite manner that makes them consider Lane’s translation “definitive.”

Henry Weber’s three-volume edition had the title of Tales of the East: comprising the most popular Romances of oriental origin. Payne, who depended on Arabic sources such as the second Calcutta edition (1842) and the Breslau, claimed his translation, in nine volumes, to be a “complete” one. Burton made his translation in ten volumes, with five additional volumes of notes only. He used the Arabic versions of the Breslau, the Bulaq, and the second Calcutta. Husain Haddawy’s translation is based on Muhsin Mahdi’s definitive 1984 Arabic edition of the old (14th century) Syrian manuscript. Powys Mathers’ translation was made from the 1937 French text of J. C. Mardrus. The Lyonses’ translation, based on Calcutta II, came in three volumes with the joint and inclusive title of The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights. In this way each translator claimed he was providing an authentic and accurate translation, but none could surpass the excellence of Galland.

The secret of Galland’s success lay in the fact that he was actually not completely faithful to the original. His translation was a kind of adaptation, literary rather than literal. He was true to the spirit or sense rather than the exact or precise meaning. He wrote to his Dutch friend Gisbert Cuper he was happy not to remain “attached precisely to the text, for that would not have given pleasure to the readers. ... I have rendered the Arabic into good French without being slavishly attached to the Arabic words.” Galland altered, abridged, adapted and omitted as necessary and tried to remain true to the demands of the contemporary French literary taste and its written form rather than the original oral form in which the tales were originally passed down marked by repetitions and other kinds of padding.
3. MODERN USES: ADAPTATIONS AND REPRODUCTIONS AS AN ORIENTAL RESOURCE

Great stories are like the timeless literary creations of both scenic and reflective beauty. For example, in the context of Persia/Iran where lies the origin of the main frame story of the *Arabian Nights*, there are Abul Qasim Ferdowsi’s early 11th century Iranian national epic *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), and, about a century later, Farid al-Din Attar’s eponymous epic poem *Mantiq al-Tayr* (“The Conference of the Birds”) and Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*, made famous by Edward Fitzgerald’s 19th century translation. All these works inspired illustrations of legendary heroes and kings and various other creatures and objects both in Persian/Iranian as well as foreign arts. Similarly, the vivid literary imagery of the *Arabian Nights* has inspired artists and illustrators for a long time. For instance, Lane’s translation around 1840s was beautifully illustrated with 650 illustrations. He himself had a background in wood engraving and lithography. There was an edition of the tales published in Philadelphia in 1851 that carried an illustration combining artistic motifs from China, the Middle East and Turkey. In 1878, there was an illustration called “Aladdin accosted by a magician” set in an imaginary China. In 1893 there was an illustration called “Queen Scheherazade relating the Story.” The following year there was a picture of an American boy reacting with curious wonder to Aladdin’s lamp. The following year there was a French edition which had a color engraving of “Abdullah of the Sea” in Persian miniature style. There is a drawing of 1900 in which a bearded “genie” is seen to be flying captives over an imaginary cityscape. The same year German artist Carl Offterdinger depicted, for

---

11 Arab/Muslim conquest of Persia took place in 642. *Shahnameh*, one of the world’s greatest literary masterpieces, completed by the poet in about 1010, contains the famous story of Rustam but is mainly about the pre-Islamic fifth-century Sassanian king Bahram V, challenged to feats of archery by his favorite lyre player, Azadeh.

12 It has been adapted in visual illustration by Peter Sis, published by Penguin Press in 2011. The epic portrays the perilous journey by all the birds of the world to find their legendary bird-king Simurgh, who would free them from their troubles. Only thirty birds reach the realm of the Simurgh (a word meaning “30 birds” in Persian), where they realize that they themselves are the object of their search, which symbolizes contemplative perseverance.
a German edition, Sindbad being carried aloft by a roc, a huge mythical sea bird (Saudi Aramco World 2008:34-39). Perhaps the most well-known reincarnation of the Arabian Nights in another art-form is the 1992 Walt Disney animated cartoon film Aladdin, which despite being somewhat racist in the view of some Arabs became highly popular and led to its sequels on the visual media including “toys, video games, spin-offs, and merchandise.” One of the well-known photographers in Oman, Nadia Al-Amri, is presently engaged, in 2012, in a project to tell the Scheherezade stories through pictures as part of her concept of visual rhyme of photography through the movement of images and colors (McLoughlin 2011:21).

Once famous Anglo-French illustrator Edmund Dulac had deeply studied Arab/Persian culture—”costumes, street scenes, domestic life, architecture, landscapes, textiles, ceramics, carpets and endless accoutrements”—before he sat down to illustrate The Arabian Nights in watercolor paintings in 1905. He borrowed minute details from Eastern culture such as “turbans, turned-up slippers, pointed arches, Moorish mosaics and courtyards, and oases set against starry desert twilights” for his illustration of “Beauty and the Beast” and “The Little Mermaid,” among his other Western subjects.13 In 1913, at the age of 31, he finally made a visit to the Arab East and took note of the flat roof, palms [and] cubes of all shades of white, blue and ochre … baggy breeches with short stockings and sometimes white or yellow top-boots, wide belts and stomachers... flowered shirt with kerchief around the head....merchants sitting cross-legged in their niches, Bedouins wandering up the alleys, the tantalizing patchwork of fabrics, odors and Islamic decorations … a number of costume sketches, … especially the women in their yashmaks... and the well-shaped eyes with eyebrows joining artificially….muezzin[s]...the cooks, the sweetmeats and their curiously fat vendors, the girls in baggy pantaloons...

---

13 See Bruns (1979:2-11). The other Western subjects Dulac illustrated were the novels by the Bronte sisters, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Bells,” Alexander Pushkin’s “The Golden Cockerel,” stories by Hans Christian Andersen, Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and Milton’s Comus. Deeply influenced by Persian miniatures, he illustrated The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.
Throughout his life Dulac was never without the influence of the Arabian Nights, which made him produce not only “Princess Badoura,” based on Scheherezade’s last story, and “Sindbad the Sailor and Other Stories,” but also some magazine covers, and decorate the Royal Albert Hall for a ball with “a glittering vision of Aladdin’s cave.” Influenced by the Eastern (Persian, Indian, and Chinese) art, the Dulac style was “decorative, diminutive, rich in detail and in story-telling content,” emphasizing “design, color and texture” and evoking “atmosphere, if not action,” as opposed to “sinuous, naturalistic lines.” American artist Maxfield Parrish has a color lithograph for the tale “The Young King of the Black Isles,” made in 1929, which reflects a combination of Neoclassical and Romantic styles with Art Deco graphic design. French abstract painter Albert Gleizes has a painting, “Aladdin,” made in 1938.

4. INFLUENCE OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AS AN EASTERN OTHER ON MODERN WESTERN WRITERS

The Arabian Nights together with the Sindbad stories were (and continue to be) an inexhaustible source of inspiration for many writers around the world, who shared in the general interest in the Arab East. From their first appearance the Nights and Sindbad stories inspired the romantic imaginations of artists, dramatists and composers alike with their arresting and rapturous combination of drama, poetry and romance full of the elements of pathos, fantasy, horror and exoticism. American writers such as Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851), Edgar Allan Poe [(1809-1849) and his works such as The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade, Al Aaraaf and Israfel], Washington Irving (1783-1859), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Bayard Taylor (1825-1878), Herman Melville (1819-1891), George William Curtis (1824-1892), William Starbuck Mayo (1812-1895), Horatio Alger (1832-1899), Mark Twain (1835-1910), Ernest Hemingway (1898-1961) and John Barth (1930-) are worth mentioning in this respect.14 On the English (or European), Arabian, and South

---

American side, countless poets and writers such as Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Robert Southey, William Beckford (Caliph Vathek: An Arabian Tale), Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley, Thomas Moore (Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance), Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, Swinburne, Walter Bagehot, A. S. Byatt, Ariosto, Voltaire, Schlegel, Schiller, Goethe, Brecht, Marcel Proust, Jorge Luis Borges, and Naguib Mahfouz are among those deeply influenced by the same.15

Academic interest in the Arabian Nights (sources, origins, translations, interpretations, adaptations, assessments) remains endless as proved by the formidable amount of resources and materials available both on the web and in hard copies.16 It seems there is something for everybody in this treasury of tales. Not just lords and laymen, male or female, young or old but also the natives and non-natives of Eastern culture, Orientalists and their critics—all find something to their taste and liking in terms of content as well as characters, narrative voices as well as literary style, which, like any other great work of literature, cut across the national boundaries and transcend the barriers of time. The different motifs of the Arabian Nights—mysteries and wonders and graphic detail - are dealt with frankly in Craig Thomspson’s graphic novel Habibi (2011) as in other modern fictional treatments for young adolescents such as The Storyteller’s Daughter: A Retelling of “Arabian Nights” (Once Upon a Time) by Cameron Dokey (2008), The Angel With One Hundred Wings: A Tale from the Arabian Nights by Daniel Horch (2004), and Shadow Spinner by Susan Fletcher (1999). Those interested in poetical expressions about the Arabian Nights may read Ari Berk’s “Night Thoughts: Scheherazade”; “Scheherazade’s Saving Grace” by Cory–

15 For a brief discussion of the influence of the Arabian Nights on some of these authors, see Hamad (Internet file); Severin (1991); Kabbani (1988); Ali (1981); Meester (1915); and Conan (1908).

Ellen Nadel, and “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” by Edgar Allan Poe. The Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s symphonic orchestra Scheherazade (1888), which was influenced by Mily Balakirev’s symphonic poem Tamara, also of oriental setting, was based on The Arabian Nights.\(^{17}\) Even the cook in the kitchen finds some cookbook elements in the collection as suggested by The Sweets of Araby: Enchanting Recipes from the Tales of the 1001 Nights (Elias & Salloum, 2011). Combining the historical and geographical backgrounds with figurative imagery, both Muslims and Christians included on its character list, and adapted in all the arts, the classic collection of the Arabian Nights helps bridge differences of different kinds and continues to address the questions of cultural transformation throughout the ages.

REFERENCES


\(^{17}\) Balakirev was inspired by Mikhail Lermontov’s poems about the angelic yet seductive Tamara, whose lures drew travelers into her tower in the mountainous gorges of the Caucasus and who offered them sensual delights overnight before having them killed off and thrown into the river.
Campbell, J. ed. 1952. *The Portable Arabian Nights*. Place: Publisher


Darraj, Susan Muaddi (ed.). 2004. *Scheherazade's legacy: Arab and Arab American women on writing*, CT, USA.


**Jalal Uddin Khan**

PhD (New York)
Professor of English
University of Nizwa
Oman
jukhan@gmail.com