In Defense of the Imagination: The Historical Reciprocity of Shahrazad and Modern Storytelling in Arabic Literature

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Abstract

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By reference to *The Thousand and One Nights*, this dissertation limns a genealogy on the imagination, in Orientalism, as a site of struggle over meanings of change and transformation. This genealogy emerges with the translation of *The Nights* by the French translator Antoine Galland (1646-1715), who incorporates the text into Western modes of production that value unity and *mimesis*. This happens through his introduction of a narrative closure to the Arabic manuscript in which he transforms Shahrazad into a mother of three male children. In this closure, Shahrazad seeks Shahriyar's forgiveness based upon her motherhood. The genealogy continues with Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), who, in his translation, exaggerates a layer of desire that has made his translation one of the most infamous takes on *The Nights* according to various scholars. Both Orientalists engage in a project of reproducing and taking editorial

liberties with the text, while claiming it is representative of Arabic and Islamic cultures and civilizations. This foregrounds a discourse on the imagination that was eloquently articulated in the racist works of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) where he deems Semitic languages incapable of imaginatively producing high literary works of literature.

While situating the logic of this Orientalist trend as a problem of rational and secular thought clusters that dominate the study of Arabic literature and Islam, a core intervention of this dissertation is to locate how the translations of *The Nights*, by Orientalists, have influenced the scholarly conclusions by many Arab scholars who investigate the text of *The Nights* later during the postwar period. Orientalist translations limit how Arab scholars approach change, transformation, and agency in relation to their respective projects. Also, this dissertation traces a wide range of debates and methodologies. The project contributes to the field by arguing that, while the study of *The Nights* has significantly improved since the late 1960s, the critical methods that dominate the study of Arabic literature need to be reconsidered, especially in terms of locating meanings of social change and transformation.

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Prelude: *The Nights,* Orientalism and Desire

The Thousand and One Nights is an authorless collection of stories that features references to Persia, India and the Arab world among many other cultures. *The 1001 Nights* originates from a lost ancient Persian text (The *Hazar Afsanah*- The *Thousand Stories).* Scholar Muhsin Mahdi points out that the earliest mentions of the *Nights* take place in the 9th century by Muslim scholars Al-Masudi and Ibn al-Nadim (Mahdi, 1994, 26). There is no version with a complete set of 1001 stories. This discrepancy between the title that promises a specific number of stories and the lacking content of many versions of the story has sparked the imagination of writers to complete it.

The Nights' frame story features king Shahriyar, who is 'betrayed' by his 'unfaithful' wife. Shahriyar, orders his wife be killed. He seeks vengeance against all women. Repeatedly, he marries women to be killed after consummating the marriage. This cycle of marriage and death continues until Shahrazad volunteers to marry Shahriyar. Shahrazad, the vizier's daughter who has been exposed to a wide range of literatures and sciences, begins a cycle of storytelling. Shahrazad tells stories every night and stops by the morning. She ends her stories at a cliffhanger to force the king to allow her to live one more day.

This dissertation will examine how different translations of *The 1001 Nights* impact the ways in which Arab and Muslim scholars think the question of change and transformation within an Islamic context. This project will focus on Galland and Burton's translation (chapter 1) and how their translations impact postwar Arab women scholars (chapter 2). Chapter 3 traces the emergence of storytelling tropes in postwar Arabic novels that negotiate confinement and power. The dissertation, by centralizing the rubrics of desire and the imagination, will trace the Orientalist production of secular methods in the study of Islam that continues insidiously in the

scholarship of major decolonial critics of Orientalism including Edward Said and Nawal El Saadawi among others. Here, I would like to state the stakes of my project: how does the Orientalist discourse on *The Nights*, especially translations, eclipse readings of *resistance* and *agency* that emerge organically from within the tradition of Islamic civilization? In addition, how does opening *The Nights* to a conversation on the imagination produce a theory of change and transformation within Islamic discourses?

. My dissertation contributes to the field of critical Muslim studies. In so doing the dissertation will draw from Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Arab studies, and the anthropology of Islam. The scope of intervention of my dissertation is to dismantle the Orientalist production of *The Nights* and offer the long textual history of *The Nights* as a site for various, contingent readings. I argue here that a major limitation in thinking change and transformation in Islam has been the uncritical application of rational and secular methodologies and the neglect of Arab women scholars who raised relevant questions in this regard. My dissertation will invite scholars to critically revisit the questions raised by Arab and Muslim scholars (Nawal El Saadawi, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Fatema Mernissi, Ferial Ghazoul and Saba Mahmoud) to construct a genealogy that reckons with Orientalist regimes of knowledge before it theorizes change and transformation within an Islamic context. In so doing, this dissertation places the imaginative faculty as a site of struggle to achieve social change and transformation.

Literature Review: Orientalism, Desire in Translation

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) describes the European Orientalist projects as combining knowledge production and colonial domination. One major trend that cuts across some of the most influential works on Orientalism, desire and Islam is the tendency to approach *The Nights* considering how the modern text of *Alf Laylah* has been produced by Orientalism

without acknowledging the insurgent and complex features of *The Nights* as a work of the imagination. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, for example, approaches *The Nights* in a variety of ways. He points out how "amongst themselves Orientalists treat each other's work in some citational way. Burton, for example, would deal with the *Arabian Nights* or with Egypt indirectly, through Lane's work" (Said, 2003, 186). Said also brings up *The Nights* in relation to Burton's combativeness with other Orientalists where Burton's "Terminal Essay" in his translation of *The Nights* "was meant to be testimony to his victory over sometimes scandalous system of Oriental knowledge, a system he mastered himself" (Said, 2003, 196). Here, Said's refences to *The Nights* are rarely to Muhsin Mahdi's version or to stories from *The Nights*, but he references the text's relation to the project of Orientalism.

For Said, the competitive relationships among Orientalists illustrate a masculine desire to violate the Orient since Orientalism, after all, is a project of domination. Said avers that to be an Orientalist "one must see and know the Orient as a domain ruled over by Europe. Orientalism, which is the system of European or Western knowledge about the Orient, thus becomes synonymous with European domination of the Orient" (Said, 2003, 196). This context is further elaborated in Said's theory to limn the sexual politics of Orientalism. Said likens the production of Orientalist knowledge to the violation of the female body; he notes, "The Middle East is resistant, as any virgin would be, but the male scholar wins the prize by bursting open, penetrating through the Gordian knot despite the taxing task" (Said, 2003, 308-309). It is within this context that Said's description of Sir Richard Burton, *The Nights'* translator, in *Orientalism* needs to be situated. Said elaborates, "Burton took the assertion of personal, authentic, sympathetic and humanistic knowledge of the Orient as far as it would go in its struggle with the archive of official European knowledge about the Orient" (Said, 2003, 198). Even Burton's

"personal eccentricities" are, for Said, overruled "by the European domination of the Orient." (Said, 2003, 198). Simultaneously, Burton's project reenacts the sexual metaphor of the Orientalist knowledge production of the East: to produce Orientalist knowledge is to penetrate through intractable layers of a resistant Middle East and to win a prize of sorts.

Said's accounts on the feminization of the "East" are usually accompanied by reflections on how a masculine male Orientalist consumes the sensuality and femininity of the Egyptian woman. Said argues that orientalism was an "exclusively male province" (Said, 2003, 207). Orientalism "viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders this is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists." He adds that "women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid and above all they are willing" (Said, 2003, 207). Here, the Orientalist produces the Oriental women as "sensual" and as an object of desire of his fantasy. The East is actively produced, believes Said, with a distinctive feature, a "feminine penetrability" and "supine malleability" (Said, 2003, 206). The sexism of Orientalism consists of thinking the "West" as masculine, active and penetrating in relation to an East that is "feminine," "passive" and "penetrated." As a result, Said's emphasis that Burton's "Terminal Essay" in his translation of *The Nights* "was meant to be a testimony to his victory over the sometimes scandalous system of orientalist knowledge" (Said, 2003, 196) should be understood within the context of the sexual politics of orientalism and the misogynistic feminization of the East.

Said's claims in *Orientalism* have put into question the paradigms in the study of *The Nights* especially in the later part of the 20th century. In particular: how can *The Nights* be studied considering the long history of Orientalist translations and commentary? Scholar Muhsin Mahdi's *The Thousand and One Nights (alf laylah wa-laylah): From the Earliest Known Sources*

(1984) has revolutionized the study of *Alf Laylah* by recovering what he deems the original manuscript of *The Nights*. Antoine Galland's (1646-1715) translation of *The Nights (*between *1704-1717*) marks a pivotal moment in the history of the text. By the advent of the 18^{the} century, *The Nights*, through Galland's translation, departed one mode of production (Arabic-premodern) and entered another (Western- modern). It is axiomatic to say that Galland's version is reflective of the mode of production under which he operates.

Muhsin Mahdi, describes Galland's changes as "forgeries" and "departures," that are in many respects no longer a translation, but a rewriting of the text (Mahdi, 1994,11). In his "translation," Galland introduces three interlaced "embellishments[1]" to the "original" Arabic manuscript. First, he transforms the *open-ended* original manuscript into an *enclosed narrative* by ending the story (Mahdi, 1994, 48-49). In his modern happy-ever-after end, Shahrazad gives birth to three male children. By the end of Galland's translation, Shahrazad states "great king…here are your [three] children, I beg you to grant me life for the love of them, and not because of my stories; because if you deprive them of their mother, they will become orphans"[2]. Second, unlike the Arabic manuscript where each story is headed by the number of the night in which it was told, Galland omits the number headings that precede stories, which makes his version difficult to be traced to the 'original.' Third, he appends stories, widely known as "The Orphan Tales"—Sinbad, Aladdin and Ali Bhabha, even though they are not a part of the Arabic manuscript (Mahdi, 1994, 29).

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[1] Mahdi notes the translation of Sinbad was carried out before Galland learned that it was a part of a larger collection of stories entitled The Nights. His decision, Mahdi argues was to ensure the same success to his Sinbad that his translation of *The Nights* achieved. Thus, he inserted Sinbad between nights numbers 69-90. See Mahdi, Muhsin. 1994. *The Thousand And One Nights From its Earliest Known Sources*. Vol. 3 Leiden: EJ Brill.

[2]. Shahrazad in this version states "grand roi dit-elle voici tes enfants, je te supplie de ma'accorder la vie por l'amour d'eux, et non a cause de mes histoires; car si tu le prives de leur mere, ils deviendront orphelins" (653). See Galland, Antoine. 1842. *Les Mille et Une Nuits Contes Arabes Traduits Par Galland Nouvelle Edition Deuxieme Serie*. Paris: Lavigne, Libraire-Editeur.

Said and Mahdi were at the forefront of writing a revisionist history of *The Nights*. Said's observations are concerned with the European, colonial context of the established wisdom on *The Nights*. Most of his concerns in relation to *The Nights* appear as passing remarks within the larger context of Said's critique of Orientalism. By contrast, Mahdi's is the first recovery project of *The Nights'* oldest manuscript. The reverberations of their work in the study of *The Nights* can be felt in later works, such as David Pinault's *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* (1992). Pinault's project departs from the earlier Orientalist scholarship on *The Nights* in two ways: first, it pays attention to selected stories from *The Nights* (not an overall meaning of the text in its entirety) and, second, it approaches desire within the context of the multiplicity of editions of *The 1001 Nights*. This is an important shift in the history of *The Nights'* studies that acknowledges the variations of *The Nights* numerous editions. Pinault argues that by embracing his approach

> one abandons sweeping generalizations and engages with the given text in the process of close reading. the further one reads in the *Nights*, the more one develops the sense that the style and literary quality of the collection vary widely from tale to tale even within a single given edition. Therefore, rather than insist on the consistent superiority of one *Alf laylah* text over another, one might profitably focus instead on the evaluation of individual stories for the sake of comparing effects and varying authorial approaches (Pinault, 1992, 250).

Here, the text of *The Nights* is neither a representative of a specific culture nor is it an anthropological decisive marker to surmise how a certain people behave, think, and conduct their daily life the way Burton argues. Meaning in this model is, first, specific to individual stories and, second, meaning emerges in relationships—how each story carries variations across multiple editions. The numerous versions of a particular story, for Pinault, open ups up space to theorize the textuality, narration, and the authorial dimensions of the text of the *Nights*.

It is within this reading method that Pinault approaches desire. Commenting on a controversial Egyptian court ruling in 1985 that "ordered the confiscation of copies of an "unexpurgated" edition of the *Nights*" (Pinault, 1992, 3), Pinault writes "in reality I believe that religious devotion and ascetic piety are far more typical than obscene entertainment as narrative concerns in tales from the *Nights*; *The City of Brass*....forms a good example thereof (Pinault, 1992, 4). Pinault restresses in these remarks the importance of analyzing individual stories, such as "The City of Brass" before making conclusive remarks in relation to a unifying feature or trope of *The Nights.* Pinault's can be understood as an attempt to resist the Orientalist generalizations by close reading individual stories and their variations across editions.

However, since Pinault's wrote his book in 1992, there was another lawsuit against the publishers of the book of *The 1001 Nights*. In *Muhakamat Al Layla Wa-Laylah* (2016), Samih Kareem revisits the claims against and for the *The Nights* in the 1985 lawsuits and another lawsuit in 2010. The allegations remain the same—the book's obscenity and its explicitly transgressive content. It is also true that the defense is repeated as well. Pinault reports Salwa Inani's stance during the 1985 case as she wrote in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* a defense of *The Nights*. Inani argues for the protection of *The Nights* against "those who would set fire to our heritage" (Pinault, 1992, 3). Similarly, commenting on the 2010 case, which was dismissed, Kareem asks: "do we also bring to court those who are interested in the study of *The Nights*' relation to popular literature? The very people who argued that the tales are a depository for the study of Arabic folklore? Do we also send to court those who authored the book? And they are a group of authors and not one?...This book is a part of our heritage and should not be violated" (Kareem, 2016, 166-167). While Kareem repeats the same defense against the book's censorship and violation, he adds a new layer of defense: the text's authorship. Scholars have observed that

the text's authorless status has contributed to its celebration and denunciation. Kareem here circumvents the text's overt representations and graphic content by emphasizing that the 'various authors' of the text make it a product of the popular imagination, which makes the book a part of the heritage of popular literature and also impossible to prosecute legally because of the multiplicity of its authors.

Abdelfattah Kilito contemplates the issue of authorship in *Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity* (2014). Kilito asks: "Is *A Thousand and One Nights* part of [Arabic] literary tradition? It seems to me that that tradition can get along without the *Nights*" (Kilito, 2014, 118). Kilito adds, "In Arabic culture, a text without an author is considered to be an aberration" (Kilito, 2014, 119). *The Nights'* authorless status, in addition to its "different versions" and "vulgar" style were "the factors that occasioned its ill fortune in the past." For Kilito, the same factors can be "blesses" (Kilito, 2014, 121-122) for the text as they also occasion its translation and reception. Here, the rogue status of *The Nights*—its embrace of vulgarity, multiple editions and faithlessness towards any known source—prevents the text from being included within the canon of Arabic literature. For Kilito, it is within the marginalization of *The Nights*, due to the combination of vulgarity, authorlessness, and multiple editions, that desire in *The Nights* can be understood.

In fact, Kilito argues that the text, due to its authorless and elastic structure, "begs to be translated" (Kilito, 2014, 122). Ferial Ghazoul presents a similar figurations of *The Nights*' structure in *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context* (1996). Her focus is not Galland or Burton, but the structure of *The Nights*. Ghazoul observes that "the text … was constructed in such a way as to allow and even invite radical changes in its content, yet at the same time preserve its own internal logic ...the text preserves its identity although it is

performed, as it were, in more than one way" (Ghazoul, 1996, 3). This flexible structure makes possible the retention of an overall structure, despite adjustments and changes to specific stories within its narrative, *The Nights* structure remains operative by retaining and accommodating any possible changes. Ghazoul, for this reason, asserts that "the flexibility of the narrative is guaranteed by an enclosing structure which can contain a multiplicity of genres, conflicting styles, and divergent themes without destroying in the least the coherence of the text. We can attest to this empirically: the two French translations of Galland and Mardus play havoc with the 'original' Arabic text, and yet *The Arabian Nights* is not compromised by such 'unfaithfulness'" (Ghazoul, 1996, 4). The changes introduced to the text by translators do not alter a pristine text whose 'purity' can be easily corrupted by editorial liberties. The text of *The Nights*, as Ghazoul reads it, thrives on constant alterations and distortions.

For Ghazoul, "If the text has been handled frequently in this promiscuous fashion, it is indicative that the text allows itself to be 'mishandled'" (Ghazoul, 1996, 4). Here, Ghazoul considers that it is not simply the translator's decision to change the text, but there is a malleable structure to the text that necessitates such changes. Ghazoul expands this model of 'textual promiscuity'

> the manifold narratives seem to be lumped together in a somewhat promiscuous and random fashion. But this is justified since the mode of ordering is not any more syntagmatic and narrative, but rather paradigmatic and poetic. Every tale relates directly or indirectly to the generating tale, that is the frame story (Ghazoul, 1996, 31).

Here, Ghazoul describes the textual promiscuity of *The Nights* as the text's capacity to accommodate stories that are "lumped" together without a clear logic for bringing them together. She suggests that there is principle within the structure of the text that incorporates a variety of stories, yet each story that is added or adjusted relates to the frame story. Here, Ghazoul acknowledges that the *textual promiscuity* of *The Nights* depends on the relationship between

each story and the frame story. In other words, each story, despite any changes made by translators, needs to be filtered through Shahrazad's voice. Unlike Said, who is concerned with the translators' reproduction of the text as exemplar of Orientalism, Mahdi who frames his recovery of the Arabic manuscript as an evidence of Galland's infidelity, or Pinault whose emphasis on close-reading individual stories pays less attention to the text as a whole, Ghazoul centers the structure of the text of *The Nights* as the object of her study. Her proposed methodology pays attention to the individual stories and how these stories relate back to Shahrazad's voice, a figuration that the other models, reviewed here, lack.

Later works that approached *The Nights* have raised Saidain concerns in terms of how desire operates in relation to translation. Joseph Massad features a discussion of Burton's translation where Massad points out that "Burton included the now-infamous "Terminal Essay," in which he discussed such [lewd] matters under the heading 'Pornography.' After offering a spirited defense to his readers for including sexual words that might be regarded as offensive" (Massad, 2007, 10) Here, Massad finds in Burton's translation evidence to how *The Nights* has been oversexualized by Orientalists, namely Burton. In the same vein, Khaled El-Rouayheb offers similar readings of Burton's translation (El-Rouayheb, 2005, 10). Additionally, he points out that "in 1930 a new edition of *The Arabian Nights* was published in Cairo, in general it followed the other editions of 1835 and 1890, but made some noteworthy omissions. For example, the few stories that related in a sympathetic tone to pederastic love affairs were quietly left out" (El-Rouayheb, 2005, 158). El-Rouayheb's engagement with *The Nights* continues this trend of reflections on *The Nights* as a diagnostic text that exposes the moral or Orientalist codes based on the changes, omissions, or translations of the *The Nights*. It is also important here to note that, in their scholarship, *The Nights* is not at the center of their respective critical and

historical projects. Yet, *The Nights* remains underexplored in terms of *how the text of The Nights incorporates figurations of change and transformation that exceed the translations, changes and omissions added to it by translators.*

In his study of 19th century translations of *The 1001 Nights*, Kamran Rastegar proposes a wider scope of engagement with *The Nights*. Rastegar proposes a concept in the study of *The Nights—literary transactions.* He suggests this concept "to discuss how interlinguistic exchanges of texts served to innovate literary practice and to revolutionize the systems of legitimization and evaluation of literature. *Transactional texts mark the encounters and exchanges between social and cultural fields with differential value systems*. In these encounters, and through these exchanges, the revaluation of a text is calculated with a consideration of the cultural costs of the encounter" (italics mine Rastegar, 2005, 271). The transactions of *The Nights* across different spheres follows from the text's autonomy according to him. Here, "the power of the text is derived from its ability to sustain a system of legitimization outside of both monarchial and religious spheres. The critical discourse on *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* constitutes, as a body, the inception of an autonomous system of legitimization of literature" (Rastegar, 2005, 271). Here, the specific changes to the text of *The Nights* do not assume as much significance as *The Night*'s "autonomous system of legitimization" and the texts power to sustain value discourse in multiple spheres. As a result, Rastegar traces the literary transactions in Al-Hilal periodical, which illusterates a growing value discourse on *The Nights* in the 19th century with readers (Rastegar, 2005, 282).

The limitations of engaging critically with *The Thousand and One Nights* strictly in terms of how translators changed or commented on the text risks undervaluing the voice of Shahrazad as a narrator. What Rastegar proposes is productive in terms of understanding particular

engagements with *The Nights* as only a part of a value discourse that needs to be examined broadly including those who "have argued for or against the merits of the text" (Rastegar, 2005, 271). Here, my approach in this dissertation is similar to Rastegar's method by understanding *The Nights* as a text that has a great deal of autonomy. While Rastegar focuses on the text's autonomy in terms of its reception and the value discourse around it. I highlight the texts autonomy by reflection on *its complex structure that provides intricate conceptions of desire that cannot be simply omitted when translators or editors elect to remove or change individual stories.* Here, I offer the story of "The Porter and The Three Ladies of Baghdad" as representative of the text's complex autonomy.

The Porter and The Three Ladies of Baghdad

"The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" begins with a wealthy woman who makes lavish purchases. She hires a porter to carry the goods she acquires from the market for a party. The poor porter follows the lady as she fills his basket with fruits, nuts, perfumes, flowers and herbs until he can barely carry the extravagant acquisitions. The porter follows the women to an elegant house where he encounters other two beautiful women. He makes a case for staying with them since they are three women, and he can offer them the company of a man as he claims. He notices a large hall that ha a pool in the middle and a bed in the center, a space prepared for festive living. They agree that he can stay if he keeps their secrets and should never divulge what happens to outsiders. He agrees; they shortly start the celebration with drinks, food and excessive touching, kissing and flirtation. The porter is in awe of his surroundings. The porter and the three ladies play a game where they name their bodily parts. Once this round of pleasure ends; they ask him to leave; he refuses to leave again and makes a plea to stay.

When he insists to stay and one of the ladies supports his stay, they tell him that he can stay on one condition. They order the porter: "abide by our condition, that whatever we do and whatever happens to us, you shall refrain from asking for any explanation, for ‘speak not of what concerns you not, lest you hear what pleases you not.’ This is our condition; don't be too curious about any action of ours” (Haddawy, 2010, 75). The porter agrees to this condition—he answers, “yes yes yes I am dumb and blind.” The ladies ask him to go to the entrance and read an inscription “written in letters of gold.” When he reads it, it instructs “whoever speaks of what concerns him not hears what pleases him not” The porter, in response, pledges “I…will not speak of what concerns me not” (Haddawy, 2010, 75). The group enjoys supper, laughing, joking and having “refined conversation” until the door knocks, and three one-eyed dervishes arrive.

The mendicant monks enter, each of whom is blind in one eye, “with a shaven head, beard and shaven eyebrows” (Haddawy, 2010, 76) They, too, are asked to keep the girls secrets and not ask questions that do not concern them. They start another round of festivity as the Dervishes play music and create an amicable atmosphere. Shortly the Caliph Harun al-Rashid and the vizier Ja’far Barmakid and his assistant Masrur join the gathering having been roaming the city of Baghdad. They are instructed to not be too curious as well and they agree to the ladies’ condition. The arrivals agree to keep to themselves and not ask curious questions.

It is difficult to keep this promise when two dogs are brought out and whipped by one of the ladies. The lady, having punished them, starts to comfort the dogs afterwards. This raises many questions for the guests who have promised not to ask questions. The guests’ feelings of inquisitiveness only increases when the other two ladies respond too passionately to an emotional song. They reveal bodies scarred with signs of beating. Harun al-Rashid attempts to

ask the ladies for an explanation, but the vizier keeps him from doing so. The group of men consult and agree that the porter should ask for the reason and should be confident to do so since there are seven men in the house and only three women. When he does, the ladies respond aggressively. One of the ladies call the guests ungrateful and "rolled up her sleeves and struck the floor three times crying out "come at once" and a door opened and out came seven black men, with drawn swords in their hands" (Haddawy, 2010, 84). Each man "dealt a blow" to one of the guests, tied him to another guest. They are lead to the center of the hall and each man stood with his sword drawn to the head of one of the guests. When the guards ask to behead the guests one by one, one of the ladies replies that she prefers to interrogate them before they die. She asks them about their stories, starting with the porter and the dervishes, letting them know that they have one hour to live during which they can tell their stories. The dervishes tell three stories, and the group is released afterwards. The caliph is still curious about the two dogs and the scars on the other ladies. He ordered the three ladies to his palace and makes them tell the stories that explain what he saw that night.

This story is particularly interesting in *Alf Laylah* because it combines multiple layers of storytelling that bring forth the complexity of Shahrazad's narrative voice. In this story, there is the voice of Shahrazad who serializes each story in the "Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad" in addition to the reflective quality of the story that mirrors Shahrazad's plight herself. Here, storytelling is a way to escape death—the way in which Shahrazad attempts to avoid her death by telling stories to the king and how the dervishes tell their stories to escape death by the ladies' weaponized protectors. More importantly, this story proposes a framing that brings about intricate conceptions of desire. Desire, figured as complex feelings, is brought in a festive cornucopia of pleasures—food, drink, music, lavish space and storytelling among others. This

story in many ways resists the presentation of desire as simply achieved and consumed. Instead, it features depictions of worldly pleasure that are removed, mediated and in flux.

This function of Shahrazad's narration complicates even Orientalist translations that attempt to offer Shahrazad's voice for male consumption. *The 1001 Nights* is a text that resists an overall coherence, not only because its open-ended structure, but also because desire in it is deeply coded, mediated and works by negating unities, symmetries and the production of a coherent meaning that can explain the meaning of the text. In this story, the rejection of explanation embedded within the framework of the story. For this reason, my purpose here is not simply to explain the story, but to offer a meditation on how the text of *The Nights* generates complex codes of desire that exceed attempts to make the text legible.

This rejection to produce a desire for consumption is incorporated into structure of the story. When the guests are allowed to enter the house, they learn that they should keep what happens a secret and never ask questions for things they do not understand. This agreement is not simply a meaningless verbal contract—the way male guests understand it, which encourages them to break it—but it is built in the structure of the house itself. The framing of desire here is similar to what J. L Austin describes as performatives utterances. Austin proposes "illocutionary" speech acts to describe "speech acts that, in saying do what they say, and do it in a moment of saying (qtd in Butler, 1997, 3). Judith Buther further explicates them "such utterances do what they say on the occasion of saying; they are not only conventional, but in Austin's words 'ritual or ceremonial' …that is repeated in time. And , hence , maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment of the utterance itself." Butler, following Austin, stresses that an "illocutionary speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The 'moment'

in the ritual is a condensed historicity; it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (Butler, 1997, 3). This means that a performative utterance in illocutionary speech act simultaneously brings together the spoken utterance with its effect. Once the utterance is spoken its effect becomes biding. The ritualistic aspect of illocutionary speech locates the speaker within a convention that is repeated over time. This creates a temporality that exceeds the past and the future and assumes further repetitions of the illocutionary speech act. To consider the framing of desire in "The Porter and the Three ladies of Baghdad" as performative is to highlight the fluid and various ways in which desire operates in *The Nights*.

In the story of the porter and the ladies, each round of guests is instructed to follow the same directions—to not ask questions or there will be consequences. The porter reads the sign by the entrance that clearly sends the same message. The instructions create something beyond a verbal agreement, they create a performative illocutionary speech act. The request—to keep to oneself—and the punishment—the appearances of the weaponized servants—both reflect the performative dimensions of language. The house as a space orchestrates the division of each segment the agreement. Once the guests speak of what "does not concern them,"—thus having the condition of their stay revoked—one of the ladies strikes the floor three times so a door opens for their punishment. This creates what Butler and Austin describe as a convention, the ritualistic and criminal aspect of language. The existence of a *convention* assumes prior instances of the same speech act and future invocations of it as well. Here, the structure of the story, the interdict, its violation and punishment, assumes that the convention exited in a past temporality and will exist in future innovations according to Butler's exploration of performatives. It is within this field of repetitions and ritualistic performances that desire operates. This offer a

degree of complexity to Shahrazad's voice that resists offering the female desire for Orientalist male consumption. However, this connections between illocutionary speech and the female power is only broken when the three ladies are physically removed from their house to Harun's palace.

Chapter 1: Galland and Burton: Narrative Closure and the Imagination

Generations of scholars have raised pertinent questions in relation to translations of *The Thousand and One Ni*ghts by Antoine Galland (1646-1715) and Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890). Their translations stand out not only because of the popularity of their volumes in their respective contexts, but also because their projects became later impactful on scholars in the Arab world, especially in the postwar period[3]. While the studies that scrutinize their translations emerge from relevant fields of critical inquiry—Orientalism, 1001 Studies, translation studies, manuscript studies, gender and sexuality studies among many others—a less developed area of investigation is the relationship between Orientalism, desire and the imagination.

Here, this chapter approximates two Orientalist projects that—to my knowledge—have not been put in conversation by scholars. First are the explicit, racist discourses on the imagination and Islam —that are found in the work of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) among others. The second discourse constitutes the translations of *The Nights* by many Orientalists, such as Galland and Burton, who either took editorial liberties to change the "original" manuscript or appended to their translations anthropological footnotes or essays—to inculcate their audiences with knowledge about the East. This chapter does not simply approach the 'alterations' to the Arabic manuscript as simply infidelities to a pristine source. Instead, it approaches translations by Galland and Burton as reflective of an Orientalist discourse on the imagination. This chapter maintains that the changes and comments that are introduced to the text of *The Nights* by the two translators mediate a colonial preoccupation with sexuality in Islam. This precisely happens when Galland introduces a narrative closure that incorporates Shahrazad and Shahriyar into a heteronormative family order through the introduction of marriage and the birth of three

[3] Chapters 2 and 3 examine how these earlier translations impact Arab scholars in the postwar period.

children. It is also true that when Burton appends a "Pornography" section in his "Terminal Essay" that anthropologically and didactically addresses the transgressions of the text, he manifests the very colonial sexualization of the text that Edward Said and other postcolonial scholars have cautioned against[4].

This chapter brings another layer of analysis that has not been studied adequately by other scholars: literary genre. *The Thousand and One Nights*, in the version recovered by Muhsin Mahdi, escapes strict categorizations of genre. The open-ended Arabic manuscript of *The Nights* resists its incorporation into already existing literary forms. This is especially true since the Arabic manuscript features variations of Arabic and Eastern genres, such as fictional narrative (frame story), and poetry. In addition, historical and fantastic elements permeate the text of *The Nights*. The frame story structure allows for a mode of storytelling that assumes no end. Storytelling, as a function of the premodern orality of the text, ensures the effortless origination of new stories and resists the introduction of a definitive end. This is implied by the title *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah*, a signifier whose signified is an unlimited number in Arabic. For this reason, Galland's introduction of an end transforms the genre of Shahrazad's artful stories into an enclosed narrative structure.

Not only is Galland's ending an issue of genre and literary form, but it is also an issue of the Orientalist fascination with oversexualizing Eastern civilizations. His ending introduces the birth of three children into the narrative. As a result, Shahrazad is implicated in Galland's conceptions of desire since, in his version of *The Nights*, she relinquishes storytelling to become a reproductive mother and a wife. This Galland-orchestrated motherhood, brings her stories to an end as she terraforms from a storyteller to a caregiver to her children. My engagement with

[4] More detailed discussion of Said's thoughts on Burton's Orientalist works in the "Prelude" chapter of this dissertation.

Galland's translation, unlike Mahdi where he fixates on Galland's infidelities to the original Arabic manuscript, illustrates how Galland was involved in translating *The Nights*, not only from Arabic to French, but also from Arab and Eastern literary traditions to Western literary traditions. This is a particularly significant event in the textual history of *The Nights* since Galland transformed *The Nights* into an enclosed narrative genre. Burton copies Galland's ending with the birth of three children in addition to an infamous "Terminal Essay" that explains to his audience the sexual practices of the Arabs. This chapter, in short, situates their translations within a genealogy on the Islamic imagination in Orientalism. This genealogy produces *The Nights* as imaginatively lacking narrative in its Arabic form. Thus, its translation is not only a translation across languages, but also across Eastern and Western literary traditions.

The Nights and Genre

Within the scholarship that explores the relationship between *The Nights* and genre, Peter Heath's "Romance as a Genre in *The Thousand and One Nights*" (1987) offers relevant insights to investigate *The Nights* through the rubric of genre. Heath's major proposal is for critics to privilege the study of genre since it "opens the *Nights* to comparison: internally, among stories and groups of stories within the work itself; externally, within the context of the study of medieval Arabic popular literature and, on a wider scale, of world literature" (Heath, 1987,171). Heath's project is to study genre in *The 1001 Nights* in order to identify relationships within the collection of stories in the text and also launch further investigations into *The Nights'* relation to other genres in Arabic literature and even on a scale of world literature. The major purpose here is comparison—in order to compare texts, one must develop a solid understanding of the generic features of the two texts. The immense body of stories in *The Nights* challenges a coherent overall structure or a guiding principle behind the text. For Heath, genre can be a useful entry

point in order to delimit basic structures within individual stories, the text of *The Nights* and outside the text when investigating other genres. For example, he points out that "[U]nderstanding the goals and conventions of genre found in the collection can provide a critical springboard from which to approach other examples of these genre—romance, *sira*, pious tale, fable, ribald story humorous anecdote, etc.—that exists outside of it" (Heath, 1987, 171). Here. Heath's proposal is significantly different from that of David Pinault's later contribution in *Story-Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*[5] (1992) where he focuses on individual stories across multiple editions.

While Heath's approach is viable in demarcating the structural features of the text, there remains a tension between this proposal and the textual history of the *The Nights*. In other words, the generic features of a story that appears in later versions, such as Aladdin, Ali Baba or Sinbad, cannot be generalized as reading methods to medieval Arabic popular literature since they are added to the text later. Still, Heath's project is especially valuable as he features an overview of what 'genre' means in the text of *The Nights*. He poses the problem of genre as an issue of both "definition and scope." In an Aristotelian sense, genre can be defined according to "modes of imitation…and their psychological effects" (Heath, 1987, 172). Heath deems Aristotle's framework insufficient since he "spends most of the *Poetics* further refining his analytic framework for studying partial aspects of these modes [of imitation] (according to plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song), however his mode—despite the obvious brilliance of his achievement—has sometimes been a source of confusion especially when later critics came to consider his observations as 'laws'" (Heath, 1987, 172). Here, Heath considers the Aristotelian model lacking since it is preoccupied with the 'partial aspects' of the modes of

[5] Pinault's project is discussed in the "Prelude" chapter.

imitation. Heath also highlights the difficulty to apply Aristotle's proposal by later critics as an additional layer of that limitation—how to classify texts that do not fit this Aristotelian model?

Heath does not highlight two important aspects of Aristotle's theory of genre: *techne* and *unity*. These two aspects complicate and enrich his argument in fundamental ways. For Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, "Epic poetry, and Tragedy, Comedy and Dithyrambic poetry... are all in their general conceptions modes of imitations" (Aristotle 7). This conception of poetry prioritizes its representational aspect. Similar to the relation of a picture to the object it represents, the imitational aspect of poetry here is essential, since, following Aristotle's conception, poetry is not creative, but representational (*mimesis*). What is at stake here is the fact that Aristotle is more concerned with the *means by which a poem is produced* (*techne*). According to this conception of poetry by Aristotle, a poet is a person who crafts a technique through which poems are made – in Greek the word '*poietes'*, poet," means "a maker" (Halliwell, 1986, 158). Aristotle pays less attention to the poet as someone who writes poetry from inspiration or transforms their emotions into poetry (Halliwell, 1986, 158). Instead, and unlike Plato's rejection of poets from his republic, Aristotle approaches poetry as "a rational art whose procedures are objectively specifiable" (Halliwell, 1986, 158). The poet's role as a craftsperson is to bring these parts into a whole in unity. Unity here, in the form of plot-structure, emerges as the major task for the poet. Notably, Aristotle values poetry in terms of the *techne* by which it is produced.

Here, while Heath is correct to point out that Aristotle's emphasis on modes of imitations can prove inapplicable to the text of *The Nights*, his focus on the 'partial' elements in Aristotelian theory, such as plot, character…etc., seems to underestimate the teleological dimensions of Aristotle's *Poetics*—modes of imitation that are crafted through careful *techne* should produce unity within the text. Heath finds in E. D. Hirsch's theory of 'intrinsic genre' a

more relatable account on genre in *The Nights*. Hirsch argues that the "genre purpose must be in some sense an *idea,* a notion of the type of meaning to be communicated, otherwise there would be nothing to guide the author's will; the author has an idea of what he wants to convey—not an abstract concept, of course, but an idea equivalent to what we call an intrinsic genre in the course of realizing this idea he wills the meaning which subserves it" (qtd in Heath, 1987, 173). The idea behind the literary genre, Heath emphasizes, can be found not only in reader-response—the emotions that a genre elicits, such as sadness or happiness—but it can also be found in "profound psychological, moral, and cosmological issues, and it is the task of genre analysis, at its broadest level, to identify and clarify these" (Heath, 1987, 173). The shift from the Aristotelian model to E. D. Hirsch's theory makes possible a classification approach that privileges the *purpose* behind the text over its modes of imitations and the *techne* of its production. This is inseparable from Heath's argument that *The Nights'* stories are edifying. He notes that the "collection's dominant voice is didactic" since in *The Nights* "romances present themselves primarily as instructional" (Heath, 1987, 203). This is one example of how Heath discerns interrelationships among stories based on the *idea* or the *purpose* behind them rather than what he considers formulaic and structural Aristotelian 'laws' that fail to define the text of *The 1001 Nights*.

The limitation of Heath's arguments lies in its focus on describing individual stories, but not the whole text. It is clear that Heath is aware of this problem since he argues that his theory is not meant to be decisive. Instead, we should think of his proposals only as "general methodological guideposts to our [literary] discussion" (Heath, 1987, 173). Yet, this problem persists since Galland's translation of *The Nights* introduces an end to the frame story. Here, the relationships that Galland interrupts are not only on the level of individual stories, but he imposes an end upon the frame story, which makes the proliferation of stories possible. In other

words, the theories of genre proposed here can be useful in either understanding the internal relationships within the text of *The Nights,* or they also can be useful in understanding the Western context of Galland's translation—the closure of the story follows the Aristotelian emphasis on the unity of the text. It is safe to say that Heath's method is an apposite way to study the Western context into which Galland translated *The Nights*. It is also useful as we study the text comparatively in relation to other genres from the history of Islamic civilization. However, the genre of the open-ended Arabic manuscript that Muhsin Mahdi recovered remains inadequately addressed in this model. In particular, this model fails to address how individual stories from the body of *The 1001 Nights* relate to the frame story where Shahrazad tells stories to escape death.

The Nights **and Sīra**

In order to depict the structural affinities between *The Thousand One Nights* and the *sīra* genre, it important to first define then review the major characteristics of the sīra genre. This genre combines three literary influences: the narratives of combat and war (*Ayyam al-ʿArab*), Persian epics of kings, and "Judeo-Christian hagiographies" (Ghazoul, 1996, 44). The term sīra was used originally to reference the life of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Later, the term started to designate the lives of historical and notable figures; it also can refer to the entire clans. The term appears in various contexts to mean different things— "state," "form" or "a manner of being"—but its relation to biography is the most relevant definition of the term. In particular, the meaning of the word sīra (as biography) bears associations with the pre-Islamic war narratives *Ayyam al-ʿArab* as well as Pahlavi Persian epics, that relate the biographies and achievements of kings, that Arabs knew during the medieval period. The same meaning applies to the biography

of prophets and saints in other religious traditions, especially in Christianity and Judaism (Ghazoul, 1996, 44).

The literary genre of the *sīra,* similar to *The Nights,* may have not received critical attention within the tradition of Arabic literature because it is not classified as high literature. The *sīra sẖaʿbiyya* genre features lengthy heroic stories that are comparable to "popular epics" or "popular romances" in Western literatures (Heath, 2012). In fact, before elaborating on popular epics in Arabic literature, it is important to reflect on Western epics since Arab scholars, such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn were influenced by Western discussions of epics. David Quint in *Epic and Empire* (1993) notes that Western medieval epics portray national dimensions. Such epics, "seemed to speak of loss and defeat. In order to build narrative of national resurgence and redemption, the nation in question is first depicted as vanquished: it receives its identity in its moment of prostration—from which, historically, its only way can be up. Present national greatness is thus a redressing of or taking revenge on the past" (Quint, 1993, 360). In other words, what Quint describes as romantic nationalism is grounded in the epic's depiction of national failure that can then motivate regrowth and rebuilding the nation after its fall.

This element of popular epics can be glimpsed in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's take on the epic in his "*Remarks on Poetry and Prose* [*min hadīth al-shiʿr wa-al-nathr*[6]] (1969) where he addresses the issue of Arab popular epics in relation to its Western counterparts. He resists the opinion that holds Arabic poetry inferior to other literary traditions. He proclaims, "there is no doubt that the poetry we inherent from the past fulfills the needs that the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" fulfilled [in their respective contexts]" (Ḥusayn, 1969, 18). Ḥusayn emphasizes the importance of popular epics as he stresses "the beauty if Arabic literature that rivals the Iliad and the Odyssey." He asks

[6] I would like to thank my dissertation advisor, Professor Terri DeYoung for guiding me to find this mention of popular epics in the works of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. I am very grateful for this valuable resource.

literary scholars of Egypt "Do any of you study [the *sīras]? If so, you will be compelled to acknowledge its artistic beauty*—that rivals the '*Iliad*' and the '*Odyssey.*'" He adds, "only read the poetry that we [Egyptians] castigate and designate to coffeehouses. This genre will establish a wide-range renaissance in Arabic literature" (Ḥusayn, 1969, 18). Very similar to Qiunt's comments on the national dimension of epics, Ḥusayn here presents popular epics as a part of a lost literary genre of the popular imagination that need to be retrieved and rescued from their current state of neglect. It is also true that he proclaims that if only scholars successfully recover *sīras,* a true renaissance can later ensue. These observations are not only important because they reveal an important acknowledgement of a genre that was, according to Ḥusayn, understudied, but it is also important because it foregrounds his search for epics in a strong sense of nationalism.

Dwight Reynolds offers am important contrast between *The Nights* and the *sīra* genre. While *The 1001 Nights* is less performed in coffeehouses and public places, the *sīra* genre still retains stronger social presence. *He claims,* "Though [Sirat Bani Hilal] is now seldom heard in the urban centers of the Arab world, in rural areas it continues to be performed in prose, in poetry, and in song. The most famous versions are those sung in Egypt by epic singers who perform their versified narrative for nights at a time while accompanying themselves on the [*rabab*] 'spike-fiddle', [*tar*] 'large frame-drum', or *kamanja* 'Western violin'" (Reynolds, 2018, 4). Reynolds presents an important difference between *The Nights* and the *sīra* genre that can help us situate Ḥusayn's remarks in more context. Popular epics still circulate through performance, which keeps alive the genre. This constant revival of the *sīra* explains Ḥusayn attention to it, especially as it pertains to the formation of a national character and a sense of history and identity.

In terms of their manuscripts, popular epics are identified as either *sīra* or *qissa*. They are "Pseudo-historical in tone and setting, they base many of their central characters on actual historical figures or events. Nevertheless, details of history are soon transcended by the imaginative improvements that fiction provides, with the result that history is usually reflected only along general levels of setting, atmosphere and tone" (Heath, 2012). Clearly, within the study of the *sīra* genre, scholars understand that popular epics do not aspire to truth and fidelity to historical events or figures since they can vary across multiple historical periods and oral narrations. Instead, the "imaginative improvements" and the presentation of a captivating narrative assumes higher significance in this genre.

As for the *sīras,* their formulaic compositions typically consist of key features that can identify this literary genre:

> "The formulaic character of their rhymed prose, the episodic structure of their story-lines, their continual repetition of a limited number of narrative patterns and motifs, the lack of any identifiable authors and their great length all indicate that these narratives originated and developed within a flourishing tradition of oral compositional public storytelling. This tradition of oral composition (either with or without musical accompaniment) has diminished significantly in the last century in the face of competition from modern entertainment technology, although some transfer has been made and these stories now occasionally appear in the Arab world as radio dramas, television series, films, and in modernised book and storybook form. Despite their primary existence as an oral popular art form, *sīras* also have a substantial manuscript and printed tradition. The earliest manuscripts date from the early …15th century, whilst in the last century printed versions of these manuscripts have been continually reproduced in various Arab countries." (Heath, 2012).

Not only do *Alf Laylah* and the *sīra* genre display strong similarities based on their distance from the canonical Arabic works of literature, but they also feature strong generic resemblances according to Heath's analysis. Some of the similarities between *The Thousand and One Nights* and the *sīra* genre include:

i. A lack of an author. Scholars have not been able, despite many speculations and attempts, to assert an author for either text.

ii. A non-canonical popular appeal as they feature a colloquial diction rather than a formal, Quranic diction.

iii. A narrative structure that assumes no end as an "infinite" proliferation of stories.

iv. A limited number of literary motifs that are repeated throughout the stories.

v. The texts also flourished under a strong tradition of oral performances of stories and process of fictionalization that values captivating storytelling over historical truth.

vi. A range of content that spans different cultures, civilizations and literary traditions.

vii. The utilization of prosimetrum, as they combine verse and prose.

viii. Stories that integrate supernatural elements and others that do not.

These elements make the *sīra* genre a product of the popular imagination, together with the *The 1001 Nights,* they bear strong resemblances within the tradition of Arabic popular literature. One major difference that the Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) notes is the "masculine" storytelling of the *sīra* genre, unlike the "effeminate" storytelling of *Alf Laylah* (qtd. in Heath, 1996, 7).

This point has been elaborated by Ferial Ghazoul, who argues that *The Nights* is an anti-sīra genre. While the *sīra* offers depictions of a male heroic figure "who tends to combine wisdom, bravery and high moral standards" (Ghazoul, 1996, 44). As this figure attempts to fulfill his mission, emerges as a man of great deeds. By contrast, according to Ghazoul, *The Nights*, offers a heroic figure, Shahrazad who fulfills the key requirements for an attractive woman in an Islamic context—a beautiful and educated daughter of a notable man and knows manners very well. This allows Shahrazad to "replace the masculine hero of the *sīra*. Instead of a traditional

battlefield in which the hero proves himself, the heroine of the *Arabian Nights* carries out her struggle in a boudoir, while sitting in bed. She is not armed with weapons and arsenal, but with narratives and discourses *(*Ghazoul, 1996, 46*).* What Ghazoul means by *anti-genre* is not necessarily a complete disavowal of the *sīra* genre, but rather an inversion of roles to the degree of mockery and irony of the genre itself. What gives Shahrazad that power is her ability to replace deeds of the *sīra* hero with great words that in the end proves to be a critique of the genre of *sīra* from within its logics.

***The Nights*, Genre and the Imagination**

This chapter's invitation—to open the discussion of *The Nights'* relation to genre—follows from the tendency in Orientalist scholarship to classify *Alf Laylah* or some of its stories under accessible categories. Many Orientalists have applied classifications of genre as an evaluative measure to cast judgement on Arabic literature by using Western standards of literary production.

Here, the discussion of genre needs to incorporate a vision of genre analysis that highlights the long history of the so-called Semitic imagination. This conception of the imagination, as Geoffrey Nash shows, occurs in Renan's *Life of Jesus* where "Renan uses "Semitic" as a racial category to connect both Jewish "responsibility" for the persecution and death of Jesus and persisting manifestations of Muslim obscurantism[7]" (32). Obscurantism here refers to what Renan perceived as the Islamic manifestations, such as the Arabic names of the villages, "concealing the traces of Jesus" during Renan's encounter in the course of his visit to Palestine in 1861. Clearly, the racial dimensions of the word "Semitic" in Renan's works has linguistic associations that groups two Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew, as less capable of

[7] Nash, Geoffrey. 2014. "Aryan and Semite in Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold's Quest for the Religion of Modernity." Religion & Literature, vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 25–50.

high literary productions than Indo-European languages. Christianity, according to Renan, "had broken out of the Semitic [mold], flourished in Aryan lands, and was destined to grow increasingly less Jewish" (qtd in Nash, 2014, 31). Renan expands this point in the *Life of Jesus* by noting

> "It is the faculty of nice discernment which makes the polished and moderate man. Now, the lack of this faculty is one of the most constant features of the Semitic mind. Subtle and refined works, the dialogues of Plato, for example, are altogether unknown to these nations. Jesus, who was exempt from almost all the defects of his race, and whose leading quality was precisely an infinite delicacy, was led in spite of himself to make use of the general style in polemics" (Renan, 1864, 279).

Renan continues this line of thinking by arguing, "As to the Semitic religions, they are as little philosophical as possible. Moses and Mahomet were not men of speculation; they were men of action" (Renan, 1864, 83). These racist claims establish positive correlations between the racial and linguistic features of Semitic civilizations and their claim for progress and growth. It is within this context of the 'Semitic Mind' that Renan advances his arguments in relation to *The Nights* and genre, more specifically, the epic[8].

Here, the process of classifying genres takes place in relation to colonial assumptions in regard to race. Within the textual history of *The Nights*, classifying stories has been linked to a degrading view of what Islam allows in relation to literary excellence and civilizational production. The epic, as a genre, became the determining factor whose presence in a culture equates literary progress. Literary traditions that did not have the epic genre, such as Arabic, were viewed by many Orientalists as less developed. In addition, many later Orientalists used the element of the supernatural and the fantastic as rubrics to divide civilizations that can

[8] Professor Muhsin al-Musawi offers incisive comments on Renan's reflections on race and language. See al-Musawi, Muhsin J. 2021. *The Arabian Nights in Contemporary World Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.255-56.

mythologize: India and Persia and others that cannot imagine supernatural worlds and events: Arab civilization.

On March 29th, 1883, Renan delivered "Islam and Science" in which he spoke of "the inferiority of Muslim countries" and "the decadence of states governed by Islam" (Renan, 1883, 8). Renan in this lecture reflects a common trope among 19th century Orientalists by equating "Islamic civilization" with Persians. In this vein, Renan posits that Islamic science, civilization and philosophy were products of those who were *not* "of Arab blood [and] …have nothing of the Arab mind" (Renan, 1883,8). What Renan means by the "Arab mind" is Arabic language as a Semitic language and instrument of thinking. Arabic, "which lends itself so well to poetry and to a certain eloquence, is an instrument very inconvenient for metaphysics. Arab philosophers and scholars are generally quite poor writers" (Renan, 1883, 8) since "God taught them nothing about [science and philosophy] and did not fit them for it" (Renan, 1883, 3).

In this lecture, Renan identifies Arabic poetry as lyrical which, according to the 19th century European hierarchy of genres, ranks as inferior to the epic. Unlike lyrical poetry, the epic features a *narrative*. Lyrical poetry, however, incorporates the thoughts and feelings of the poet (Abrams, 1958, 84-85). For Renan, Arabic poetry lacked narrative. What Renan suggests here is that narrative requires cohesiveness (plot and character), which implies reason and logic. This can explain his fascination with the Persian element in Islamic civilization. Persian epics remind him of the "local color… from Sassanid times" as they offer the narrative elements he sets as crucial standards for high literary production. In short, Renan attributes "Islamic civilization" to the rise of the Persians "about the year 750" because, for him, Persians brought about "traces of

one of the most brilliant civilizations that the Orient had known, that of the Sassanid Persians [9] (Renan, 1883, 4).

It is in this context that Renan makes his observation about *The Thousand and One Nights.* The historical moment in which *The Nights* flourished, for Renan, was neither Arab nor Muslim, it was Persian, which for him indicated Indo-European, not Semitic. The rulers of the Abbasid empire, who "were barely Muslims" were "outspoken leaders of a fanatic religion" who protected free thinkers from the 'fanaticism' of Islam. He adds, "That is the explanation of this curious and captivating civilization of Baghdad, whose features are captured in the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*" (Renan, 1883, 5). It was a "movement which occurred despite Islam, against Islam, and that Islam, fortunately, was unable to prevent" (Renan, 1883, 9). According to this Islamophobic view, according to him, the only viable way Muslims can stake their claims for civilization is by *resisting* their religion and acting *against* it. The artistic imagination in Renan's account is one that can only be effective if it *resists* the teachings of the Islam. This purified imagination becomes the [non-Arab] bulwark against violence and terror.

In a publication titled "The Arab" (1905), an anonymous writer has repeated Renan's trope of linking Arabs' capacity to build a civilization, philosophical speculation and high literary production to their capacity to imagine cratively. The writer states, "The fatal defect in that [Arab] character is its lack of the capacity to think consecutively, to proceed slowly but surely, to test every phase in a development in the consciousness that each phase can only be a sure basis for what is to follow if it is a logical deduction from what went before" (The

[9] The Abbasids, who have their roots in the Arabian peninsula, revolted against Banū Umayya, who also had roots in the peninsula. The Abbasids had the Persians' support, which translated after their success in awarding distinguished offices to Persians. It was a common practice by Orientalists in the 19th century to speak of a struggle the "Aryan Persian" against the "Semitic Arab" within the Abbasid Empire. Renan here reflects this trope of 19th century Orientalist study. See Lewis, B. 2012ʿAbbāsids.' *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Reference Online. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Web. 25 Feb. 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0002

Edinburgh Review, 1905, 400). This capacity to think logically and deductively is a faculty "the Arabs have never possessed." Reminiscent of Renan's argument, where Arabs 'failed' to produce cohesive narrative poetry, "The Arab" here "lacks that principle of cohesion which is the first condition of all progressive development" (The Edinburgh Review, 1905, 400).

A part of this "progressive development" is the emergence of a "poetry of thought" that succeeds "the poetry of action." In other words, Arabic imaginative writing failed to pass the stage of ballad poetry (poetry of action). The Arab "has remained always in the stage of ballad poetry" (The Edinburgh Review, 1905, 408). The argument here links this failure to produce contemplative (narrative) poetry to the failure to produce a "coherent society" and, by extension, to produce a civilization (The Edinburgh Review, 1905, 403). The confluence of a lack of a literary imagination and the failure of Arabs to produce a progressive society or a nation is a repeated trope in Orientalist accounts[10]. Renan and the author of "The Arab" state it clearly in their scholarship. However, the same Orientalist discourse takes on different shapes up until now as it continues to exist in the academy.

For example, similar to Renan's engagement with the Arab literary imagination, one can detect an Orientalist trope of classifying the stories within the collection of *The 100 Nights*. The desire to classify stories in *The Nights* stems from a search for origins. The question many European and American Orientalists raised was how to tell if a story is of an Arab, Persian, or

[10] For Raphael Patai, the relationship between the "East" and the "West" is comparable to the relationship between the genie and the Fisherman in *The Thousand And One Nights.* The Fishermen catches a copper flagon that releases a massive genie (ifrīt) the genie threatens to kill the fisherman list he send him back to the flagon. Tricked by the Fisherman, who states that it was not possible for such a massive creature to be occupying the flagon, the genie reassumes its smoke shape. It is then that the Fisherman reimprisons the genie inside the flagon. For Patai, the relationship between the East and the West resembles this story. The Arabs, could not "resist the temptation" opening the flagon of "Western accomplishments." They soon realized that "unless they could control this flood of intrusive Western offerings, their own traditional culture could suffocate…they tried to coax the genie of the West back into its flagon, force him to do their bidding, fulfill their wishes. See Patai, Raphael. 1983. *The Arab Mind*. Rev. ed. New York: Scribner. 268-269.

Indian origin? Since the text of *The Nights* has been accumulating stories for a long time and because many stories in *The Nights* were given an Arab local color, it has always been difficult for Orientalists to classify stories. This also meant that even stories of Arab origin were classified into stories from Baghdad or Cairo. What is important to note here is that the desire to classify reveals the Orientalist theory of the imagination. It is in that desire to classify stories based on their content, delimit rigid conceptions of genre and the multiple assumptions pertaining to what the Arab mind can or cannot imagine, that an Orientalist theory of the imagination is revealed.

This prominent trend, of classifying stories, in the study of *The Nights* during the 19th and 20th century, is exemplified by the works of Chauvin, Littmann, MacDonald, Nöldeke, Østrup, and Cosquin[11]. Many of these scholars scrutinize *The Nights'* individual stories, arguing that the stories that are rhymeless, supernatural, or have *jinn* are Persian or Indian. The French folklorist Emmanuel Cosquin observes that the frame story of *The Nights* is of an Indian origin. He relies heavily in his claim on the appearance of a supernatural creature at the beginning of the story. D.B MacDonald agrees with Østrup who distinguishes Arab stories from Persian and Indian stories based on the element of the supernatural (Cosquin 1922, 205-47, Littmann 2012, Nöldeke 1888, 71, Macdonald, 1924, 353-397, Marzolph, 2007, 226).

One of the recurring supernatural creatures in *The Nights* is the figure of a flying horse. This figure appears in stories, such as "The Ebony Horse" and in third Darvish tale in "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad." In "The Ebony Horse," a Persian king receives gifts in

[11] The folklorist Emmanuel Cosquin makes his claim in his essay "Le Prologue-Cadre des Mille et une Nuits," Revue Biblique, Jan.-April, 19, which was collected in his posthumous volume *Etudes Folkloriques* pp. 205-247. For Littmann observations See Littmann, E. 'Alf Layla Wa-Layla'. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill Reference. Theodore Nöldeke traces Indian and Greek elements in The Nights. See Nöldeke, Th. "Zu Den Ägyptischen Märchen." Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, vol. 42, no. 1, 1888, pp. 68–72. pp.71. Macdonald. the American Orientalist distinguishes Indian and Persian tales in Macdonald, D. B. "The Earlier History of the Arabian Nights." Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, vol. 56, no. 3, 1924, pp. 353–397. For Johannes Østrup's observations on *The Nights,* I rely on Marzolph, Ulrich. *The Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective*. Wayne State University Press, 2007. pp.226

exchange for offering his daughter for marriage. One of the gifts he receives is a horse made of ebony. When the king's son mounts the horse, the horse flies away. By the time he learns to descend, he finds himself in faraway lands. In the story of the third Darvish, a man tells the story of how he lost his eye. He opens a door he was instructed to avoid. He finds a horse in the room. By riding the flying horse, the Darvish loses his eye when the horse lands. The motif of the flying horse for Østrup, Littmann, Chauvin and others becomes a definitive sign that indicates a non-Arab origin of the story.

In the first Arabic study of *The Nights*, the Egyptian critic Suhayr al-Qalamawi detects a tendency in Orientalist studies to "argue that [a certain] phenomenon does not correspond with the Arabic nature or the nature of Muslim countries" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 37). Al-Qalamawi argues that scholars should take into consideration popular literatures (especially in Egypt) that can collapse the 'natural-supernatural' binary. Here, I will elaborate the comments she makes in passing by, first distinguishing two Arabic words that refer to *jinn*. The word *jinni* (*genie*) has religious connotations since chapter 72 of the Quran is titled "Sūrat al-Jinn." Second, the word '*ifrīt*, in agreement with Al-Qalamawi's observation, tends to be used in popular literature. Still, Al-Qalamawi's claims that the Arab literary imagination can mythologize and produce supernatural stories at the *popular level*. For her, the dominant discourse, exemplified by "the books of Arabic literature and Islam" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 37), is insufficient to make judgements about the supernatural elements in *The Nights*.

Here, Al-Qalamawi, Littmann, Østrup amongst others dismiss the existence of a flying horse within the *Islamic* tradition. *Al- Burāq*, "a flying steed of the prophets, upon which the prophet Muḥammad rode on his nighttime journey (*isrāʾ*) from Mecca to Jerusalem" (Gruber, 2012, 40-41). Within the Islamic tradition, tales emerged later to describe how *al- burāq* carried

the prophet "through the heavens toward God, onward to Paradise and Hell, and back to Jerusalem and Mecca in a single night." This connection has been neglected by generations of Orientalists and Arab scholars. These debates around the figure of the flying horse and classifying stories based on the element of the supernatural reveal a theory of the imagination and the 'Arab mind.' In other words, the figure of the flying horse mediates generations of Orientalists who questioned if Islam could produce philosophy, science, narrative poetry, the epic, a coherent society, democracy, logical language and, by extension, a nation.

Galland, Burton and Narrative Closure

The Aristotelian background of Western works of literature emphasizes unity as one of the key elements in the theory of narratology. John Roberts notes

> [Aristotle] assigns a central place to *mȳthos* or 'plot', which is the criterion (rather than metre) that he uses to distinguish poetry from other forms of discourse. Mythos, [analyzed] both in terms of content and of its representation, is required to have an organic unity which calls to mind the concept of *closure*" (Italics mine, Roberts, 2005).

Narrative closure—as one of the components that cohere a plot into a beginning, middle and end—has always been one of the expected requirements for accomplished literary writing. Though the order of the beginning, middle, and end can be manipulated—Homeric epics opening in *medias res*—the assumption remains that a work of literature must integrate a unified plot structure. This background to Western works of art can help us understand Galland's decision to add an end to *The Nights*.

In his recovery project of *The Nights*, Muhsin Mahdi refers to Galland's translations as one that took so many editorial liberties with the Arabic text[12]. (Mahdi, 1994, 11). Elsewhere, Mahd designates Galland's project as introducing "a new genre to French literature and expose Western readers to a valuable tradition that they would otherwise have remained unaware of"

[12] This point was discussed in detail in the "Prelude" chapter of this dissertation.

(Mahdi, 2006, 127). Commenting on one of Galland's reflective accounts on his translation, Mahdi points out that Galland did not intend his translation to be exact since he "wanted to appeal to a popular audience" (Mahdi, 2006, 127). Unlike Mahdi's previous critique of Galland's alterations of the text of *Alf Laylah*, here Mahdi acknowledges the positive sides of Galland's translation—Galland's project gives the text a new audience and popularity on a Western and global scale. While Mahdi's study is pivotal in bringing to light the specific changes that Galland introduced to the text and his departure from the Arabic manuscript that he had consulted for his translation, little attention is paid in Mahdi's examination to the implications of Galland's translation on the genre of the text. The ending that Galland introduces to the text—where Shahrazad becomes a mother to three children to whom she appeals to have the king spare her life—functions as a *narrative closure* to the frame story—where Shahrazad marries the king Shahriyar and starts narrating to him a story every night. Galland's closure does not simply add stories as narrations by Shahrazad, thus having each added story filtered through the voice of Shahrazad. Instead, Galland's is a version that ends the frame story and the possibility of future tellings by Shahrazad.

Galland's conclusion is a significant moment in the textual history of *The Nights*. As a translator of the text, Galland knew the text very well, which helped him imagine a conclusion. He supplemented this section by the end of his translation of *The Nights*:

> When Scheherazade had finished her story, not wanting to start a new one, she threw herself at the feet of the Sultan … and said to him:
> King of the world, mighty monarch of this century. your slave has told you for a thousand and one nights pleasant and amusing tales, stories and anecdotes in prose and verse. Isn't that enough, and do you still persist in your old resolution? That's enough, says the Sultan; let her head be cut off, for her latest stories especially have caused me fatal annoyance. Then Scheherazade made a sign to the babysitter, and the latter entered with three children whom the Sultan had given to Scheherazade, rendering her a mother, during the thousand and one nights that her tales had lasted. One of these children began to walk alone, the second walked to the corner [of the room], and the third was carried by

> the babysitter. She presented these children to the Sultan of India, and threw herself again on his knees.
> Great king, she said, here are your children, I beg you to grant me life for their sake, and not because of my stories; for if you deprive them of their mother, they will become orphans: no other woman can have a mother's heart for them. As she said these words, she pressed her children to her breast, and shed a torrent of tears.
> The Sultan, moved to tears by this spectacle, embraced his children, and said: By the merciful God! Scheherazade, I forgive you for the love of these children, because I see that you are a good mother. I forgive you. God is my witness.
> Scheherazade kissed his feet, and was transported with joy. May God, she said, prolong your days, and grant you endless power and bliss.
> Joy immediately spread throughout the palace. That thousand and first night was a night to remember forever; it took place amidst rejoicing and universal joy.
> The next day the king summoned a large divan, and clothed the vizier, father of Scheherazade, with a magnificent robe of honor. May Heaven, he said, reward the service you have provided the empire and to myself, by putting an end to my anger against the daughters of my subjects… your daughter, who made me the father of three children, is my wife.
> He then ordered to light up the whole city and to make public celebrations. The drums beat, the trumpets sounded, the buffoons started to entertain people with their games in public places . These feasts lasted thirty days, during which everyone was admitted to court feasts. The king bestowed the greatest of magnificent presents, and distributed charity to the poor. He reigned happily for many more years, until the day he was surprised by death, which puts an end to all the bliss of this world (Galland, 1842, 653).

Mahdi describes Galland's conclusion as abrupt. He notes, "the conclusion in the *Nuits* does provide a satisfactory resolution for the tension between Shahriyar's oath and Shahrazad's determination to put an end to the slaughter. The further one reads without the constant reminder of night breaks and numbers, however, the less one feels the need for such a resolution. The lack of conclusion seems appropriate under the circumstances and, in fact, no Arabic manuscript extant in Galland's day has a thousand and one nights or a conclusion" (Mahdi, 2006, 133). Mahdi's references to narrative closure are situated within his larger project of pointing out the editorial liberties that Galland took with the text as well as delimiting the features of what he describes as the "original" manuscript.

On the level of narration, Galland's intervention complicates how we understand narrative voice in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Gérard Genette, in *Narrative Discourse*,

identifies Shahrazad's narration as *intradiegetic-heterodiegetic,* "a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent from" (Genette, 1980, 248). Shahrazad is both a character in the story and tells stories that are not her own. Genette's claim is true once Shahrazad enters the narrative and starts telling stories. However, the frame story—where we are introduced to the basic plot until Shahrazad marries the king —is told by what Genette calls an *extradiegetic-heterodiegetic* narrator, "a narrator of the first degree who tells a story that is not his own" (Genette, 1980, 248). The entry of Shahrazad, and the proliferation of stories, suspends the extradiegetic level as Shahrazad commences an abundance of stories on the *intradiegetic-heterodiegetic* level. The closure that Galland features brings back the *extradiegetic-heterodiegetic* narrator that we encounter in the frame story and whose narration is suspended by Shahrazad. Simply put, the struggle—as maintained through narration—is over these levels of storytelling. Shahrazad's success on this level is offering an alternative to the progressive temporality of the narrator of the frame story and the closure. What Shahrazad offers instead is a circular temporality that evades the progression of time towards her death by featuring cycles of storytelling.

On a thematic level, Galland's ending does two major things: first, it revisits the didactic elements of *The Nights*—the king is healed of his vengeance after listening to Shahrazad's stories. Second, it ends the frame story by reintroducing Shahrazad as a mother. These two elements exist in tension in the conclusion. If the king is educated by Shahrazad's stories, then why does he refuse to spare her life when she asks him the first time? It takes Shahrazad another attempt after she asks the babysitter to present the children whose existence—as well as their parents' sexual engagements—remain hidden throughout the various volumes of Galland's translation. What is especially interesting in this ending is the foregrounding of her claim to live

in her motherhood. Here, Shahrazad as a mother is prefaced by losing the desire to tell stories. She instead hugs her child closely, and states that no other women can replace her to her children. Thus, Shahrazad produces herself as *in competition* with other women, which is different from the educated and knowledgeable Shahrazad at the beginning of the frame story who attempts to risk her life to save other women. Here, narrative closure is not only a thematic choice to make the story palatable to the French popular taste, but it also has clear Orientalist dimensions wherein Galland produces the knowledge that he circulates about the East; thus, figurations of the so-called hetero-normative or non-normative desires are introduced through narrative, not the presumed reality that the Orientalist narrative pretends to represent.

In *History of Sexuality Vol* 1 (1976), Michel Foucault locates a parallel between the rise of the bourgeoisie in France and the disciplining of desire. He notes that the family became a site of "agency of control and a point of sexual saturation: it was in the "bourgeois" or "aristocratic" family that …the urgent need to keep sexuality under close watch and devise rational technology of corrections [took place][13]" (Foucault, 1988, 120) This interest in sexuality led the bourgeoisie to consider that "its own sex was something important, a fragile treasure, a secret that had to be discovered at all costs" (Foucault, 1988, 121) This interest in normalizing sexuality reached the working class through "the organization of the 'conventional family' (Foucault, 1988, 122). This intervention "came to be regarded …as indispensable instrument of political control and economic regulation for the subjugation of the urban proletariat: there was a great campaign for the 'moralization of the poorer classes'" (Foucault, 1988, 122). Here, Foucault's account on the normalization of sexuality in France and the constant desire to regulate any form of sexuality that does not match a heteronormative, reproductive model should be incorporated in the

[13] Foucault, Michel, and Hurley, Robert. *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*. Vintage books ed., Vintage Books, 1988.

interpretation of Galland's ending and the question of genre, knowing that Galland wanted to introduce the text in a shape that fits the expectations of his audience. Here, the incorporation of Shahrazad into a successful family model negates her narrative voice with a loss of desire to tell stories.

Burton adds one more layer to Galland's project—a "Terminal Essay." In this part of his translation, Burton does two things: first, he compares *The Nights* to classical epics and, second, he appends a section entitled "Pornography" to address what he deems indecencies of the text. Burton notes, "We may, I believe, safely compare the history of *The Nights* with the so-called Homeric poems, the 'Iliad and the Odyssey, a collection of immortal ballads and old Epic formulae and verses traditionally handed down from rhapsode to rhapsode, incorporated in a slowly-increasing body of poetry and finally welded together about the age of Pericles" (Burton, 1900, 93). Here, Burton assumes that the epic genre is a "natural" production of every civilization—that in the transition of the Homeric epic from orality to written form, they were "welded together," is generalizable to the history of *The Nights*. Burton here ascribes his comments to the long history that judges Arabic literature based on the lack of an epic in the tradition. Interestingly, in its Western context, he relates *The Nights* to the epic genre to categorize *Alf Layla*'s literary form.

The second proposal in Burton's "Terminal Essay" is still connected to the first. In its Arabic context, when he classifies *The Nights* as a part of the Arabic genre of "pornographic literature." Burton's core arguments in this section concerns, first, what he calls the "primitive" stages of language—the ways in which a language features excessive vulgar speech. The second argument of this section concerns what frames as pathological desires—in terms of relationships across a wide geography within the East. He states,

> This primitive stage of language sufficed to draw from Lane and Burckhardt strictures upon the 'most immodest freedom of conversation in Egypt, where, as all the world over, there are three several stages for names of things and acts sensual. First we have the *mot cru*, the popular term, soon followed by the technical and scientific, and, lastly, the literary or figurative nomenclature, which is often much more immoral because more attractive, suggestive and seductive than the "raw word" (Burton, 1900, 203).

Burton continues his assertions through hierarchical comparison between civilizations. In order to approximate his defense of those who speak in a "primitive" stage to Western contexts; he argues that even the "highest civilization"—the French—is featuring depictions of vulgar expressions in their writing by noting the vulgarities in *La Glu* by Jean Richepin (Burton, 1900, 203).

This second proposal by Burton in the terminal essay concerns what he calls the "Sotadic Zone." In this section he advances a theory for non-normative relations as not "racial", but geographical and influenced by climate. This zone, according to Burton's theory, spans the Mediterranean, "Italy and Greece, with the coast-regions of Africa from Marocco to Egypt" in addition to other countries in "Asia Minor," such as Afghanistan, Sind, the Punjab and Kashmir" (Burton, 1900, 206-207). Burton describes this zone as a site where "the Vice is popular and endemic, held at the worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of the limits here defined practice it only sporadically." Those who live outside this proposed Sotadic Zone "as a rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon it with the liveliest disgust" (Burton, 1900, 207). Beyond this zone, the existence of what he calls "the Vice" is sporadic, but the climate of the region he specifies, according to him, increases this desire. Burton uses words, such as "endemic" to describe the spread of the phenomena he describes. Burton argues that his "Sotadic Zone" is characterized by forms of crossing social gender rules. He claims that "within the Sotadic Zone there is a blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments, a crasis which elsewhere occurs only sporadically. Hence the male

feminisme whereby the man becomes patiens as well as agens, and the woman a tribade, a votary of *mascula Sappho*" (Burton, 1900, 208). Burton here presents his analysis of the East through a language of pathologizition that has been discussed widely by scholars. However, with respects to *The Nights*, Burton inclusion of this section reflects how he wanted produce *The Nights* through an invention of a discourse of the non-normative and exotic East as a site of desire. His scholarship is not only tinged with an anxiety towards people from Eastern cultures as instruments of difference, but also showcase an anxiety caused by subjects, like *The Nights*, whom he produces as incoherent with the assigned social categories he produces through anthropological discourse and disavows simultaneously through moral Western codes. Indeed, this process of inventing a category then incorporating it into Western modes of production reflects the same intellectual clusters that cannot conceive of *The Nights* as a unique genre that does not fit predetermined classifications of genres.

It is not a coincidence that in his "Terminal Essay," Burton incorporates his comments on the Arabic context of *The Nights* within the "pornography" section of his essay. In this section, Burton advances his claims on sexual difference by providing a list of genres that he considers representative of 'Arabic pornographic literature.' It is necessary to juxtapose his arguments next to his attempt to generalize the epic genre to *The Nights.* For Galland, the lack of closure does not satisfy his audience's expectations. He transforms Shahrazad as a result into a mother who births three children. Thus, exposing what Foucault had deemed an emerging interest in the family as a unit in his French context. At the same time, the changes that Galland introduces to the text can be understood as a continuation of the Orientalist discourse expressed by Renan and others who assert a proposed inferiority of Arabic works of the imagination to their Western counterparts. As a result, modifying their genre and introducing them in a more disciplined

format that suits what Burton explicitly describes as “highest civilization” (Burton, 1900, 203). Burton in this way gives language to what Galland performed in translation—the failure to comprehend different forms of producing literature, thus approaching *The Nights* as a text that needed to be remedied or Non-Western works of literature as inferior.

Chapter 2 *The Nights* in Postwar Arab Intellectual History

Representations of women in *The Nights* can be considered one of the most examined topics in relation to the text. Yet, rarely have scholars turned the lens of examination to how prominent Arab women scholars approach *The Nights*. In fact, scholars have seldom raised questions that pertain to common trends in Arab women scholarly engagements with *The Nights*: either their critique or praise of the text as well as their elaborations of representations of women and power in *The Nights*.

This shift in the scope of analysis—from strictly analyzing the text of *The Nights*, a prevalent trend in the study of the *Arabian Nights*, to highlighting the intellectual clusters that cut across the works of many Arab women scholars—is not only needed to underscore a genealogy of Arab women intellectual history, but it is also fundamental *because it shows the relationship between the specific book edition a scholar consults and their findings*. This process of relating a scholarly argument to a book edition of *The Nights* is precisely where this chapter intervenes in the study of *The Nights*.

Additionally, this section proposes a reading method that contextualizes some of the leading critical scholarship on *The Nights* by Arab women scholars, such as Suhayr al-Qalamawi (1911-1997), Fatema Mernissi (1940-1915), Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021), Ferial Ghazoul (b. 1939) and Fedwa Malti-Douglas (b. 1946). While this chapter privileges the works by Arab women scholars, it features works by Edward Said and Muhsin al-Musawi, who have made pertinent contributions in this regard. This chapter also locates the common trends across their works as well as some of the key differences in their takes on *The Nights*. Some of these studies make assertions in regards to *The Nights'* Arabic or Islamic contexts based on book editions that have been either altered by translators, such as Antoine Galland (1646-1716) and Richard

Francis Burton (1821-1890)[14], or generalize their findings to encompass the entire corpus of the book of *Alf Laylah*—not only the particular edition they consult. As a result, the assumption of an "original" text is conflated with the multiple recensions, translations and editions of *The 1001 Nights*.

This chapter frames their contributions by how they understand the relationship between representations of women in *The Nights* and the imagination. Since this chapter elaborates how the aforementioned scholars think the question of social change and transformation, this chapter revisits their understanding of agency and power. In other words, this chapter relates some of their conclusions not only to the specific edition of *The Nights* they consult, but also to the critical methodology they prioritize in their research.

Their search for figurations of freedom in the text is influenced by the plot of the frame story—Shahrazad's act of storytelling to stall and delay her impending death. The struggle here is over narrative—narrative closure equates a metaphorical death of liberation in some of their readings (El Saadawi and Malti-Douglas). The continual spiraling of stories by Shahrazad, on the other hand, marks a structural framework that negotiates the Shahriyar-imposed death through Shahrazad's steadfast commitment to bring the king's violence to a halt (Ghazoul). This proliferation of stories can also mediate modern-day gender relations. (Mernissi).

In so doing, this chapter identifies vital propositions within their engagements with *Alf Laylah*. First is the application of Islamic standards of storytelling to evaluate *The Nights*. Second is embracing radical actions as pathways to freedom. Third is the implementation of the concept of "nomadism" as an alternative to narrative closure. Here, of particular importance is how Galland's narrative closure influences many of the assertions made by Arab women

[14] This point has been elaborated with more depth in chapter 1. The addition of a closure to the text impacts the studies of many Arab women writers, especially Fedwa Malti-Douglas and Nawal El Saadawi.

scholars in relation to the Islamic context of the text. While the scholars this chapter features offer rich and incisive readings of *The Nights,* this chapter also points out some of the limitations in their scholarship. In the same vein, this chapter pays attention to the structure of *The Nights*. This is a crucial element in the nomadic structure of *The Nights* that has been highlighted by Ferial Ghazoul. In this chapter, Shahrazad's storytelling—in order to prolong her life—is a fundamental factor in understanding how the imagination functions within the logics of the text and, by extension, within the larger Islamic context in which the text circulates. Put differently, approaching the content of Shahrazad stories with an awareness of Shahrazad's purpose to live one more day can alter how the question of power is understood in relation to the imagination (*takhyil).*

It is necessary to clarify that this chapter creates a dialogue among their works. In many respects, this section is a cogitation on the prominent methods that we inherit in the study of Arabic literature. This chapter will interrogate how rational conceptual frameworks—through which the conflation between agency and freedom as the only pathway to social transformation—are applied the study of *The 1001 Nights*. In other words, the aim of this section is to revise and contextualize some the major assessments of the *Arabian Nights* by Arab women scholars. Rather than placing these debates within the scholarship on *The Nights* inside categories of those who get their evaluations of *The Nights* "right" or "wrong," my interest here is to elaborate the question of method, in particular: how do postwar Arab women approach the literary imagination in relation to agency, change and transformation? To elaborate how the question of agency comes to bear on our understanding of the imagination, this chapter features a

genealogy of how the question of agency has been complicated by anthropologists of Islam—especially the work of Saba Mahmoud[15].

1. A Genealogy of The Islamic Context of *The Nights*

One of the first book-length studies of *The Nights* in Arabic was conducted by Suhayr al-Qalamawi (1911-1997). In the 1940s, al-Qalamawi completed her dissertation on *The Thousand and One Nights* under the supervision of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973), one of the most distinguished scholars of Arabic literature. Here, it is crucial to point out that *Alf Laylah* is a book of colloquial Arabic, a level of Arabic language that is commonly dismissed by formally trained scholars of Arabic literature, who privilege literary works written in classical Arabic. The diglossia[16] of Arabic indicates the existence of two varieties of the Arabic language—colloquial (*Aammiya*) and classical (*fusha*) levels. While the formal literary establishment in Egypt and other Arab countries prioritize the classical Arabic in which the holy Quran was revealed, the colloquial oftentimes is relegated to a marginal status. As a result, works in colloquial Arabic are usually deemed unworthy of serious academic scholarship.

For this reason, al-Qalamawi's intervention is a critical and pioneering moment not only in terms of the specific engagement with *The 1001 Nights*, but also in relation to Arab intellectual history since al-Qalamawi is the first Egyptian woman to a acquire a doctorate degree in literature and the first Egyptian woman to graduate from the University of Cairo. Foregrounding this chapter's observations in her work is necessary to identify zones of contact between her work and later scholarship by subsequent Arab women scholars.

[15] The conclusion of this chapter reflects in depth on the work of Saba Mahmoud and other anthropologists of religion.
[16] Diglossia is a linguistic term that refers to the existence of two varieties in one language.

In her study of *The Nights*, also titled "*Alf Laylah Wa Laylah*[17]" (1941), al-Qalamawi offers a pioneering paradigm to understand the roles women play in *The Nights*. Equally important are the criteria that she implements as she puts in place standards of artistic evaluation that reveal an early theory of imagination in *The 1001 Nights*. In other words, through her judgment of the book of *The Nights*, we can detail the ways in which conceptions of change and transformation are imagined. Since al-Qalamawi's study inaugurated *The Thousand and One Nights* as a field of study in Arab literary criticism, her observations should be taken in relation to the historical moment in which she lived. In particular, as she was conducting her research, al-Qalamawi was inhabiting male-dominated literary circles in Egypt as well as consulting male Orientalist scholarship.

Al-Qalamawi reveals this aspect of her work in the opening pages of her study as she states "The greatest achievement of Eastern [scribes] was producing multiple written copies of *A Thousand and One Nights.* Thanks to them, this [medieval] masterpiece was protected against loss until it reached the Orientalists who made it popular" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 14). This is an understanding of the popularity of *The Nights*—made possible by Western Orientalists—as contingent upon the text's preservation in a written form by Eastern copyists. Consequently, she suggests that the text was not satisfactorily engaged in academic and literary circles in the Arab world. To corroborate her claim, she describes the lectures on *The Arabian Nights* that were delivered in Baghdad in 1932 by the Egyptian critic Ahmad al-Zayyat as "cannot be considered research …but fulfilled the purpose of giving an audience of listeners a general impression about this great part of our heritage [*The Nights*]" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 15-16).

[17] The title in Arabic means *Thousand and One Nights* as well.

There are three characteristics that distinguish al-Qalamawi's intervention. First, she relies extensively on Orientalist scholarship since—before her leading work—mostly Orientalists have engaged critically with *The Nights* in English, French and Dutch among other languages. In other words, Orientalist scholarship constitutes the majority of al- Qalamawi's bibliography. It is for this reason that Ṭāhā Ḥusayn forwards her text by stating, "Having received her [Master] degree, al-Qalamawi persevered and traveled to Europe to meet a group of Orientalists who study the field [of *The Thousand And One Nights'* Studies]" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 7). Second, her study is less occupied with the figure of Shahrazad—Shahrazad's storytelling to stall an impending death. Al-Qalamawi's elaborations are more concerned with the historical, cultural and religious contexts of *The Nights*. Third, her work is more concerned with classification—stories in *The Nights* that depict the 'real' society of Egypt versus stories that were inserted to the text. What sets her intervention apart is her consistent elaboration of how *The Nights*, despite the various sources of its individual stories, retains an Islamic tone.

This element of her work—the way in which the Islamic context of *The Nights* continually reworks the text's amalgamation of stories that finds roots in various cultures, such as, Indian, Persian, Chinese and other literary traditions—distinguishes her intervention from the previous Orientalist scholarship. If previous Orientalists attempted to classify stories into Arab and non-Arab, al-Qalamawi illuminates the literary styles and themes through which the Islamic context accommodates the stories' numerous origins. Rofail Farag, for example, postulates "[a] juxtaposition of foreign elements imported from the East and elements of pure Arab origin is noticeable in the *Alf Layla wa-Layla.* Indeed, the genre of this book indicates one characteristic literary stage, that is the development of Oriental culture in general" (Farag, 1976, 197). This Islamic context—that Al-Qalamawi identifies as crucial to the text's development within an

Islamic framework whether in Baghdad or Egypt—can be elaborated, for the interest of this chapter, as a theory of the imagination in an Islamic environment.

Al-Qalamawi observes that *The Nights* was a product of a specific social class—middle class merchants in Baghdad and Cairo. She states "the social class that produced *The Nights* was influenced by the most distinguished aspect of Islamic civilization: its [Islamic] religion. The spirit of Islam has influenced the stories of *The Nights*. The narration of stories [in *The Nights*] has been shaped by the principles of this religion …." (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 89). As she further points out, this class of merchants entertained several privileges during medieval times, most important of which were wealth and urbanism. This merchant class dwelled in urban centers, such as Cairo and Baghdad. Muhsin al-Musawi endorses the same view by stating "[e]specially in Baghdad and Cairo…schools [of Islam] shunned extremism and catered to the amiable climate that is the dominating tone in these tales." (al-Musawi, 2009, 280). As both scholars aver, these two centers of Islamic civilization offered an apposite climate for the tales to flourish[18].

They also acknowledge the impact of Islam on storytelling in *The Nights*. Al-Qalamawi notes that individual stories were inspired by core Islamic teachings, most important of which is submission to the will of God. This concept is widely prevalent in *The Nights* since "the spirit of the whole book is Islamic [conveying] submission to God's judgement" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 94). The same point is articulated by Muhsin al-Musawi who maintains that "[t]here is the *qadā mahkum* as decreed by God in the 'preserved tablet,'" (al-Musawi, 2009, 38). Both observe the effects of the belief in God's judgment on the unfolding of stories from the collection of *The Nights*.

[18] Chapter 1 engages with Earnest Renan who argues that the atmosphere that an urban center, such as Baghdad was actually non-Islamic and the rulers of the Abbasid empire suspended Islamic teachings. Here, al-Qalamawi and al-Musawi argue that it was an openness towards religious teachings—that operated from within the Islam—that created the social climate which allowed *Alf Layla* to flourish.

Al-Qalamawi, for example, identifies a trope in the text where the Islamic concept of *al-tawakkul*—submission to God's will—affects the events of many stories from *The 1001 Nights*. Since "justice will prevail sooner or later, there is no reason for giving up or even fear. This is [an Islamic] worldview that enables the hero [of some tales] to be convinced that caution does not prevent God's will" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 95). Some of the tropes that Al-Qalamawi lists include heroes who undergo serious hardships, such as falling into a well, boarding a sinking ship, ascending a mountain with no return path. In such incidents, the hero chants the phrase "*la hawla wala quwwatā illa billah" '*there is no might or strength except from Allah'" If a character utters this phrase, "then they have intoned the magic phrase that changes the events of the story and brings the desired closure" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 95). As a result, the will of God makes possible narrative strategies not only as Islamic references on a thematic level—the way in which Islamic principles shape the themes of the universe in a given tale in relation to plot, character, setting…etc—but also on the level of literary devices and narrative trajectory where the will of God functions as the denouement of the story[19].

While al-Musawi agrees with al-Qlamawi on the themes of resignation and submission to God, he pushes this layer even further to argue that "submission does not exclude self-trial, however, for resignation does not mean undue negligence of one's duties. It means, rather, that there are things that are at times beyond human capacity to redress[20]" (al-Musawi, 2009,78). In other words, *The Nights* does not simply present divine intervention as a resolution without

[19] The story of Sinbad is a fitting example of this trope in the stories of *The Nights* where Sinbad embarks on seven voyages. Each of his voyages depicts not only an overreliance on God's judgement, but also other Quranic influences on the story.

[20] Al-Musawi comments here on the story of the "Fishermen and the Genie" wherein the fisherman believes in God's judgment by submitting in God's will, but also having to devise ways to trick the genie back in the bottle.

featuring oftentimes logical and even witty sequencing of events that inserts human action into the larger divine plan behind the tale.

The more subversive intervention that al-Musawi features is his interpretation of the frame tale of *The 1001 Nights* as he argues that divine design and representations of transgressive content are intertwined in the frame tale. His reading of the frame tale—where king Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman prepare to embark on a journey, having both been betrayed by their wives—takes the Islamic context into account. Earlier, both royals discover that their wives have been fornicating with slaves. On their journey, they encounter a giant demon who carries his caged bride. The demon—who imprisons his bride in a glass chest sealed with fours locks—wants to keep the woman untouched by other men to preserve her virtue and chastity. After the demon sleeps, the woman opens the cage and approaches king Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman.

The bride looks up to see the brothers hiding in a tree. She gestures to them and asks them to descend and copulate with her. She collects their rings to add them to a total of ninety-eight rings—she hides beneath the demon's horns, and presumably acquired from previous coital relations with other men. In this story from the frame tale of *The Nights*, al-Musawi points out that the text of that story features a religious layer. The wording of the story emphasizes how the demon attempts to keep his human bride "pure and chaste, not realizing that nothing can prevent or alter what is *predestined* and that when a woman desires something, no one can stop her"(italics mine, qtd in al-Musawi, 2009, 39). The use of the word "predestined" here in association with the sexual acts creates a complicated scenario whereby *The Nights'* depictions of seemingly transgressive actions are narrated from within a religious frame of reference.

For al-Musawi, this incident reveals two important aspects about the work: "(1) the accelerated coincidence that justifies any occurrence under the auspices of fate and (2) the wiles of women, which Scheherazade's tales have to counteract within the underlying relativism. The immediate response of both kings is to believe in both fate and the treachery of women, hence their decision to go back to their kingdoms and 'never to marry a woman' again" (al-Musawi, 2009, 39). What makes al-Musawi's contribution especially relevant in this regard—in addition to his presentation of depictions of desire as unfolding through a rubric of fate—is his attention to the layer of narrative in the text. In other words, this association produces narrative and should be interpreted figuratively as the precondition for Shahrazad's storytelling—unlike the previous Orientalist attempt to oversexualize the text and Islamic culture. This point becomes clearer in al-Musawi's work when he deciphers the earlier graphic scenes in the frame tale—the carnal event through which Shahriyar learns about his wife's infidelity through his brother Shahzaman.

In that scene, Shahriyar's brother, Shahzaman—who discovers his wife's affair with a kitchen servant earlier, visits his brother after killing his wife and her partner. As he gazes at the garden

> The private gate of his brother's palace opened, and emerged strutting like dark-eyed deer, the lady, his brother's wife, with twenty slave-girls, ten white and ten black. While Shahzaman looked at them, without being seen, they continued to walk until they stopped below his window, without looking in his direction, thinking that he had gone to hunt with his brother. Then they sat down, took off their clothing, and suddenly there were ten slave-girls and ten [male] black slaves dressed in the same clothes as the girls. Then the ten black slaves mounted the ten girls, When the lady called Mas'ud, Mas'ud" and a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground, rushed to her… (Haddawy, 2010, 7).

Scholars have various interpretations of this scene. Most important of which are those by al-Musawi and Fatema Mernissi. This incident highlights the force of this scene in the frame tale since it emphasizes the *raison d'être* for the king's ensuing retaliation and indiscriminate killing

of women later in the story. For al-Musawi, this scene operates at the intersection of multiple dichotomies. He notes that "[t]he frame tale uses pairing to disturb racial and social demarcations, for black men and white women mix and make love, royalty and slaves do the same in the garden scene and the royal bedroom" (al-Musawi, 2021, 66-67). This interplay and mixing between two polarities— the garden as site of public display of desire during the daytime versus the private intimacy that occurs between husband and wife inside the palace. It is within these opposing forces that the mixing between the black male slaves and the white female slaves takes place. It is also within this intermediary space that the mixing between different social classes takes place in this incident.

However, this incident, according to al-Musawi, should not simply be interpreted for its overt lascivious content and the immediacy of its graphic description. In this scene, according to him, "symbolic and referential narrative codes are available to ground a seemingly smooth story of betrayal and revenge" (al-Musawi, 2021, 67). This is a significant intervention since the very codes that al-Musawi elaborates here are later employed in the text by Shahrazad—common themes that include characters of marginal status, powerful rulers, love, desire, revenge, and punishment. In other words, this scene furnishes the ground for the following stories as it makes possible their later spiraling, circulation, and proliferation in terms of the themes of their content as well as the figurative literary devices of their narration. Historically, this intervention should be highlighted as a critique of the earlier Orientalist engagements with the text that highlighted its sexual metaphors as representative of Arab and Islamic sex practices[21].

Fatema Mernissi teases out similar, yet more complicated, connections between the frame tale, narrative and copulation. For her, the frame tale and its seemingly transgressive depictions

[21] Chapter 1 engages in particular with Richard Burton's lengthy terminal essay in which he identifies *The Nights* as representative of Arab sexual practices.

are representations of an act of solidarity between the female slave and the black male slave. This gathering of marginalized subjects marks the driving force behind the narrative of the tale. Her work *Scheherazade Goes West* (2000) looks into the relationship between the traditional harem, especially in Morocco as a site of male sexual violence against enslaved women. The harem, as a space, for Mernissi, has always been tinged with irredeemable practices of sexual assault that generated acts of refusal and resistance by women. She states

> In Muslim harems, men expect their enslaved women to fight back ferociously and abort their schemes for pleasure. The Westerners also referred primarily to pictorial images of harems, such as those scenes in painting and films, while I visualize actual palaces—harems built of high walls and real stones by powerful men such as caliphs, sultans and rich merchants. My harem was associated with historical reality. Theirs [male Western journalists] was associated with artistic images created by famous painters such as Ingres, Matisse, Delacroix, or Picasso—who reduced women to odalisques (a Turkish word for a female slave)—or by talented Hollywood movie makers, who portrayed harem women as scantily clad belly-dancers happy to serve their male captors (Mernissi, 2001, 14).

Mernissi creates a pertinent parallel between the harem as a space of sexual assault and female vulnerability and the frame tale of the *Arabian Nights*. The powerful male figures build such enclosures for women. This power is exemplified by erected high walls that separate women from the outside world. What is relevant to the context of *The Nights* and narrative is her emphasis on how art mediates these relations. For Western artists, as she points out, this relation is characterized by the consumption of Arab and Muslim women feminized sexuality that these film makers simultaneously produce and consume—while, on the other hand, the harem in its Islamic context is expected to house acts of dissidence, refusal and violence. In Arabic literature, *The Thousand One Nights* offers a salient modeling of that refusal—but not as a physical altercation. Shahrazad offers narrative to control her confinement.

The garden graphic scene, for Mernissi, "seems to sum up the entire harem tragedy: the woman's fatal need to topple the hierarchy built by the husband who has locked her up, by siding

and copulating with his male slave" (Mernissi, 2001, 45). However, this act of negotiating polarities among socially recognized differences and refusal of the binaries of race, space and status soon transforms into narrative by Shahrazad since *The Thousand and One Nights* "begins as a tragedy of betrayal and revenge, and ends as a fairytale, thanks entirely to Scheherazade's intellectual capacity" (Mernissi, 2001, 44). Here, like al-Musawi, who also reads the scene as metaphorically stimulating the imagination for narratives, Mernissi locates Shahrazad—not necessarily with the women who inflicted violence in harems, but as a storyteller who sublimates physical desire, violence, and vengeance into storytelling through the imaginative faculty.

2. Islamic Perspectives on The Imagination

Concerning *The Nights*, the imaginative faculty needs to be portrayed sufficiently to appreciate Shahrazad's intervention within an Islamic context. In other words, if we judge Shahrazad's storytelling and depictions of characters or narrative cycles through modern standards of literary writing, we can easily abandon a theory of the imagination from *The Nights*. There are two elements that need to be elaborated in regard to literary production within an Islamic context: (1) the religious restriction and castigation of poets who overwhelm their work with untruthful and fabricated content. (2) The primacy of God as the Creator, to whom artists should be subordinated—"Islam declares that Allah is the only image-maker, the only creative and shaping being, for centuries Islamic artists faced insecurities about representational arts" (Peer, 2017, 2). These two points should be taken into consideration when judging *Alf Laylah* since they can pave the way to a better understanding of how *The Thousand and One Nights* negotiates these restrictions imaginatively.

Edward Said, al-Qalamawi and Todorov are some of the scholars who observed some of the effects of these Islamic restrictions. However, they have not contemplated the possibility that

some of the assumed limitations of the text have connections to its Islamic context. They voice core issues most notably related to how the text imagines change and transformation in the world (Said) as well as how the text portrays characters (al-Qalamawi and Todorov). It is worthwhile to note that Edward Said is critical of *The Nights* in his work of criticism. In *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), Edward Said comments on *The Nights*, "The *Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of it; neither are they lessons, structures, extensions, or totalities designed to illustrate either the author's prowess in representation, or ways in which the world can be viewed and changed" (Said, 1975, 81). What needs to be addressed here is Said's figuration of change and transformation. For Said, *The Nights* fails to produce "a world [that] can be viewed and changed" because the "writer" or the "author" in an Islamic worldview cannot introduce fundamental changes to a world that has already been saturated by Islam. In Islam, the "prophet is he who has completed the worldview; thus the word heresy in Arabic is synonymous with the verb 'to innovate' or 'to begin'… Islam views the world as a *plenum* capable of neither diminishment nor amplification" (emphasis mine Said, 1975, 81). *The Nights*, for Said, operates in a marginal space because Islam has already limited the 'freeplay' within the structure dominated by Islam. Innovation is not possible under this framework[22]. This begs the further question: how can we think of change under the aforementioned restrictions? In other words, if the text, according to his reading, does not engage in skillful representation nor does it attempt to revolutionize and reshape the world, then is it safe to assume that the text operates from within

[22] Said might be overstating the concept 'heresy' in Islam. It is unclear to me how Said connects "to begin" and "to innovate" since he does not clearly mention the Arabic words he refers to, especially that "*bada'a*—to begin—and *Bid'a*—to innovate" are different words. For further reading on the relationship between innovation and heresy in Islam see Robson, J. 2012. 'Bidʿa'. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill Reference Online. Accessed, Web. 9 Oct. 2020.

an Islamic space that observes these rules? Is it also possible that Said proposes modern standards of literary evaluation on *The Nights*?

Al-Qalamawi is especially important in this regard since she dedicates a chapter titled "Women in *Alf Layla*" to examine the major roles that women occupy in *The Nights*. Al-Qalamawi first claims that representations of women in the text can be approached as either drawn from the narrator's immediate social context—"merchants of the middle class Egypt or other lands ruled by Islamic empires" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 300)—or stories drawn from the imagination, such stories, according to her, fail to represent fully developed characters since they attempt to incorporate historical figures, such as Zubaidah, the caliph Harun al-Rashid's wife or supernatural and foreign women characters, such as genie women, who are frequently represented in spaces uninhabitable by humans, such as the sea or clouds or warrior women who are frequently depicted as non-Muslim. For al-Qalamawi, women who portray supernatural elements still behave similarly to middle-class women in Egypt. In *The Nights*, there are no substantial differences between how a woman who lives in Egypt behaves and how a supernatural woman behaves. They all, al-Qalamawi argues, behave like "a Muslim slave-women who can be sold in the slave market." (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 301).

Al-Qalamawi privileges representations of women who convey solid connections to popular life in Egypt and stronger relationships with reality. For her, "the stories that reach the narrator from his regional context are more truthful to his context and portray more realistic features and are less divergent [from the reality of Egyptian popular life]" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 301). Al-Qalamawi sets faithfulness to reality, especially fidelity to middle class merchants in Egypt, as the yardstick by which stories in *The 1001 Nights* can be measured. In her evaluation, stories either succeed or fail to represent a truthful reality and any departure from the ideal

representation of reality signifies a failure of the story overall. Here, Al-Qalamawi echoes a Quranic disavowal of untruthful storytelling. In the last verse of Sura "Yusuf," the Quran presents the value of Quranic storytelling by emphasizing the truthfulness of stories in the Islamic tradition

> In their stories there is truly a lesson for people of reason. This message cannot be a fabrication, rather ˹it is˺ a confirmation of previous revelation, a detailed explanation of all things, a guide, and a mercy for people of faith. (The Noble Quran, 2012, 12:111).

It is within this context that the concept of *Takhyil* develops *in Arabic literature. Takhyil* in the Arabic theory of poetics has multiple meanings. All these meanings, as Wolfhart Heinrichs, one of the leading scholars of Arabic literary criticism, points out, "have an element of illusion in them" (Heinrichs, 2008, 2). The linguistic root for the word *takhyil* has meanings that include "mirror image, shadow image, dream image, an apparition, a distant obscure shape and a scarecrow" (Heinrichs, 2008, 2). In the Quran, the word *khuyyala (*a derivative of *takhyil*) describes the *transformation* of Moses' staff into a snake (Sura 20. Verse 66). *Takhyil* mediates the religious prohibition on the poet as a creator (of lies) and the author's desire to invent artistically. The result is a figuration of the imagination that engages audiences by "creating a delusion" (*iham*) as Heinrichs posits (Heinrichs, 2008, 2). In short, the author does not simply introduce their work as "truth," but "a kind of irreality" (Heinrichs, 2008, 12). In addition, poets embraced the saying "*khayru 'l-shiri akdahabuh'* '*the best poetry is that which lies the mo*st' (emphasis mine Heinrichs, 2008, 2). Consequently, the commentary that *takhyil* makes possible is indirect. It takes place by creating delusions, manipulating language and "giving the impression of praising while one is lampooning" (Heinrichs, 2008, 2). Here, it is significant to stress that *takhyil* takes place in non-realistic artistic productions—poetry that lies the most for example.

Takhyil, as a literary concept has developed in relation to Arabic poetry, not *The 1001 Nights*. Yet, some of the observations made by scholars can be useful in understanding al-Qalamawi's observations on *The Nights*. Of special importance here is how characters are drawn in *The Nights*. Scholars have pointed out that characters in *The Nights* lack depth of representation and stronger development. While this argument can be further complicated in the discussion of the stories that were added to *The Nights* in the modern period, such as "Sinbad" and "Aladdin," it is still a strong argument in relation to premodern stories in *The Nights*. In "Narrative Men" Tzvetan Todorov points out the lack of a complex psychology of characters in *The 1001 Nights*. For Todorov, this does not compromise the value of the *1001 Nights* since the structure of *The Nights* requires the proliferation of stories in a way that increases the volume and length of stories over the texture and sophistication of psychological representations of character (Haddawy, 2010. 451). Todorov's concept of "Narrative Men" privileges the expansion of narrative to a point that resists narrative closure. Notable here is the lack of emphasis on how this process of expansion and accumulation of stories is related back to Shahrazad's desire to live or the text's Islamic context.

Al-Qalamawi and Tzvetan Todorov both raise concerns about representations of characters in *The Nights*. Al-Qalamawi argues that "the book of the *1001 Nights* does not present characterization the way we understand drawing a character in literary criticism. In fact, the book features individuals as models, not characters" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 301). Such model depictions of roles vary in the *1001 Nights* and can be filled by different possible individuals. For this reason, al-Qalamawi claims that *The Nights* fails to portray historical or supernatural characters since they bear no differences from other individuals in the stories of *The Nights*. Some of these models of character include the manipulative old lady, the beautiful slave-women…etc. Al-

Qalamawi highlights some of these roles in detail by examining multiple tropes in relation to women characters. First, are women in love, who either love deeply and go through horrors to meet their lovers, or cheat on a partner with their lovers. Second, women who practice trickery and manipulation by either using magic, sedating or poisoning their partners to achieve their goals. Third is the role of the woman warrior who, is typically non-Muslim according to al-Qalamawi. The fourth depiction of women is the scholarly woman, who can answer difficult questions as they display a great deal of wisdom (*hikmah*).

These one-dimensional proto-characters appear in different stories, but, al-Qalamawi claims, "their presence is the same." As a result, she argues that "*The Nights* crafts types of women, but not a woman per se" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 302). Both Al-Qalamawi and Todorov seem to neglect Shahrazad as the storyteller of the stories. Ferial Ghazoul has pointed out in *Nocturnal Poetics* that any story narrated within the body of work that makes up *The Nights* has to be filtered through the figure of Shahrazad[23]. This is a significant observation since both Todorov and Al-Qalamawi associate narration with masculine narrators. For Todorov, it is the crafting of the concept of "narrative-men" that limits narrators in *The Nights* to manhood. For al-Qalamawi, it is the association of a narrator of *The Nights* with a male author "*qas*, *rawi*" (al-Qalamawi, 1966, 301-2). In both cases, narration is restricted to male storytellers while Shahrazad whose voice remains the only entry point into the stories, fades into the background. This overemphasis on narration by either "male characters" or "male" scribes of *The Nights* impacts how both interpret power circulation in the text—particularly how, in their works, the content of stories or their Islamic historical context gains primacy over the significance of Shahrazad's ability to manipulate time to negotiate her debacle.

[23] Full discussion of Ghazoul's work is presented in the "Prelude" chapter.

While Todorov offers a good framework that elaborates the relationship between characters and the expansion of stories, al-Qalamawi is cognizant of the Islamic context to Shahrazad's stories, especially the importance of truthful storytelling. Still, her judgement of characters can be pushed further. Particularly, the existing *tension in the Islamic restrictions to write artistic works that are true to reality and; on the other hand, to never rival God's ability in creation*. In other words, if Muslim poets and artists represent reality truthfully, they will be transgressing the other restriction—to never imitate God in his creation. This imitation can include accurate *representation* of human-like characters, fully developed, and endowed with judgement and reason. This tension needs to be situated as a part of any interpretive model of *The Nights* since it can help us understand not only the depiction of characters in *The Nights*, but also the limitations of later scholarship by Arab-women scholars.

3- Postwar Arab-Women Engagements with The 1001 Nights

Arab women scholarship has brought into question the fiction of absolute power. Writers, such as Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Fatema Mernissi and even Nawal El-Saadawi, who castigates the figure of Shahrazad, have observed *The Night*s' attempt to bring about change and transformation in the world. For El-Saadawi, Shahrazad's failure is not a total passivity and acceptance of the male-dominated universe of the tale; the failure of Shahrazad, according to El-Saadawi, lies in her practice of trickery and manipulation as well as bearing the king's three male sons. Here, this chapter will depart from previous scholarship by taking recourse to the textual history of *The Nights*—Antoine Galland's translation. Instead of advancing major claims about *Alf Laylah*, I would like to propose paying close attention to Galland's translation. This chapter delineates the effects of his translation on feminist scholarship. Rather than disproving Arab

women scholars, my purpose here is to revise much of their claims in order to release critical energies from the text of *The Nights*.

Antoine Galland's (1646-1715) editorial liberties are important to note here[24]. These changes include, first, Galland's incorporation of a narrative closure to the story where Shahrazad becomes a mother of three male boys—that does not exist in the 'original' Arabic manuscript. Second is the incorporation of the 'orphan tales' to the text of *The Nights*—"Sinbad," "Ali Baba" and "Aladdin." In addition, Galland made fundamental changes to the numbers of some nights in which Shahrazad tells a story that complicate tracing his translation back to the Arabic manuscript. Here, I by no means suggest that there is a "pristine" Arabic original whose contents where distorted[25].

My interest here is to show how Arab women scholarship has been impacted by the specific edition of *The Nights* that scholars consult. This becomes especially significant since El-Saadawi bases her dismissal of the figure of Shahrazad on Shahrazad's bearing the king's three sons. In fact, Nawal El Saadawi postulates that Shahrazad should never serve as a role model. Shahrazad, for El Saadawi, accepts the position of a storyteller and lives under the king's domination after giving birth to his three male children. Women in *The Nights*, in her estimation, are either submissive mothers, "pure angels who give birth only to males" or "demonic ill-reputed women who never reproduce" (El Saadawi, 2001, 89-90). The failure of Shahrazad, the way El Saadawi frames it, takes place when Shahrazad engages in "manipulation, trickery" not "courage, confrontation and reason" (El Saadawi, 2001, 89-90). Here, Nawal el Saadawi exemplifies a common trope in contemporary engagements with *The Nights* and Islam. First, she

[24] Galland's changes to the text of *The Nights* have been discussed at length in the "Prelude" chapter of this dissertation as well as Chapter 1.
[25] Within the larger body of this dissertation, I examine Galland's changes as reflective of the mode of French writing under which he reproduced *The Nights* in chapter 1.

relies on Antoine Galland's version that forces an end to the story where Shahrazad gives birth to three sons, which does not exist in the Arabic 'original' manuscript. This is an example of how Galland's version impacts even progressive, non-Western scholarship on *The Nights* in the 20th century.

This is also true in the case of Fadwa Malti-Douglas who states "[t]he last part of the frame is its closure with the happy ending. [Shahriyar] is told that he has meanwhile fathered three sons" (Malti-Douglas, 1991,14). In addition, narrative closure impacts Malti-Douglas' conclusion. For her, "[T]he presence of children shows how restoring the heterosexual couple saves patriarchy…Shahrazad relinquishes her role of narrator for that of perfect woman: mother and lover" (Malti-Douglas, 1991, 28). Much of these claims that investigate the history of Islamic civilization are based on the editorial liberties practices by Orientalists, such as Galland and other translators. The scholar Suzanne Gauch has called attention to the problem of translation in Arab women scholarship on *The Nights* in general and in Malti-Douglas' work in particular. Gauch notes "Malti-Douglas relies on a particular European translation or a late Arabic edition...Malti Douglas...references an Arabic edition, the nineteenth-century Cairo 1, or Bulaq as well as Sir Richard Burton's epic version" (Gauch, 2007, 5). Galland's closure, as a result, becomes a critical impasse that prevents not only the "liberation" of Shahrazad from the confinements of closure, but it also impacts how we understand the way in which Shahrazad's narration exposes the precariousness of the perceived totality of power.

Arab women writers invoke "nomadism" in two different ways. Ferial Ghazoul proposes the concept of "nomadic texts" to elaborate the structure of the *Arabian Nights*. At the same time, she acknowledges that the text is a product of a history of orality. More importantly, there is a human agent figured as a nomad who travels and lives in flux. The nomadic model in

Ghazoul's vision is a product of the geography of the desert that a human inhabits and the orality of classical Arabic literature that are both caused by a human desire for connection, togetherness and community. Ferial Ghazoul presents figurations of *The Nights*' structure in *Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context* (1996). Her focus is not specific translations by Galland or Burton, but the structure of *The Nights*.

Ghazoul observes that "the text … was constructed in such a way as to allow and even invite radical changes in its content, yet at the same time preserve its own internal logic ...the text preserves its identity although it is performed, as it were, in more than one way" (Ghazoul, 1996, 3). This flexible elements of the text of *The Nights* makes possible the retention of an overall structure, despite adjustments and changes, by translators, to specific stories within its narrative. As a result, the structure of *The Nights* remains operative by retaining and accommodating any possible changes and alternations. Ghazoul, for this reason, asserts that "the flexibility of the narrative is guaranteed by an enclosing structure which can contain a multiplicity of genres, conflicting styles, and divergent themes without destroying in the least the coherence of the text. We can attest to this empirically: the two French translations of Galland and Mardus play havoc with the 'original' Arabic text, and yet *The Arabian Nights* is not compromised by such 'unfaithfulness'" (Ghazoul, 1996, 4). The changes introduced to the text by translators do not alter a pristine text whose 'purity' can be easily corrupted by editorial liberties. The text of *The Nights,* as Ghazoul reads it, thrives on constant alterations and distortions.

Ghazoul observes the significance of nomadism in the study of *The Nights*. She argues that the ending of *The Nights* "is not a real closure" (Ghazoul, 1996, 152). The nomadism of the *1001 Nights,* according to Ghazoul occurs at the intersection of four major points. First, the work offers many genres and frames for storytelling that are subordinated under a frame story. Second,

it revolves around universal themes that speak to everyone. Third, the work is self-reflexive—"constituting what amounts to the creation of a myth of the origin of verbal creativity and its healing powers" (Ghazoul, 1996, 152). Fourth, the stylistic flexibility and fluidity of the text (Ghazoul, 1996, 152). According to Ghazoul, these four conceptual features of *The Nights* explain its universal appeal.

At the same time, Ghazoul remains grounded in the traditions of writing Arabic literature. Particularly, she considers the transition from orality to writing as crucial to *The Nights'* reception. She argues that "*The Arabian Nights*—though written down by narrators, [was] never part of the literary canon and thus continued to carry the imprint of free oral diversifications" (Ghazoul, 1996, 153-154). In agreement with Ghazoul, Peter Heath also stresses the importance of the oral culture in which *The Nights* spread[26]. Ghazoul locates the nomadism of the oral environment in which the stories of *The Nights* circulated as central to the text's history. This makes the text speak to various classes of people that canonical literary works fail to represent. It is in this marginal status of the text that Ghazoul locates desire. *The Nights* "uncovers unspeakable desires and marginalized types…women, slaves and the riffraff are central" (Ghazoul, 1996, 152). Ghazoul here puts in place a structural framework to analyze *The 1001 Nights* that centralizes the text's oral history in Arabic literature. Her contribution is locating the structural universality of *The Nights* in the oral mode in which it circulated. In other words, the text reaches an international world-literature status because of the flexibility of its circulation in Arabic.

Similarly, Fatema Mernissi's elaborations on the figure of Shahrazad are especially relevant. For Mernissi, Shahrazad offers a fluidity of narration that cannot be easily confined. In

[26] This point is elaborated in the introduction of chapter 1 of this dissertation. See Heath, Peter. 1996. *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press. Page 3.

fact, in her reading of Shahrazad, she emphasizes a central message of Shahrazad's narrative—"that a woman should lead her life as a nomad" (Mernissi, 2001, 6) In her reflections on *The Nights*, Mernissi pays close attention to how oral retellings of stories from *The Nights* vary in her Moroccan context. She finds in these variations a possibility for freedom. Interestingly, whereas the changes that Galland introduces to *Alf Layah* generate critical engagements that suppress Shahrazad's dream of freedom, the oral variations in recounting tales from *The Nights* produce, for Mernissi, further possibilities for freedom. This fluidity of narrative and manipulation of the events of stories are made possible because of "the power of [Arabic-Moroccan] oral tradition" (Mernissi, 2001, 8-9) By shifting the scope of analysis from books of translation to oral performances of *The Nights*, Mernissi finds in Shahrazad a substantial figure that negotiates the limitations of reality by activating the imaginative faculty.

Unlike the scholarship of Malti-Douglas and El-Saadawi where Shahrazad's hopes for freedom cease to exist due to closure. Based on the work of Ghazoul and Mernissi, the supplement, in a Derridean sense, takes on a nomadic property—one that reflects the Islamic context of *The Nights*, the orality of the early history of the text and Shahrazad's constant negotiations of confinement. More importantly, Ghazoul and Mernissi stress the importance of the past (*The Nights*'s orality) as the grounds for the text's fluidity and generative properties (towards a future). In other words, for Mernissi and Ghazoul, the future cannot be easily cleaved from the past. It is within the nomadic structure of *The Nights*—that is inherited from past—that the text's future oral retellings, manipulations and further adaptations are possible.

This temporal element of *The Nights* has been observed by Walter Benjamin. In the "Storyteller," Benjamin assigns to Shahrazad the power of *memory*. He observes that Shahrazad embodies the "muse-derived element of the epic art …[a] [m]emory [that]creates the chain of

tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation" (Benjamin, 1969, 98). Benjamin describes Shahrazad's memory as a 'chain' or a 'web' where "she thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop" (98). Shahrazad, in other words, can serve as a historical image from the past that negotiates homogenous progressive time by creating chains and webs of stories that offer alternative histories and alternative temporalities. The dreams for transformation here do not necessarily overpower Shahriyar's power materially, but they appeal to the imagination as a site of struggle and refusal of erasure. This is precisely the function of Shahrazad's storytelling.

4- Conclusion—A Problem of Method

An appropriate place to conclude this chapter is to situate the complexity and the tension in the works of many Arab scholars as problems of history and method. Al-Musawi's characterization of this issue is the most salient as he notes

> Was it the sheer coincidence that led three Iraqis to start working in the mid-1970s on the *Arabian Nights*? Ferial Ghazoul submitted her doctoral dissertation on a structural analysis of the *Arabian Nights* to Columbia University 1978; I published an article in 1976… to be followed by my dissertation in 1978 that appeared in book form as *Scheherazade in England* in 1981 … almost around the same time (1972-84), the renowned philosopher and social scientist at Chicago and then Harvard, Muhsin Mahdi took upon himself the arduous task of writing firstly "Remarks on the *1001 Nights*" (1973) and then editing the extant fourteenth-century Arabic manuscript of *Alf laylah wa-laylah*… that appeared in 1984 (al-Musawi, 2021, 11-12).

Al-Musawi further asks if the emergence of scholarly interest in *The Nights* is as a result of "a momentous cultural movement" made possible by significant cultural and political transformations including the "the massive youth and workers' revolt of May 1968, The Vietnam War, the civil rights movement in America, the raging Cold War and the serious revisionism undergone by European communist parties, especially in France and Italy?" (al-Musawi, 2021, 11-12). Al-Musawi suggests that these events impacted college campuses and "opened up

troubling gaps in patriarchal structures and Eurocentric university programs that had allowed no texts of color in their curricular offerings" (al-Musawi, 2021, 11-13).

Al-Musawi offers an eloquent description and an accurate characterization of the relationship between the academy's decolonization and the increasing publications on *The 1001 Nights*. Still, this chapter concludes that while the publications on the topic have increased, the field of *The Thousand and One Nights* studies has not decolonized its methods. For example, within the same period that al-Musawi identifies as transformational in terms of the critical study of *The Nights*—the later 1960s onward, many anthropologists of Islam raised concerns about the methodologies applied to the study of Islam and the Arab world.

In 1986, Talal Asad proposed a method of studying Islam as a tradition. Tradition, defined as a set of discourses that instruct practitioners in a certain practice, "includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith" (Asad, 1986, 20) Asad's invitation to think Islam from *within* its founding documents has impacted the study of Islam in anthropology. In 1990, Lila Abu-Lughod published a critique of the "romance of resistance." In her study, she proposes rethinking Muslim women's acts to bring about change and transformation "without either misattributing to them …a feminist consciousness or feminist politics-or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided?" (Abu-Lughod, 1990, 47). Abu-Lughod considers silence, reciting poetry and buying moisturizing creams and other mundane acts that are not prohibited by religion to be acts of 'resistance.' These two contributions by Asad and Abu-Lughod's are essential to the later work by Saba Mahmoud.

The proposal Mahmoud makes is to detach the concept (agency) from its association with progressive politics. To advance this point, she argues that to "effect change" in the world or on a personal level, one has first to realize that the meaning of "change" and the "means" by which

it is achieved is historically and culturally specific. In this sense, "what may appear as a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency" (Mahmood, 2012, 21). Agency then can be understood not only as "acts" *against* norms, but also how one "inhabits" norms. Norms, adds Mahmoud, "are not only consolidated and/or subverted, I would suggest, but *performed*, inhabited and experienced in a variety of ways" (emphasis mine Mahmood, 21).

Asad's invitation to think of Islam as a tradition, and to elaborate its social and cultural manifestations through a practice of reading from within its key religious teachings and texts—as well as the subsequent works by Abu-Lughod and Mahmoud—seem to have made little to no impact on the disciplinary study of *The Nights*. Aside from the remarks made by al-Qalamawi and al-Musawi in relation to the Islamic context of *The Nights*, the prominent methodology of studying the text remains deeply mired in a long history of secular and rational knowledge clusters. In other words, this chapter attempts to highlight this limitation as it expands the religious restrictions on artists in Islamic context and how *The Nights*, as a work of the imagination, transforms these limitations into powerful and captivating narratives.

The secular dimension of the works of Arab scholars usually conveys a latent assumption that change and transformation within Islamic societies can only be achieved through resistance figured as revolutionary struggle. For Said and El-Saadawi, Shahrazad's storytelling fails to redefine the hierarchies of power in the text. Shahrazad fails to offer a new worldview where she wins politically by confronting Shahriyar for El-Saadawi. Stylistically, Shahrazad fails to bring about literary innovation for Said. These views remain limited to a specific conception of change that can only be measured by its immediate, predetermined results. The fact that some forms of informal actions for change do not particularly fit snugly with formal resistance, such as marches

for freedom or speaking truth to power, does not diminish their hopes for a better world. These forms of resistance are associated with lower classes. In other words, El-Saadawi and Said assign greater value to formal acts of resistance and less value to informal actions for change, such as *storytelling*, that are commonly accessible to the less privileged classes.

In addition, their arguments concerning *The Nights* run the risk of presenting Arabic literature and traditions as hermetically sealed. In fact, one of the core contributions of this chapter is to think of the seemingly transgressive content of *The Nights* as unfolding through religious rubrics of fate and archetypal characters that do not aspire to be of the same stature as the humans that God creates. In other words, the workings of the imagination from within a religious tradition, does not always unfold through representations of piety and religiosity as Saba Mahmoud argues. Within the context of *The Nights*, the interplay of good, evil, discipline and transgression through one-dimensional characters, produces a remapping of the limits of religiosity and secularism, especially when applied to modern discourses.

Chapter 3 The Shahrazad Freedom Dream: Representations of Storytelling in The Modern Arabic Novel.

In Nawal El-Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* (1975), the main character, Firdaus, is a women prisoner convicted of killing a man. A female psychiatrist who researches women inmates attempts to meet Firdaus before her execution. Firdaus repeatedly refuses to meet anyone or even to sign the paperwork that might mitigate her harsh sentence. After many visits by the researcher, Firdaus finally agrees to meet on condition the psychiatrist remain silent and listen to her life story. Firdaus makes clear that at 6:00 p.m. of that day she will be taken away to a place no one above the ground knows. Thus, the psychiatrist soon learns that Firdaus is going to tell the story of her life on the day of her death. The *point zero,* according to this framework as it is clearly stated in the title of the novel, refers to *the space where storytelling negotiates an impending death by leaving behind a story*[27]. On the one hand, Firdaus' act of storytelling anticipates a possible death in the future. One the other hand, she negotiates the finality of death by leaving behind a story of her personal history. As a result, the novel centralizes the relationship between storytelling and death. Similarly, the relationship between storytelling and death constitutes the major theme of *The Thousand and One Nights*[28].

The Nights' frame story tells the tale of king Shahriyar after being stunned by his wife's extra-marital relation. Shahriyar, having ordered his wife's execution, decides to be vengeful against all women. Time after time, Shahriyar marries a new woman only to be killed after the

[27] Here, I do not reference what Ronald Barthes terms *le degré zéro de l'écriture* (the zero degree of literature) where writing becomes an absence of signifiers in a neutral, impersonal mode of literary language. See Barthes, Ronald. 1968. *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang. P. 17-32-33-40. My observations here are also different from the German concept *liebestod* (love death) in reference to Richard Wagner's 1859 opera Tristan und Isolde in which a romantic love story ends in a climatic death.

[28] Many scholars have noted the similarities between El Saadawi's work and *The 1001 Nights*. See Matthes, Melissa. 1999. "Shahrazad's Sisters: Storytelling and Politics in the Memoirs of Mernissi, El Saadawi and Ashrawi." Cairo: *Alif*. 19 (19): 68. doi:10.2307/521913., p. 68.

marriage is physically consummated. In the story, this creates a cycle that begins in marriage and certainly ends in death. Shahrazad, who is the daughter of one of the notable men in Shahriyar's empire, decides to intervene; otherwise, the king's decision to kill women will leave no females in the empire. Shahrazad is very knowledgeable in history and various arts and sciences. She marries the king then establishes cycles of storytelling that puts an end to Shahriyar's indiscriminate killing of women. Every night, Shahrazad narrates stories only to stop by the break of day at a cliffhanger to have the king keep her alive one more day to finish her story.

Unlike Shahrazad who succeeds in postponing her impending death, El Saadawi's *point zero* (1975) ends in Firdaus' death. Here, I signal a departure from the pre-modern story of Shahrazad, where death is defied, to a modern relationship between storytelling and death in which death eventually occurs. However, the works I trace in this chapter introduce figures who display a desire to outlast death by telling stories. Here, I examine El Saadawi's *Point Zero* (1975) next to Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). I choose these works because they identify storytelling, death, and desire as history-making categories. I include Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* because it offers different layers of storytelling. The novel features an unnamed narrator who tells the story of the life and possible death of the main character Mustafa Said. This chapter asks three major questions: first, how does this modern *point-zero* framework function within the logics of modern Arabic literature? Second, how can this literary framework be read in relation to *The Nights*? Third, how do these texts imagine alternative histories and revise our understanding *resistance, change and transformation*?

El Saadawi employs the relationship between storytelling, death and desire in ways that align and diverge from *The Nights* in her novel. For example, in El Saadawi's *Point Zero,*

Firdaus' sexuality, which includes her early genital mutilation, marriage and later engagement in sex-work, gives further possibilities to her narrative. Firdaus tells a story of desire after she loses her sense of pleasure. In addition, Firdaus narrates the story of her life on the day of her death simply because she deems her desire antithetical to the world she inhabits. Once her desire is articulated, her bodily presence ceases to exist. As a result, the major themes of the novel cannot be located in positive concepts or complete plentitudes. Instead, the story Firdaus tells is a story of failure—a failure that cuts through the various themes of the novel. She states, "My life means their death" and adds "I no longer want to live, nor do I fear death; I want nothing" (El Saadawi, 1979, 67). In short, she tells her story not for a social or a political victory, *but she tells her story to become historical*. It is this relationship between *storytelling*, *desire,* and *history* that I will refer to in this chapter as the *Shahrazad freedom dream*.

In this chapter, I reappropriate Robin Kelley's conception of 'freedom dreams' in his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002). For Kelley, a freedom dream gestures towards historical actors whose liberationist dreams might not be translated into reality. These dreams feature a politics of struggle whereby the "work of dreaming" produces "cultural works that enable communities to envision what's possible with collective action" (Kelley, 2002, 7). Dreaming has value because ultimate victory is not necessarily the only way of measuring the viability of the dream, but because in the struggle for a utopian world, significant cultural productions imagine what an alternative future might look like. This figuration of the "radical imagination" places emphasis on the constant struggle and the *works of art* that it generates more than a final victory. Here, I reappropriate the term to *the Shahrazad freedom dream* to refer to storytellers who produce narratives that negotiate the impending danger of death by recounting narratives. Firdaus, for example, fails to change the male-dominated world she inhabits,

however, she dictates her story to the psychiatrist before her execution. The production of stories in this sense challenges the myth of absolute power.

Here, I consider Richard Van Leeuwen's recent work in which he observes the tendency in modern Arabic novels—that reference *The Nights*—to be a critique of their respective political and social contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2017, 104-118). I depart from this common trend in the study of *The Nights*—the focus on a direct mention of *The Nights*. Instead, I trace *Shahrazad freedom dreams* that manifest in novels that sometimes do not directly reference *The Nights*. I will examine literary works that, like Shahrazad, present loquacious storytellers who refuse death and violence by recounting tales and freedom dreams.

The relationship between *The Nights* and narrative is especially relevant to this chapter. Al-Musawi affirms this relation by stating that Arabic premodern literary works, including *The 1001 Nights* "attest to the presence of pre-modern genres in modern fiction, not only as oblique readings that reflect on current situations in the modern nation-state, but also as providers of narrative strategies, stylistic variations, and a great amount of irony, travesty, and parody, which are among the markers of postmodern narrative" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). Here, Al-Musawi identifies *The 1001 Nights* as a pre-modern provider "of narrative strategies" that influences the production of Arabic fiction in the latter half of the 20th century. Al-Musawi, in his analysis of Arabic fiction, points out that *The 1001 Nights* serves as "a functional container and frame to offer material that can be encapsulated through the amalgamation and collapse of motifs and events, to produce polarized situations and uncover the workings of desire and power" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). Here, Al-Musawi acknowledges the structural importance of *The Nights*. In his estimation, *The 1001 Nights* functions as a premodern model of narrative the offers the background of literary material, events and motifs. This background makes possible the

production of "polarized situations" in order to reveal the interlocking ideological layers of power and desire. Al-Musawi acknowledges the centrality of desire to storytelling. The dynamic forces of storytelling, desire, and power shape the reception of *The Nights* by Arab novelists. While Al-Musawi's work confirms the effectiveness of measuring the domain of influence through storytelling, death and desire, his observations remain limited to the works that explicitly reference *The 1001 Nights*[29]. Despite this limitation, Al-Musawi's argument that *The Nights* functions as a "container" or a 'background of literary material" foregrounds the structural significance of *The 1001 Nights* that generates literary forms that can be thought relationally. In other words, Shahrazad tells her stories to negotiate death, which is a structure that figures into the framework of later stories in Arabic literature that might not reference *The Nights* explicitly. Here, the structural affinities among storytelling, power—the king's power to enact Shahrazad's premature death—desire and history in relation to the premodern text of *The Nights* and modern Arabic writing are relevant as structural *concepts*—not only as direct references.

It is within these structural affinities that Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* features a fundamental interruption. The story of Firdaus begins with Firdaus' acquiescence to tell her story after multiple rejections to speak to the psychiatrist. Despite her multiple failed attempts at first, the psychiatrist insists on visiting the prison to meet with Firdaus. There is no clear reason for why Firdaus agrees to tell her story except that when she begins to speak, she requests silence. Firdaus' first words are in the Arabic *fi'l al-Amr* (imperative mood)—"close the window" (El Saadawi, 2017, 17). Then, she follows with other demands: "let me speak and do not interrupt me" and "I do not have time to listen to you" (El Saadawi, 2017, 18). Firdaus, which means paradise in Arabic, tells her story by first reflecting on her aversion towards male

[29] Al-Musawi's observations on the "workings of desire and power" takes place in his reading of *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982) by Naguib Mahfouz, which references *The Nights* explicitly.

authority figures. This includes a latent feeling of discomfort towards them as well as a constant desire to commit acts of violence against them.

Firdaus then introduces her family—a poor family with a father who "sold a poisoned buffalo before it dies and sold his virgin daughter before she spoiled[30]" ((El Saadawi, 2017, 18). Her earliest memories of her mother include teaching her how to balance a heavy earthenware jar on her head while walking and taking her to a woman who performs clitoridectomy on young Firdaus. She reports early memories of sexual abuses by her uncle with whom she lives after her parents die. Her new life in Cairo offers a chance of an education. During her secondary school education, Firdaus experiences complicated feelings towards her teacher Miss Iqbal. Shortly, Firdaus graduates and is separated from Miss Iqbal. After her uncle's marriage, his wife campaigns against Firdaus' stay with them. Her uncle agrees to marry off Firdaus to Sheikh Mahmoud an elderly man with a putrid and viscous wound on his chin, who continually causes Firdaus pain and harm. After Sheikh Mahmoud beats Firdaus for wasting food and finding him unattractive, she runs away.

Subsequently, she comes in contact with Bayyoumi with whom she stays in hopes her secondary school degree will secure a job for her. Firdaus agrees to cook and clean in exchange for Bayyoumi's promise of an employment. However, shortly Bayyoumi begins to rape her. Then he invites his friends to further abuse Firdaus. After Firdaus manages to escape the apartment, she feels lost on the streets until she meets Sharifa Salah el-Dine, a high-class procuress. Sharifa, who offers Firdaus a place to stay, teaches Firdaus the niceties of her

[30] Sherif Hetata translates this section "[her father knew]...how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time." This translation is different from the Arabic text in two ways. First, in the Arabic text it is not clear who poisons the buffalo. However, Hetata's translation assumes it is an enemy. Second, the father is described to "sell" his daughter. There is no clear reference to the dowry in exchange for his daughter. In my translation, I choose to be more literal to what the Arabic text leaves open for interpretation.

vocation. She instructs Firdaus to know her value and to ask for costly prices in exchange for her anticipated liaisons. Firdaus for the first time learns how comforting it feels to earn her independent finances.

Later on, Sharifa introduces her to Fawzi, another procurer. Fawzi tries to take away Firdaus from Sharifa's circles. Sharifa refuses, when Firdaus listens to them fight and engage in further conflicts, she decides to escape. Firdaus seeks a job worthy of respect. She develops feelings for an outspoken revolutionary named Ibrahim. She confides her secrets in him and finds his desire to speak for the poor an attractive quality. Ibrahim works for the same company that employs her. As time passes, she learns that he is engaged to a high-ranking official's daughter for the purpose of his personal advancement in the company. This marks the loss of her first love relationship, Firdaus decides to go back to her old work. When another procurer, Marzouk, enters her life, he threatens her luxurious lifestyle. A fight ensues between them, and Firdaus reaches out for his knife and stabs Marzouk multiple times, which results in his death. Having escaped the scene of the cime, she encounters a high-ranking official from another country. She threatens to kill him. The police intervene and she is condemned to death for killing Marzouk. Once Firdaus finishes her story, she is taken away. The psychiatrist feels overwhelmed when she goes to her car. Clearly, Firdaus' words have impacted her deeply. She looks at the world and sees a great deal of dishonesty. She pushes her foot against the accelerator with full force, suddenly she hits the brakes realizing "Firdaus was more courageous than me" (El Saadawi, 2017, 69).

Throughout her journey in life, Firdaus replaces a failed desire in exchange for another. She constantly projects the future as a site of regaining control over her life if only she manages to learn how to achieve economic stability. She soon learns that her secondary school degree

fails to achieve that independence when Bayyoumi tells her his café is crowded daily by university graduates who cannot find a job (El Saadawi, 2017, 40). In many respects, her degree functions against her. For example, her degree marks her old enough to marry an elderly man. The same degree fails to give her independence from the abuses of Bayyoumi, who promises to find her a job because of that degree. Firdaus frames her high school degree in her personal library after achieving economic independence through paid relations. Afterwards, when her degree finally secures a "respectable" job at a company, she realizes that the other women offer similar, physical favors for promotions. She states, "I realized we are all prostitutes for varying prices. A highly paid prostitute is much better than the cheapening degradation I see every day in the eyes of high-ranking officials when they look at poorly salaried female workers" (El Saadawi, 2017, 55). Here, transformation in her life is not simply premised on how hard she works or what degrees she obtains. She understands that the conceptual ramifications of this work are ubiquitous—a practice that exceeds the linguistic sign of an 'ill-reputed' woman. For her, the lawyers she 'rents [*asta'jir*]' (El Saadawi, 2017, 63) to defend her honor, the doctors she pays to perform abortions and the journalists who publish her news and pictures are all a part of her career, performing tasks in exchange for money. Everyone has a price, she contends, "And to every profession its price. The price increases based on the person's placement on the social hierarchy" (El Saadawi, 2017, 63). Here, Firdaus shifts from an earlier desire to present herself as someone who has a secondary school degree to a person who has a price in a world the ascribes exchange value to everyone. The shift here is not only an upward mobility from a peasant background to a luxurious lifestyle, but it is a linguistic dehiscence—a deep fissure in language and meaning. Here, meaning collapses in such a way that her services merge into the

larger circulation of money in tandem with other professions: doctors, lawyers, and journalists, participating with her in a state that complicates the zones of contact between morality and value.

This tension is sustained throughout the novel. In every stage of Firdaus's development as a character, she learns that words do not mean what she thinks they connote. At the beginning of the novel, Firdaus associates change with a different location—to move to Cairo away from her peasant background. This creates semantic associations between Cairo as a big city and opportunities for success. Further in the novel, she understands change as having a degree that helps her find a job. This again associates education with financial stability and independence. She learns that these associations are untrue through experience. The practice of FGM and her uncle's assault on her body as well as the violations by her husband and Bayyoumi among others teach her that desire does not equate pleasure. Even when she loves, the exploitation of her feelings by a highly respected revolutionary colleague forces her to realize that love does not equate honesty, fulfillment, and financial stability.

The novel frames her awareness of change and transformation based on her sense of desire. For Firdaus, her desire for a better world cannot be separated from the loss of sexual pleasure through the earlier surgery. Her mother takes her to a woman who performs female genital mutilation on Firdaus. Shortly after this operation, Firdaus wonders "I look around me in astonishment as if I was never born here.... I find myself in a place that is not my place, a house that is not my house, a father who is not my father and a mother who is not my mother" (El Saadawi, 2017, 21). The narrative trajectory places the loss of her sense of physical intimacy at the center of Firdaus' semantic investigation. Firdaus' language employs negation to achieve the linguistic split she experiences after FGM. In the quotation, the use of phrases, such as "a father who is not my father" or "a place that is not my place" reflects the divide between the world

signs—where words are supposed to equate predetermined meanings—and her material reality—where that predetermined meaning does not exist. The place as a sign fails to mean its connotation of home. The mother and farther as linguistic signifiers fail to fulfil their signified meanings of family, protection, and security.

This sense of unfulfilled desires is sustained throughout the novel even before the episode of FGM. For example, Firdaus remembers playing a game, "bride and bridegroom," with another village boy. She recounts "from a part of my body, where exactly I did not know would come a sensation of sharp pleasure. Later I would close my eyes and feel with my hand for the exact spot. The moment I touched it, I would realize that I had felt the sensation before." (El Saadawi, 2015, 17). Firdaus' memories of desire are marked by trauma. She interjects her memories with phrases, such as "where exactly I did not know" which signifies a failure of language to capture the accuracy of her memories. While Firdaus here features a memory of desire, this desire is still unclear, unknown and fails to achieve a sense of completeness. The boy by the end leaves, Firdaus tries to capture him, but he departs and promises to visit the next day (El Saadawi, 2015, 17). Here, Firdaus frames desire as incomplete, interrupted, and unfulfilled even before the episode of FGM. However, the introduction of FGM into the story establishes a split between words and their meanings. An example takes place when Firdaus describes a sexual experience after clitoridectomy. She reports, "My body shakes with an old sense of pleasure that I cannot locate. As if it emanates from outside my body. In its final streak lies something that resembles pleasure. I try to capture it, even if just for a second, but like air or a mirage, it escapes and disappears" (El Saadawi, 2017, 26). The feeling cannot be contained by words. The motif of a transient feeling that resembles pleasure and exists outside her body is sustained throughout the

novel. This separates the signifier ‘desire” from its more permanent signified meaning—pleasure or love.

For Derrida, a centered structure carries within its logics a “contradictory [coherence]" or a “strange unity” (Derrida, 1998, 1). A deconstructionist reading, for Derrida, undermines the perceived coherence by accentuating its contradictory logics. Derrida proposes the *supplement* as a method to expose a *lack* within the seemingly centered fullness of a structure. He states, “But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void...whether it adds or substitute itself, the supplement is exterior outside of the positivity” (Derrida, 1998, 145). Hence, the supplement negates logics of coherence, unity, fullness and centralized structures.

Scholars have applied Derrida’s *supplement* to the textual study of *The Nights*. In his often-cited essay “Narrative-Men” Tzevan Todorov, for example, introduces the concept of *narrative-as-life* to refer to the *embedded* structure of *The Nights*: the proliferation of stories by characters who are threatened by death (Todorov, 2010, 450). Shahrazad, who tells stories to prolong her life under the king’s cycle of marriage and death, features characters who also use *narrative-as-life*: to stop narration is to die. For Todorov, the spread of stories is a manifestation of the supplement. He argues that the supplement “takes several forms in *The Arabian Nights*. One of the most familiar is that of the argument” (emphasis in original, Todorov, 2010, 451). It happens when characters are about to die, then make *arguments*—telling a story—explicating their reason to live; thus, they escape an impending death. This creates a cycle in which stories spiral and proliferate from one character to another *ad infinitum*. In other words, the supplement does not only fill—and thus reveal a lack—but its work is to temporarily reveal the precariousness of plentitude and the asymmetries of power. He delineates, “[The] supplement is

also a lack; in order to supply this lack created by the supplement, another narrative [figured as a character] is necessary" (Todorov, 2010, 451). As a model of narration, it assumes no end or closure. Todorov's observations here delimit the textual function of the supplement. First, in *The Nights*, the supplement manifests as stories that assert a character's desire to live. Second, the supplement has generative properties—it produces temporary stories that require further storytelling. This infinite emanation of stories brings into question the myth of centralized structures, totalities, and worldviews that cannot be negotiated, reworked and reimagined.

The work of the supplement can be felt in Firdaus' actions here. She tells her stories to negotiate death by supplementing it with oral storytelling that—after her death—turns into a written form by the psychiatrist. She also learns that power is always fragile through a deeper level of language and meaning, which enables her to constantly redefine her position in the world. For example, the tension between word and meaning builds throughout the novel and culminates in the violent scene when Firdaus kills Marzouk. The scene of the crime in many respects echoes the violence of separating the world of signifiers from the world of meaning[31]. Firdaus describes the scene as follows

> I continued to look straight at him without blinking. I knew I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master. I saw from the expression in his eyes that he feared me as only a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman. But it lasted for only a second. Then the arrogant expression of the master, the aggressive look of the male who fears nothing, returned. I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. The whites of his eyes went red. His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. I was astonished to find how easily my hand moved as I thrust the knife into his flesh, and pulled it out almost without effort. My surprise was all the greater since I had never done what I was doing before. A question flashed through my mind. Why was it that I had never stabbed a man before? I realized that I had been afraid

[31] The conclusion of this chapter will have further discussion on Friedrich Hegel's master–slave dialectic.

> and that the fear had been within me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in his eyes (El Saadawi, 2015, 130).

After killing Marzouk, Firdaus is asked by police officers if she is a killer and a murderer. She replies, “I am a killer, but not a murderer” (El Saadawi, 2017, 67). Firdaus frames killing Marzouk as a linguistic problem. A killer does not equate a murderer in her world of signs. The crime becomes possible for her in the moment Marzouk shows fear in his eyes. It is that fleeting moment of fear that shows Marzouk’s vulnerability. Derrida, commenting of Hegel’s Master–Slave dialectic notes that there are moments of risk that might “destabilize the entire system” (qtd in. Rafey, 2019, 197). She realizes at that point that it is the linguistic associations between violence and criminality that gives Marzouk power over her. It is not a physical power that he has, but a power over meaning and interpretation that renders her a ‘prostitute’ and a ‘fallen women’ and renders him a businessman whose “capital” is a woman’s body (El Saadawi, 2017, 63).

In addition, the violent struggle between Firdaus and Marzouk is a representation of Derrida’s supplement. While Firdaus lives most of her life in fear of patriarchal structures, she gradually understands that her subservient status is based on how language operates. For Derrida, a centralized structure is exposed to constant challenges by the work of the supplement. The supplement points out its incoherencies, contradictions, and vulnerabilities. Marzouk, for Firdaus, stands for every man who used and abused her. She wonders why she did not commit the same violence against others. The vulnerability of a centralized structure is represented in the scene when Marzouk’s eyes turn from white to red. Firdaus realizes at that point that power is asymmetrical and incoherent. The violence of the supplement in decentralizing phallogocentrism within a structure is represented in this scene through the symbolism of the knife.

The gradual development of the separation between words and their meaning in the novel culminates in Firdaus' success to grab Marzouk's knife. In the same way Firdaus learns to split words from their meanings throughout the novel, she uses a knife to split her desires, hopes and dreams from Marzouk's overwhelming determination for control. In a figurative sense, the knife supplements Firdaus' search for truth. For her, the socially accepted and untroubled relationship between words and meanings constitutes the bulk of untruths that contribute to her lifelong bleak struggles and cruel traumas. When she is described as dangerous and monstrous, she replies "I said the truth and the truth is monstrous, the truth is dangerous (El Saadawi, 2017, 67). She stops telling falsehoods after committing the crime. When an Arab dignitary asks her if she enjoys copulating with him, she replies "no" (El Saadawi, 2017, 66). Otherwise stated, the violence of the knife functions to restore a truthful meaning from the structures of social power that sustain hierarchies through language. This is reflected in the ease with which she stabs him. Now, Firdaus has accumulated knowledge of how words fail to connote their socially sanctioned meaning. This knowledge is finally performed in her struggle against Marzouk. The fact that she reaches for his knife implies a desire to replace the world of lies the likes of Marzouk rely on with a world of monstrous truths.

Truth and violence are deeply intertwined in the novel. This juxtaposition is stated in the first line of the novel where Firdaus is introduced as both real and criminal. The narrator states, "[t]his is the story of a real woman. I met her in the *Qanatir Prison* a few years ago. I was doing research on the personalities of a group of women prisoners and detainees convicted or accused of various offences" (El Saadawi, 2015, 3). The truthfulness of the story and the criminality of Firdaus frame the events of the story. Truth here is not only the set of rigid social beliefs that Firdaus deconstructs, but also the material existence of Firdaus. The English translation of the

text describes Firdaus as only real. However, it leaves out a crucial part of the characterization of Firdaus in the Arabic original text that describes her as a real person of "flesh and blood [*min laham wa-dam*]" (El Saadawi, 2017, 13). This description foregrounds Firdaus' character—as an embodied experience—at the center of the novel. The two figurations of truth in the novel—first, *the bodily existence of Firdaus as a person* and, second, *her rejection of the lies that circulate around her*—are connected by reference to her experience as a process. Firdaus undergoes various life-changing experiences in the novel, such as her early marriage, failed love relationships, finding sources of income…etc. Throughout these experiences, Firdaus continues to revise her conception of what change and transformation means in her life. When Marzouk sexually assaults her, she describes the submissiveness of her body as a form of resistance. She states, "He wound his arms around me I felt the familiar weight pressing down on my breasts, but my body withdrew, turned in on itself away from me, like some passive, lifeless thing refusing to surrender, undefeated. Its passivity was a form of resistance, a strange ability not to feel either pleasure or pain, not to let a single hair on my head, or on my body, be moved." (El Saadawi, 2015, 128). The description here centralizes Firdaus' loss—which was caused by FGM—as the precondition upon which her passive resistance is possible. This is not simply a form of detachment that allows her to get through the sexual assault, but it is an act of defiance that happens at a specific point in time. Later, Firdaus determines that the appropriate act of resistance is stabbing him to death. These two acts of resistance, despite their seeming contradiction, are manifestations of Firdaus' discovery that "truth is criminal and dangerous" (El Saadawi, 2017, 67). In other words, truth here is a negativity. Truth in the novel is not simply the telling of what happened by reference to factual evidence. Instead, truth refers a negative value the rips apart already existing structures. Subsequently, she separates assault from pain and the

self from the body. Similarly, the violence against Marzouk is a culmination of this negative truth—she separates the knife from him at the moment she sees fear in his eyes. Interestingly, Firdaus does not simply replace Marzouk as the new procuress. She refers to her connections with the police and ability to protect herself. However, her connections are not as powerful as his (El Saadawi, 2017, 63). Put differently, Firdaus version of the truth is not simply producing herself as the new 'master' having successfully vanquished Marzouk. Alternatively, she continues to haunt untruthful figures by presenting herself as a destructive force. When a man of status asks her if she has ever killed a person, she replies affirmatively. He states, "I cannot believe that someone [as tender as you are] can kill" to which she replies, "who said killing does not require tenderness" (El Saadawi, 2017, 67). No sooner does she finish this question than she starts slapping him multiple times. This encounter leads to her arrest and later exposes her connection to Marzouk's death. Her last two encounters in the novel, with Marzouk and the dignitary, reveal Firdaus' realization that truth can only be a constant struggle against the untruthfulness through which her traumatic world is sustained and reproduced. Earlier in the novel, she spits on those she deems a part of her struggle. However, after the encounter with Marzouk, she identifies violence as the only way that can restore her humanity. When Marzouk tells her that there are two kinds of people: masters and slaves, she aspires to be a master, but he tells her that women cannot be masters. This leads to her later realization that

> For death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. This is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is the truth that frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth that prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen" (El Saadawi, 2015, 140).

Here, Firdaus clearly states that the knife is merely a supplement to attain truth. This frightening truth is referred to in the Arabic text as monstrous-*mutawahishah*. Yet, the monstrosity of truth, like the tenderness of killing, is simple. As an act of truth, Marzouk's murder is performed via the same weapon that cleaves out a portion of flesh during the episode of FGM: a knife. This does not only centralize desire as the precondition for this negative and fearsome truth, but it recognizes her destructiveness as an unfolding process. Firdaus is very clear about her plans to continue killing if they release her from prison. In other words, while the knife supplements the monstrous truth, truth itself can only be expressed through acts of unmaking, cleaving, ripping apart and undoing the work of unities, coherencies and imagined communities.

Firdaus, as a result, emerges as the other to the story of unified structures and her eradication is necessary for the continuity of that myth. She states, "they know as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death" (Saadawi, 2015, 137). She identifies the lives of those who abuse their social privileges and power as a continuation of the untruthful fiction of decadence. Firdaus asserts that "…life for them means more crime, more plunder, unlimited booty" (Saadawi, 2015, 137). At this point in her testimony, she projects her destructive intentions into the future. While most of the previous parts in the novel report her tragic past, here, she identifies the future as a site of more violence against the likes of Marzouk who shamelessly confess that women's bodies are their "capital" (Saadawi, 2017, 67). It is important to note that she does not simply accept death. Contrary to her statement "I want nothing I hope for nothing I fear nothing. Therefore I am free" (Saadawi, 2015, 137), her agreement to tell her story to the female psychiatrist complicates this otherwise convincing detachment. If she wants nothing, then why does she tell her story? Why does she narrate into the minutest details of her life?

This question cannot be easily answered without asserting the collective aspect of the novel. Firdaus can be (mis)read as an individualistic maverick who has discovered the truth through life experiences only to share that discovery with people as a romantic reading might advance. Similar readings would not consider four important characters in the novel—the mother, Miss Iqbal, Sharifa Salah el-Dine and the female psychiatrist. These four characters' contribution and tragic fates can be easily overlooked if we do not consider what brings them together as an unexpected collectivity. The mother, despite Firdaus critiques, is identified at the beginning of the novel with the episode of FGM and teaching Firdaus the peasant women's elegant movement—to balance the water earthenware on her head while walking. Miss Iqbal appears in the novel as one of Firdaus' interests. Sharifa emerges after escaping Bayyoumi's sexual violence to provide a needed relief and teach Firdaus her disciplined line of work. The female psychiatrist—unlike the other characters—does not speak with Firdaus, but hears her story and writes Firdaus's story after her execution.

Each of these characters contributes immensely to the development of Firdaus. For example, the mother, while participating in Firdaus' early loss figured as genital mutualization, introduces the fissure in her conceptions of desire and language—that makes possible Firdaus' later understanding that words and their meanings are not necessarily corresponding. The mother figure is evoked during the altercation with Marzouk, through the knife—the same weapon that carves out a piece of her adolescent body leads to her victory over Marzouk. More importantly, the mother's early training—when she teaches Firdaus to balance out the earthenware on her head without holding it with her hands—leads to the supple and athletic reflexes that allow Firdaus to reach out for the knife before Marzouk. Firdaus, as a result, cannot be seen as detached from her mother. Her relationship with her mother should be characterized as a

deformed, inconsistent, and traumatic relationship, yet liberating and transformational. Firdaus' conception of the "frightening truth" when she states "[w]hen I killed I did it with truth not with a knife" (El Saadawi, 2015, 140) situates truth as the basic understanding that the ideological layerings of social meanings is a myth. Therefore, truth can only be a force that undoes the already existing thought constellations that produce figures, like Firdaus, who can occupy only polar binaries of 'good' and 'bad' for such categories fail to jibe with Firdaus' shifting performances and choices.

Firdaus refuses to concede to socially sanctioned meaning. This is evidenced by her refusal to stop killing and to keep telling the truth through violence. She is also not willing to present herself as the new female center because she clearly states that she wants nothing—that she has relinquished her desires and fears. However, when Firdaus agrees to tell her story, she complicates her lack of interest in worldly possessions. In other words, when Firdaus agrees to tell her story to the psychiatrist, she shifts from endless deconstruction where the negativity of truth disavows all meaning to the humanism of storytelling.

By humanism, I refer strictly to Hannah Arendt's statement that the artist has "the ability to produce stories and become historical" (Arendt, 2013, 125). Humanism here denotes the production and sharing of stories as what makes human history possible. In fact, Firdaus' project is not abolishing of the human simply because she spends the last moments of her life performing a very human action: telling a story. Her project, indeed, is the abolishing of Man figured as the human. The difference lies in the fact that Firdaus is aware of the phallocentric thought systems that make her constant suffering possible. She realizes that she operates in a world that assigned her no space. Clearly, she realizes that the eradication of this world is her destiny. Yet, she still understands that she has no power compared to her powerful rivals or even

marginal players like Marzouk. What she understands is that their power is not absolute. Her discovery leads to her death. This discovery is precisely what she narrates in her story. This frames Firdaus as a story of failure. However, her success or failure are not the appropriate measures to recognize her contribution. Firdaus' achievement is the survival of her *freedom dream* as a story that is narrated to the psychiatrist despite her death. Thus, her story is not only about what happened to her in the past, but also about her narrative's entry into history. This movement towards the future, while remaining faithful to the past, locates history as site of struggle. Firdaus, due to her emphasis on truth as a negativity presents her life as a collapse of meaning. Out of that collapse, a new meaning can emerge. She carves out a space where difference operates on the level of the imagination—the freedom dream. Here, *the freedom dream is an act of storytelling that defies a possible death and by leaving behind a story of failure.*

Similar to *Point Zero's* emphasis on storytelling, death and desire, *Season of Migration to The North* (1966) offers a cogitation on these categories in a number of ways. The Sudanese author Tayeb Salih's novel starts with the return of the narrator from England. The narrator never gives away his name as the novel unfolds. The narrator had recently received his PhD in English literature. When he returns to his village, he recounts the details that he misses about the Sudan. The familiarity of the place and people in the Sudan evoke in him the warmth and tranquility he was not able to find in England. The narrator becomes increasingly interested in a man named Mustafa Said, who was not a member of the village prior to the narrator's trip to England and lives in a simple house. He learns that the man has moved to the village a few years back, married to a woman named Hosna and has two sons. He follows the story of this strange man who has no interest to be known. One night, under the influence of alcohol, Mustafa recites a few

lines of English poetry that the narrator recognizes. This increases the narrator's sense of curiosity, especially that the narrator is already curious about Mustafa's presence in the village and the reasons that brought him to the village of *Wid Hamid*.

When Mustafa becomes aware of the narrator's interest, he invites him and starts sharing parts of his story. Mustafa tells him stories from his childhood—the way he excelled in school at an early age—which made teachers transfer him to higher levels. Mustafa describes the way in which people deemed British schools a threat; they would hide their children. He then tells the narrator that a degree in English literature does not have a practical value for a village of farmers. He proceeds to describe how he learned English with a native-level British accent; people would mistake him for a British person. Mustafa is offered a scholarship to a high school in Cairo at the age of twelve. He remembers the unemotional way he parted with his mother, whom he never met again. In Egypt, he is received by Mr. Robinson, the school's principle, and his wife Mrs. Robinson. At the age of fifteen, Mustafa was accepted to study in England. In England, Mustafa is involved in many sexual encounters as he embraces coital relations as form of freedom and liberation from the British colonizers of the Sudan. Mustafa becomes a university professor in England. He establishes a turbulent relationship with a woman named Jean Morris whom he marries later. The relationship culminates in Morris' death for which Mustafa undergoes trail in England. Later in the novel the narrator learns that Morris herself demanded her death. Mustafa kills her by stabbing her. Mustafa returns to the Sudan to live in a quite village. After he shares his story with the narrator, the narrator is appointed in Khartoum. When the narrator returns to the village, he finds that Mustafa disappears in a flood, everybody assumes his death. Prior to his presumed death, Mustafa leaves the narrator as the guardian of his wife and children and grants him a special access to his library.

In *Season*, storytelling takes place on two interrelated levels. First is the first-person unnamed narrator who tells the story based on his interaction and knowledge of the events and the characters in the story. This type of narration constitutes of entire corpus of the *written* text of the novel. The second type of narration is *Season* constitutes oral stories told by Bint Mazjoub, an old woman who tells stories in the village's convivial gatherings. This type of narration is reported by the unnamed narrator as well. In this sense, the reader of the novel only has access to Bint Mazjoub's stories when the narrator is present in her occasional gathering. Her narratives are oral and take place in informal settings. She is the embodiment of a loquacious female who interrogates cultural binary roles. She speaks of intimate matters with confidence in the presence of the men of the village. She smokes, drinks wine, and speaks in a husky, manly voice.

Men and women rush to hear her stories. In fact, the men ask her to tell them stories about her intimate past experiences with her previous eight husbands. She shares the private details of her late husbands with no hesitation or reluctance. She challenges the boundaries of expression by stepping out of the domestic space to the more male-dominated gatherings. A man asks her, "who of your eight husbands was the best, sexually" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 87). She replies with specific details about the physical prowess of her late husband Haj Ahmad simultaneously as she questions some of the present men's bodily stamina (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 87). What makes her stories valuable is the way they are shared collectively. Bint Mazjoub allows those who attend the assembly to know the history and traditions of the village. She tells stories to the younger generations that feature older generations and the village's victories and losses in what amounts to a living archive of the village. In addition, she depicts how the world looks like outside the small village by describing trips outside the Sudan (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 92-93). These elements allow

Bint Mazjoub to be a robust character for storytelling as she successfully contributes to the longevity of the history of the village through oral narrations.

Both the narrator and Bint Mazjoub control storytelling; thus, they also control access to the village's memory. Mustafa's death introduces a problem of memory in the novel. If stories about him stop, his memory can be easily erased. After Mustafa's disappearance, the survival of his story establishes a conflict that the narrator undergoes. On the one hand, he can tell the story since Mustafa gives him permission to share his story (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 87); on the other hand, he understands Mustafa's story as an infectious disease that causes further troubles and conflicts. In all cases, Mustafa, after his disappearance, transforms him into a relic of the past. Mustafa's story then is collected through different sources at different times and places. Scholar Ami Elad-Bouskila argues that "One particularly interesting phenomenon in Salih's effective portrayal of characters is how he sweeps them off stage when he no longer has use for them" (Elad-Bouskila, 1999, 70). He gives an example of Mustafa as a character that Salih removes from the narrative when he no longer needs him. While it is correct to point out that the absence of Mustafa from the narrative is sudden and unexpected, that might not necessarily mean that Mustafa is no longer needed in the narrative. In fact, Mustafa's story is intensified as the narrative collapses around his possible death since he is no longer available as the source of his story.

After Mustafa's death, the narrator is forced to witness his story in different locations. In a train, the narrator meets one of Mustafa's classmates who recounts stories of Mustafa's childhood. The narrator poses and observes, "Mustafa Said, against my will, is a part of my world, an idea inside my mind, a specter that never leaves me alone" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 67). He hears again about Mustafa in a meeting with other government workers (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73). Mustafa's possible death opens up a space for other characters, such as Hosna, to whom the narrator should

be a guardian as Mustafa instructs before his disappearance. This culminates when the narrator approaches Hosna, Mustafa's wife, for soties about Mustafa. When the narrator has a chance to ask Hosna questions about Mustafa's life, he asks her about Mustafa's past and about the closed room (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 67). After Mustafa's presume death, the mourning of Hosna Bint Mahmoud and her future with the threat of Wad Rayyes, an older man who attempts to forcefully marry her, are not of the narrator's concern. He approaches her for the knowledge about Mustafa's past without tending to her needs given the fact the Mustafa left him as the official guardian of Hosna and thier two children.

Clearly, Hosna occupies a lower social position than Wad Rayyes, which makes her vulnerable to his advances. As a solution, Hosna wants the narrator to marry her without any obligations except putting an end to Wad Rayyes' unwanted marriage proposal. After Hosna is forced by her father to marry Wad Rayyes (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 122), she refuses to consummate with him, which causes a violent struggle between Hosna, a woman in her thirties and Wad Rayyes, an elderly man in his seventies. It is clear that they die when Hosna refuses Wad Rayyes' attempt to rape her. The fight is gruesome and graphic especially when the details of the violent scene are reported later by Bint Mazjoub. After the occurrence of this violent episode, the narrator is reminded that Hosna told him before of her plan when she states, "If they forced me to marry him, I will kill him and kill myself" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 101). He also learns that during his absence she wanted him, again, to marry her to keep away from Wad Rayyes. However, the narrator was not available during that time due to his job outside the village (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 125). More importantly, the absence of Mustafa and Hosna from the narrative is what collapses the unity of the narrative. The story as a result does not move forward and the narrator is forced to return to Mustafa's house to open the library. However, this time the narrator is determined to learn what he needs

to know as he contemplates burning the library. The narrator, amidst reading Mustafa's most intriguing secrets, decides to suddenly depart. He states, "while he was speaking, I left" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 153). The novel ends with the narrator's desire to commit suicide in the river. He enters the river naked, then he realizes that there is still reason to live. The novel closes with his cries, after he chooses to live, "help…help" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 156).

Within the story world of *Season*, the supplement appears in relation to, first, education and, second, storytelling. Mustafa's education in the Sudan, Egypt then England shapes much of his life experiences and sense of place. More importantly, education operates in the novel as an instrument of colonization. When Mustafa recounts the story of his early childhood to the narrator, he notes that people did not trust schools. When "the government sends its representatives [searching for students], people hide their children. People thought that it [education] was a great evil that arrived with the colonizing army" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44). This attitude towards education reveals not only a fear of colonial education as a site of indoctrination and erasure of traditional culture, but it also reveals the distrust people had for the local representative. Education, as revealed in the conversation between Mustafa in his childhood and the government official, is designed to produce generations of government-dependent workers. The representative who crosses long distances in search for pupils asks Mustafa "Would you like to study in a school?" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44) Mustafa adds, "I said: what is a school? He replied: a beautiful building made of stone amidst a grand garden bordering the banks of the Nile. The bell rings then you attend your classes with other pupils—you learn reading and writing and arithmetic" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44). The government official in this encounter describes what a school is and the major skills that Mustafa is expected to learn.

Much of the details given here cannot properly be understood by a child who was never exposed to the specific experience of going to school and learning in a classroom. As a result, Mustafa answers "Will I wear a turban like that [the one the official is wearing]?" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44). To which the official replies with laughter then states, "this is not a turban, it is a hat" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44). The man approaches Mustafa and places the hat on Mustafa's head. The child's head disappears in in the hat. The official concludes, "when you get older and finish school and become a government official, you will wear a hat like this" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 44). It is at this point that the representative of the government reveals the purpose of his search for pupils for the newly built schools. It is to produce a workforce to satisfy the demands for government positions. This almost satirical scene foreshadows how Mustafa grows up to occupy liminal spaces—similar to the metaphor of the hat that does not fit his tiny head— where he misfits expected roles that are expected of him. After finishing middle school, Mustafa's teacher asks him to leave for Cairo due to the fact that there were no longer any resources available for Mustafa there to continue his education and advance further. The teacher states, "we have nothing to offer you by now" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 46). This early conflict in Mustafa's early life was never resolved in his lifetime—that he is a product of colonial education and at the same time he exceeds the expectations of colonial education. In other words, his ambitions transgressed that desired outcome where he joins the workforce. This is evidenced by the fact that he returns to the Sudan to live in a rural village as a farmer instead of making advantage of his postgraduate education in economics.

There are other instances in the novel when the colonial attitudes survive but in a more subtle form. The novel features a critique to the variety of ways in which white characters still maintain a colonial sense of superiority. After Mustafa's death, his story is brought in a

conversation with Richard, a British person who went to Oxford and works in the Sudan, and Mansour, a politically oriented Sudanese. Richard criticizes Mustafa and how he led a life with false friends. Richard claims that Mustafa associated with left-wingers who wanted to maintain appearances by keeping the company of a black friends (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73). Richard continues his scathing remarks towards Mustafa as he notes that Mustafa could have been able to make a great future for himself. Richard continues his scornful remarks by speculating, "if he dedicated his time for knowledge, he would have made friends of all races, you would have heard of him here. He certainly would have returned to benefit this country, a place where superstitions rule supreme" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73). Richard continues his harangue to explicate his critique of superstitions. These superstitions include: "the superstition of industrialization, the superstition nationalization, the superstition of Arab unity, the superstition of African unity" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73). Richard concludes by stating,

> "you [Sudansese] are like children, you think that in the depths of this land there is a treasure that you will get by the work of a miracle and then you will solve all of your problems and live in a paradise afterwards. These are illusions. Daydreams. Only by way of facts, numbers and statistics will you be able to accept your reality and live within its means and try to change within the limits of your capacities (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73).

Here, through Richard, the traditional missionary practices that highlights the inferiority of the colonized are replaced by the language of science and statistics. Richard thinks of himself as someone in solidarity with the Sudanese people while simultaneously reducing the experience of colonization to numbers and statistics. His language is fraught with the binaries: East versus West, facts and statists as instruments of reality versus dreams and wishes as manifestations of superstitions. This language echoes the logics of centralized structures, complete plentitudes and a rigid conception of the world. When Richard lectures his Sudanese friends, he fails to recognize that he still carries on the legacies of colonial attitudes towards the colonized. Miriam

Cooke, in her observations on *Season*, states “Infantilization of the colonized did not end with independence” (Cooke, 2020, 89). Richard’s insistence to compare the Sudanese who refuse colonial standards of progress to children proves that colonial education operates with prescribed expectations that pathologize non-normative education outcomes. In other words, when Mustafa becomes a farmer, he fails according to that view that deems cultivating his native home a failure.

Richard’s discourse is characterized by, first, a specific investment in truth as discernable facts in the form of empirical knowledge. Second, his remarks are guided by an understanding of time as linear movement—that a hopeful future can emerge from the atrocities of the past. This happens when he observes that Mustafa “would have returned to benefit [his] country” (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73) if he allowed himself to learn properly. In fact, it is also through the same formulation of time that Richard thinks that facts and statistics can produce a better future.

While it is true that the narrator criticizes Richard for embracing “the superstition of statistics (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 73), he still abides by the same configuration of the future. The narrator believes in a hopeful future in which the colonizers will leave the Sudan. It is a future, as the narrator sees it, in which “railroads, ships, hospitals, factories and schools will be ours” (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 66). In this future, the people of the Sudan will speak English without feeling guilty or grateful towards anyone. It is a temporality when people can live an ordinary life (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 66). Despite the differences in their viewpoints towards the socio-political issues of the Sudan, Richard and the narrator share the projection of the future as a site of utopia through education.

In this novel, the supplement resists this simplistic understanding of “facts” and “time” in a various ways. First, Mustafa describes the ways in which he learns scientific knowledge as a process in which the conventional divisions between the humanities and the natural sciences are

blurred. Mustafa notes that when he started to learn English, "words and sentences appeared to [him] as mathematical equations; as if algebra and geometry were lines of poetry" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 46). He adds, "[T]he vast world, in a geography lesson, looked like a chessboard" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 46). The notion of science and statistics as purely empirical and devoid of artistic impulses are challenged here by Mustafa. In Mustafa's description, his mind could bring together these two "conflicting" realms of knowledge. This aspect of Mustafa continues with him as he grows older. We learn for example that at Oxford he used to lecture about a form of economics based on love as he called for humanizing economics (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 56). Elsewhere, we learn that Mustafa's contributions to the field of economics consisted in what he called "the economics of colonization" a form of economics that pays less attention to statistics and figures (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 72). These significant differences in approaching scientific knowledge do not only reveal the colonial management of "truth" and "facts," but it also reveals how in the novel the differences between the human and natural or applied sciences are subject to further interrogations.

The second appearance of the supplement can be found in tension the novel presents between oral storytelling and violence. This tension means that *Season* presents a world that is not entirely violent nor is storytelling always successful in abating violence. Here, Bint Mazjoub is an essential figure since her gatherings are chiefly the site of convivial storytelling. For example, when the narrator returns to learn that Hosna has killed her elderly husband and died during the confrontation, it is quickly revealed that during the night of the crime Bint Mazjoub was not telling stories in her house as usual. When the narrator returns to visit his grandfather, he finds him crying out Wad Rayyes' name. The old man proceeds to curse all women, then he cries—an unusual incident that scares the narrator since his grandfather is one of the strongest men in the village—his tears reflect the horrors of something that has happened. The narrator

goes to Bint Mazjoub observing "If Bint Mazjoub does not tell me what had happened, no one will" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969,120). After serving her a third of a bottle of whisky and a cigarette, she starts to tell him of the details of a tragic night.

She starts by strictly instructing, "the words I will speak to you will not be shared with you by anyone else in this village" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969,121). She continues, "the story [*kalam*] of what happened was buried with Hosna and Wad Rayyes; those are disgraceful words very hard to say" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969,121). Then she recounts the details:

> After al'isha' prayer, I woke up by the loud screams of Hosna Bint Mahmoud in Wad Rayyes' house. There was silence in the village; you could not hear a soul. In all honesty, I thought that he took what is rightfully his from her [sexually]. The poor man became nearly insane. Two weeks have passed, and she never talked to him or let him come close to her. I opened my ears and she was screaming and wailing. May God forgive me, but I laughed when I heard her screams. The cries grew louder. Then I heard movement in Bakri's house next to Wad Rayyes' house. I heard Bakri cries, 'Have some shame Man! Do you have to make [this night] scandalous and noisy? His wife shouted, 'Hosna save your honor!'…even a virgin bride does not make these [noises] as if you never slept with a man before. Hosna's screams grew stronger, then I heard Wad Rayyes shouts 'Bakri, Haj Ahmad, Bint Rayyes, anyone…Hosna killed me" I jumped from my bed, barely covered by my dress. I knocked on Bakri's door and Mahjoub's door and ran towards Wad Rayyes's door; I found it closed. By the time people gathered as we were breaking the door, we heard two final screams one by Wad Rayyes—it was a scream that could uproot a mountain and then a similar scream by Hosna. Then we entered, Mahjoub, Bakri and I…He was naked the way he was born. She also was naked…she was bitten and scratched in every part of her body. Her stomach, her hips, her neck. He has bitten her nipple until he cleaved it out of her body, blood was pouring out of her lower lip. He was stabbed more than ten times. She was stabbed in her stomach, chest…she was on her back; there was a knife in her heart, her mouth and eyes were open as if she were alive and he had his tongue sticking out and his arms raised high. (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 121-122).

The blood, as Bint Mazjoub further explicates the scene was "pouring out of her heart and between his thighs" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 122). We learn that both Hosna and Wad Rayyes were buried the same night. There was no funeral; everyone was forbidden to enter to see what happened and those who saw the scene were forbidden to talk about it. During the same night, multiple fights broke out. The silent and peaceful village was disturbed, she explains, "as if demons were

present among us" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 123). We learn from Bint Mazjoub here that this violent act took place during a night when she was asleep. Unlike the nights when the villagers are gathered in her presence. Violence surfaces during times when oral storytelling and the entertainment that Bint Mazjoub provides subside. This structure—storytelling as a way of abating violence is reminiscent of Shahrazad's entry to the frame story in *The Nights*.

In the novel, Hosna multiply rejects Wad Rayyes' advances. Her father forces her to marry him in order not to be without a husband. She clearly states to the narrator that if she is forced to marry him, she will kill him and kill herself (Ṣāliḥ, 1969,101). The narrator, when he hears Bint Mazjoub's version of the events, becomes aware of his complicity in her death. The supplement here is not simply the violent act itself, but how stories of the tragic night circulate. Clearly, it is possible to read Hosna's action, especially the way in which she uses a knife to cut though Wad Rayyes' body, as exposing an existing lack that negotiates power and desire. In other words, here violence exposes the fragility of powerful violent figures who can rationalize assault, such as Wad Rayyes, who forces Hosna to marry him to have access to her body. It is also possible to read the wounds on her body as the price she has to pay to end her struggle and enter the history of the village through acts of storytelling. However, my interest here is more in how the narrator collects stories in the novel.

In the novel, we learn about this story by the narrator who hears the story from Bint Mazjoub. As readers, we are twice removed from the action. More importantly, we learn that there is the desire to erase this incident from the history of the village. Here, by telling the story, Bint Mazjoub supplements the patriarchal desire to erase Hosna's story. Put otherwise, Hosna's story is not simply a story of her violent refusal of rape and willingness to query the power dynamics that make access to her body possible, but it is also the entry of her story into Bint

Mazjoub's oral narratives that makes her lasting story supplement her transient bodily presence in the village. When the narrator starts telling people that he knows the details of what happened. He is told, "Bint Mazjoub told you for sure; she cannot keep a secret" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 125). In other words, while Bint Mazjoub denounces Hosna's action publicly, her ability to circulate the story allows Hosna to be historical. Here, the novel positions Hosna against Mustafa. While Hosna's story successfully enters the village's lexicon, Mustafa story is withheld from public narratives.

After his death, Mustafa's past haunts the narrator. The narrator is caught between Mustafa's intriguing past and his desire to overcome it. The encounters between the narrator and Mustafa, especially during the night when Mustafa tells his story to the narrator, allow the narrator to witness Mustafa's personal history. The narrator in this sense is a privileged character since he is the only one that gains a fuller scope of Mustafa's life. In an interview, Salih remarks: "Mstafa Saeed… is veiled in ambiguity, … but when Mustafa Saeed arrives in the village, he gets a name, a status, and a history. The villagers didn't know it, but Mustafa [Said] recounted his entire history to the narrator. In other words, he fixed him in time and place. (qtd in Elad-Bouskila, 1998, 73). A question arises here pertaining to the figurations of this fixity of time and place. Salih explicates here two significant concepts that allow for a better understanding of history. First, by moving to the village, Mustafa started to have a history. This implies that having a history is a communal act that was achieved by getting married and being a part of a community. The failure of Mustafa in England is a failure to develop a similar sense of community and togetherness. His success in the village—to have a history—is developed through this collectivity. Second, this history "fixes" the narrator in time and place once it is recounted as a story. In other words, Mustafa's personal history was codified as a story. Through

this configuration of history, collectivity, Salih implies that only through storytelling can Mustafa be historical—that his story be known and shared from one generation to another.

However, Mustafa's failure in the novel does not take place because of his morality. Mustafa fails because the narrator refuses to tell his story. In order to become historical—and by extension a hero—Mustafa's story needed to be reported, circulated and collectively shared. However, the narrator choice to withhold the information prevented Mustafa from becoming the protagonist in this narrative. It is also true that withholding this information is a painful act—it leads the narrator to almost drown in the river (Ṣāliḥ, 1969,156). Here, the novel suggests that coming to terms with the past is a violent act. As a result, in order to reckon with the past, one has to experience that reckoning collectively, this is implied when the narrator cries in the end of the novel "help, help." It is in that act of calling for help and it is through the desire for collectivity that the narrator can maintain the possibility of redemption that culminates in his declaration "I choose life" (Ṣāliḥ, 1969, 156). By contrast, the story of Hosna enters into the oral narrations of Bint Mazjoub, which allows her to access the village memory and, as a result, she enters history.

Chapter Conclusion

Within the context of this dissertation, this chapter asks: how do the *modern* texts of El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* connect with the *premodern* text of *The Thousand and One Nights*? Before answering this question, the relationship between *The Nights* and modern Arabic novels must be historically situated. In this regard, works by Roger Allen, Muhsin al-Musawi and Richard Van Leeuwen are relevant because they represent different strands of literary engagements with how *The Nights* influence modern Arabic literature. Allen avers that "in the post-1967 (June War) period…Arab

intellectuals and creative writers sought different modes of identity by searching into the past" (Allen, 2017, 53). He adds, "[M]odern Arab novelists frequently refer back to … motifs and heroes [from *The Thousand and One Nights*]" (Allen, 2017, 53). Here, Allen detects the emergence of a new trend in writing in the second half of the 20th century in Arabic literature. The work written the earliest in this chapter, *Season* (1966), is only one year ahead of 1967—the date that Allen identifies as the point of emergence of this new trend in writing. The defeat of 1967, known also as the six-day war or June war, was an Arab-Israeli war that culminated in the defeat of the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian alliance, and Israel's occupation of Arab countries, such as the West Bank in Palestine, Sinai in Egypt and the Golan Heights in Syria. This loss, in Allen's estimation, has impacted how literary works in the Arab world responded to their historical epoch. Allen ascertains that "[a] recently developed sense of postcolonial Arab identity had been severely mauled, and a quest was initiated for new modes and forms, including a resort to the heritage of the past" (Allen, 2017, 57). This sense of defeat that was shared by many Arab scholars coincides with increasing references to *The Nights* in Arab novels.

Richard Van Leeuwen focuses on modern works from the Arab world and world literature that explicitly reference *The Nights*. Muhsin al-Musawi, in agreement with Allen and Van Leeuwen, acknowledges the impact of *The Nights* on modern Arabic literature by reference to works that explicitly mention *The Nights*, such as *Arabian Nights and Days (*1979) by Naguib Mahfouz and many others. Beyond explicit references to *The 1001 Nights*, Muhsin al-Musawi emphasizes the significance of *The Nights* as a medieval provider of the "narrative strategies" that Arab writers incorporate into their works (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). He states, "medieval narratives like *A Thousand and One Nights*…attest to the presence of pre-modern genres in modern fiction, not only as oblique readings that reflect on current situations in the modern

nation-state, but also as providers of narrative strategies, stylistic variations…" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). Here, al-Musawi stresses the importance of *The Nights,* not only as a "a functional container" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76) that can be solely understood as explicit references to Shahrazad stories, but he acknowledges the presence of "narrative strategies" and "stylistic variations" that exceed literal references to *The Nights* (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). This distinction is important because Musawi's insightful remarks open up a space for the study of these narrative strategies in relation to texts that feature acts of storytelling without explicit references to *The Nights*.

This brings back the earlier question: how do the texts of this chapter relate to *The Nights* and Shahrazad's narrative voice? The relationship here is historically situated in the texts' moment of production as Roger Allen stresses in post 1967 Arabic literature. Second, the relationship is, as al-Musawi observes, can be located in what he calls "the medieval turn in modern Arabic narrative" when The *Nights* offers stylistic and narrative material to modern works of literature (al-Musawi, 2017, 77). This (re)turn to the premodern Arab past coincides with a vehement social critique of post-independence Arab states. Scholars agree that the literary works that reference *The Ngihts* tend to be critical of their respective context of inception. Albert Hourani named the post 1967 period "a disturbance of spirits" (qtd in. Allen, 2017, 57). Allen affirms that a "recently developed sense of postcolonial Arab identity had been severely mauled" (Allen, 2017, 57). Van Leeuwen notes that "The intention of the [modern] novel is quite explicitly to criticize social conditions" (Van Leeuwen, 2017, 108). Al-Musawi continues this line of thought by observing that the return to medieval narratives, such as *The Nights* "proved to be one of the most viable means of interrogating the present through this distancing into the past" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76). In other words, the works that feature *The Nights* tend to "maul,"

"criticize" and "interrogate" the regimes of knowledge under which they are composed. This chapter builds on previous scholarship by describing one of what Allen describes as "new modes and forms," of literary writing.

Here, it is necessary to expand al-Musawi's observations on the structural affinities or "stylistic variations" (al-Musawi, 2017, 76) between *The Nights* and modern Arabic literature by focusing on the triangle of *death*, *desire* and *storytelling*. This transhistorical movement from the modern texts of *Point Zero* and *Season* to the premodern framework of *The Nights* is diagnostic of the ways in which power works and change and social transformation can be imagined. Here, *the Shahrazad freedom dream* includes;

- The modern literary works *attempt* to frame women character's desires by the introduction of marriage—usually a forced marriage—to the story. *Point Zero* depicts the premature marriage of Firdaus. No sooner does she graduate high school than a marriage arrangement to a stranger is carried out by her uncle. In *Season*, Hosna's forced marriage to Wad Rayyes is immediately considered after her husband, Mustafa Said, dies;
- While the medieval Shahrazad succeeds in deferring death, death occurs in the modern texts. Firdaus and Hosna both commit acts of violence that lead to their death and
- Representations of storytellers who use a *first-person* narration and *witness* the suffering of the women characters and tell their stories after their death. In *Point Zero*, the woman physiatrist witnesses Firdaus last moments and hears her story then writes a book about her story. In *Season*, the oral storyteller Bint Mazjoub recounts the details of Hosna's story to the novel's narrator who then reports it in the narrative.

This framing reflects that same structure of *The Nights*—that revolves around desire, death and storytelling. However, in the modern texts we can observe significant changes. Here, it is safe to assert that the roles that Shahrazad play in the premodern text of *The Nights* are distributed to various characters. Shahrazad in the classical narrative assumes the roles of a wife who volunteers to marry Shahriyar despite the threat of death—an educated oral storyteller who succeeds in bringing the king's violence to a screeching halt. In the modern texts, these roles are divided among different characters. In the two literary texts of this chapters, the insurgent stories are told orally to characters who function as scribes.

Firdaus and Bint Mazjoub tell the stories orally, but their stories gain permanency when they are recorded in *writing* by the psychiatrist in *Point Zero* and by the narrator in *Season*. These key differences from the premodern text of *The Nights*—where Shahrazad's entry into the narrative suspends the frame tale and establishes a drastic change from the earlier descriptions of the king's cycle of marriage and death to the *content* of her stories—reveal that a significant change has happened to storytelling under modernity. Todorov has observed Shahrazad's success in producing stories endlessly. Todorov's concept *narrative-as-life* captures how Shahrazad produces stories that defy the threat of her death[32].

My contribution in this chapter is to frame Todorov's observations on Shahrazad by its premodern context. Put differently, what Todorov describes as Shahrazad's embedded structure—the infinite spread of stories by characters who are threatened by death—ceases to be the case under modernity in the modern Arab novels that this chapter reviews (Todorov, 2010, 450). In all the texts I review in this chapter, death occurs in contrast to Shahrazad's success to prolong her life. While in the premodern text of Shahrazad, as Todorov illustrates, the

[32] This point—Todorov's concept of *narrative-as-life*—has been discussed in more depth earlier in this chapter.

supplement appears as the "argument"—or the stories—that characters tell in order to justify their reason to live, in the modern texts of this chapter, the major shift that takes place is the occurrence of death. The supplement in this context is not entirely a corporeal argument for life, *but the breaking down of wholes, unities and totalities that culminate in leaving behind stories after the realization that death—and the perishing of the human body—is inevitable.* This explains why in the modern texts of this chapter the oral storytellers, Firdaus and Bint Mazjoub, have their stories written down as *freedom dreams* by other characters who witness the unbearable act of narrating the horrors of life and death; those characters develop a practice of listening that reperforms these horrors and codifies the transience of orality into the permanency of writing; thus, identing history itself as a site of struggle.

The question here is how to understand this shift from the premodern text of Shahrazad, where death is defied, to the modern context where only the freedom dream survives after the human body perishes. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault detects a shift from the premodern "sovereign power" to a modern form of power that he terms "biopower." Foucault's concept of biopower refers to the way in which, inseparable from the rise of capitalism, the "entry of life into ...politics" (Foucault, 1988, 141-142) coincided with an increasing interest in the preservation of life. He states, "[It] was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death that gave power its access even to the body" (Foucault, 1988, 143). The techniques of power in this case are concerned with the well-being of the politicized bodies of the population. By contrast, Foucault states that the sovereign shows his power over life "only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing" (Foucault, 1988, 136). By having this power, the ruler "evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring" (Foucault,

1988, 136). Hence, this power is bound up with the capacity of the sovereign to bring about death.

A tension develops since biopower—figured as an investment in the preservation of life—and sovereign power—figured as the power to bring about death— are practiced by the same modern state. Foucault resolves this tension by postulating in "Society Must Be Defended" that racism establishes "caesuras within the biological continuum (Foucault, 2013, 74). He adds that state racism is "the precondition that makes killing acceptable" (Foucault, 2013, 75). Making use of these divisions, racism serves as the link between biopower and sovereign power—that is between the right to live or die. As such, racism based on biological difference becomes of pivotal role in organizing how biopower and sovereign power operate. In modern states, as a result, it not uncommon to find a portion of the population whose lives are protected while other segments of the population are denied the right to live. In the texts of this chapter, gender difference is the form of biological difference that marks the women character's struggles. In these novels, it is a male character that forces a woman to marry. In *Point Zero*, Firdaus' uncle forces her to marry an elderly man after she graduates from high school. In *Season*, Hosna's father forces her to marry Wad Rayyes. Despite this wide-ranging reach of power, Foucault still acknowledges the possibility of resistance.

Foucault asserts that resistance emerges from *within* power structures. He states, "[W]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1988, 95). This means that resistance does not emerge from outside power relations as exteriority. Foucault refers to "resistances" in the plural form. For him, "they are the odd terms in relation of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular

fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities…" (Foucault, 1988, 96). Change, for Foucault, is possible because the established power structures are not total or unified. He describes these multiple points of resistance across a variety of power relations, but they are "mobile and transitory" (Foucault, 1988, 96). Their function is to produce "cleavages in a society that shifts about, *fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remodeling them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds*" (italics mine, Foucault, 1988, 96). Foucault proposes a considerable formulation of power, change and transformation. Here, he privileges transient forms of power that have not been yet shaped into organized and disciplined actions for change. These points of conflict appear asymmetrical, sporadic, and inchoate. Foucault clearly acknowledges that resistance can be a "radical rupture," however, he points out that it is through "the strategic codification of these points" that large-scale change and transformation is possible (Foucault, 1988, 96). In other words, there is an issue of scale in this Foucauldian formulation of resistance. It is through the codification of transient and scattered points of resistance across fields of power that drastic social transformational action is possible.

In *Homo Sacer* (1995), Gorgio Agamben approaches biopower differently. Unlike Foucault's model, the biopower in his work is associated more with death than life. Specifically, Agamben's theory problematizes the way in which sovereign power exercises its right to kill in relation to space and law. Expounding the figure of the *homo sacer*, Agamben interrogates the relationship between life and politics. The *homo sacer* in Roman law is he "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (Agamben, 1998, 8). The denial of a sacrificial ritual to the *homo sacer* reflects the denial of any political status since the sacrifice has political connotations. Agamben also gives an account on the death camps under Nazi Germany where the life of the *Muselmann*,

"a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic," is denied any political value (Agamben, 1998, 119). The fact that the lives of the *homo sacre* and the *Muselmann* are stripped out of humanity reveals how Agamben's figurations of biopower privileges death, unlike Foucault's theory that associates the term "biopower" with life. Clearly, these examples reflect what Agamben means by *bare life*: it is the point at which human life loses all political value to the degree it exists on a bordering zone between life and death. Agamben notes that "[i]n Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (Agamben, 1998, 8). In other word, the bare life of those who are included only in the form of exclusion is what inaugurates politics. This model does not promise resistance. As long as bare life is only included in politics as an exception, "every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile" (Agamben, 1998, 10). There is a sense of hopelessness in Agamben figurations of biopower. The exclusion and removal of bare life from the political realm of experience ensures its continuity in the negated sphere where it cannot come back in the form of dreams for change and transformation.

In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander G Weheliye interrupts Agamben and Foucault's theories by proposing that resistance might take alternative forms. According to him, the poverty of the theories of biopower lies in its Eurocentricity. Foucault and Agamben theorize, and by extension abstract, a European body as the *nomos* of modern politics. Interrogating Agamben's work, Weheliye states, "I am questioning the projection of death camps onto exceptional ontological screen (both as end point and as a site of origin)" (Wehelyie, 2014, 36). According to this view, Agamben singularizes the experience in the concentration camps as "the end point" of human life and the "site of origin" that produces politics. Amidst this complexity, Weheliye points out

possible alternatives: what are about other experiences that can be described as bare life? Particularly, slavery was a historical moment in which concentration camps were dominant. Weheliye reflects on such camps in the United States, Cuba and South Africa (Wehelyie, 2014, 35). In these contexts, concentration camps were associated with colonialism and slavery. This allows him to explore other sites of resistance that does not exist in European theories of biopower. Especially significant is the way in which Weheliye finds resistance in the body of the slave. Exploring Hortense Spiller's theory of the flesh, he distinguishes between the body and the flesh. To have a body is to be a subject of rights and to possesses a sense of personhood. However, to be reduced to flesh (bare life) is be a product of the effacement of personhood. What produces the flesh is the "calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol and the bullet" (qtd. In Weheliye, 2014, 39). Approaching bare life in terms of the flesh interrogates the abstraction of Agamben's theory, which does not feature any possibility of a utopian dimension, and allows us to deal with the enflshed body as a site of struggle that can generate emancipatory alternatives.

Weheliye's interruption in terms of rethinking bare life in terms of the flesh is theoretically enabling. He notes that after the suffering what "remains is the flesh, the living, speaking, thinking, feeling, and imagining flesh" (Wehelyie, 2014, 40). The flesh becomes a site that produces effects that testify to its subjection. Thoughts, emotions, sounds and imaginations emerge as potential sites of struggle that respond to the condition of suffering. In fact, they transform the condition of suffering into a "condition of possibility" (Wehelyie, 2014, 40). These alternatives are unconventional since they produce series of effects that are valid, but different than any conventional forms of activism and resistance. The language, voice, and imagination of the enfleshed have the potential for imagining their own utopias. Particularly, the

suffering forms their "cognitive-epistemological interventions by envisioning its own utopia, rather than accepting an assigned position within the amiliotary schemes proposed by the dominant discourse" (qtd in Weheliye, 2014, 126). Hence, the flesh is always in conflict with dominant discourse that attempts to write it off. The flesh's utopian potential lies, on the one hand, in its transmission of such wounds to other generations that live under the illusion than they have been "liberated" (Wehelyie, 2014, 39) and, on the other hand, maintaining a sense of a future where forms of "human emancipation that can be imagined, but not described." (Wehelyie, 2014, 127). Such unconventional forms of resistance still maintain social elaborations once they are witnessed. This happens when others "bare witness to their plight" (Wehelyie, 2014, 126). In other words, *those who come in contact with the enfleshed body and report its wounds give it a lasting story that breaks far beyond the confines of its subjugation.*

Building on the work of Derrida, Foucault and Weheliye, this chapter develops its own vison of how utopia and change take place in *Season* and *Point Zero*. The first function of transformation can be located in forms of counter actions that undermine the assumed totalities of power structures. Foucault describes the effects of points of resistance in relation to power as "fracturing," "cutting… off," "furrowing," "remodeling," and "marking off" (Foucault, 1988, 96). These words invite a sense of split and dehiscence. Here, resistance operates on a level that undermines the myth of centralized structures. Foucault's figuration of the mobile and transitory points of resistance is reminiscent of Derrida's supplement. While Derrida's supplement adds to the structure, and by adding, it exposes a lack, Foucault's points of resistance "[fracture] unities]" (Foucault, 1988, 96). Hence, both formulations challenge not only the totality of power, but also the fiction of resistance figured only as revolutionary struggle. Here, Weheliye intervention is of pivotal role because he contemplates forms of resistance that elaborate the

actions of those who undergo extreme conditions of violence. These forms of "human emancipation" (Weheliye, 2014, 127) evade clear description, according to Weheliye, because they exist in the *excess* and *surplus* that is produced by the violence enacted on the human body. Echoing Robin Kelly's figurations of *freedom dreams*—where the success of the project of resistance is not the final goal—Weheliye states "improvements are not the aim or product of the imaginaries born of racializing assemblages and political violence instead they summon forms of human emancipation that can be imagined but not described" (Weheliye, 2014,127). This is precisely where Weheliye's explication of the *Muselmann* departs from Agamben's. Querying Agamben's absolutisms—the *Muselmann*'s loss of humanity, consciousness, and personhood—Weheliye finds value in the *Muselmann*'s "idiolect…the kinds of dialects available to the subjected and how these are seen and heard by those who bear witness to their plight" (Weheliye, 2014, 126). The *Muselmann's* appeal to language—though incoherent and "confused"—displays, according to this reading, "instantiations of radically different political imaginary that's steers clear of reducing the subjectivity of the oppressed to bear life "(Weheliye, 2014, 127). Here, Weheliye frames the *Muselmann's* actions by two figurations of counter epistemology. First, the desire to communicate with others by making an appeal to language and, second, how the *Muselmann's attempts to communicate "*are seen and heard by those who bear witness to their plight" (Weheliye, 2014, 126). Here, Weheliye, unlike Agamben who focuses on the *Muselmann's* loss of status, privileges the *Muselmann's* desire to connect with other humans in various ways that might not be completely understood. This figuration of change and transformation is essential to my explication of *Season* and *Point Zero*.

Both texts introduce significant changes to how desire, death and power work in the premodern text of *The Nights* that can be explained by reference the previous theories of

biopower. First, Foucault's account that the biopolitical investment in life meant the entry of the human body into politics through the development of some disciplines—"universities, secondary schools…"—and practices—"problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration"—are essential to my discussion of the texts of this chapter (Foucault, 1988, 140). This holds true because Foucault explains that the politicization of the human body is "for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the era of "biopower" (Foucault, 1988, 140). This, in turn, elucidates why in the texts of *Season* and *Point Zero*, Hosna and Firdaus cannot escape death.

In this regard, *Point Zero* (1975) seems to articulate some of the implicit assumptions in *Season* (1966). In fact, one can argue that Firdaus gives a language to Hosna's cries before her death. In other words, Firdaus is successfully interpellated in the educational system. She makes constant claims that her secondary school certificate should contribute to her independence. Unlike, the uneducated Hosna, Firdaus's sense of disillusionment takes place in reference to state institutions, such as education. Firdaus' social literacy takes place in relation to formal institutions, such as the lawyers who defend her, the police agents who facilitate her social network and the doctors who perform her abortions. This form of literacy is absent in the representation of Hosna. In fact, formal institutions, such as schools and universities, produce characters in *Season,* such as Mustafa Said, who is formally education in the Sudan, Egypt and England, and the narrator, who bring a great deal of suffering to Hosna's life. The narrator, for example, connects with Hosna on regular basis to satisfy his obsession with Mustafa Said's story after his death. However, when she asks him to marry her to stop Wad Rayyes' unwanted marriage proposal, he abandons her and leaves to Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. His egotistical

search for fulfillment frames his much of his actions in the novel. This representation of knowledge in the novel cannot be separated from formal education of the narrator.

Here, it is safe to argue that Hosna is marginalized in the text of the novel. Firdaus, in *Point Zero,* is more confrontational. The hesitant reporting of Hosna's violent insurgency against Wad Rayyes by Bint Mazjoub is contrasted by the prideful Firdaus's assertion that she does not regret killing Marzouk and if she where to depart her imprisonment, she would do it again. Despite their differences, both characters reach the same insurgent conclusion. While Hosna's violence responds to Wad Rayyes' rape attempt after marrying her according to the local norms of her community of villagers, Firdaus calls into question the legal structures that rationalize her punishment. Foucault states, in his discussion of norms and juridical structures, "a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life" (Foucault, 1988, 144). Scholars have pointed out the relationship between rational thought systems and woman insurgency. Alys Weinbaum points out that the alternative rationality of woman insurgency "is grounded in a sensibility that is uncomfortable, almost intolerable to contemplate but nonetheless reasonable when contextualized within the irrational circumstances to which it opposes itself" (Weinbaum, 2019, 95). This explains Firdaus's statement "I am a killer, but not a murderer" (El Saadawi, 2017, 67). Here, again, Firdaus contextualizes her actions, and by extension, Hosna's insurgency by simultaneously offering her reasoning for killing Marzouk and bringing into question the irrationality of the conditions that lead her to the insurgent act.

In addition, it is important to note that the texts of *Point* Zero and *Season,* suggest that change and transformation cannot only be found in these isolated insurgent actions, but the *stories* that report Firdaus and Hosna's actions. What constitutes a dream for change and transformation, in line with Weheliye's argument, is the relationship that the two texts feature in

relation to storytellers who report the instances of violence to *witnesses* who later put in *writing* the stories. In *Point Zero*, it is Firdaus who tells the story of the violence she commits, then the female psychiatrist produces a document of Firdaus's story. In *Season*, it is the oral storyteller Bint Mazjoub who tells the narrator of Hosna's insurgency. The narrator then reports it in in the narrative, having existed a space of secrecy to a space of history. *Season* elaborates this layer of narrative even further. The narrator's choice to burn Mustafa Said's library and his decision not to tell his story represents Said's failure to enter the history. This is sharply contrasted by Bint Mazjoub's transgression when she tells the story of Hosna despite the village elders' interdict. Hosna's story is even more contrasted to Musafa Said's story where the narrator selects to report it in his narrative. This allows Hosna to enter the history of the village. In both novels, storytelling happens under conditions that question the rational world. In *Seaso*n, Bint Mazjoub tells the story after drinking third a bottle of whiskey. In *Point Zero,* Firdaus voice is described as one of the voices that come from a dream. Both of these literary representations delineate the painful entry of the story into history and the fissure that takes place in the rational world—through dreaming or intoxication—when the stories are told.

This precisely what Hannah Arendt recognizes when she gives primacy for the artist over the scientist. She states, "[T]he action of the scientist since it acts into nature from the standpoint of the universe and not into the web of human relationships, lacks the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence" (Arendt, 2013, 125). In many respects, this summarizes the importance of the figure of Shahrazad to the chapter, Shahrazad stories make history. Arendt asserts here that the artist allows stories to circulate and to become a part of a meaningful web of human experience. It is through producing

stories that we become historical and it is through maintaining these stories that we preserve our humanity and meaningfulness. The entry into the social world and human interaction are the assumption that underlies Arendt's assertion. This chapter is a cogitation on how the enfleshed bodies can feature a utopian entry into history. The utopian here appears as an attempt to leave behind traces of the existence of the flesh as a claim to humanity that cannot be concealed by discourse. The utopian then is that desire to become historical, to allow others to witness the hieroglyphics of the flesh, to recall Hortense Spillers, and to transmit enfleshment into the production of stories—even if those stories are seemingly irrational or discordant. These in the end are attempts to claim a connection with the social world and these stories form what remains after a crisis as they create their narrative of history and dreams of freedom.

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that modern intellectual clusters have complicated the study of Islam and Arabic literature. In so doing, it locates the literary imagination as a site of struggle over conflicting meanings of artistic production. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, has successfully dismantled the Orientalist project, figured as a system of knowledge-production that works in tandem with imperialism. Yet, an existing layer of secularism in Edward Said's work actively conflates successful literary productions with acts of resistance or bringing about fundamental changes to the world. In other words, while his model can be useful, the problem of the imagination is more complicated since Orientalism racializes the quality of literary productions.

As chapter 1 has shown, Orientalists were involved in a project that translates *The Nights* into a Western literary tradition: the epic. Translators introduced narrative closure to the text. Many, such as Earnest Renan, have voiced their overt racism—arguing that Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew, cannot produce epic poetry. Orientalists identified the literary imagination as a physical capacity in the people who spoke those languages. As a result, they started to classify *The Nights* into works of Arab, Persian or Indian origins based on how they judged the imagination of each civilization.

The concern is, as chapter 2 elaborates, the changes that Orientalists introduce become influential on how questions of change and transformation, especially in relation to women, are thought. In other words, many Arab women scholars interpret the narrative closure that Galland incorporates as representative of *The Nights'* Islamic context. At this level, my dissertation suggests that each translation of *The Nights* can possibly lead to a different interpretation. In other words, the process of historizing the text must be included in any interpretative model.

In addition, my dissertation proposes that we need to develop a reading practice that operates from within Islamic traditions. The invitation of this argument is to rethink the radical as the only way for change and transformation. In fact, some of the seemingly transgressive stories in *The Nights* unfold through extensive religious framework. Chapter 2 also highlights Shahrazad's engagement in storytelling not only because she experiences vulnerability and threat, but also because Shahrazad, through storytelling, identifies a weakness in the rational world.

This point is elaborated in Chapter 3 where we encounter characters in *Women at Point Zero* and *Season of Migration to The North* who reach the same realization. In chapter 3, Firdaus and Hosna commit acts of violence that reveal to them the precariousness of totalities of power. However, both novels present very similar narrative strategies of how the events unfold. Both stories of female insurgency are told by first-person characters. In other words, we never encounter the voice of Hosna or Firdaus, except through loquacious characters who tell the stories of their insurgency. This particular framing of both events reveals a significant departure from the earlier model of Shahrazad, where she enters the frame story to takes control of storytelling, thus escaping death. Now, neither of these characters follows in Shahrazad's footsteps in terms of the success of her stories to keep violence at bay. Chapter 3 suggests that this is one of the examples of how modern power works in relation to pre-modern power. In other words, the totalizing aspect of modern biopower, that politicizes the human body, prevents these characters from significantly reshaping the world. They both lose their lives, however, their stories, like Shahrazad's, live on.

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