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**“Indeed, the King has a Cunt! What a Wonder!”:
Sex, Eroticism and Language in One Thousand and
One Nights**

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“Indeed, the King has a Cunt! What a Wonder!”: Sex, Eroticism and Language in One Thousand and One Nights

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Abstract

One Thousand and One Nights, which can be traced back to as early as the 9th century, is probably the greatest introduction to Arabic culture through literature. This colossal and diverse book has drawn the attention of scholars, researchers and students to classic Arabic literature as well as influenced many prominent authors and filmmakers. It is not just a book of careless and unconnected stories but rather a piece of esteemed literature which has been read and analysed in many countries all over the world. However, it is also true that this book has been criticised for its sexual promiscuity and degraded portrayal of women.

The aim of the presentation is to prove that underneath the clumsy and seemingly funny structures of One Thousand and One Nights, there is a description of overflowing sexuality. Through the sexualised or erotic description of female bodies, the book gives agency to women but at the same time depicts them derogatively, and thus fulfils the naked desire of the then patriarchal society. The presentation will highlight how sexual promiscuity or fathomless female sexual craving is portrayed through figurative and grammatical language, which objectifies the female characters but at the same time enables them to be playful with the male characters, and thus motivates them to become more powerful than the males. Finally, the presentation will focus on language or narrative as an act of survival from the perspectives of the female characters, which is most evident in the case of Scheherazade who saved not only her life but also lives of countless maidens by her mesmerizing storytelling talent.

Keywords: overflowing sexuality, promiscuity, language game, story-telling

Introduction

One Thousand and One Nights, also known as Arabian Nights, which can be traced back to as early as the 9th century, and which contains traces of Arabic, Persian and Indian cultures, is probably the greatest introduction to Arabic culture through literature. This colossal and diverse book has drawn the attention of scholars, researchers, and students, to classic Arabic literature, and has influenced many prominent authors and filmmakers. This is not just a book of careless and unconnected stories, but rather, a piece of esteemed literature which is read and analysed in many countries all over the world. However, it is also true that this book has often been criticised for its overflowing sexuality or sexual promiscuity. The use of indirect language provides sexually explicit scenes with a mysterious flavour. In one way, the book provides the female characters with agency, yet also depicts women in an obscene and degraded manner. While the book provides women with sexual freedom and agency, it simultaneously portrays them as obscene and sex-hungry.

The aim of this research is to evidence that underneath the clumsy and seemingly funny structure of *Arabian Nights*, there is a description of overflowing sexuality. Through the sexualised or erotic description of female bodies, the book assigns agency to women, but at the same time, depicts them derogatively, and thus fulfils the naked desire of the then patriarchal society. The work also highlights the employment of indirect language or the language game to denote the sexual promiscuity and aberration practiced between men and women, while positioning storytelling as an act of survival.

Obscene and Degraded Portrayal of Women

One Thousand and One Nights presents a distinctive viewpoint on the role(s) of women in patriarchal Muslim society. The book provides a dualistic or contrasting portrayal of women as active and passive, disobedient and subservient, assertive and meek, beautiful and ugly, pious and lustful, and so forth. One should not ignore the fact that the frame story is narrated by a woman Scheherazade, who considers it her responsibility to save other young women from death at the hands of the King Shahryar. From this perspective, she can be considered a voice for oppressed women. However, although Scheherazade provides the king with the narrative pleasure of her stories, she also places her body at his service, which results in her giving birth to three sons. Her desire to save the lives of many other young innocent women through the narrative positions her as agent; however, in order to attain this agency, she must sacrifice her body. It is important to note that she uses her storytelling to counter male pretensions to define all women as the same. As both a sexual object and an intelligent narrator, Scheherazade uses her feminine gift in a way that challenges misogynous discourse on women.

The story of *Wardan the Butcher, the Woman, and the Bear* is significant for many reasons. The most provocative or controversial aspect of the story in terms of content is perhaps the graphic description of the sexual encounter between the woman and the bear, as well as the prefatory meal and intoxication. Although sex between beast and human is not completely exotic in pre-modern Arabic literature, it is as shocking for the pre-modern audience or reader as it is for the modern one.

The bear mounted her and copulated with her. After the first time he ravished her a second time, and yet another time until he had done a full ten times in one go. All the while both of them had been moaning and groaning until they finally reached fulfillment. The bear fell to her side as if dead, and so did she.

(Marzolph 2015, 190)

The bear's sexual appetite might have attracted an audience that most probably was exclusively male. According to Ulrich Marzolph, "sex usually makes a good story. The effect of this ambiguous attraction is even more striking when the sexual encounter is illicit, in other words when sex is considered a crime" (190).

Again, in another story, a king's daughter becomes a nymphomaniac after being deflowered by a black man. To satisfy her fathomless sexual desire, she obtains a monkey and hides it in her room where it copulates with her day and night. After being threatened by her father, she leaves the kingdom. At one point, she is followed by a butcher who is astonished to see her female beauty: "At that point, she bought some wine, drank from it, and served it to the monkey. It, then, had sexual intercourse with her about ten times until she fainted" (Burton IV 2008, 297-298).

In both stories, the narrator employs simple language to describe the intensive sex between women and their pet animals. The female sexual intercourse with animals also brings them to the level of perverts and again shows the desire of patriarchal society to humiliate women. Apart from positioning women as possessing high sexual drive (libido), there are numerous examples where they are portrayed as evil and infidel. This portrayal of women as infidel again fulfils the desire of a society which is very much patriarchal and conservative in relation to women and their activities.

Scheherazade's stories do not merely give her an opportunity to pass the night and live for another day, but function rather therapeutically to heal the king and to move him out of a patriarchal society where women are marginalised or executed. However, her way of narrating stories is also significant. Stories about adultery force the king to confront his own psychological trauma, and serve as a process of healing. Since Scheherazade tells her stories to a person for whom sexuality is a big part of life, her stories are also characterised by sensuality and sexuality. She endeavours to teach the blood-thirsty king that although fate has given him three adulterous women in various stages of his life, there are still more virtuous wives to counteract the existence of the infidel. She herself sets an example of a virtuous woman one thousand and one nights after their marriage. According to Naithani, by showing that both adultery and fidelity coexist in a community, her stories create "a counter hypnosis to the one afflicting Shahrivar and his state of mind" (279-280).

In *The Porter and the Three Ladies*, three sisters invite a porter, whom they have hired for the day, to their home. After having finished with their food and drink, they undress themselves one by one, plunge into the swimming pool and then sit on the porter's lap. Pointing at her sexual organ, each sister asks the porter what this is: "Then she washed herself under the belly, around the breasts, and between the thighs. Then she rushed out, threw herself in the porter's lap, and asked, 'My little lord, what is this'" (Burton I 2008, 92)? They chide, slap, hit and play with him, since each of his answers is considered incorrect. The removing of their clothes, their sexual attractions, and their playing games with the porter, empowers and provides them with agency over males. However, it also objectifies them. Addressing the porter as "Lord" is humiliating for them. By showing their beautiful bodies and behaving playfully with the porter, they assert their power over males, which concurrently fulfils the evil desires of a patriarchal society.

Oblique Language (Language Game) in Depicting Sex

Oblique language or, more specifically, language game, is employed in *One Thousand and One Nights* to depict sexuality and sexual intercourse. In some cases, we are presented with the graphic description of sex, while in some other cases indirect or metaphorical language is used to depict sex. Even so, there are cases where sexual intercourse is depicted in grammatical terms. The narrator describes the sexual intercourse between Qamar al-Zaman and the jeweler's wife through the following grammatical rules:

Then, he passed the rest of the night with her, hugging, embracing, engaging in the acts of the preposition in harmony, and being united like the relative clause and the relative pronoun. All that time, her husband was as the removed nunation of the construct state. Qamar al-Zamān and the jeweler's wife remained in this situation until the morning.

(Burton IX 2008, 272)

As Naaman states, “According to the medieval Arabic grammarians, (preposition) are connective particles whose task in the sentence is to connect a given noun with another noun, or a given verb with a given noun” (2013, 345). “Engaging in the acts of the preposition in harmony” stands for couple engaged in sexual activities, and the cheated husband’s situation is compared to “the removed nunation of the construct state”. Thus, this type of metaphorical language is evidently associated with grammatical theory and terminology, which might have been difficult to understand by uneducated people.

There are other examples of the use of figurative language in portraying sexual performance. In the story of *Nur al-Din Ali and His Son Badr al-Din Hasan*, sexual intercourse between Badr al-Din and Sitt al-Husn provides such an example. When the intercourse between them actually starts, the narrative shifts to figurative language:

He then set up the cannon, aimed it at the fortress, fired, and blasted it, finding her a pearl not pierced and a mount not ridden by another. He took her virginity, enjoyed her youth, and kept setting up the cannon and returning [to attack] until reaching the limit of fifteen times. She, then, became pregnant by him.

(Burton I 2008, 223)

Here, the instance of the sexual intercourse is metaphorically depicted as a siege in which a cannon, standing for the penis, attacks a fortress, standing for the vagina, and blasts it or deflowers Sitt al-Husn. The fact that she is compared with a pearl that is not pierced and a mountain that is not climbed by anybody symbolises the fact that she has not had sexual relations with anybody before.

There are also instances where sexuality and sexual intercourse are depicted in direct language. In a story, Abu Hasan, the Merchant of Oman, tells Caliph Harun al-Rashid how he was fascinated by the beauty of the daughter of a brothel-owner, and describes their feelings in a series of poems. The merchant expresses a flirting expression towards her through a strange combination of erotic and poetic verse:

O Night! Is there in your gloom a companion for me, Or, is there a master lfucker for this cunt?” She beat it with her palm and sighed Like one who grieves, sad and weeping “The beauty of the teeth appears through the use of a tooth-pick And the cock is like a tooth-pick for cunts O Muslims, don’t your cocks stand erect, Is there no one among you to help the moaner?

(Burton IX 2008, 197)

The author of this story did not express hindrance in using erotic words to depict the sex-scene in the most graphic manner. The first part of the poem, which shows the female character craving for sex, again fulfils the desire of the patriarchal society to abuse women by depicting them as sex-thirsty.

While using metaphorical and figurative language, we can imagine a triangle so as to talk about the function of three idiomatic expressions — euphemism (sweet talking), dysphemism (offensive talking) and orthophemism (direct talking). As we have seen prior, ‘cannon’ and ‘fortress’ are euphemistic expression for penis and vulva respectively. In the poem by the Merchant of Oman, words like ‘cunt’, ‘fucker’ and ‘cock’ are dysphemisms, while ‘taking virginity’, ‘penis’

and ‘pregnant’ are orthophemisms. Naaman, however, talks about a union set of euphemisms, dysphemisms and orthophemisms — “cross-varietal synonyms denoting the same thing but having different connotations”(351).

The story of *The Porter and the Three Ladies* also employs metaphorical language. When the first sister exits from water after bathing, she sits naked on the porter’s lap and, pointing at her genital, asks him to name it. By using euphemistic expressions, he replies “womb,” and is then struck by the woman. He then uses dysphemisms like ‘cunt’ and orthophemisms like ‘vulva,’ but is repeatedly slapped and hit by all the sisters. After many attempts, he finally cries, “its name is the bridges’ basil” (Burton I, 93). All three burst into laughter and fall on their backs. In answering the second sister’s question, he tries differently and is punished. Finally, he tries “the bridges’ basil” — the term he heard from the first sister — but is told that it is the “husked sesame” (93). When the third sister points to her sex organ and asks what it is, he tries both “the bridges’ basil” and “husked sesame”. The third sister, who is the most beautiful of the three, names her genitals “the hostel of Abū Masrūr” (93). The porter decides to play his part in the game. When he asks the same question to the three ladies, they try various euphemisms, dysphemisms, and orthophemisms, while he rejects them all. He continues to caress and kiss the women until he says, “This is the shattering mule” (Burton I 2008, 94).

Seeing the confused faces of the ladies, the porter explains, “It is the one grazing in the bridges’ basil, munching husked sesame, and galloping freely in the hostel of Abū Masrūr” (I, 94). The three sisters are extremely amused by his reply and continue to play and drink.

The smashing quality of the mule suggests sheer force. *Erotic Manuals of a Middle Age Arab World* narrate episodes of women having sexual intercourse with animals, such as donkies or mules, since this is the only way they could satisfy their insatiable sexual appetites. The porter’s comment can be considered a joke, which indicates the reassertion of masculine dominance over a female community that is considered abnormal in its lack of men. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, there are instances where a single euphemistic motif is used for more than one expression (oppositions). In the story of *Dalia the Crafty*, the narrator describes al-Hajj Muhammad as being “like the knife of the colocasia seller cutting male and female, and loving to eat figs and pomegranates” (Burton VII 2008, 151).

These two euphemistic expressions depict Muhammad as bisexual, as figs stand for anus and thus men, and as pomegranates symbolise the vagina and thus women.

Storytelling as a Survival Tactic

It is a quite common perception of the reader of the *One Thousand and One Nights* that Scheherazade’s labyrinthine tales and fascinating storytelling ability is a survival tactic through which she manages to save not only her life but also the lives of countless unmarried girls. The collective nature of her project is made clear in her statement to her father, the king’s vizier: “I would like you to marry me to king Shahryar, so that I may either succeed in saving the people or perish and die like the rest”

(Burton I 2008, 11)

In attempting to do so, she serves as the connection of three interweaving threads regarding the representation of women in the medieval Arab world:

rhetoric, sexuality and sharpness. According to Marzolph, the cycles of stories, “links them to the frame tale, since the characters in the tales have to tell stories in order to save their own lives or rescue another character, just as [Scheherazade] does in the frame tale. The ability to tell a story thus becomes tantamount to survival or life”

(Marzolph 2015, 194-195)

In the very first story of the manuscript *The Merchant and the Jinni*, the jinni threatens to kill the merchant as he accidentally kills the jinni’s son by discarding a date stone. However, his life is spared in exchange for the wondrous tales told by three old men.

In *Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies*, the three sisters threaten to cut off the head of one of the visitors as punishment for the violation of his oath of not asking any question irrespective of what he witnesses. However, the sisters agree to spare his life, provided that each man tells a story: A strategy that echoes Scheherazade’s own life-saving narrative. At first, the sisters tell their stories describing their victimisation at the hands of greedy men. The half-sister and the two full sisters of the mistress of the house have all been ill-treated by men, and for this reason they all are living together without men. Their world which is devoid of men is clearly a slap to the porter’s claim that it is not possible for women to stay without men. All the men save their lives by telling stories: Each dervish explains their motives for having one eye only; Jafar, the vizier, explains the story of how he, Masrur (the eunuch), and the caliph, have spent a night at the house of a local merchant where they enjoyed wine and the company of singing girls. The porter’s tale is not a tale, but rather, a repetition of all the tasks he completed in the morning to help the shopper. He, however, distinguishes himself from other male guests by learning to joke according to the rules set by the female of the household, and thus becomes one of the members of the family.

Conclusion

One Thousand and One Nights is replete with sexuality, where the sexualised depiction of women is provocative and derogatory, thus fulfilling the desire of a patriarchal society — a society which likes to see women as infidels, lecherous, and subservient. However, the society fails to realise that the sexualised portrayal of women is also empowering, assigning women motivation and agency, and thus equipping women with all the opportunities with which to defy social norms and order. Scheherazade’s storytelling ability, through which she enchants the king and saves the lives of many virgins, places her in the position of an agent and saviour. However, in order to achieve this agency, she must sacrifice her freedom and virginity. The sexual promiscuity or the fathomless female sexual craving is portrayed through diverse figurative and grammatical language, which enables the female characters to be playful with the male characters, and thus renders them more powerful than the male. The teasing attitudes of the three sisters towards a porter, where the sisters are depicted in a sexually explicit manner, and later their attempt to kill one of the visitors, invert traditional gender hierarchy. I have also shown how telling stories serves as a survival tactic from the perspectives of the characters, which is most evident in the case of Scheherazade, who saves not only her life but also the lives of countless maidens.

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