

The Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction: Intertextual Readings. Richard Van Leeuwen. Leiden: Brill, 2018. 842 pp. (ISBN-13: 9789004362697 [E-book] and 9789004362536 [Hardcover])

“People need stories more than bread itself. Stories tell us how to live and why.”
(*Thousand and One Nights*)

Molded after Persian and Indian examples and transferred through a Persian collection called *Haẓār Afsāneh* or *Thousand Tales*, *Thousand and One Nights* traveled along the Silk Road to reach the West through the French translator and orientalist Antoine Galland in the 18th century (1704-1717). Its circulation in the Ottoman Empire in the early 17th century and its reproduction in Egypt had finalized the number of the nights to one thousand and one by the end of the 18th century. The fame of the narrative in the Arab-Ottoman world and its increasingly exotic allure made *Arabian Nights* a more popular alternative title instead of *Thousand and One Nights*. The Ottoman imperial court provided a bridge between the eastern Islamic world (India, Central Asia and the Middle East,) and western ones (Africa). Mostly known as “orphan stories” and collected from unauthorized origins, Galland’s version of *Nights* was translated into different European languages to build “a rather shaky foundation” of the *Nights* together with the “eroticized and exoticized” French version of J. C. Mardrus (1899–1904), Edward Lane’s “biblical” and censored British version (1838–40), the pompous and animated version of Richard Burton (1885–88) and the first “modern translation” by Enno Littmann (1921–28) in Germany (Van Leeuwen 3-8).

Standing at the pinnacle of popular literature, *Nights* never adapted the austerity of highbrow literature until the 20th century when modern Arabic culture tried to discover the relationship between its magnificent past and the gloomy present. *Thousand and One Nights* as a literary and cultural phenomenon had cemented its role in Western literature by the end of the 19th century. Van Leeuwen delineates that its widespread effect in non-Western literary culture is often conveyed through European literary influence. Gaining momentum in the Western Enlightenment, *Nights* is interpreted as a critical look at European society and culture from the outside world. In *Nights*, storytelling is a matter of life and death as well as an act of fabulation and that is how existing literary categories are challenged and negotiated.

In the tradition of world literature, *Thousand and One Nights* means hybridity and adaptation rather than referring to an original work whose language, be it Arabic or Persian, could not be perceived by its readers. Van Leeuwen’s *Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction* is a smart collection of forty-six different authors of different nationalities from the 19th to the 21st century whose works have one intertextual aspect in common with the *Nights*. They are major contributors who have shaped the literary backdrop of the twentieth century. Van Leeuwen has provided many direct quotations for the sake of clarity.

The laws that governed European literature from the Enlightenment era were challenged by the first translation of *Thousand and One Nights* – a novel definition of narrative that revealed how new experiments and exploration could bend literary boundaries and gave birth to modernism. For many literary figures, Shahrazad is the source of inspiration and *Nights* is an intertextual cradle for newly born narrative genres, literary techniques, and many segments of world culture. *The Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction* is a systematic scrutiny of the influence and incorporation of *Nights* into textual and visual aesthetics; it focuses on the procedures of transmission and adaptation of narrative material and narrative techniques rather than highlighting the postcolonial forms of “Othering.” The translation of *Nights* is not simply an exotic replication. Thus, its effects on modern culture are prevalent. Van Leeuwen traces the gradual assimilation of *Nights* into world literature from the beginning of the 18th century onwards. After a brief historical account in the introduction, the book is divided into six parts: 1) “Enclosures, Journeys, and Texts,” 2) “Capturing the Volatility of Time,” 3) “The Textual Universe,” 4) “Narrating History,” 5) “Identifications, Impersonations, Doubles: The Discontents of (Post)Modernity,” and 6) “Aftermaths: The Delusions of Politics.” Each section is meticulously organized with examples of different intertextual works, a separate introduction and conclusion.

“Enclosures, Journeys, and Texts” revolves around the dynamics in *Nights* and its successors regarding the way they defy narrative structure. This transformation in narrative is akin to the fluid, fragmented and multilayered definition of reality in modernism traced in the works of six authors. Van Leeuwen categorizes Hugo von Hofmannsthal (19th-20th c.), an Austrian novelist, and André Gide (19th-20th c.), a French author, in terms of their similar treatment of destiny in autobiography. For them, letters serve as the medium of life’s alteration. Autobiography is a vehicle that crosses the boundaries and tensions between vehemence and lethargy in life. As for Al-Tayyib Salih (20th-21st c.), a Sudanese author, and Ibrahim al-Faqih (20th-21st c.), a Libyan novelist, the desire for homecoming and creating a sense of identity is evoked in different forms of narration. The force of time and the author’s journey in shaping his portrait are analyzed in the works of Michel Butor, a French writer (20th-21st c.), and Abilio Estévez, a Cuban novelist (20th-21st c.). Their new definition of subjectivity and intertextuality is portrayed in their narrative universe.

“Capturing the Volatility of Time” focuses on the instability of the experience of time in *Nights* and its modern literary followers in the works of eight different authors. Rooted in the scientific advancements of the 20th century (i.e. relativity theory and quantum theory), time is too fluid to be defined. Time cannot provide a coherent framework for traumatic experience. Writers like Marcel Proust (19th-20th c.), a French novelist, and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (20th c.), a Turkish poet, tried to capture the transitory quality of time and its painful effects. For Vladimir Nabokov (20th c.), a Russian author, and Margaret Atwood (20th-21st c.), a Canadian writer, narration is a means of survival. They try to restructure their past by recreating their memories. Shahrazad’s literary inheritance—unbound desire and

sexual freedom—is echoed in the works of the Marquis de Sade (18th-19th c.), a French revolutionary philosopher and writer, and Angela Carter, a British novelist (20th c.). Thus, contrary to stereotypes, many women modeled after Shahrazad’s narratives are strong and witty while the passive and anti-heroic deeds of men throw obstacles in the way of love. That is how the process of reaching love is privileged over the final unification of lovers. The themes of temporal dystopia, reverberation of memories, war and the reinvention of time are portrayed by Botho Ostrich (20th-21st c.), a German playwright, and Haruki Murakami (20th-21st c.), a Japanese writer.

“The Textual Universe” emphasizes the dialogic and self-reflexive quality of *Nights*’ narrative echoed in the works of nine modernist authors. For modernists, texts are a reality where fiction is reshaped as fact. The textual autonomy of a literary work and its interlinkage with the human experience is analyzed in the radical textuality of James Joyce (19th-21st c.), an Irish novelist. His celebration of textuality and self-reflexivity in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* paved the way for the textual worlds of Argentine (post-)modernists, namely Fernández, Arlt, Borges, and Piglia. Like Shahrazad, Italo Calvino (20th c.) believed that stories never ended. This Italian journalist defined his own version of narration in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*

. For Georges Perec (20th c.), a French novelist and filmmaker, narration is an integral part of life to the extent that humans are addicted to stories and storytelling. For Abdelkébir Khatibi (20th-21st c.), a Moroccan literary critic and writer, and Juan Goytisolo (20th-21st c.), a Spanish author, hybridity is a form of celebration, a refuge and the new way of narrating the physical body. Thus, the physical and metaphorical bodies are intertwined and inseparable. Like Shahrazad, they jeopardize their own body and place it in a textual universe.

“Narrating History” demonstrates how the traumas of history connect reality to the fictional text. History is (re)presented and reassembled in novels whose experimental nature is inspired by the *Nights*. Shahrazad’s juxtaposition between narration and suffering is reflected in historical fiction. William Faulkner (19th-20th c.), an American writer, Toni Morrison (20th-21st c.), a black American author, and André Brink (20th-21st c.), a South African novelist, are discussed as modernist examples. While these writers are haunted by the historical events ...

of the past, Gabriel García Márquez (20th-21st), a Colombian novelist, and Salman Rushdie (20th-21st c.), a British-Indian writer, celebrate the potentials of history since when history goes awry, narration is the only remedy. Though we cannot alter the past, we can change its significance and interpretation in the present by altering objective suffering to subjective imagination. For Roberto Calasso (20th-21st c.), an Italian writer, words are written as a trauma-defying act against death. David Grossman (20th-21st c.), an Israeli author, fights the Nazi hegemony, and Elias Khoury, (20th-21st c.), a Lebanese writer and intellectual, breaks the boundaries of narrativity. Benefitting from Shahrazad’s technique, these writers deconstruct the rigidity of historical narratives by colliding storytelling with violence and imagination with the rigid power of politics.

“Identifications, Impersonations, Doubles: The Discontents of (Post-)Modernity” reveals how the Orient has represented the Other within the Self; needless to say, the “Other” is defined as the contradictions, oddities and irrationalities within the Self that have been long repressed. This part focuses on eight authors who use iconic motifs, characters and places from the *Nights* as heart of their narrative. Henrik Pontoppidan (19th-20th c.), a Danish writer, and Ernst Jünger (19th-20th c.), a German soldier and author, recreate Aladdin’s nightmare, the City of Brass, and the curse of Aladdin as a metaphor for the complications of modernity. Their example of orientalism demonstrates how the meaning of the “modern” Self, in periods of great socio-economic turmoil, deals with the condition of modernity. Gyula Krúdy (19th-20th c.), a Hungarian author, and John Barth (20th-21st c.), an American metafiction writer, name this condition “the Sindbad Syndrome.” While Krúdy is the nostalgic nomad, Barth is mostly the intrepid traveler. H. G. Wells (19th-20th c.) a British writer, Arthur Schnitzler (19th-20th c.), an Austrian author and dramatist, and Orhan Pamuk (20th-21st c.), a Turkish novelist, represent different versions of the “Mock Caliph” tale. Well’s *The Research Magnificent* and Schnitzler’s *Der Traumnovelle* epitomize a modern Harun al-Rashid, and Pamuk’s *The Black Book* reworks sham caliph and Jafar’s fictional sister as a new story where the writer, his double and the missing wife are trapped in a postmodern setting. The multiple faces of Shahrazad are rewritten by Leïla Sebbar (20th-21st c.), an Algerian- French author, and Waçiny Laredj (20th-21st c.), an Algerian writer. Sebbar’s *Shérazade* trilogy and Laredj’s *Les Ailes de la Reine* narrate multiculturalism, French youth subculture and Shahrazad’s journey.

“Aftermaths: The Delusions of Politics” discusses the disillusionment with ancient heritage and the contradictory demands of modernity. Political and cultural critiques are prevalent throughout modern Arabic literature like the works of Tawfiq al-Hakim (19th-20th c.), an Egyptian writer, Taha Husayn (19th-20th c.), an Egyptian writer and intellectual, and Najib Mahfuz (20th-21st c.), an Egyptian writer. Modern inconstancies are revealed through the predicament Shahriyar faces. Both Hani al-Rahib (20th-21st c.), a Syrian novelist, and Rachid Boudjedra (20th-21st c.), an Algerian writer, focus on the fabrications of power and formation of a false utopia; for them, Shahrazad’s spell has haunted the modern Arabic world. Mostafa Nissaboury (20th-21st c.), a Moroccan poet, and Bahram Beyzaï (20th-21st c.), an Iranian filmmaker and playwright, utilize Shahrazad’s suffering to incorporate the themes of stagnation, decay, history, and the passage of time. Closely linked to the concept of the *Nights*, the figure of Sinbad is the conveyor of the writers’ pessimistic message. What is missing in this chapter is the Persian heritage of Beyzaï’s writing.

After discussing all the intertextual connections in six parts and twenty-one chapters, in his concluding section, Van Leeuwen reveals how the influence of *Nights* has been tightly woven into the structural, narrative and thematic fabric of novels. The works of Paul Auster (20th-21st c.), an American writer and director, serve as a good example. Like the *Nights*, his novels are a combination of spatiotemporal instability. For him, the condition of “solitude” is the essence of writing. Memory is a medium through which the author shapes a relationship with his present self and the social world; it is a means to shape identity and construct life.

In Auster's novels, narration connects the omnipresent motifs of locked room and double to each other and to intertextual references. In *Nights*, narration links the indistinguishable and mysterious system of meaning. Thus, storytelling is not a pack of dialogues; rather, it is a "ritualized form of communication" connecting experiences to metaphoric "representations, meanings and insights" (Van Leeuwen 706).

After the concluding section, the rich transnational "bibliography" of twenty-three pages is completed with an index of both historical and imaginary "people and places" in eleven pages, and a comprehensive index of "subjects" in eighty-two pages that works as a treasure map for researchers to find related topics. Van Leeuwen's academic rigor and his inclination toward proving the trans-cultural and intertextual quality of the narrative are seen in his dedication to the original title, *Thousand and One Nights*, over the popular title, *Arabian Nights*. "Arabian Nights" is referred to in the collection only in terms of direct quotations or titles of books and articles that contained it. Despite the transcultural quality and the handsome collection, Persian authors from Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan are missing from the list except for Bahram Beyzaï, who is of Iranian origin. One can mention Atiq Rahimi's *Patience Stone*, Abbas Ma'roofi's *Symphony of the Dead*, Sadegh Hedayat's *Blind Owl* and Simin Dāneshvar's *Savushun* as relevant intertextual sources and literary inheritors of *Nights*. Though the core of storytelling as a means to manipulate time and power and as a strategy for survival is presented by Shahrazad, out of forty-six authors, only four women, namely Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison and Leïla Sebbar, are analyzed despite the existence of canonical female writers in modern literature.

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