

Exploring the Frame Story in *The Arabian Nights* Gender and the Question of Authority

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Men have always been afraid that women could get along without them.

Margaret Mead

Abstract

*This paper examines how in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad defied the established understanding of gender and authority with all its paraphernalia thus, subverting the representation of women in dominant male discourse. The frame story is the backbone of the whole text, if omitted the tales will be incoherent. Gender and authority play a very important role in the development of the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* and in the development of the text itself. It is understood that authority has different manifestations, many of which, including coercive authority, are the scope of men only. However, this is contested in the frame story, where Shahrazad challenges this paradigm. Unquestionably, this long accepted conventional role is transformed by Shahrazad, who became in world literature, an iconic model for a different kind of authority that inspired the empowerment of women. She has an emancipatory project where she unconsciously gives voice, as a powerful narrator, to the unheard aspirations of women, inclusive of all women; across gender, class and ethnicity - along with controlling her male counterpart. Manifestly, she has optimized her life options through a seemingly passive yet potentially active resistance - the act of storytelling. This seems to be an overtly passive resistance in the face of a blindly oppressive king, yet proves to be effective. It is the different discourses and concepts within this frame story that give us a sense of the questions that must always be addressed. Problems such as authority, gender, social class, ethnicity, and tradition are seldom questioned; and advocates of an unchanging status quo refuse to permit its exploration, stifling the potential for questioning or intellectual discussion. These challenges and questions which are raised in the frame story and also in the text itself should be regarded as an affirmation of its revolutionary characteristic, and a testimony to its survival through different ages and across various cultures and languages.*

1. Introduction

This paper explores how in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad defied the established understanding of authority and gender. The frame story is the backbone of the whole text, if omitted the tales will be incoherent. *The Arabian Nights* has come to be part of the literary tradition of the entire world, the East as well as the West since "No other work of fiction of non-Western origin has had a greater impact on Western culture than the *Arabian Nights*. ... the work has been an inexhaustible mine of inspiration for all kinds of creative activities" (Marzolph & van Leeuwen vol. I xxiii). Its genesis and development remain indefinite. However, it is believed that it originated in the East & was given its finished and present form by the Arabs. *The Arabian Nights* is an oral, free text, which developed through ages and across cultures until it reached its final version over centuries of deposited layers of narratives. Moreover, it is plural and mercurial, different from an ordinary, established text written by a single author.

The importance of the frame story arises from the fact that it introduces the reader with what will follow in the text. It is an

indispensable part of the narrative; ... The stories related by Shahrazad (as well as one related to her by her father to dissuade her from marrying the king) can be omitted from the discourse without infringing on the narrative thread. On the other hand, if the frame story were omitted, the result would simply be unconnected stories. In the first case, we have a necklace without beads; in the latter, beads without a necklace. (Ghazoul 18)

It is in the frame story where the reader learns the story of a betrayed king who decides to marry a virgin every night and behead her in the morning as an act of vengeance against women kind; King Shahrayar's unfaithful wife had an illicit relationship with a black slave. Thus she has not only breached marital boundaries but ethnic and class as well. Her offense is a desecration of a taboo. When Shahrazad knew this, she decided to marry him and make him realize how cruel he has been aiming to make him restore his faith in women. The reader learns all of this from the frame story, when Shahrayar's brother, Shahzaman

entered the palace, he found his wife lying in the arms of one of the kitchen boys. When he saw them, the world turned dark before his eyes and, shaking his head, he said to himself, "I am still here, and this is what she has done when I was barely outside the city. How will it be and what will happen behind my back when I go to visit my brother in India? No. Women are not to be trusted". (Haddawy 6)

Unbelieving, he sees his brother's wife making love to "a black slave" (Haddawy 7).

There is also variety in the frame story since there are several different styles and genres including narration and storytelling by characters, as well as fables. The frame story can be divided into four narratives which could stand independently: the story of Shahrayar as a betrayed king; the story of Shahrayar as a traveler seeking knowledge through a voyage; the story of Shahrazad who is well read, hoping to deliver her fellow women; and the fables narrated by her father, the vizier.

Thus, the frame story holds the whole text of *The Arabian Nights* together and delivers it as one complete whole, since it introduces the reader to the same kind of narratives that he will encounter in the text itself. It is also within this framework that the reader is introduced to different issues including questions of gender and authority, the narrator as authority, ethnicity and social class, and the reversal in the roles of the male and the female characters. Manifestly, the issues we are presented with are against the recognized norms and traditions. Throughout the story, we are presented with abstractions, explorations, and subsequent uncertainties with regards to these topics.

2. Genesis

It has been acknowledged that the court of Harun al-Rashid serves as the inspiration for the setting of *The Arabian Nights*:

The fabulous descriptions of Harun and his court in *The Thousand and One Nights* are idealized and romanticized, yet they had a considerable basis in fact. ... Harun's palace was an enormous institution, with numerous eunuchs, concubines, singing girls, and male and female servants.

As caliph he had power of life and death and could order immediate execution. In the stories of his nocturnal wanderings through Baghdad in disguise, he is usually accompanied by Masrur the executioner as well as ... Abu Nawas, the brilliant poet. (Watt)

The content of *The Arabian Nights* is perhaps most intently defined through the diversity that makes up this collection of stories:

The work consists of four categories of folk tales-fables, fairy tales, romances, and comic as well historical anecdotes, the last two often merging into one category. They are divided into nights, in sections of various lengths, a division that, although it follows no particular plan, serves a dual purpose: it keeps Shahrayar and us in suspense and brings the action to a more familiar level of reality. (Haddawy xiii)

The Arabian Nights stands as a basis for the accumulation of history through the concepts readers are presented with. Yet, despite the fact that this collection of stories has traveled throughout different locations and times, the central theme is particularly contradictory to the perceived practices of the time.

The text is characterized by this trend of extremities, challenging the mainstream of the age and giving us the opportunity to think and question beyond what is typically perceived as the norm. The seemingly traditional setting causes readers to assume *The Arabian Nights* as merely a set of stories in a typical framework; however, we are soon presented with surprises and alternatives, which carry the reader in a different direction. This different course of action is delivered through the roles, actions, emotions and words of the characters that manage to display certain ideas in a different light.

First, a note must be made with regards to the history and general composition of the text. It is commonly recognized that the evolution of the text has been defined by the differences, which came about from the nature of its arrangement. According to Richard van Leeuwen, the text has been collected throughout three phases;

First a collection of stories was made in Baghdad in the 8th or 9th century, possibly based on a Persian example, ...; second, this core of tales was supplemented with Arabic material to form the first truly Arabic version of the collection (ninth to tenth centuries); finally, in the so-called ‘Egyptian period’, from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, stories were added to give the work the shape with which we are familiar now. (2)

What is fascinating about this process is the fact that the stories within *The Arabian Nights* do not resemble a piece of work lacking harmonization due to what the reader is introduced to in the frame story. Similar to the frame story, the text of *The Arabian Nights* come together to effectively portray overlapping themes and a variety of interpretations.

Questions concerning the origins of the text continue to emerge; however, it is evident that this work is a reflection of a series of historical, intellectual, and cultural influences, which blend providing an alternative to the commonly accepted social discourses of the times at which they were written. The ambiguity of the origins of this text has expanded the possibilities and the scope for elaboration, interpretations, and additions. It is within this context that we see the establishment of what is referred to as an open text, guaranteeing “flexibility...[with] a multiplicity of genres, conflicting styles, and divergent themes without destroying in the least the coherence of the text” (Ghazoul 4). Through this intense miscellany, the text, by way of the frame story, is able to establish a comprehensive structure that renders it so sophisticated and yet, so paradoxical.

After establishing this background, it is now necessary to consider the discourse on gender and authority amongst various others, which by consequence will be generated; all rendered in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*.

3. Gender and Authority

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. ... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ... which is described as feminine

Simone de Beauvoir

Gender and authority play a very important role in the development of the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* and in the development of the text itself. Gender roles in any society is a cultural construct that is generated through time and adopted as the basis of a definite presentation of what is known as feminine or masculine. Gender is always associated with having authority or lacking authority. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary authority means “Power, right, to enforce obedience”(78). This culturally constructed paradigm affects how we perceive and how we are perceived, how we evaluate and how we are evaluated. This results in expected behaviours, which vary across cultures and are carried from one generation to another. These projected behaviours are not innate but are culturally determined:

It is widely held that while one’s sex is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of **gender**-of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior-are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our [human] civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ... which is described as feminine.” By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional. (Abrams 89)

Gender is one of the universal dimensions on which status differences are based. Unlike sex, which is a biological concept, gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow. According to Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, gender is the “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance” (238). The issue of gender in society is based on a conviction of having status differences for each gender and hence establishing different social and cultural roles. As Alan Wolfe observed in “The Gender Question” in *The New Republic*, “Of all the ways that one group has systematically mistreated another, none is more deeply rooted than the way men have subordinated women. All other discriminations pale by contrast” (27). Women are usually seen as having less authority than men and are of no use because their “differences are rooted in anatomy or genetic factors” (Wolfe 28). Men believe that they are more dynamic and thus have an exaggerated sense of status. Hence, women are incapable of doing the same kind of work:

Traditionalists, whether working within a religious or a “scientific” framework, have regarded women’s subordination as universal, God-given, or natural, hence immutable. Thus, it need not be questioned. What has survived, survived because it was best; it follows that it should stay that way. (Lerner 16)

This is due to the fact that men fear women could be better than them, then might take over their status and their authority. Thenceforth, Shahrayar, being the male, is regarded as the epitome of supreme authority out of a long accepted conviction “that male ideals are universal to which women should conform” (Wolfe 28). The two kings Shahrayar and Shahzaman are both betrayed by their wives and this was a shock because they believed that women lack the authority to act out of their own free will and hence are powerless and innocent. Hence, they would not have the courage to be disloyal to them. Obviously, the wives of both kings defy this paradigm of absolute authority through their illicit interaction with men who are considered below their statuses. In this regard, they are seeking alternatives to what they are presented with, albeit in unlawful manners. This is not the only factor that should be addressed in this part of the story; the flagrancy of descriptions with regards to the illegitimate events that occur within *The Arabian Nights* is a further indication of the degree to which this story brings in another realm and once again, an alternative. It was and is not common for storytellers in the region this text originated from to write on and pursue such explicit expressions of sexuality, particularly with regards to women:

Then they sat down, took off their clothes, and suddenly there were ten slave-girls and ten black slaves dressed in the same clothes as the girls. Then the ten black slaves mounted the ten girls, while the lady called, “Mas’ud, Mas’ud!” and a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground, rushed to her, and, raising her legs, went between her thighs and made love to her. Mas’ud topped the lady, while ten slaves topped the ten girls, and they carried on till noon. (Haddawy 7)

Again, within most societies, the actions of these women are in contradiction to the prevailing paradigm of the dominance of patriarchy, since a patriarchal society is that which

is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. ... Women themselves are taught, ... to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. (Abrams 89)

Thus, after he finds out about his wife, he decides to go with his brother, Shahzaman, on a journey leaving behind their royal lives to “roam the world for the love of the Supreme Lord. If we should find one whose misfortune is greater than ours, we shall return. Otherwise, we shall continue to journey through the land, without need for the trappings of royalty” (Haddawy 11). This journey signifies the need for a change within their lives; it implies spiritual and mental development; buildingsroman: a forerunner for Proust’s *À la recherche du temp’s perdu*. After their encounter with the demon’s wife, the two brothers undergo experiences that make a change in their lives. As a consequence, they return to their kingdoms and Shahrayar_ eventually comes to terms with this perceived reality, and take on the course of killing a virgin every night after sleeping with her. He believes that this act of consuming a virgin every night is the essence of absolute male power and authority, and a protection from the betrayal of women. Meanwhile, Shahrazad decides and is determined to marry him and make him realize how cruel he has been, in an attempt to make him restore faith in women.

Hence, when she “makes on the first night...a modest request: to narrate stories” (Ghazoul 38), she is implicitly defying the paradigm of absolute male authority. At face value, Shahrayar is the archetype of power: an oriental tyrant who consumes a woman every night, while Shahrazad embodies the very principle of female weakness. She is at the mercy of Shahrayar’s vengeance plan.

As aforementioned, we are presented with different challenges to the paradigm of male authority through two different female personalities in *The Arabian Nights*. The first is rendered by the actions of the wives of Shahzaman, Shahrayar, and the demon; the second by Shahrazad. When Shahrayar and Shahzaman are betrayed by their wives, they try to claim their authority by killing their wives and their lovers concluding that “There is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the entire face of the earth” (Haddawy 14). Shahrayar further attempts to prove his masculinity through asserting his authority; his plan “is to take every night the daughter of a merchant or a commoner, spend the night with her, then have her put to death the next morning” (Haddawy 14).

But Shahrayar is merely proving his weakness through these actions since he is attempting to ensure his protection from the “wickedness and cunning of women” (Haddawy 14). His weakness is also displayed by the fact that he is obviously unwilling to accept any likely threats, in this case, to his emotions. Furthermore, the acts of adultery committed by both wives and the mistress of the demon are indicative of the degree to which the supposedly dominating male is no longer master of his domain. Rather, the discourse becomes the manipulation, power, and ability of the woman, who, when “desires something, no one can stop her.” (Haddawy13). But what also become quite obvious from these actions is the fact that the wives of Shahrayar and Shahzaman cheat on their husbands within their own palaces; displaying the degree to which their authority is undermined. Hence, the female domination of “a space of their own, spending their [lives] indulging in luxury and pleasures” (van Leeuwen 102) emerges. In effect, this contradicts the theoretically inferior implication, which accompanies the private sphere that females occupy. Also, since they are both kings they have a sense of status and authority and everyone respects them so no one could believe that their wives would betray them: “By God. I am king and sovereign in Samarkand, yet my wife has betrayed me and has inflicted this on me” (Haddawy 6). Moreover, “Even though my brother is king and master of the whole world, he cannot protect what is his, his wife and his concubines, and suffers misfortune in his very home” (Haddawy 8). They are full of themselves and of their extraordinarily grand positions in society. This kind of status that no one would ever think to hurt or humiliate. Due to this act, they believed that women are not to be trusted and that they are evil creatures which, for them it is unusual because women were typically seen as less than men in everything and that they are incapable of doing anything that is absurd or could upset men. This is so because Shahrayar and Shahzaman are both powerful kings and anyone would be afraid to harm them however, they have the right to act in any way they want especially to their wives who are meant to be under their control since they are less than them in status and have to fear them and respect them. Since men and women play different roles in society and it is believed that the role of men are more essential than that of women, hence they should be given more attention and respect than women due to the “monolithic conception of male dominance” (Kandiyoti 274-275). Then both kings come to the conclusion that “No one is safe in this world. Such doings are going in my kingdom, and in my very palace. Perish the world and perish life! This is a great calamity, indeed” (Haddawy11).

Another incident of challenging established authority is when Shahrazad challenges her father when he rejects her request to be given to the King: “I would like you to marry me to King Shahrayar, so that I may either succeed in saving the people or perish and die like the rest.” ... “Father, you must give me to him. This is absolute and final” (Haddawy 15). He tells her that she will suffer negative consequences, urging her to come back to her senses and abandon her request: “Foolish one, don’t you know that King Shahrayar has sworn to spend but one night with a girl and have her put to death the next morning?” (Haddawy 15) “YOU, MY DAUGHTER, will likewise perish because of your miscalculation. Desist, sit quietly, and don’t expose yourself to peril. I advise you out of compassion for you” (Haddawy 17).

However, in the end, Shahrazad achieves what she wants and “Tired and exhausted, the vizier went to King Shahrayar ... told him about his daughter, adding that he would give her to him that very night” (Haddawy 20). Here, we are presented with “paternal authority, [which] is invoked but ultimately rejected” (Sallis 93). In this regard, the commonly perceived acceptance of paternal authority is challenged and Shahrazad’s individualism is once again revealed. It should also be noted that Shahrazad achieves what she wants without rebelling against her father. In the end, he is the one who ends up giving her to the King despite his threats to do to her “what the merchant did to his wife” (Haddawy 18), in reference to beating her.

Certainly, some argue that the prevalence of patriarchy in all societies is defined by historical experience where one encounters “the privileging of one gender over the other, giving males control over female sexuality, fertility, and labor” (Ebert 19). Placing males over females has been commonly reflected through restricting females to the private realm while promoting the role of males in the public sphere. Actually, it is understood that authority has different manifestations, many of which, including coercive authority, are the scope of men only (Johnson, 1976). This is due to the fact that, “the *gender stereotype* hypothesis posits that different trait expectancies for men and women underlie negative attitudes toward female authority. Because powerful roles have traditionally been filled by men, authority itself may be more associated with male characteristics (e.g., agency) than female characteristics (e.g., communality)” (Rudman, Kilianski 1316). Unquestionably, gender roles are not biologically based; many, if not all, masculine and feminine traits are socially constructed. Ebert maintains “that the very ground of patriarchy—gender—is ... a cultural construct and *not* a biological or natural feature” (21).

However, this is contested in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, where Shahrazad challenges this paradigm. Unquestionably, this long accepted conventional role is transformed by Shahrazad, who became in world literature, an iconic model for a different kind of authority that inspired the empowerment of women. The words spoken by Shahrazad do not belong to the established authority of her male counterpart but to her. Thus the conventional whereabouts of authority is toppled leading to a change of roles. Shahrazad becomes in control of the mainstream representation of women. In this authoritarian, gendered and class tiered society, Shahrazad represents a different kind of authority. She has an emancipatory project where she unconsciously gives voice, as a powerful narrator, to the unheard aspirations of women, inclusive of all women; across gender, class and ethnicity; along with controlling her male counterpart. Eventually, she comes to assume the role of the narrator as authority.

4. The Narrator as Authority

‘Listen’

Shahrazad

Traditionally, accepted authority has to do with men who have the right to control women since the universal model of “classic patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 278) implies that females tend to be subordinated and controlled in their actions. Men are seen as the important figures that are in charge of everything, unlike women, who are taken for nothing. In the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* the notion of accepted authority changes and the roles are played differently. Shahrazad obtains the privilege of narrating, thus overturning her relationship with her master. Shahrazad’s stories are tales that mesmerize the king. As the narrator, she has the upper hand claiming the role of the dictator. She is the narrator “who refers to all characters in the story by name, or as “he,” “she,” “they”” (Abrams 231). Moreover, she acts as the omniscient narrator who “knows everything needs to be known about the agents, actions, and events, and has privileged access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and motives; also that the narrator is free to move at will in time and place, to shift from character to character, and to report (or conceal) their speech, doings and states of consciousness” (Abrams 232). The listener, by definition is one who receives information, that is, the passive party in the act of narration. Accordingly, Shahrazad’s position is the opposite of the conventional one, where speech is the right of the dominant; who should be King Shahrayar. After taking his permission to start her stories, she addresses him or rather orders him saying: “Listen” (Haddawy 21). Listen is to “hear person speaking with attention; ... yield to temptation or request” (Concise Oxford Dictionary 709). Shahrazad sounds commanding. Moreover, her narrative gift and copious knowledge are stressed. She is an exceptional person in her own right:

Shahrazad had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined. She had read and learned. (Haddawy 14-15)

She is potentially powerful by the power of her words, yet theoretically helpless. Her status is uncertain and so is her condition as she “may either succeed in saving the people or perish and die like the rest” (Haddawy 15). In anticipation, she is put to death but kept alive for an indeterminate period of time. Shahrayar by being completely entangled in her fictional web and captivated by her narration evokes the image of an enslaved superman. She is indomitable in her intention that her stories “will cause the king to stop his practice, save [her]self, and deliver the people” (Haddawy 21).

Evidently, Shahrazad is a woman defined with qualities that transcend the traditionally recognized qualities of women as physical objects: “Beauty is not mentioned because the female body and physical seduction plays no part in Sheherazade’s performance” (Sallis 102). This is against the other female characters that are defined in terms of their physical characteristics and sexuality. On the contrary, Shahrazad’s physical appearance is not addressed altogether. Furthermore, Shahrazad’s gift for story telling does more than amuse Shahrayar. Her ability to keep the Sultan from killing her through creating suspense in her stories is just a feature of what she is able to do. She shows to Shahrayar the existence of righteous women and the “injustice of irrational revenge” (van Leeuwen 46). Accordingly, the desire that Shahrazad “manipulates is not sexual, it is narrative, substituted for the sexual” (Sallis 102). This offers Shahrazad the power that her fellow girls had failed to induce as “she replaces the variety of wives with a variety of tales and she herself becomes the many-in-one” (Sallis102). It is argued by some that the rejection of the even subtle appearance of females as something other than objects had been entrenched in Shahrayar’s mind due to his upbringing in a society that “is blinded by the ideology of patriarchal society” (van Leeuwen 46) which promotes male domination.

In effect, by presenting him with a new direction, Shahrazad communicates to Shahrayar an alternative to what he has always been taught and exposed to growing “up in an environment that gave women no significance” (van Leeuwen 46). The paradigm that dominates Shahrayar’s world and notions is further defined by his perception of accepted authority. In this respect, Shahrayar’s self-perception is with regards to his being “represented as the quintessence of patriarchal authority, as the greatest king of his time” (van Leeuwen 47). To him, any challenge to his authority is unacceptable and hence, his subsequent reaction to his wife’s infidelity. The response is therefore intense and results in the culmination of the lives of all the girls of the kingdom.

Undoubtedly, the challenge to accepted authority develops from the relationship between Shahrazad, as a narrator, and Shahrayar. Shahrazad’s captivating stories create a reverse relationship of authority and control over the King. Shahrayar attempts to reassert his authority through marrying virgins and killing them, displaying his character as a seemingly “paradigm of power;” (Ghazoul, p. 23) while on the other hand, Shahrazad is merely “at the total mercy of Shahrayar’s monstrous appetite” (Ghazoul 23). Nonetheless, “By obtaining the privilege of narrating, Shahrazad has inverted her relationship with her master” (Ghazoul 24). Shahrazad was able to trick him and take over the authority because she became in charge and made him do what she wanted. Also, Shahrazad changed the aspect of accepted authority because in her own case she was taking over everything and was able to change Shahrayar's concept and make him stop killing the innocent girls he married. Since Shahrazad had read books of literature, philosophy, and medicine and knew poetry by heart and had historical reports, she was intelligent, knowledgeable, and wise and this is why she was able to trick Shahrayar into stopping him from marrying for one night and putting them to death the next morning.

Clearly, the words spoken by Shahrazad do not belong to the accepted authority of her male counterpart but to her. Thus authority roles change, as she becomes in control of the mainstream representation of women countering the male accepted authority. Therefore, the powerless becomes the powerful through words, and the powerful becomes captive and could not kill her because he wanted to hear her stories till the end: “*After the first night “The king thought to himself, “I will spare her until I hear the rest of the story; then I will have her put to death the next day”*” (Haddawy 23). Before narrating her story in the second night, Shahrayar tells her: “*Let it be the conclusion of the story of the demon and the merchant, for I would like to hear it*” (Haddawy 23). Then after the third night “*The king was all curiosity to hear the rest of the story and said to himself, “By God, I will not have her put to death until I hear the rest of the story and find out what happened to the merchant with the demon. Then I will have her put to death the next morning, as I did with the others”*” (Haddawy 26).

What she achieves is extraordinary because “Over time she replaces the variety of wives with a variety of tales and she herself becomes the many-in-one” (Sallis 102). Basically, Shahrayar becomes the passive voice while she is the active speaker. This was hard to believe because it is known that Shahrayar is more powerful than her and all the other girls. No one could influence him to change his vengeance plan, however Shahrazad was smart enough to do, proving that women can do the same thing as men and can even have authority over men and control them as well. Shahrazad's role is representing humanity for both men and women. What is commonly perceived as accepted and unquestionable is obviously challenged and reversed within this frame story. Shahrazad is no longer the “negative object, ... to man as the dominating “Subject” who is assumed to represent humanity in general” (Abrams 88).

She subverts this established collective myth because her stories allow Shahrayar, the despot, to think and wonder making his world more rational and balanced, thus bringing him nearer to the meaning of humanity as epitomized in such an act of forgiveness moving away from vengeance, hence curing him “of his hatred of women, teaches him to love, and by doing so saves her own life and wins a good man” (Haddawy xii). Her narrative enables her to achieve her goal. Shahrayar did not end her life because he fell in love with her and had children with her:

TRADITION HAS IT that in the course of time Shahrazad bore Shahrayar three children and that, having learned to trust and love her, he spared her life and kept her as his queen. (Haddawy 518)

Steadily, and after three years of story-telling, Shahrazad acquires the voice of an authoritative narrator who questions and subverts accepted authority along with unyielding beliefs, giving way to an overall change to Shahrayar, who undergoes emotional healing due to the curative effect of her words. Manifestly, she has optimized her life options through a seemingly passive yet a potentially active form of resistance; the act of story telling. Although this seems to be an overtly passive act of resistance in the face of a blindly oppressive king, yet it proves to be effective.

5. Reversal of Roles

It is also within this frame story that we begin to see the alteration in the roles of the male and the female characters. As aforementioned, in a patriarchal society, women are expected to accept their place in society, merely as a subservient partner to their male foils. In this respect, we are once again presented with a challenge to this model in many instances in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*. There is a reversal in the roles of the wives of both kings, with the demon’s wife, and of course with Shahrazad as examined earlier. For instance, the demon’s wife assumes the role of the active partner in her sexual endeavours with the hundred men she slept with. She orders Shahrayar and Shahzaman telling them “You must come down to me. ... Make love to me and satisfy my need, ... You must” (Haddawy 12). Then she orders them to give her their rings, “Give me your rings,” (Haddawy 13) to be added “to the rest, and make a full hundred. A hundred men have known me under the horns of this filthy, monstrous cuckold, who has imprisoned me in this chest, locked it with four locks, and kept me in the middle of this raging, roaring sea” (Haddawy 13). Conventionally, and according to accepted conduct, this is a male form of action; a woman does not order a man bluntly, and forces him through threats to make love. This is not an expected pattern of female behaviour but it is an accepted pattern of male behaviour because women are believed to be sexually passive. Women are often labelled negatively if they are too overt about sex. The story of the demon shows how absolute authority is being reversed. Although the demon imprisoned his wife in a glass chest on her wedding night she was still able to cheat on him with a hundred men, as he was asleep. This also affirms the fact that despite what men do, women are still able to act in the way they want and can still deceive men whenever they want. Also, a demon is seen as very powerful and no one can trick him no matter what, yet his wife was able to do so even though she was trapped and locked with four locks. Both kings are forced by the demon’s wife to do what she wants of them. The demon’s wife frightens them and threatens them, which attests that their power and strength is socially established by their status as kings in society, and not an inherent character being males. They become each in his way the slave with whom their wives betrayed them with, undergoing experiences that make a change in their lives. Similarly, and as discussed earlier, Shahrazad, the narrator also assumes this same reversed role, where she controls Shahrayar through her spellbinding words.

Obviously, many, if not all, masculine and feminine traits are socially constructed. Gender roles are not biologically based. Social value structure continues to give men higher positions and roles (Mead). Thus we are faced with some gender anticipations where there are things you are expected to do or not allowed to do because of your gender. Man is not born to be more powerful or more intellectual, nor woman is born to be more passionate or more loving and affectionate. Boys are not born to play with guns nor girls were born to play with dolls.

6. Ethnicity and Social Class

‘his wife ... had betrayed him with some cook, some kitchen boy’ (Haddawy 6)

The fact that both the wives of Shahzaman and Shahrayar cheat on their husbands with black servants reflects the foundations on which these two concepts rest. Both these men as well as the other men whom Shahrayar’s servants sleep with are black and servants. The issue here is that their wives “not only transgressed marital boundaries but class and ethnic ones as well.

The offense approximates a violation of a taboo” (Ghazoul 7). Interestingly, this makes the acts even more extreme, accentuating the degree to which each character represents a different role than the one assigned through tradition which “is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules ... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm 1). The king and his wife are “within the confines of social culture” (Ghazoul 33), representing norms and acceptance. On the other hand, the wife’s betrayal of her husband with a black slave is an indication of something, which is unacceptable and shocking: “The copulation between slave and queen represents an intercourse between two extreme poles of rank. The erotic attraction of opposite forces is evident from the connotations inherent in ‘slave’ and ‘queen’ ” (Ghazoul 32), and displays the extent to which these actions are intolerable, not only to Shahrayar, but also to society as a whole. Another interesting factor is with regards to the name of the slave-lover; whose name “Mas’ud is the stereotypical name for a black person” (Ghazoul 32). This is another confirmation of the differentiation of the servant in comparison with the king and queen. The demarcation along ethnic and class lines is clear to the readers and the degree to which this further questions and challenges the authority of both Shahzaman and Shahrayar is tremendous.

Historically, ethnicity and social class play a significant role in any society. Again in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* the issue of ethnicity and social class is addressed in the sense when the wives of both kings betrayed them with a black slave or a kitchen boy respectively. The feeling of being deceived is accentuated by the fact that they were betrayed with men of inferior ranks: “Shahzaman’s heart was on fire because of what his wife had done to him and how she had betrayed him with some cook, some kitchen boy” (Haddawy 6). This was frustrating to him and made him depressed because she not only cheated on him but with someone who belongs to the working class. Also, Shahzaman as a king is humiliated by being put in the same status as the kitchen boy. Another situation was when Shahrayar found his wife also betraying him with a black slave who works for him and in his palace. This made him kill her as well as the other slave girls who work for him because he felt that they all did not consider his value and not only betrayed him but with black slaves who are of no social class: “ten black slaves mounted the ten girls, while the lady called, “Mas’ud, Mas’ud!” and a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground”(Haddawy 7).

The crime of infidelity is highlighted by the fact that the kings were betrayed with men of lower social standing and in the case of Shahrayar, not only a slave but also a black one. These two situations explain the idea of the role of ethnicity and social class in the frame story to *The Arabian Nights*, which reflects societal practices at large.

7. Conclusion

What is commonly perceived as accepted and unquestionable is obviously challenged and reversed within this frame story. The importance of the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* comes from the fact that it is a text, which challenges the dominant paradigm, not only when it was written but up till the present. It is a “benchmark text of both the changing and the enduring attitudes of readers” (Sallis 68). The fact that it subverts what is rarely questioned and usually taken for granted is in itself a profound reversal of tradition. The revolutionary perspective of the frame story stems from the fact that it has managed to attract readers, cultures, and stories, to be included in the main text, from all directions. Therefore, paving the way for *The Arabian Nights* as a text to question tradition without dismissing various viewpoints.

Ultimately, the complexity of the concepts presented to readers in the frame story are indicative of the point to which it takes a multi-faceted approach to the society in which it was written. It introduces *The Arabian Nights* as an extremely sophisticated text, especially for its time; and reveals progression as well as the degree to which elaboration on concepts, which are usually taken for granted is necessary in any society. The text is a testament to the necessity of allowing discussion, elaboration, and interpretation within the context of any society. It is the different discourses and concepts within this frame story that give us a sense of the questions that must always be addressed. Problems such as authority, gender, social class, ethnicity, and tradition are seldom questioned; and advocates of an unchanging status quo refuse to permit exploration, stifling the potential for questioning or intellectual discussion. However, the challenges and questions raised by the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* and also the text itself should be regarded as an affirmation of its revolutionary characteristic, and an acknowledgment to its survival through different ages and across various cultures and languages.

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