

Cultural and Religious Insights from Works Based on *The Arabian Nights*

Literary works are staples of individual regions and the cultures within them. By examining certain aspects of any groups literature a great deal can be learned about the societal structure, beliefs, daily lives, interests, or any other aspect of life for that group. *The Thousand and One Nights*, one of the most prolific works of literature, can be used to bring to light aspects of Middle Eastern culture. Comparing the Islamic elements of *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Arabian Nights and Days*, a work heavily influenced by *The Thousand and One Nights* written by Naguib Mahfouz, and articles relating to the topic, the religious beliefs and cultural justifications of both the common people and readers, as well as the impact of those beliefs, can be examined.

Both *The Thousand and One Nights*, also referred to as *The Arabian Nights*, and *Arabian Nights and Days*, have a very strong religious component. *The Arabian Nights* opens “in the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful” (Haddawy. 4) praising “God, the Beneficent King, the Creator of the world and man, who raised the heavens without pillars and spread out the earth as a place of rest... I praise Him ... and I thank Him for His infinite grace” (Haddawy. 4). Similarly, *Arabian Nights and Days* begins immediately “following the dawn prayer” (Mahfouz. 1). In both of these works, the importance of religion is presented immediately, either by direct praise of God or through the actions of characters in the work. The placement of this element of the story at the very beginning only serves to emphasize the importance placed on it throughout each work. For both, the main cause of disorder driving the story is a result of irreligious activity, and resolution comes through reconciliation with religious principles on part of characters in the book. In *The Arabian Nights*, the frame tale tells the story of the King

Shahrayar, who, after discovering his wife is unfaithful, kills her and begins a bloody reign wherein he takes a new bride each night and kills her each morning until Shahrazad is able to rehabilitate him through storytelling. These stories all have a religious undertone or moral lesson based on teachings of Islam. For *Arabian Nights and Days*, the cause of disorder is corruption among government officials in the quarter of the city where the tale takes place. This comes to rights when Ma'rouf, "a believing servant of God, who is not tempted by any power to oppose God's wish" is instated as governor. In both, it is clear to see that piety among the rulers is directly linked to a resolution.

Along with the rulers, the religious activities and beliefs of common people in these tales help to show the stability of the society at large. The first character who receives supernatural intervention in *Arabian Nights and Days*, and therefore the story that takes place furthest from resolution and return to a moral and peaceful society, is Sanaan al- Gamali. Sanaan, after being coerced by a genie into killing the current governor of the quarter, turns away from religion. The morning after contact with the genie, "For the first time in his life, Sanaan al- Gamali left his house without performing his prayers" (Mahfouz. 16). He later goes on to rape and murder a ten year old girl. When he is caught and tried for the murder of the governor, Sanaan is not saved by the genie who led him to commit the murder. The next person in *Arabian Nights and Days* to receive supernatural intervention is the corrupt chief of police, Gamasa al- Bulti. Gamasa, unlike Sadaan, is saved by the genie before he can be executed for murdering the next corrupt governor. Also unlike Sadaan, Gamasa seeks out the Sheikh, "The thought of the sheikh came to him like a stray breeze on a scorching summer's day" (Mahfouz. 45), signaling his resort to religious thought under duress instead of Sadaan's approach of trying to do what he believed would be

best for himself. Later, as Abdullah the Porter, Gamasa repeats this behaviour of seeking out the Sheikh, "Filled with perplexity... he found his legs had brought him to the house of Sheikh Abdullah al- Balkhi" (Mahfouz. 57), when facing a conundrum. The characters of the individual narratives as well as those in the frame tale, specifically the Sultan, become more and more prone to following religious code, until a peaceful resolution is reached at last.

The specifics of what is considered religious behaviour is the same in both works. Generally, it is a reverence of God, attempting to follow principles set by the religion, and basing actions in moral teachings. This is more explicitly stated in *The Arabian Nights*, by the inclusion of the purpose of the text in the foreword, which is "the instruction of those who peruse it, for it abounds with highly edifying histories and excellent lessons for the people" (Haddawy. 4). As the stories are explicitly stated to be instructive as to correct moral codes in a religious society, the important aspects of these tales can be taken to be the values held by the particular religion. Some of the more notable lessons include a respect of order, resistance to excess in carnal behaviours, and reverence of God. Both in *The Arabian Nights* and *Arabian Nights and Days*, a respect of authority both on a larger scale societal level, and smaller scale familial level, are expected. The power of the king is described in terms similar to, though less immense than, the power of God. *The Arabian Nights* tells how Shahrayar's "power reached the remotest corners of the land and its people, so that the country was loyal to him, and his subjects obeyed him" (Haddawy. 5), while Dandan in *Arabian Nights and Days* remarks that "The sultan is not like the rest of humankind" (Mahfouz. 4). On a slightly less significant note, the stories in *The Arabian Nights* tend to encourage a patriarchal power structure within the family, where the father and husband should be obeyed. For example, in "The Tale of the Merchant and His Wife", the

insistence of the merchant's wife to have a question answered despite the merchant saying no results in the impending death of the merchant. The solution proffered is that the merchant should beat his wife and "go on beating her until he cures her for life, and she will never oppose him in anything" (Haddawy. 19-20). A good daughter is shown to be one who obeys her father, like Princess Jauhara, who agrees to marriage because her father tells her to, and she "cannot disobey [him]" (Haddawy, 517). Excessive indulgence in sex and drink in both *The Arabian Nights* and *Arabian Nights and Days* are often the cause of troubles for characters. Also found in both works is an abundance of dialogue wherein characters praise and thank God for good fortune and make reference to His omnipotence and omniscience. Religion and morality are intrinsically linked in both works. A prime example of the synonymity between piety and virtue is found in "The Tale of the First Lady" in *The Arabian Nights*. In a previously irreligious and pagan city where the entire population has been eliminated by God, one person has been spared. This is a young man whose first introduced as "a sweet voice chanting the Quran" (Haddawy. 165). He was spared because he was religious because "there was a very old woman who used to teach [him] the Quran, saying, 'You should worship none but the Almighty God'" (Haddawy. 167).

When the basic religious guidelines are followed by society at large, there is a state of peace in the stories. This can be extended into real life as well. In Amitai Etzioni's essay, *Religion and Social Order*, the importance of religion in creating a stable society is emphasized. In general, government and law enforcement are presented as secondary measures for promoting social cohesion, where the primary should be a general public agreement of values, which is easily provided by a uniform religion. In enforcing codes of conduct, Etzioni argues that

“Enhanced law enforcement may do so initially, but, in the longer run, a rather different kind of authority must become the major source of social order if it is to be considered legitimate, which in turn, is essential for stability. Religion... is a major source of such authority” (Etzioni. 59-60). This principle is mirrored in *Arabian Nights and Days*, when the chief of police Gamasa, cracks down on enforcement, but still has little impact on crime.

Authority had completely absorbed him and had created of him something new so that he had become oblivious to the goodly words he had learned at the hands of the sheikh in the prayer room in the time of innocence... opening wide the windows of hellfire. Whenever a new incident took place he arrested tens of people and tortured them unmercifully. As a result of this, his pursuit of the Shiites and the Kharijites decreased so that they were able to redouble their activity. They composed secret news sheets that were full of indictments of the sultan and the men in charge of affairs and which demanded that the Quran and the Prophet's Traditional Sayings should become the basis for legal rulings. Becoming frantic, he also arrested many of them, so that an air of dread hung over the whole quarter and all went in fear and trembling. Al- Hamadhani found the violence of the steps being taken shocking. Yet he closed his eyes in his desire to find an end to the incidents. Despite all that, they increased in number and violence.

(Mahfouz. 40)

There are many important things to note in this passage. First, the absorption of Gamasa's character into a quasi-totalitarian enforcer serves to remove him from “the goodly words he had learned at the hands of the sheikh”, or religion and morality. Also, his increased vigilance over one type of crime allowed another type, religious subversion, to increase. In attempting to fix this by doubling down on every type of crime, he does not stop them, but leaves the area under his jurisdiction “in fear and trembling” while the affronts “increased in number and violence” regardless. This fits in perfectly with Etzioni's argument, that “Security... must either be undergirded by a police state... or by a firm social fabric that entails a shared moral culture-supported largely by informal social controls and pressures- and which encourages people to ‘behave’ most of the time” (62). An analogy to Prohibition laws and the widespread disregard of

them in America is made to explain how a society's moral convictions often trump the laws put in place. The moral fabric of Mahfouz's setting at that point in time is not strong, as the leaders and people of the quarter are not properly religious, as they will be in the end. Also with The Arabian Nights, the King not being as religious as he should be results in his ritual murder of his brides. As he is brought back to religious morality through Shahrazad's stories, this chaos ends. Etzioni also makes the point that "if police are widely used, this by itself is a very telling sign of social failure" (62). The extensive use of police force under Gamasa's leadership at the time is a symptom of the larger problem of irreligious beliefs and behaviours in the quarter. The leadership's lack of religion, and therefore moral culture, creates a vicious cycle, as "If [government offices] are not imbued with a strong moral culture, the law enforcement agents themselves are likely to abuse their power and violate the law" (Etzioni. 62)

It is easy to assume that the strongest possible moral fabric of a society would come from one in which the beliefs are entirely uniform. This seems to be supported in Arabian Nights and Days. Nearly every character has received a religious education from the same person, Sheikh Abdullah al- Balkhi, no matter their social standing. A basic religious understanding, observance, and study seems to be required of all upstanding people in this setting. This is echoed in Ibrahim, B., Arifin, M., and Abd Rashid, S. Z.'s article The Role of Fatwa and Mufti in Contemporary Muslim Society, where it is stated that "it is the communal obligation of every Muslim to study" (320), and the uniformity of doctrine is mentioned by "The life of Muslims and their personality [being] clear and plain in terms of their beliefs, worship, social life, economic activity, legislation, litigation and the law" (B, Ibrahim.323). Although the Sheikh in Arabian Nights and Days offers different routes on what is called "The Way", there is only that one way. Groups

who deviate from the mainstream interpretation of the religion, like the Shiites and Kharijites, are seen as forces of chaos or evil, disrupting society. This is seen as well in *The Arabian Nights*, in “The Story of the Slave- Girl and Nur al- Din Ali ibn- Khaqan”. Here, Nur al- Din uses different religions as derogatory terms when he refuses to sell his wife to a man, saying, allegedly, “Wretched old man, I will sell her to a Christian or a Jew rather than you” (437). Here it seems that unification of a culture through a uniform religion or set of moral codes is desired. This is in contrast to the popular view that diversity strengthens a society, as put forward in Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil of India’s article, *Building Up Social Cohesion; Working for Unity Amidst Tensions*. While he supports cohesive thought, citing how “ancient Indians exhorted each other, ‘Meet together, speak together, let your minds be of one accord... May your counsel be common, your assembly common, common the mind, so you may live well together’” (Menamparampil.154), he stresses also the importance of collaborating with multiple different cultures and religions for “the wisdom... to guide and inspire a violent, corrupt and confused world” (Menamparampil.153). As the comment supposedly made by Nur al- Din suggests, this type of respect and collaboration of diverse religions is not highly prized in the *The Arabian Nights* or *Arabian Nights and Days*. A study of a single religion and a single interpretation of that religion is promoted by these works, where Menamparampil lauds the benefits of collaboration. This difference highlights the different levels of tolerance or willingness to entertain different perspectives between these two cultures in their time periods.

One of the ways in which the worlds of *The Arabian Nights* and *Arabian Nights and Days* are corrupt is the disconnect between the rulers and the people. This, at the very least, facilitates the problems presented in each work. In *Arabian Nights and Days*, the Sultan is one of

the only major characters to not have received lessons from the sheikh, while in both *Arabian Nights and Days* and *The Arabian Nights* the Sultan is seen as being above the law, and as such is permitted to carry out the main affront of the frame tale, killing his virgin brides every day for years. In both works, descriptions of the power of the Sultan are worded in such a way that he gives the impression of being, if not godlike, then above the position of the rest of humankind. *The Arabian Nights* credit the Sultan as being “king and master of the whole world” (8), and Dandan’s remark that “The sultan is not like the rest of humankind” (Mahfouz.4) resembles that train of thought. In a society where religion is paramount in shaping mores, likening the ruler to God in such a way makes it incredibly difficult for any opposition. The King is permitted to kill his virgin brides “until all the girls perished, their mothers mourned, and there arose a great clamor among the fathers and mothers, who called the plague upon his head, complained to the Creator of the heavens, and called for help on Him who hears and answers prayers” (Haddawy.14). Here, the Sultan is somewhere between God and the rest of mankind, where no one can do damage to him. The kind of society presented here is one that notices things that it considers to be wrong, but can let it be depending on the perpetrator. Shahrzad, a religiously minded character who, like the sheikh, helps to create a moral compass in others, pokes at this behaviour by saying that “a crime is a crime” (Haddawy.5). This is one of the few instances where the Sultan is put on the same level as the rest of society and judged that way openly by any character.

This society where hierarchy is so defined promotes an unambiguous moral code. The clear divisions of society are seen, for example, in the seating arrangements in the Cafe of the Emirs in *Arabian Nights and Days*. While the upper class citizens sit on chairs at tables and

booths by the wall, middle and lower class citizens sit on cushions on the floor and rarely join the conversations of the upper class customers. The Sultan's apparent exemption from cultural and legal precedents serves as an exception proving the rule, that all members of this culture are expected to behave in a certain way according to their shared beliefs. These beliefs and their impact are relatively constant despite any changes in location or time period. As *The Role of Fatwa and Mufti in Contemporary Muslim Society* explains, though a "fatwa is not legally binding when it is issued, it carries a significant effect... as it provides guidelines and rules to follow" (B. Ibrahim. 315) and is issued by "a qualified mufti who is considered as being learned or knowledgeable" (B. Ibrahim, 317). This helps to "preserv[e] the identity of Muslims" with rules for daily life and behaviour set by scholars of religious text, who are more familiar with the work and less likely to be influenced by local standpoints. This, in theory though not necessarily practice, creates a uniform guide for behaviour in this group across large geographic zones.

It is interesting to think of what sort of culture these belief systems work in, and how the culture impacts these belief systems. Although these works tend to support the idea that the belief system of this culture is largely consistent, some pivotal questions do not match up. The general nature of man, for example. While the aspect of redemption that is so essential to *The Thousand and One Nights* and *Arabian Nights* points toward the notion that people are responsible for their actions and therefore the type of person they are, there are also points in each work where characters are presented as unchangeably good or evil, like the Sheikh and the series of corrupt governors. B. Ibrahim's essay argues that without clear rules, "society would descend into chaos to the extent that people are not able to differentiate between what is permissible and what is prohibited (323), suggesting that humans are naturally prone to behave

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badly. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Menamparampil's work, which claims that there is "a natural desire in human hearts to do what is right" (Menamparampil. 153). Major similarities shown through each work is a willingness to believe. This functions to believe in the order of the created society, as well as a willingness to accept what cannot be seen, which also feeds into the readiness to accept supernatural elements as real. Regardless of the individual differences or sweeping generalizations about Middle Eastern culture that can be made through reading these works, literature is able to create a microcosm of the idea of a society that is transmittable, and therefore teachable and comparable, to the rest of the world.

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