
**THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONDITIONS REFLECTING CONTEMPORARY TIME
AND HISTORICAL ELEMENTS IN ARABIAN NIGHTS**

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Abstract: This paper shows the role of Literature on containing the elements of history as it is depicted in *Arabian Nights*, the collection of Arabian folk tales also translated in English popularly known as *One Thousand Nights and One Night* which is a portrayal of contemporary time and the people resided in Africa to the Far-East. *Arabian nights* would be a good example of folk tales represents an highly imaginary world but it arises the curiosity of advanced readers and the researchers, provoking thoughts because of its real settings in the time of Abbasid Caliph, the age of Islamic doctrine; the sea voyage, different geography, people, customs, maritime trade which it has shown. As the readers of literature search for the inner saying and information of any work, feel interest to work on *Arabian Nights* which contains calling research elements provoking the thoughts on geographical discovery, scientific advancement and intellectual novelty of Middle Eastern people of Abbasid era.

Keywords: Arabian Nights, contemporary, historical, Islamic

Introduction: *One Thousand and One Nights* often known as *Arabian Nights* is a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales orally composed by several anonymous poets and story tellers. It is a notion that the original concept is derived from an ancient Sassanid Persian classic but stories were collected and written over many centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across the Middle East and North Africa within the timeframe of 900 AD to 1500 AD. The tales originated in ancient and medieval Arabic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian folklore and literature. It is mainly compiled in Arabic and translated into French, German, English and other prime languages of the world. All stories of *Arabian Nights* are enclosed by one key story called frame story. Though the frame story places in Persia, other stories pervade Iraq, India, Turkey, Egypt, Greece even China, the mostly populated area of that time. These stories depict the human characteristics through love and affair, bravery and sacrifice, tolerance and greatness, deception and intrigue, magic and spirituality. In these stories nothing is unsaid about human nature: adultery, luxury, desire, ignorance and cunningness. It was translated into English at first in 1706. It is mostly known in the West as, *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. Without the fairy tales *Arabian Nights* is an enormous source of historical elements of not only highly civilized Middle East of the 9th to 13th centuries, but also the other parts of the earth. These huge stories reflect the socio-cultural and political conditions, economical activities, maritime trade, transport and judicial system of Abbasid era, state of women and Islamic doctrine, their practice of science and other branches of knowledge; practice of geography, mathematics, sculpture, poetry and geometry reflected in *Arabian Nights* that is not only a world of magic and

supernatural things but also a representation of actual socio-cultural provision.

The Islamic empire of Abbasid era was bigger than that of Hellenistic and Roman Empire causes vast economical activities and trade in this enormous realm. After the Muslim invasion and victory, Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea was connected. Urbanization was begun from Cordova to Samarkand. As the gold coin is introduced in Islamic territory, importing slaves brought economic opulence and initiate new civilization. From the Asia Minor to Indian Ocean, Sudan to Barber and The Russian basin initiated a new trade region which was totally free and boundless. "*The Story of the Porter and the Ladies of Baghdad, and of the Three Royal Mendicants, Etc.*" from *Arabian Nights* depicts the trade and economical activities of that time:

The porter exclaimed, this is, indeed, a fortunate day!—and he took up the crate, and followed her. She next stopped at the shop of a fruiterer, and bought of him Syrian apples, and 'Othmani quinces, and peaches of 'Oman, and jasmine of Aleppo, and water-lilies of Damascus, and cucumbers of the Nile, and Egyptian limes, and Sultani citrons, and sweet-scented myrtle, and sprigs of the henna-tree, and chamomile, and anemones, and violets, and pomegranate-flowers, and eglantine: all these she put into the porter's crate, and said to him, Take it up." [Lane tr. Screen 1]

In Bagdad the goods came from different areas of the world are actually imported things, evidence of heavy maritime business and highway trade. The luxury in making perfumes became an art at that time:

The lady smiled at his remark, and next stopped at the shop of a perfumer, of whom she bought ten kinds of scented waters; rose-water, and orange-flower-water, and willow-flower-water, together with

some sugar, and a sprinkling-bottle of rose-water infused with musk, and some frankincense, and aloes-wood, and ambergris, and musk, and wax candles; and, placing all these in the crate, she said, Take up thy crate, and follow me. [Lane tr. Screen 1]

The French are renowned as lover of perfume, but it is found that the people of Arabs were not less than them. They are producing various kinds of perfume as Basra was famous for flowers, specially rose.

"*The Voyages of Sind bad*" are the evidence of maritime trade of that time which introduce us with vast economical activities, renowned ports of that time, countries, regions, tribes, and different commodities of trade, productions of different places, and above all diverse cultures that practiced in different regions. "*The second voyage of Sind bad*", the mariner and businessman Sind bad was left in a vacant Island where he faces a lot of troubles. In the story we discover that there were rare species of birds and reptiles. The Jewelers collect diamond by the birds. As it is a story of *Arabian Nights*, seems unbelievable though there would have the existence of such species which might have been eliminated. The technique of collecting jewels reveals the real fact as the Arabs spread out in the whole world and the experience they gathered their tales and stories are the proof of that. Whatever in the story "*The second voyage of Sindbad*", Sindbad was captured by the Cannibals, certainly in Africa. The procedures which make the prisoners healthy and fat are very interesting as they feed well with the coconut oil, meats, fat and fruits. It seems that at the medieval age the Arabs went to African continent and they knew about Cannibals. The custom of eating human is also same as they do actually. They make their prisoners healthy and fattish:

The savages now produced large bowls full of rice prepared with coconut oil, of which my crazy comrades ate eagerly, but I only tasted a few grains, understanding clearly that the object of our captors was to fatten us speedily for their own eating, and this was exactly what happened. [Lang tr. 18]

In the same story Sind bad was in a country where nobody use seat upon their riding animals. Our mariner introduced the things to them. It seems that the mariners transmit various techniques, technologies to the different areas. In the same territory there was a peculiar culture that is if anyone's wife died her husband should have been buried with her. It reminds us the cultures practiced by Hindus. But where Sindbad had gone, rules were reversed which indicates that same custom was practiced differently in different places and the mariners help people to know the unknown information.

In the 8th century the maritime trade of Muslims had

been increased as Indian, African and Mediterranean Sea was connected at that time. The voyage started from Siraf, Bashra and Ubullu port. In 10th century Muslim ships reached Chinese port of Khanpho, now it is named Canton, there was a colony of Muslims. It is mentioned that the Muslim's trade ship was also reached at Korea and Japan. Muslims spread their business till Malakka and Sumatra. "*The fifth voyage of Sind bad*" reveals business in these areas. He speaks about the interesting technique of collecting coconut as they annoyed the Monkeys and the monkeys throw the fruit aim at them. This archipelago may be the Indonesian archipelago where coconut grows in a large amount. "*The sixth voyage of Sindbad*", Sindbad goes in a place which seems near India, perhaps Sri Lanka, told here as Serendip, is reflected here:

The island of Serendib being situated on the equinoctial line, the days and nights there are of equal length. The chief city is placed at the end of a beautiful valley, formed by the highest mountain in the world, which is in the middle of the island. I had the curiosity to ascend to its very summit, for this was the place to which Adam was banished out of Paradise. [Lang tr. 177]

That place was very much enriched. In India, the men are full of hospitality. They rescue Sindbad from drowning, make him consoled:

My brother, be not surprised to see us; this is our land, and as we came to get water from the river we noticed your raft floating down it, and one of us swam out and brought you to the shore. We have waited for your awakening; tell us now when you come and where you were going by that dangerous way? [Lang tr. 176]

Later on in the same story the King of India speaks about his country, Snowy Mountain at North, heavy forested areas at East, ocean at south. There are huge diversity within men lived here, in their language, custom and culture.

During the Abbasid period, Muslim women were increasingly confined to the household and totally subjected to patriarchal authority. The Abbasid caliphs maintained harems, in which both wives and concubines were secluded in the imperial chambers. The prosperity of the later Abbasid period allowed the Muslim elites to obtain numerous slaves, many of which were taken or purchased from the non-Islamic regions that surrounded the empire. Female slaves were not secluded and may have had greater freedom than Muslim wives. Another custom calculated to preserve the purity of Muslim males was the veiling of free females. Elite women were cut off from any occupation other than running a household.

The females of *Arabian Nights* have a high regard for their males as they are socially suppressed and sort of second class citizen, always afraid of males. On the

other hand it is shown there that the women are waiting for men eagerly, praise them and even worship them. In "The story of second Calender" we find that the ladies are waiting long time for a man.

The males of *Arabian Nights* show zero tolerance to their wives if there would be a smell of lechery though that is to be uncertain. In the story of "The Porter and the young girls" it is found that the husband of Aminah who was suspicious about his wife that there would have any extra-marital affair. This silly suspicion led him to kill his wife where the women couldn't protect that. In "The Tale of the Murdered Young Woman" an innocent woman found murdered by her suspicious husband who cut her into pieces and thrown in Tigris River.

In *Arabian Nights* there are several evidences about the use of scientific knowledge. The stories seem science fiction written in mediaeval Arab. Several stories within the *One Thousand and One Nights* feature early science fiction elements. One example is "The Adventures of Bulukiya", where the protagonist Bulukiya's quest for the herb of immortality leads him to explore the seas, journey to the Garden of Eden and to the Hell, and travel across the cosmos to different worlds much larger than his own world, anticipating elements of galactic science fiction; along the way, he encounters other forms of life. In "Abu al-Husn and His Slave-Girl Tawaddud", the heroine Tawaddud gives a lecture on the mansions of the Moon, and the benevolent and sinister aspects of the planets.

In another *One Thousand and One Nights* tale, "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman", the protagonist Abdullah the Fisherman gains the ability to breathe underwater. "The Ebony Horse" features a robot in the form of a flying mechanical horse controlled using keys that could fly into outer space. Medical science in medieval Islam was an area of study that advanced particularly during the Abbasid reign. During the ninth century, Baghdad contained over 800 doctors. In *Arabian Nights* we find the evidence of this excellence. In "The Story of the Greek King and the Physician Douban" we find the innovative technology of treatment without visible application of medicine.

After the death of the Prophet of Islam, three hundred years had past when the *Arabian Nights* was written. *Arabian Nights* is the evident of the declination of Islamic doctrine which started in Abbasid era. People remind God in their every speech but they violated the rules of Islam in each work. They are praying, going to Mosque, maintaining Islamic dress code, preaching others and address themselves as a believer. But as we find in *Arabian Nights* they are not loyal to their husband or Wife, engaging lechery, adultery, deception, intrigue,

wiliness and the sins could be committed as far. In "The story of first Calender, Son of a King" the Calender went his uncle's house, met with his cousins. Here he could not see the face of his sister. It is the Islamic guideline that the girls should maintained restriction about whom they could meet. The first Calender couldn't meet with his cousin but incest was occurred there. The sibling engages incest where Islamic doctrine was violated which is certainly an irony:

He then bade me wait an instant, and vanished, returning in a few moments with a richly dressed lady of great beauty, but as he did not tell me her name, I thought it was better not to inquire. [Lang tr. 68]

In "The tale of the porter and three ladies" we see that the ladies wear Islamic dress, veiled at outside but when they get the porter inside their region they involve vulgarity. The stories of these three ladies and the Calenders are evident of the violation of Islamic doctrine. The other stories of *Arabian Nights* also reflect this abuse where there plenty of illicit sex, people maintain dual standard.

Arabian Nights is the collection of fairy tales, a cocoon of demons, djinnis, ghosts, angels, supernatural things, magic, black art and a collection of fables. This impression that the readers contain is not totally incorrect as it is presented in films, TV series and different discussions. But without this phase it has a charming opposite which contains history, geography, custom, regions and contemporary time and this phase is not less attractive. It should be conveyed that *Arabian Nights* encloses the stories which is full of supernatural things, black art, magic, imaginary creatures and sometimes unbelievable components. The stories which seems based on true things, true geographical regions, cultures and customs are not unmixed certain. As these stories were actually orally composed, there might have deviation at the time of collection. If that would not happen though, *Arabian Nights* is not written based on true stories. So everything happens there that may not allow for historical elements. That's why actual history of that time from other sources should be considered. While taking it as an element it is not overlooked.

Arabian Nights is a pleasant manifestation of middle-eastern society of Abbasid era. To some extent the economic and political situation, condition of enormous extending Islamic empire, the practice of knowledge, the condition of women and Islamic doctrine, variety of regions, nationals, and tribes are reflected here. So in guise of fairy tales and demon-angel stories it hides a world of history, geography and charisma which create bundle of questions in our mind, make us curious, more vigilant and sophisticated reader. It would be searched again that

who arrived in American & African continent first, science & geographical knowledge.
who initiated or developed the practice of physical

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