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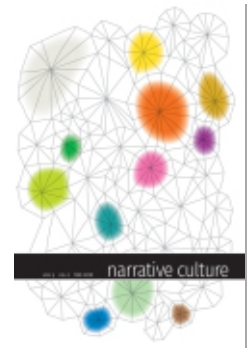
The Serpent Queen: A Case Study in “Travel” and
Appropriation

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Narrative Culture, Volume 5, Number 2, Fall 2018, pp. 187-210 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.5.2.0187>



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The Serpent Queen

A Case Study in “Travel” and Appropriation

Introduction

For hundreds of years, *The Thousand and One Nights* (the English rendering of the title, *The Thousand Nights and One Night*, Macnaghten; Payne; Burton; Mathers; in later literature, *The Thousand and One Nights*) has been circulating in the Arabo-Islamic cultural spheres as a popular collection of stories from various genres: love stories, fairy tales, rogue stories, travel tales, romances (Heath 1:3; Haddawy xiii). It is, however, true that inasmuch as *The Thousand and One Nights* has been regarded by many scholars as a trove for folk literature (Burton 1:ix; Elisséeff 3, 37; Goitein 301; Pinault 15; Naithani; Kruk 34; Müller 48; Marzolph 79; El-Shamy, “Mythological Constituents” 25; Gerhardt, however, refutes this tagging, 43) drawn from oral tradition (Molan 191), it has been appropriately argued that it rather contains “semiliterary stories of folk extraction reworked by literate editors and redactors” (El-Shamy, “The Oral Connections” 9–10; Kabbani 26; see also Shoshan 79, 88; Muhawi 336).

The focus of this article is the cycle of *Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn and the Queen of Serpents*, which appears in most of the Arabic editions of *The Thousand and One*

Nights and belongs to the Egyptian branch. In folklore as well as in religion (Propp 84), the serpent as a complex mythical symbol is perceived as a primordial being and is linked with wisdom and the presentation of cosmic power (Lurker 8556–60; Çalişkan 92; Kuehn 5–10; El-Shamy, “A ‘Motif Index,’” 295–60). The snake-woman is the embodiment of world-generating, life-giving principle and lunar wisdom (Campbell, *Occidental* 9–10; Çalişkan 93). Whenever the serpent appears in folktales, epics, and religion, one would expect a spectacle of ongoing metamorphosis.

In its rich folkloristic and topological heritage, the cycle came to serve the hermeneutics implicit in a work by Egyptian novelist Badr al-Dīb (1926–2005), who uses the cycle as a hypotext to “rewrite” it. The reproduction of the cycle becomes entirely focused on the hero and his inner development.

I take this popular tale as a case study to demonstrate how a modern author uses it to develop new contexts, offering a novel reading and opting for an experience of constant impermanence. The crossing of spaces and the shifting of physical as well as imagined borders form a central dynamic in the structure of the tale. However, the retelling of the story reflects a powerful process of territorialization that converges toward particular erasures and consolidation, and hence toward a new configurative meaning suggesting a transference from subject to author and of course the communicative frame and play of interpretative, metaphorical transformations.

The first part briefly depicts the history of *The Thousand and One Nights* in light of Edward Said’s “travel theory.” The second part is dedicated to the themes inherent in the cycle of *Hāsib Karīm al-Dīn and the Queen of Serpents*; the third part studies Badr al-Dīb’s interpreting procedures of decoding the symbolic structure of this popular cycle and the tactics marking the appropriation he undertakes to emphasize a new metaphoric pole. A comparison is drawn with two other transfiguration attempts, namely, the works of Miguel Unamuno’s *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (1905) and Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*” (1939).

The Thousand and One Nights in Motion

Edward Said argues in his essay, “Traveling Theory,” that

Ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished

and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and the theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a useful enabling condition of intellectual activity. (Said 226)

Books, the carriers, of ideas, imagination, and theories, travel and migrate. They circulate; break through borders and thresholds; are translated, abridged, rewritten; and form new circuits of intertextual webs. They adapt to new perspectives and changes in meaning and are even reinvented. Such cultural symbiosis through the traveling of books has always been facilitated by the exchange network of trading routes, by way of migrants and through translation.

Perhaps no profane book other than *The Thousand and One Nights* has traveled so extensively through cultures and centuries. As Borges puts it, "Los siglos pasan y la gente sigue escuchando la voz de Shaharázád" (*Obras* 4:625).

The ostensible history of *The Thousand and One Nights* (for the beauty of the title, Borges, *Obras* 3:275) has been the subject of interest and meticulous studies since the ninth century. In what follows, I give a swift sketch, referring only to the most significant moments in this history of reception and ongoing transformation.

In 1949, Nabia Abbott showed that the earliest fragment known to us is an early ninth-century fragment of light-brown paper of the "Thousand Nights" dated in 266/879, which was part of a collection of Arabic papyri at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (Abbott 129–44). Scholars of *The Nights* have agreed that the earliest mention of the book goes back to the first half of the fourth century H/tenth century CE, as the frame story of the *Thousand and One Nights* was known to Arab scholars in Baghdad, for example, librarian and bibliophile Ibn al-Nadīm and historian al-Mas'ūdī (Ibn al-Nadīm 304–5; al-Mas'ūdī 2:406). Both authors refer to a frame story in Arabic conjoining a collection of stories known as the *Hazār afsāneh* or thousand tales (Marzolph 76), which is of Sanskrit origin and reveals an apparent relation to the Indo-Persian royal house of the Sassanids, 224–651 CE (Abbott 145; Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* 2–3; Ibrāhīm 82–92; Irwin 48–51; Grotzfeld 218–28).

From that point of its literary history, the enduring metamorphosis of the text of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which discloses a complex oral and written process, becomes difficult to trace. Like a magnet, the frame story had attracted stories, themes, and motifs from high and popular literatures going back to various geographical and cultural spheres: Arabic, Indian, Greek, Babylonian, Hebrew,

Persian, and more. It had been repeatedly supplemented and modified and underwent rearrangements and adaptations of individual stories.

In a careful philological study of the available manuscripts of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Muhsin Mahdi concluded that these manuscripts go back to two families of Syrian and Egyptian provenance, the oldest of which is of Syrian origin and goes back to the fifteenth century, during the Mamlūk era (Mahdi, *Alflayla wa-layla* 1:25–36; Irwin 54–62).

As I have argued elsewhere, it is important to keep in mind that

the reception of the text in world literature must really be understood to have taken place not as a single event, but rather as a continuous process, running through the eighteenth century, and reaching a kind of climax in the Romantic period. Antoine Galland's (1646–1715) enterprise coincided with—and the reception of *The Nights* afterwards took place during—a period of colonial expansion, which was a significant feature of its reception history. The renewed interest in *The Nights* in the Arab World as of the nineteenth century can be partially read in the light of this process; in other words, ironically it returned to its source of origin in the Arab world as one of Europe's cultural exports to what would ultimately be considered the third world. (Jarrar 298)

The Cycle of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn and the Queen of Serpents

The cycle of *Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn and the Queen of Serpents*¹ (synopsis in Marzolph and van Leeuwen 1:348–50; and Çalışkan 94–97; for the narrative levels of the cycle, Ibrāhīm 103) contains two stories integrated in the framestory of Ḥāsib and the Serpent Queen. The first story is that of Bulūqiyā (Marzolph and van Leeuwen 1:30–32), who inherits from his father, a Jewish sage, an ebony chest in which he finds the description and qualities of Prophet Muḥammad who would be sent by God in the latter days and be the lord of all humanity (for the motif of the inheritance, Kiliṭū, *al-'Ayn wal-ibra* 74–86). His heart is captivated with love for Muḥammad, and he goes wandering over the Earth, hoping to foregather with him. This motif of the quest for Prophet Muḥammad, who is foretold to a pre-Islamic epic hero, also appears in the popular romance of Sayf b. Dhī Yazan (probably between the ninth/fifteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries; Lyons 2:254). The second story in the cycle is that of Jānshāh, is a tragic love story (Marzolph and van Leeuwen

1:238–41). Jamel Eddine Bencheikh (155) emphasizes that Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn's cycle displays an ensemble of three genres: an initiatory, an apocalyptic, and a tragic love story. In the stories that make up the cycle, Van Leeuwen discerns four significant resemblances pertaining to continuity in the regular time of reproduction, the differentiation of earthly space, the form of the journey, and a process of initiation (Van Leeuwen 34–36, 42).

The cycle traces themes and motifs that traveled through ages and cultures and infiltrated the composite text. Several sources have been identified: *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Būlūqiyā's quest for the juice of the magic plant) as it was adapted, through the *Alexander Roman* (Dalley, "Gilgamesh" 1–17; Dalley, *The Legacy* 171; Fortado; al-Ghānimī 35–42; Annus 323–24), a Sanskrit novel (Gray 47); Talmudic Jewish revelations and legends—Solomon, and the revelation of Daniel (Segert; Bencheikh 165–66); the Arabic genre of *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Asensi, "Tras los 'signos'" 173–200; Bencheikh 178–87); and the Islamic genre of Muḥammad's Nocturnal Journey (Bencheikh 189–94; El-Shamy, "Mythological Constituents" 28–31).

The Serpent Queen is given a name in the cycle: Yamlikha (El-Shamy, "A 'Motif Index'" 295–60). Interestingly, it is mentioned in the Arab sources that one of the names of the Seven Sleepers was Yamlikha or "Jamblichus" (Le Strange 276); Van Leeuwen (42–43) suggests that the name might have a relation to Porphyry's "Iamblichus."

Because the serpent represents a universal, mythical animal, Yamlikha's role becomes decisive and effects the transformation of the boundaries of the text by opening various spheres of the marvelous and the uncanny, establishing a relation of enchanting affinity. She recounts the stories of Bulūqiyā and Jānshāh during the process of Ḥāsib's initiation, who was swallowed up by her and then released as "a new man after he has had access to the secrets of the world" (Bencheick 170). She "becomes the guardian of a rare memory and it is Shahrazād who recounts what yamlikha relates to Ḥāsib creating thus a succession of echoes resumed and reverberated" (Bencheick 216).

I'ādat ḥikāyat Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn: A Case in Transference

A reading of Badr al-Dīb's (Al-Sakkūt 117–18; Tramontini and Donohue 1:528–31; *al-Akhhbār*; al-Kharrāt 16, 19, 27–34), *I'ādat ḥikāyat Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn wa-malikat al-ḥayyāt: warā' al-kaynūna al-kitāb al-thānī* reveals the unrestrained options of

the imagination of a contemporary writer whose “renarrating” of this cycle of the *Thousand and One Nights* amounts to a *diegetic transposition* of the cycle (Jarrar 313–14). As its subtitle discloses, the book is the second part of a literary project titled as *Beyond Being* (*warā’ al-kaynūna*), which is, to my mind, a confusing subtitle. The bafflement arises from the use of the Arabic terminology, as I argue later. The first part of the project appeared in the same year (1990); it is, however, a thin volume of prose-poetry comprising seventeen short poems in forty-one pages under the title of *Aqsām wa-‘azā’im, Oaths and Incantations* (the term appears in *Hāsib Karīm al-Dīn’s* cycle 1:696; for these magical oaths and spells used to persuade the spirits to undertake the required work, al-Būnī 15–16, 60, 91–92; Ibn Taymiyya 24:276–80; Hājji Khalifa 1:275–76).

One wonders about the possible overarching theme that joins these two thin books as consecutive issues carrying the same subtitle. A kind of a swift explanation is attempted by the author in the introduction to book I (7–9); his account, however, does not make our endeavor toward a more lucid understanding easier. He refers the reader to a third book of his, which was written a year earlier (1989), titled *al-Mustaḥil wal-qīma: tajriba fī l-dīyalaktik*, or *The Impossible and Value: An Experiment in Dialectics* (book review by Rizq). The title proposes a sort of a philosophical endeavor because the words “value” and “dialectics” belong to the semantic field of philosophical discourse.

In *Aqsām wa-‘azā’im*, part I of *Beyond Being*, al-Dīb explains further (8–9):

Both parts are an endeavour beyond being, aiming therein, that invoking being (*al-tawaṣṣul ilā l-kaynūna*) would mean invoking both the impossible and value (*al-tawaṣṣul lil-mustaḥil wal-qīma*). The first part was an employment, once again, of love and art, *qua* oaths and incantations as they are used by a sorcerer in order to bring forth and to summon being (*kaynūna*). What does a sorcerer actually call for? He summons states (*aḥwāl*) of love which do not arrive at their stations (*maqāmat*); and he also summons an apparition of the beloved or his manifestation, should we use the Ṣūfi terminology which is common today, although its meaning is not fully apprehended. Both the state (*al-ḥāl*) and manifestation (*al-tajallī*) are facets of being (*awjuh min al-kaynūna*), that despite its integrity (*kullīya*), remains mixed with time and threatened into vanishing. The sorcerer then summons the embodiments of value [9] which are scattered in the realm of possibility, represented in the gathering places of people, like the coffee shop and the airport. These [embodiments of value!] try to appear (become manifest) through art, and

are captured by preaching or moral lesson. Lastly, he summons entities (*kayānāt*) from the realm of the collective unconscious (*‘ālam al-lā wa’l-jam’ī*) that tries to capture the ultimate value of existence—i.e. to become mere being (*kaynūna*); however, it collapses in the realm of exemplum (*umthūla*) or myth. One wonders if the deficiency is inherent in the oaths and incantations themselves or if it is that the sorcerer is and will ever remain an apprentice learning sorcery. Hence, being (*kaynūna*) will remain ambiguous and withdrawn from him: whenever he tries to approach it, it devastates and silences him.

To try to make sense of this somewhat confused paragraph, let us turn our attention to its vocabulary: the three key terms are *being* (*al-kaynūna*), the *impossible* (*al-mustaḥīl*), and *value* (*al-qīma*).

First, the term *al-kaynūna* is used by the mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1242) to refer to God’s external being. Samer Akkach (Akkach 117; Ibn al-‘Arabī 3:465–66) explains that the Cloud (*al-‘amā*) is “the first existential condition (*ẓarf*) that supported God’s external being (*kaynūnat al-ḥaqq*), while at the same time identifying it with absolute being (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*.” This Cloud is otherwise known as the absolute imagination where Divine Breath (*al-naḥas al-raḥmānī*) is an act of imagination (Ibn al-‘Arabī 4:164; 6:9, 225, 284, 305). ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), one of the commentators on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt* (al-Nābulusī 83–86) elucidates that “it is in this Cloud, which represents the first external being of God, that all things, corporeal and intelligible or comprehensible, had been determined (*ta’yīn*.” In the fifth sphere (*dā’ira*) of God’s external being, things become manifest (*ẓuhūr*) through the command *Be* (*kun*) uttered by the Divine Breath, and through it things become existent (*mawjūd*) as manifestations of God’s *kaynūna*. Chittick (337) explains that “the words spoken by the Breath, or the shapes assumed by the Cloud, are neither God nor the cosmos, but images of both, He/not He and it/not it.”

In Arabic thought, the terms *wujūd* or *anniya*—and not *kaynūna*—are usually used to refer to the term *existence* (Sayf 1:176–264). The same applies to modern Arabic thought: for example, in his 1940s translations of existential European philosophy, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī translates Sartre’s *existence* and Heidegger’s *Sein* into *wujūd*; the Heideggerian *Dasein*, however, translates into *āniyya* (Badawī 5, 42–45, 23–33; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān 152–68; al-Miskīnī translation of Heidegger 761–83). Even the later translations of Heidegger’s terminology in *Sein und Zeit* employ the terms *wujūd* and *anniya* (Ja’far 74–87). Nevertheless, the term *being*, as used by Parmenides, is translated as *kaynūna* in the Arabic translation of Jean André Wahl’s

book *The Philosopher's Way* (Fāl 57). With the definitive translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* into Arabic by Tunisian philosopher Fathī al-Miskīnī in 2012 (816, 826), *das Sein* is translated into *al-kaynūna* and *das Dasein* into *kaynūnat-al-hunāk*.

It is noteworthy, however, that Islamist ideologue Sayyid Quṭb in his book, *The Islamic Concept and Its Characteristics* (*Khaṣā'is al-taṣawwur al-islāmī*), speaks of *al-kaynūna al-insāniyya* referring to the restricted nature of the human existence, which is bounded by the limits of space and time (Quṭb 6, 10, 16, 19, 42–46, 187, 203).

It is not my intention in this article to survey the evolution of the term *kaynūna* in Arabic philosophical thought and its semantic meanings by various thinkers but to try to understand the meaning of the term as used by Badr al-Dīb in his books. To my mind, al-Dīb relies on Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmological vision of the universe and its various spherical levels in which the Divine Breath bestows the various manifestations of being through the creative verb *Be* (Abū Zayd, *Hakadhā takallama Ibn 'Arabī* 226–30); Ibn al-'Arabī (11:182; compare with Abū Zayd, *Falsafat al-ta'wīl* 64) corroborates that the human existence is dependent on the external being of God (*kaynūnat al-ḥaqq*):

“Wherever we are God (the Truth) is with us, [an] external, existential being, exalted—as He deserves. To be [in relation to us humans] is but a command [that caused our] existence; [consequently], the ineffectual is nothingness and God is [the cause of all] being.”

Relying on Quran 7:172, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) argues that “the individuals of the human species have had a partial, singular being (*kaynūna juz'īyya mutamayyiza*) even before their actual human existence” (Mullā Ṣadrā 9:272–73; where he refers to Plato's world of ideal forms). It seems to me, however, that al-Dīb uses both *wujūd* and *kaynūna* to denote the human, temporal existence, as is clear from his following sentence (*Aqsām wa-'azā'im* 8): “By repeating the experiment starting from existence (*wujūd*) or being (*kaynūna*).”

Second, Al-Dīb defines the *mustaḥīl*, the impossible, as an ever transmuting reality and equates it with being which is in permanent flux. He argues that (*Al-Mustaḥīl wal-qīma* 5),

Completion (or fullness) as a reality, is but exile; it is (represents), however, the movement of existence, i.e. it is the nature of existence and its very course; (or) its existence in the sense of its struggle to negate itself. Should you negate fullness from existence, you would change it into nothingness and would attach it to

the particularity (*juz'īyya*) of space and time or to the duality of consciousness. Although the impossible/ever transmuting is raw material not processed yet, it is, however, value that makes of it an eternal and fixed quiddity (*jawhar*) which surpasses time and space.

We come to the third term, which is *value* (*al-qīma*). Al-Dīb argues that (*Aqsām wa-'azā'im* 9),

The quest in search for what lies beyond being (*warā' al-kaynūna*), which should end by discovering the self, leads to explicating the value of the differentiation made in the *Thousand and One Nights* between quality (*ṣifa*) and craft or trade (*ṣan'a*); for the human being exists through quality, but fulfils his existence through craft. To strive towards only one of them, disregarding the other, is obstructive, for this does not generate value.

I sum up my understanding of al-Dīb's somewhat confused reflections: human existence (*kaynūna*) is a state of exile in the idiosyncrasy of time and space; this existence will lose all meaning if it is devoid of value (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 21). Accordingly, things have to exist in relation with value. Value is prior to being; it belongs—so to speak—to another, a higher Being (*kaynūna*). To realize value, the human being should strive, not only through will but through a combination of quality (*ṣifa*) and craft (*ṣan'a*). The quality, as we will see by analyzing al-Dīb's second book on *Beyond Being* (*I'ādat ḥikāyat Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn*), is represented by love, which urges the human to go on a mystic path in search for the *ṣifa* of Prophet Muḥammad (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 33–34, 39–40) or the *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* (Muḥammadan Reality—Muḥammad as the total and perfect theophany of all Divine Names, manifest in the human form; Schimmel 272; see also Jeffery 52). As for the *ṣan'a* (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 23, 137), it denotes a vocation or trade in life in which one should excel. Excelling in one's trade gives one a sense of value in the day-to-day affairs of life in space and time, whereas the ultimate value and meaning can only be realized beyond being, in the realm of what Ibn al-'Arabī labels the fifth sphere of God's external being, the *kaynūna 'amma*, over all beings in our universe (Al-Nābulusī 186).

What are al-Dīb's ostensible sources in his approach to value and the human existence? Ibn al-'Arabī is definitely a major source of inspiration, but if one tries to designate a modern source, one finds him embracing nuances from the axiological system of American philosopher Wilbur Marshall Urban (1873–1952) (Shook 985–86). Returning from his studies in Germany, Urban intended to formulate a

general theory of value within the limits of psychology and phenomenology. In his second book, *Intelligible World: Metaphysics and Value*, Urban describes his theory as a “dialectical inquiry” (since *dialectic* in the historical sense has always been concerned with issues of valuation) for “Any solution of the ontological problem must be, as Hegel saw, dialectical in the broadest sense of the term” (Urban 77). “Dialectic, says Bergson, is necessary to put intuition to the proof, necessary also that intuition should break itself up into concepts and so be propagated to other men. But all it does, often enough, is to develop the result of that intuition that transcends it” (Urban 126). Urban further asserts the position of German philosopher Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) that “the confidence in the implications of intelligible purpose, is born, not of knowledge, but of a faith based on the dialectical analysis of the concept of the moral end.” Therefore, “the task of the philosopher at this point is that of making transparent, as it were, the structure, the *a priori* structure if you will, of value and being in their necessary relations” (Urban 344).

In his book on *Recent American Philosophy*, Andrew Reck argues that “Urban’s philosophy belongs to the Platonic tradition which exalts the Good above being and knowing” (Reck 164). Urban, however, was struggling to “synthesize coherently the Platonic transcendence of value over being and the Hegelian immanence of value within being” (Reck 165). There are many things, Urban says, “which the plain man feels to be real, but which also belong to a ‘transcendental, ideal’ world, in the sense that they cannot be defined in terms of space and time, and are communicable only in a non-spatial and non-temporal idiom” (Urban 71; for the phases of Urban’s philosophy, Johnson 335–60).

We can discern many similarities and affinities between al-Dīb’s “Platonic” approach to value and human existence and the axiological theory of Urban, a fact that makes me suggest that he might have been familiar with Urban’s axiology. Urban was first introduced in Egypt by Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd in his book *Ḥayāt al-fikr fi l-‘ālam al-jadīd* (291–300). However, we need to keep in mind that al-Dīb graduated from the University of Cairo in 1946 with a BA in philosophy; he also studied aesthetics at the Sorbonne for one year, and earned an MA in library sciences from Columbia University in 1953. He served as an expert in various UN positions. As such, al-Dīb might have been introduced to Urban’s axiological philosophy of through many possible channels.

Narrative Strategies

Al-Dīb's book (in 173 pages), which is divided into nineteen chapters, each with its own title, starts with a two-page introductory note (*awrāq tamhīdiyya*) in which a first-person narrator addresses the readers, setting the time and the state of affairs:

In these strange days of our lives, in our Arab countries, there appears a growing and mounting wave of writing memoirs. . . . We used to think that it was restricted to Egypt, directly after the dimming of the lights of 'Abd al-Nāṣir; however, it seems to be a mark of our age. We find this trend spreading across the various Arab countries; everyone is trying to re-write history, or to create a history of their fancies, but in reality history has not been written yet in order that they re-write it. (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 9)

In the second paragraph, the I-narrator reveals itself as Ḥāsib: "*I am Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn.*" He refers to his story in the *Thousand and One Nights*, but he makes no mention of Shahrazād.

At the beginning of chapter 1, the narrator reasserts that his name is Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn and that his aim is to write memoirs similar to those being written in the Arab world; actually, he adds, he is not writing his memoir because it is already written and read in the *Thousand and One Nights*, covering *Nights* 461 to 527. The narrator also affirms that he is writing in Cairo where he had reached old age.

Toward the end of the two-page prologue, a concluding prose poem comes to question being, creation, and the word. Hence, the reader realizes they will be faced with an ontological text, grappling with the whimsical nature of existence. Al-Dīb keeps the cycle of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn's text nearly intact, summing up long descriptions or undertaking various abridgments and adding commentary at crucial junctures.

In undertaking this goal, al-Dīb remains faithful to the text of the cycle in *The Thousand and One Nights*, which, as we have seen already, integrates three genres: an initiatory, an apocalyptic, and a tragic love story. Al-Dīb's rewriting merges these genres in an approach that reads Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn's adventures as an ontological journey, a Ṣūfī hagiography, and an esoteric rite of passage leading toward a spiritual union with the prototype of the Perfect Man, the idea of *al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya* (Chodkiewicz 60–73). John Collins defines apocalypse as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an

otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (Collins 5–6). He also contends that apocalyptic literature proposes an elaborate review of history and its development.

Already in the prologue, Ḥāsib, the narrator in al-Dīb’s novel, stresses the fact that what has been written in “history” about his own story amounts to lies, as it merely reflects material facts, whereas his rewriting “creates” a new personal reality that struggles to remain true to the trust *amāna* that God had offered to man, although man is forgetful, referring to Quran 33:72 (al-Dīb, *I‘ādat* 13; on 53 Bulūqiyā admits that forgetfulness is the very nature of man but realizes that the love quest for Muḥammad brings man to attain a new *ṣifa* and a new *kaynūna*). Ḥāsib the narrator is accordingly rewriting “history” from the standpoint of his apocalyptic, revelatory event, represented in his astounding meeting with the Serpent Queen, who introduced him to the *ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*; he attained and internalized a radically other experience of his own consciousness that gives meaning to and reinterprets time and history (Tillich’s “the new man,” 2:165–68).

Hypertextuality

How is al-Dīb’s endeavor to be classified in comparison with similar poetic ventures of a relational nature in world literature? His text is foregrounded as hypertext on a preexisting and recognized text (Genette, *Palimpsests* 9–13). Furthermore, his enterprise involves not only a rewriting but also a transgeneric relation as a resignification of the text. Basing my argument on Genette’s architextuality, the *Thousand and One Nights* clearly appears as a hypotext wherein the whole reproduction of the cycle of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn as rewritten by al-Dīb becomes entirely focused on the hero and his inner development. Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* as a generic prototype in world literature seems to be relevant as a case for comparison. Two texts come to mind in this regard: Borges’s “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*” (*Obras* 1:530–39; English translation in Borges, *Labyrinths* 36–44), and Miguel Unamuno’s *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*.

In Borges’s “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*,” the narrator is a critic commenting on the work of an imaginary author who tried to rewrite Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Menard’s *Quixote*, although fragmentary and unfinished, is a verbatim reproduction of some chapters of the original (Borges, *Obras* 1:446, *Labyrinths* 39).

The narrator, however, judges Menard's *Quixote* as "arguably more subtle . . . and infinitely richer" (Borges, *Obras* 1:536, *Labyrinths* 42). This is an extraordinary and insinuating experiment that oscillates between pastiche and parody and questions the meaning of literature.

Borges's innovative text about Menard's improbable literary purpose has been the subject of many interpretations. "In writing a rigorously literal *Don Quixote* from his own inspiration," argues Gérard Genette, "Menard allegorizes the act of reading considered as, or disguised into, an act of writing . . . they mesh into a unifying metaphor of the complex and ambiguous relationship between writing and reading" (Genette, *Palimpsests* 252).

On his part, Robert Jauss proposes that Borges's Pierre Ménard "did not just reveal new meaning in the supposed identity of old and new, in literal repetition; but, at the same time, it made us aware of the fictitious nature of our experience." He adds, "Borges with *Pierre Ménard* did more than anticipate the shift from the classical aesthetic production to the modern aesthetic reception" (Jauss 67).

Unamuno's *Don Quijote*, as Genette explains, is a simple reworking "that scrupulously respects and follows the order and pattern of its hypotext, preserving even its chapter headings. The plot line remains identical, save for a few episodes" (Genette, *Palimpsests* 318). He adds that Unamuno's work "has been brought to bear not on the events but on their *significance*" (Genette, *Palimpsests* 319). Actually, Unamuno was critical about how Cervantes dealt with Don Quixote's character (Unamuno 7). His project was to revive Don Quixote as a national hero to represent the Spanish identity in the aftermath of the 1898 defeat of the Spanish-American War and the decline of Spain as a colonial power (Carr 386–88, 473). Alan Hoyle reads this reappraisal by Unamuno as a national regeneration of spiritual values "to make a patriotic virtue out of what he had previously diagnosed as defeat" (Harrison and Hoyle 26–30).

In the case of al-Dīb rewriting the cycle of Ḥāsib Karīm al-Dīn, the strategy is ingeniously different. Although the narrating I is ultimately fictitious, the narrator reports telling his own story, which was already orally narrated for centuries and was written in the *Thousand and One Nights*. Contrary to the narrators in Borges and Unamuno, who are heterodiegetic (absent from the narrated world), Ḥāsib is both homodiegetic (present in the narrated world) and autodiegetic (identical with the protagonist).

Another major juncture that distinguishes al-Dīb's endeavor lies in the fact that contrary to Pierre Menard and Unamuno, who were rewriting a narrative by

a known author, al-Dīb is attempting to rewrite a narrative from popular lore that belongs to an oral/read literature without author (Gerhardt 39; Irwin 42; Kiliṭū, *al-Adab wal-irtiyāb* 51).

In the case of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the text has always been unsettled; there is no “definitive” text that can be considered original. As Borges puts it, “The concept of a *definitive text* corresponds only to religion or weariness” (*Obras* 1:280). The text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, moreover, has been endlessly reread and appropriated in different contexts. In Barthes’s sense, it is “a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture . . . it is a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146).

Rewriting as a Creative Adaptation

The hermeneutics implicit in al-Dīb’s rewriting can be described through the interplay between two closely related strategies: intertextuality and parody. Al-Dīb undertakes numerous alterations and insinuations and opens space for a profound dialogue between Ḥāsib and the Serpent Queen. These “falsities” and displacements, as Borges calls them (*Obras* 1:473), create the potential for new and unexpected meanings. As a result, al-Dīb’s hypertext reveals a hybrid nature and a ploy to transform the original and turn it into a personal history, a vita of a Ṣūfī on his journey toward love. However, Bulūqiyā’s journey and respectively that of Ḥāsib carry the *ṣifa* (quality) of love and the *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya* (al-Dīb, *I’ādat* 61), where the Serpent Queen comes to represent value (al-Dīb, *I’ādat* 109, *al-qīma wal-ma’nā*), whereas that of Jānshāh conversely carries the *ṣifa* of passionate earthly love (al-Dīb, *I’ādat* 76, 81, 85–86, 92, 97) and is represented by the chorus’s slogan in the final stasimon of *Oedipus Rex*, “Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last” (Sophocles l. 1684), which makes the title of chapter 11 (*lā taḥsaban aḥadan sa’īdan ḥattā yamūt*). This slogan is often repeated by the Queen of Serpents, who quotes it from Jānshāh as a life lesson and imagery for the instability of human fortunes (al-Dīb, *I’ādat* 95, 100, 102, 115, 119).

In chapter 13, the Serpent Queen makes a link between the slogan from *Oedipus Rex* and Ḥāsib’s own journey (al-Dīb, *I’ādat* 120), a link that is established through *al-maktūb*, which had been decreed from eternity and will only find its ultimate meaning in *al-kaynūna*. It is quite interesting that al-Dīb borrows an element from Greek culture that involves the ambiguous idea of *moīra* and introduces it in his

rewriting, emphasizing the notion of fate and *al-maktūb* (for the concept of fate in modern Arabic literature, see Cohen-Mor xvii, 31, 114), which is underscored once again by the narrator referring to a higher code that traverses the laws and the existence of men (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 14–16, 21, 54, 70–71, 75, 122, 156, 164–66, 169). Greek *moîra* refers usually to the fates, but Walter Burkert has shown that for man it indicates that “the most important and most painful boundary is death: this is his limited portion” (Burkert, *Griechische Religion* 204). Moreover, classicists have long been debating about the extent to which *Oedipus Rex* can be read as a drama of tragic fate or a drama that calls attention to individual choice. Dodds, for example, argues that

The whole notion is in fact anachronistic. The modern reader slips into it easily because we think of two clear-cut alternative views—either we believe in free will or else we are determinists. But fifth-century Greeks did not think in these terms any more than Homer did: the debate about determinism is a creation of Hellenistic thought. . . . Nor did Sophocles intend that it should occur to readers of the *Oedipus Rex*. Neither in Homer nor in Sophocles does divine foreknowledge of certain events imply that all human actions are predetermined. (Dodds 42–43; Burkert, *Oedipus, Oracles, and Meaning* 17)

The notion of *al-maktūb* and predestination (*qaḍā' wa-qadar*) prevails in the *Thousand and One Nights* as part of the folk mentality (Rescher 50–58; Yāsīn 201–22; Irwin 195–201; El-Shamy, *Types of the Folktale* 229, 433, 649; al-Musawi 38–40). Although the narrator in *I'ādat* explains that he does not aim at “preoccupying himself with the issue of predestination and free will” (al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 24 and 21). Nevertheless, by overemphasizing this notion as an overarching theme of his reading, it seems to me that al-Dīb situates his theological, messianic narrative under a fatalistic, Ṣūfī interpretation of the complex modern human situation in a feeble Egyptian society facing all kinds of crisis and disillusionment in the last decades of the twentieth century (Amin; Shukrallah 90–95).

Al-Dīb uses a metadiegetic approach (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 236–7), in the sense that it becomes not only a fiction that contains another or includes reflection on its own diegesis, development, or characteristics but also develops into a symbolic reading and a narrative of diversion and creative writing (Calabrese 33–34).

In his memoir, Ḥāsīb describes the experience of his encounter with the Queen of Serpents as being outside space and time, a *kaynūna mufāriqa* (al-Dīb,

I'adat 43–44), and accordingly he becomes an involved listener and spectator who identifies emotionally with the “characters” of his own story as narrated to him by the Queen of Serpents. He indulges in an intra-diegetic form of gaze to interact directly with Bulūqiyā and Jānshāh, whose lifestories occur in front of his eyes as if on a screen, thus amounting to a total violation of the boundaries between the levels of narration (al-Dīb, *I'adat* 67).²

To borrow from Linda Hutcheon, al-Dīb's rewriting amounts to a “parodic creation of new fiction through the rewriting of old is itself the narcissistic subject of metafictional parody” (Hutcheon 25). As Hutcheon explains, parody is an “exploration of difference and similarity; in metafiction it invites a more literary reading, a recognition of literary codes. But it is wrong to see the end of this process as mockery, ridicule, or mere destruction” (Hutcheon 25).

The text is designed around the very act of listening, the imperative verb *isma'* or *i'lam* (al-Dīb, *I'adat* 23, 59). Like Shahrāzād, the Queen of Serpents turns Ḥāsib's desire into reflective listening (Malti-Douglas 24–25)—a spiritual initiation through hearing: “Hold fast to what we have revealed to you and listen,” as per Quran 2:93 (“Listening with the presence of the heart,” Sands 23–27). Ḥāsib cannot help but listen, and he becomes absorbed in what he hears. He is then no longer a listener but an emotionally active participant, and he changes into a custodian of the Word (Bencheikh 219), where, in the process of listening, his body has been transmuted into word and back into a new being (Malti-Douglas 28).

In his hypertext, al-Dīb offers a novel reading, opting for an experience of constant transience and impermanence. With a “minimal” reworking of the text, which becomes now permeated with the remains of a Ṣūfī discourse, the overall meaning is transformed into a spiritual journey bearing insights into the meaning of being and value, destiny, narration, and the act of writing itself.

Conclusion

Despite this short display of the book's general idea, al-Dīb's attempt can only be deemed unique and innovative in Arabic literature. It should be stressed that in a waning Egyptian society with political and cultural disruptions, al-Dīb's project of a “textual exegesis” of a popular medieval tale turns out to be a mystical, romantic rewriting that amounts to an estrangement from the world (where the serpent symbolizes kind of a search to a Gnostic “yonder shore,” Campbell, *Creative* 157–58)

and an interpellation that concedes to the legitimacy of the dominant ideology. His aesthetically distinctive experiment, which underscores an individualistic, mystical experience, fosters the ability to expand the recognition of common, popular beliefs and fatalistic, escapist religious thought that had been propagated by the Egyptian regime and the dominant Islamist culture in its various prevailing shadings (Amin 15–19).

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■ NOTES

I thank Dima Mouallem (American University of Beirut) and Laura Poole for their meticulous editing skills. I am also much indebted to Ulrich Marzolph and the two anonymous readers for their valuable comments.

1. Macnaghten 2:583–699 (Nights 483–537); Būlāq 1:657–710 (Nights 483–537). It does not appear in Galland's translation but does appear in the French translations by Trébutien, *Contes inédits des Mille et une nuits* 1:142–257 (Nights 479–537) and Mardrus 1: 811–41 and its English translations by Mathers, *The Thousand Nights and One Night* 2:329–66 (Nights 355–373). Gerhardt 96 mentions that Mardrus reduced the cycle "to about a fourth of its length"; Burton 5:298–396 (Nights 483–537); a separate version appears in a sixteenth-century manuscript (Taymūrīya, qīṣaṣ 15), Grotzfeld and Grotzfeld 83–85.
2. See also al-Dīb, *I'ādat* 39, where Ḥāsib, the narrator, internalizes the fiery, passionate love that Bulūqiyā carries toward Muḥammad; 55, where he weeps together with Jānshāh and Bulūqiyā; 69, where he yells at Jānshāh not to slay the gazelle; 70, where he interferes to ask Bulūqiyā a direct question, as if he were expecting an answer from him; 91, where he envisages the flying of Shamsa, as if on a screen, but only hears the scattering of her wings; 92, where he sneaks into

Shamsa's chamber; 100, where Jānshāh turns around looking at Ḥāsib and the Serpent Queen rehearsing the slogan in *Oedipus Rex*, "Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last"; 110, the overwhelming influence of the Serpent Queen on his senses so that he can take part in the actions that are narrated to him).

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