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# Sabry, Somaya Sami, Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race, and the Idea of The Arabian Nights

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**Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance:  
Orientalism, Race, and the Idea of The Arabian Nights  
by Somaya Sami Sabry (review)**

Jeana Jorgensen

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authors such as Lewis. Whereas Pullman criticizes this tradition for being world hating, Gray suggests that through his immersion in the works of William Blake, Pullman himself is, perhaps unconsciously, involved in “the tradition of heterodox Christian Platonism” and that the “power of Pullman’s myth, then, may derive partly from sources beyond his conscious control” (162).

Gray concludes *Fantasy, Myth, and the Measure of Truth* with a brief examination of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) and whether or not she belongs in the mythopoeic tradition stretching from Hoffman to Pullman. Although such speculation provides an intriguing conclusion to the study, Gray’s attempts to insert references to the *Harry Potter* series earlier in the volume seem rather out of place and awkward. Perhaps the biggest challenge to the readability of Gray’s study, however, is actually, and unfortunately, a formatting issue: namely, throughout the volume Gray abbreviates the titles of more than sixty books, referring to them only by initial. Although this choice certainly seems like a reasonable way to make Gray’s many references more wieldy, because of the sheer number of these texts and the frequent movement between them, these abbreviations have the potential to hinder the reader greatly. Flipping back to check the “Abbreviations” page disrupts the flow of what is otherwise an engaging, detailed, and ultimately convincing argument.

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***Arab-American Women’s Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race, and the Idea of The Arabian Nights.* By Somaya Sami Sabry. London: I. B. Taurus, 2011.**

Somaya Sami Sabry makes a considerable contribution to studies of diaspora, Arab American identity, transnational feminism, and post-9/11 ethnicity in this book, although folklorists may be disappointed by how little time is actually spent discussing *The Arabian Nights*, despite its prominence in the title. Indeed, Sabry makes much of “Sheherazadian narrative” and “Sheherazadian orality” in her texts, terms that she uses to refer to “a narrative which resists stereotypical and exotic representations through reformation of the frame tale of *The Thousand and One Nights* or the invocation of its orality” (3). However, the matter of what precisely makes a narrative Sheherazadian is not explained to my satisfaction; is it a particular quality of Arab or Muslim women’s speech acts, or does it require concrete intertextual references to *The 1001 Nights*? So many cultures have complex relationships with orality and frame tales that Sabry is on firmer ground when she discusses the fascinating context of contemporary Arab American cultural translations.

In the first two chapters Sabry explores Sheherazade in the West in connection with Orientalism, the “racing” of Arabs, and views of Arab women

that alternately position them as exoticized or subaltern. All this is to set up the exploration in the following three chapters of contemporary women's uses of Sheherazade: "The resurgence of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the literary imaginations of Arab-American women writers represents an attempt at translating Arabic culture to an American public enveloped by limited, 'raced' representations of Arabs" (8). Cultural translation receives much attention here, because Sabry is concerned with the politics of representing one's identity to an outsider audience, which becomes especially crucial in the anti-Arab aftermath of 9/11.

In the third chapter Sabry examines Arab American women's narratives in the novel *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber. The discussions of food in the text (and as a cultural marker in general) are fascinating, but the description of how the novel interacts with *The Nights* would have benefited from clarification. A simple plot analysis would have helped readers not familiar with *Crescent* understand how the novel departs from the tropes of *The Nights*. For instance, when Sabry states that "Abu-Jaber links her writing with the narrative tradition of Sheherazade, which as an oral narrative had the distinguishing characteristic of being infinitely fertile and fluctuating" (73), we are left unsure how exactly Abu-Jaber links her writing with Sheherazade (through explicit or implicit references? by borrowing the framing device? by using the same motifs or tale types?). Some characters are adapted from *The Nights*, but the rest of the interaction between the two texts is unclear. Moreover, Sabry's romanticization of orality as "fertile and fluctuating" seems to be the same essentialization that she laments is projected onto Arab American women.

In Chapter 4 Sabry analyzes the poetry in Mohja Kahf's collection *E-mails from Scheherazad*, with a focus on the veil or *hijab* in Muslim American women's experiences. The connection between this work and *The Nights* is much more obvious, as seen in the title of the poetry collection; however, Sabry acknowledges that "Sheherazade's name is mentioned overtly only twice in this collection of poetry" (91). Sabry's main point in this chapter is that "Kahf foregrounds the diversity of Muslim-American women and their experiences of wearing the headscarf through recasting Sheherazadian narrative; in this she resists reductive perceptions of Muslim women and their identities" (88). This chapter contains a wealth of information about veiling practices and the scholarship thereon, challenging simplistic Western feminist conceptions of the veil that impose ethnocentric and dualistic judgments on a multifaceted phenomenon.

Sabry addresses the performance art (including stand-up comedy) of Laila Farah and Maysoon Zayid in Chapter 5. Again, the connection to *The Nights* seems a bit tenuous at times. Farah has a piece titled "Sheherazade Don't Need No Visa," and "Zayid makes no direct references to Sheherazade's

frame tale of *The Nights*,” which Sabry still interprets thus: “Her performative resistant storytelling is a revival of Sheherazade’s storytelling” (147). The rest of the chapter is an intelligent exploration of how performance genres can contest discursive hegemonies, but the imposed connection with *The Nights* makes me pause. Is every French woman’s subversive storytelling a revival of Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, and is every English woman’s transgressive tale telling a reference to Mother Bunch?

The sixth and final chapter situates this research within the context of Arab American studies. Resistance through reappropriation is one of the major themes of this book, and Sabry convincingly demonstrates how women artists contest stereotypical depictions of Arab American women by reviving “Sheherazade and her storytelling techniques to unfix the traces of Orientalist and racist discourses which still shape their representations” (171). Thus one of this book’s strengths is its attention to power dynamics, whether they are constructed in regard to gender, race, or national identity.

Because *The Nights* is one of the foundational texts in literary imaginings of the Orient and one of the intertexts her study foregrounds, Sabry spends a reasonable amount of time discussing its origins and impact. She makes some salient points, such as how “the problem with most nineteenth-century translations of *The Nights* is that these tales were introduced as the ‘door’ to the understanding of a people as a whole, so that the approach to reading this textual world became primarily anthropological” (37). However, the fact that Sabry does not cite scholars such as Ulrich Marzolph or other folk narrative scholars who have worked on *The Nights* and related topics, such as frame tales (Lee Haring) or postmodern takes on folk narrative (Cristina Bacchilega), is disappointing. In Sabry’s discussion of performance too I would have expected to see folklorists such as Richard Bauman cited. Given the attention Sabry pays to oral and cultural performances, I was a little disappointed to see that the stereotype of the seductive belly dancer was mentioned briefly yet not interrogated.

Although this book might appeal to folk narrative scholars for endorsing sentiments such as the “human capacity to grasp stories” that contributes to “the urgency in exploring Sheherazadian narrative and performance as diasporic narratives, outlining Arab-American women’s worlds” (5), there are some red flags. Sabry’s uncritical merging of orality with the communal (130) and her omission of folkloristic research on *The Nights* are problematic. However, this book should interest scholars of *The Nights* (especially modern interpretations) and scholars of diasporic, Arab American, and women’s literature.

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