

**Reclaiming The Narrative: Modern Female Voices in The
Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell: A Feminist,
Post-Colonial Reading**

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Abstract

*This paper attempts a feminist, postcolonial reading of *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell*, a collection of stories that reimagine traditional folk tales through the voices of modern Egyptian female writers. By reclaiming these narratives, the authors challenge the dominant patriarchal and colonial discourses embedded in classical texts like *One Thousand and One Nights*. The paper explores how the Women and Memory Foundation, which spearheaded this project, seeks to correct the misconceptions about women's roles in society perpetuated by popular culture and traditional storytelling. Through the re-writing of folk tales from a woman's perspective, these stories create new, empowering representations of women. The analysis also examines how the feminist postcolonial theory is embodied in the texts by deconstructing colonial representations of gender, culture, and power. Focusing on one story as a case study, the paper demonstrates how these narratives subvert established gender roles, offering alternative models of female empowerment. Additionally, the research highlights the collective efforts of the Women and Memory Foundation, including workshops, storytelling events, and exhibitions, which engage diverse audiences in conversations about gender, culture, and identity. Ultimately, this work contributes to the ongoing discourse on reclaiming narrative spaces for marginalized voices.*

Keywords:

The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell; One Thousand and One Nights; Feminism; Postcolonialism; Folk tales; Narrative reclamation

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية تقديم قراءة نسوية وما بعد الفترة الاستعمارية لمجموعة قالت الراويات ما لم تقله شهرزاد، وهي مجموعة من القصص تعيد تصور الحكايات الشعبية التقليدية من خلال أصوات كاتبات مصريات معاصرات. من خلال استعادة هذه السرديات، تتحدى المؤلفات الخطابية السلطوية الأبوية والاستعمارية السائدة و المترسخة في النصوص الكلاسيكية مثل ألف ليلة وليلة. تستكشف الورقة كيف تسعى مؤسسة المرأة والذاكرة، التي قادت هذا المشروع، إلى تصحيح المفاهيم الخاطئة حول أدوار المرأة في المجتمع التي ترسخها الثقافة الشعبية والحكايات التقليدية. من خلال إعادة كتابة الحكايات الشعبية من منظور المرأة المصرية المعاصرة، تخلق هذه القصص تمثيلات جديدة وقوية للمرأة. كما تحلل الورقة تجسيد النظرية النسوية وما بعد الاستعمارية في النصوص من خلال تفكيك تمثيلات الاستعمار للجنس والثقافة والسلطة. وتركز الورقة على قصة واحدة من المجموعة كدراسة حالة لتوضيح كيف تقلب هذه السرديات الأدوار الجنسانية المترسخة وتتحدى النظرة الكولونيالية للمجتمعات العربية، مقدمة نماذج بديلة لتمكين المرأة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تحاول الدراسة إبراز الجهود الجماعية لمؤسسة المرأة والذاكرة، بما في ذلك إقامة ورش العمل وأحداث السرد والمعارض التي تشرك جمهوراً متنوعاً في مناقشات حول الجنسانية والثقافة والهوية. في النهاية، تهدف الدراسة تشجيع النقاش المستمر حول استعادة الفضاءات السردية للأصوات المهمشة كالنساء والشعوب التي عانت من الاستعمار وإبراز دور الحكيم والأدب عموماً في إحداث تغييرات في المجتمعات والثقافة السائدة وإحداث التطورات اللازمة للتمكين.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

قالت الراويات ما لم تقله شهرزاد ؛ ألف ليلة وليلة؛ النظرية النسوية؛ نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار؛ الحكايات الشعبية؛ استعادة السرد

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Introduction

Storytelling has always played a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, challenging societal norms, and resisting oppression in all its forms. The collection *One Thousand and One Nights*, with its iconic figure Shahrazad, exemplifies this tradition. Shahrazad's narratives, crafted to ensure her survival under the tyrannical rule of King Shahryar, represent a form of resistance within the confines of patriarchal oppression. The modern collection *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* (2005) by eight contemporary Egyptian female authors, not only continues this tradition but transforms it as well.

The Egyptian Female Writers and Woman and Memory Foundation

The eight Egyptian female writers who contributed to the collection *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* are affiliated to "Woman and Memory Foundation", a pioneering feminist institution in Egypt. Established in 1995, the foundation is committed to critically engaging with Arab cultural heritage, challenging traditional narratives, and promoting alternative perspectives that highlight women's roles and experiences. The Women and Memory Foundation recognizes the influence of fairy tales and folk tales in shaping misconceptions about gender roles and the unfair representation of women in popular culture. In response, it seeks to create alternative narratives by telling folk tales from a different perspective. These stories aim to challenge the prevailing stereotypes and to empower women by presenting positive female roles. The project "Rewriting Folk Tales from a Woman's Point of View" focuses on analyzing and rewriting popular texts like those from *One Thousand and One Nights* using a feminist lens. Since 1998, the group has organized bi-monthly workshops to reinterpret these tales. The first workshop, held in March 1998, brought together Egyptian women from various fields to analyze and rewrite fairy tales from a feminist perspective. In addition to rewriting original texts, some participants created new stories. The foundation has organized storytelling events to share these rewritten tales, attracting diverse audiences, including

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researchers and children. The group has also exhibited their work at venues like the Cairo Opera House, Townhouse Gallery, and some international institutions (Women and Memory website).

The writers of *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* are Hala Kamal, Omayma Abou Bakr, Sahar Elmougy, Siham Bent Sanya and Abdelsallam, Soha Ra'afat, Mona Ibrahim, Mounira Soliman, and Maha Elsaed. Most of them are mostly distinguished academics and authors with a profound interest in the status of Arab women and the preservation and reinterpretation of cultural heritage. Many of those authors still hold prominent academic positions and are deeply preoccupied with issues related to gender, culture, identity and history in the Arab world. Their work often explores the intersection of these themes, seeking to uncover and critique the patriarchal and colonial structures that have historically marginalized women's voices. Through their contributions to the collection, they engage in a form of literary activism, using storytelling to reclaim women's narratives and challenge the dominant cultural discourses that have long shaped perceptions of femininity in Arab societies.

The Woman and Memory Foundation has been instrumental in creating a supportive environment for these writers, fostering a community of feminist scholars, writers, and activists dedicated to rewriting history from the perspective of women. The foundation's projects frequently focus on revisiting and reinterpreting classical texts, oral histories, and popular culture to foreground women's contributions and challenge dominant narratives. By aligning their literary work with the mission of the Woman and Memory Foundation, these Egyptian female writers position themselves within a tradition of feminist scholarship that seeks to disrupt the status quo and offer new ways of thinking about gender, culture, and memory in the Arab world.

This collection represents a critical intervention in the cultural heritage of *One Thousand and One Nights*, offering a gender-sensitive perspective that highlights the voices and experiences of women. By reimagining these tales, they not only reclaim their cultural heritage but also challenge the dominant narratives that have historically marginalized them. In doing so, they contribute to a broader movement of re-reading and re-writing cultural texts to support and empower women, both in the Arab world and beyond.

Thesis Statement

This paper attempts a dual mission of examining the feminist and postcolonial re-reading and reinterpretation of traditional folk tales in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell*, while challenging the Western narratives that have historically helped to shape these stories. By reclaiming their voices and offering new interpretations, contemporary female authors of the collection engage in narrative resistance, rewriting history and confronting dominant colonial discourse and patriarchal hierarchies. Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to provide an overview of postcolonial theory and contextualize *One Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights* as it is commonly known in the West.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory is an academic discipline that analyzes the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. It examines the power dynamics and social hierarchies established during colonial rule and how these continue to influence contemporary societies. Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha are seminal figures in postcolonial studies, each contributing foundational concepts that have shaped the field.

Edward Said's body of work, particularly *Orientalism* (1978), is a must to understanding postcolonial theory. Said argues that the West constructed the "Orient" as a means of asserting cultural and political dominance, portraying Eastern societies as exotic, backward, and inferior. This construction is evident in literature, art, and academic discourse, reinforcing colonial power structures. Said states, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient...by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 3).

Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) introduces the concept of the subaltern, referring to marginalized groups excluded from the hegemonic power structures of colonial and postcolonial societies. Spivak argues that these groups are often denied a voice within dominant discourses. She asserts, "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item" (Spivak 104). Her work emphasizes the importance of giving voice to the marginalized and reinterpreting their histories from their own perspectives.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, articulated in *The Location of Culture* (1994), examines how colonial subjects resist and transform colonial power structures to create new, hybrid identities. Bhabha states,

“Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects” (Bhabha 112). This process of hybridization disrupts the clear boundaries between colonizer and colonized, creating spaces for new cultural expressions and resistances.

Orientalism and One Thousand and One Nights

The reception and interpretation of One Thousand and One Nights in the Western world have been significantly influenced by Orientalist perspectives. Western readers and scholars often approached the text with preconceived notions about the East, shaped by colonial ideologies that emphasized exoticism and cultural otherness. This Orientalist lens led to a portrayal of the tales as fantastical and otherworldly, reinforcing stereotypes about Eastern societies with men as blood-thirsty, sex maniacs and women as submissive, voiceless and oppressed. The two major characters in the tales of One Thousand and One Nights Shahrazad and Shahryar are perfect examples of the stereotype.

Edward Said’s analysis in Orientalism highlights how Western interpretations of Eastern texts often serve to maintain colonial power dynamics. Said argues that Orientalism “is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). This perspective has influenced the way One Thousand and One Nights has been translated, adapted, and studied in the West. According to Marina Warner, “The Nights, as translated by Galland and his successors, exercised a strong and pervasive influence over European imaginative and literary life” (Warner 45). These translations often emphasized the exotic and sensual aspects of the tales, aligning with Western fantasies about the East.

This orientalist framing has been critiqued by contemporary scholars who seek to reclaim One Thousand and One Nights as a cultural artifact with intrinsic value and complexity. Muhsin al-Musawi argues that the tales should be understood within their historical and cultural contexts, noting that “the Arabian Nights must be approached as a series of narratives that articulate complex social and cultural concerns” (al-Musawi 22). This re-interpretation challenges the simplistic, reductive orientalist view and highlights the rich cultural heritage of the tales.

Rewriting as Resistance

Re-imagining and re-writing traditional narratives serve as a powerful form of cultural and political resistance. By reinterpreting

stories from marginalized perspectives, writers can challenge dominant cultural narratives and offer alternative visions of history and identity. This process of rewriting not only reclaims cultural heritage but also empowers marginalized voices. Another concept of postcolonial literature is writing back to the colonial center to challenge and correct stereotypes and show their authentic identity in their own voice. The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell, the paper argues, is an example of rewriting as resistance that strikes two birds with one stone. By retelling the tales from One Thousand and One Nights from modern Egyptian women's perspective, the collection challenges both patriarchal and orientalist narratives. This act of rewriting serves to "break out of the repeated stereotypes of women" and present "a different cultural material, which is the folk tale from a woman's point of view" (Women and Memory).

Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern is relevant here too, as it emphasizes the importance of giving voice to marginalized groups; postcolonial people and particularly women who were doubly oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy. By rewriting these tales, the women storytellers in The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell reclaim their narratives and assert their agency. Spivak argues that "the subaltern must be seen as silenced, for in the ways of the world, subalterns cannot speak" (Spivak 104). Through their storytelling, these women challenge this silencing and create space for their voices to be heard.

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity also plays a crucial role in understanding the impact of these rewritten tales. The new narratives blend traditional elements with contemporary gender-sensitive perspectives, creating hybrid stories that challenge and transform existing cultural norms. Bhabha states, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha 112). This hybridization disrupts colonial and patriarchal power structures, offering new ways of understanding and representing cultural identities.

To sum up, postcolonial theory provides valuable insights into the reception and interpretation of One Thousand and One Nights on the one hand, and the purpose and value of The Narrator's Told what Sharazad Did Not Tell. By applying the concepts of orientalism, subalternity, and hybridity, we better understand the significance of rewriting traditional narratives as a form of resistance, offering a powerful counter-narrative that reclaims and empowers women's voices within the rich cultural heritage of Middle Eastern storytelling.

Contextualizing One Thousand and One Nights and Its Cultural Significance

One Thousand and One Nights, also known as "Arabian Nights," is a seminal collection of Middle Eastern folktales that has captivated readers all over the world for centuries. Despite its deep roots in Persian, Indian, and various other eastern cultural traditions, the collection came to be known in the West as the Arabian Nights, a name that reflects the colonial and orientalist tendencies to attribute the origins of these stories to the Arab world exclusively. This misattribution has played a significant role in shaping Western perceptions of the stories and their cultural significance. Its narrative framework centers around the character of Shahrazad, a clever and resourceful woman who tells stories to the king, Shahryar, to postpone her execution. Each night, she leaves her tale unfinished, compelling the king to spare her life for another day to hear the story's conclusion and the cycle continues for one thousand and one nights.

The cultural significance of One Thousand and One Nights is immense, as it offers a window into the rich and diverse oral traditions of the Middle East. The collection includes a wide range of stories, from adventure and romance to moral tales and fables, reflecting the complexity of human experience and the cultural values of the societies from which these stories originate. According to scholar Robert Irwin, "The Nights is a treasure house of popular lore and cultural wisdom" (Irwin 5). This vast array of tales has influenced literature, art, and popular culture worldwide, cementing its status as a cornerstone of global literary heritage.

However, One Thousand and One Nights has also been subject to various interpretations and adaptations, often influenced by Orientalist perspectives. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, argues that Western depictions of Eastern cultures are often shaped by stereotypes and a sense of exoticism, which serve to reinforce colonial power dynamics (Said 12). This Orientalist lens has historically framed the tales as fantastical and otherworldly, rather than as expressions of authentic cultural narratives.

The Origins of the Tales

The origins of One Thousand and One Nights are complex and diverse, with contributions from various cultures. The core of the collection can be traced back to ancient Persian stories, particularly the *Hezar Afsan* or (Thousand Myths), which were later adapted and

expanded upon by Arab writers. These tales were transmitted orally and through written manuscripts, evolving over time as they absorbed elements from Indian, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian folklore.

As Robert Irwin notes in *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*,

The stories in *One Thousand and One Nights* were not Arabic in origin. The earliest versions of these stories likely came from Persia and India, where they were adapted and eventually translated into Arabic during the Abbasid Caliphate” (Irwin 45).

The collection’s journey through different cultures and languages highlights its multicultural origins, which contradict the simplistic label of “Arabian Nights” imposed by Western scholars and translators.

The Western Appropriation and Renaming

The term Arabian Nights became popular in Europe after the French translation by Antoine Galland, who translated the tales into French under the title *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in the early 18th century. Galland’s version introduced the stories to a European audience, and his translation included several tales that were not part of the original Arabic manuscripts, such as *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. These additions, coupled with Galland’s adaptations, played a crucial role in shaping Western perceptions of the collection.

Marina Warner points out in *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* that

Galland’s translation was instrumental in creating the Western concept of the Arabian Nights. By emphasizing the exotic and oriental aspects of the tales, Galland effectively branded the collection as an ‘Arabian’ product, even though its origins were far more diverse (Warner 28).

This renaming and branding of the tales as Arabian Nights reflects the colonial mindset that sought to simplify and label the East according to Western fantasies and stereotypes. In *Orientalism*, Said discusses how the West’s portrayal of the East often involved oversimplification and misrepresentation. He argues that “the concept of the Arabian Nights was less about accurately representing the stories and more about constructing a fantastical image of the Orient that could be consumed by Western audiences” (Said 56). This colonial rebranding of *One Thousand and One Nights* as Arabian Nights is an important example of how Western interpretations have shaped and often distorted the understanding of Eastern cultures.

Rewriting the Colonial Narrative

The historical background and the renaming of the tales as Arabian Nights sheds light on the complex interplay between colonialism, literature, and cultural identity. While the very brief historical context above shows that these stories have been historically framed by the West, the contemporary female storytellers in the collection at hand are reclaiming and rewriting these narratives from a feminist, postcolonial perspective; they are, in other words, writing back to this interpretation. Postcolonial re-writing is not just about correcting historical inaccuracies but about reasserting the cultural and literary agency of those who were marginalized in the colonial narrative. Homi K. Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture*, that postcolonial literature often involves “a process of reclaiming and rewriting history from the perspective of the colonized, challenging the narratives imposed by colonial powers” (Bhabha 113). This approach is evident in the way modern female storytellers are revisiting and transforming the tales of Shahrazad.

The Significance of the Title

The title of the collection, *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell*, embodies a profound shift in narrative agency from survival to empowerment. It signifies a deliberate departure from the themes of the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, where Shahrazad's tales were crafted as a means of survival. Instead, the modern storytellers in this collection assert their voices to challenge traditional notions of femininity and the status of women in Arab societies.

By invoking Shahrazad, the title acknowledges a historical continuity with the tradition of female storytelling, yet it also emphasizes a break from the past since all the writers are feminists and the institution that started the rewriting project is Women and Memory Foundation. Shahrazad's storytelling was constrained by her need to appease and survive under patriarchal authority. In contrast, the contemporary female authors in this collection use their narratives not just as tools of survival but as instruments of empowerment. They speak the truths that Shahrazad, due to her precarious circumstances, could not or did not articulate.

The phrase "what Shahrazad did not say" suggests that there are stories, perspectives, and truths that have been historically suppressed or left untold. The modern storytellers are reclaiming these silences, giving voice to the previously unspoken and overlooked aspects of women's experiences. This act of storytelling is not just an inheritance of cultural

tradition but a transformative act of cultural production, where women are no longer just passive recipients of narratives but active shapers of them.

Overall, the title is a manifesto for a new generation of Arab women writers. It displays their mastery of storytelling as a form of resistance and their commitment to redefining cultural heritage. By telling the stories that Shahrazad did not, these authors are not only continuing her legacy but also transforming it. Their narratives offer a bold feminist critique of both past and present, reshaping the literary landscape to center women's voices, perspectives, and identities.

Shahrazad's Strategic Storytelling: A Necessity for Survival

In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Shahrazad's storytelling is a life-saving strategy. Faced with the threat of execution every night, she tells a series of captivating tales, each ending in suspense, to prolong her life for one more day. Shahrazad's narratives are carefully crafted to entertain King Shahryar while subtly critiquing his tyrannical rule. However, as Mohja Kahf explains in *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Shahrazad's critique is always veiled, as "she knew that the art of storytelling was not just about weaving tales but about wielding power in a way that would not provoke the wrath of the king" (Kahf 45). Her resistance is thus constrained by the very power structures she seeks to undermine.

Shahrazad's stories, while powerful, are shaped by the necessity of survival. Her tales, though rich with meaning, remain within the boundaries of what is acceptable to her male audience. As Jack Zipes notes in *The Arabian Nights: New Cultural and Historical Perspectives*, Shahrazad's narratives are a "delicate balance of critique and conformity" (Zipes 112). They reflect her acute awareness of the limits imposed by the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Reversing the Standpoint: Empowerment through Direct Confrontation

Unlike Shahrazad, the authors in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did not Tell*, adopt a radically different approach. These modern narratives do not simply navigate patriarchal constraints; they actively confront and challenge them. The contemporary female authors write with a freedom and boldness that Shahrazad could not afford, using their stories to directly address issues of gender inequality, oppression, and the status of women in Arab societies. To demonstrate how this work aligns with feminist postcolonial themes, we will analyze one of the stories as a case study. As the book opens the reader is aware that stories are told by a group of modern women who found a volume containing

tales written by Shahrazad in an ancient palace a long time ago. After they sat listening to the original tales, they wrote new tales inspired by them. The stories are related to the heritage of One Thousand and One Nights but from a feminist, post-colonial stand as the following example attempts to verify.

"Set ElMolk and the Musk in the Jars" by Maha ElSaeed

In Maha ElSaeed's story "Set ElMolk and the Musk in the Jars," the contemporary narrative stands in stark contrast to Shahrazad's subtle and cautious storytelling in One Thousand and One Nights. While Shahrazad crafted her tales to survive in the perilous and patriarchal environment of the king's court, Set ElMolk's story challenges the oppressive structures that persist in modern Arab society. ElSaeed's work serves as a more direct confrontation of these structures, illustrating a bold and public rejection of the traditional norms that have long restricted women.

Set ElMolk, the story's protagonist, is depicted as a strong, determined woman who refuses to be bound by the societal expectations of her age. Her defiance does not stop at rejecting these norms for herself; she actively encourages other women to break free from similar constraints. In fact, she goes beyond mere defiance and provokes women around her to challenge not only social expectations but also the ultimate patriarchal authority of the kingdom, symbolized by the police. This depiction of Set ElMolk highlights her role as a leader in mobilizing women to disrupt the status quo and assert their rights.

The setting is an unnamed old Arab state, probably during the Fatimid period, a time and place where women were largely confined to their homes, unable to voice their dreams or desires without the presence or approval of men. The story revolves around Set ElMolk's discovery of jars filled with musk, a substance commonly associated with power, wealth, and status. However, rather than hoarding this wealth to elevate her already prestigious standing, Set ElMolk chooses to distribute the musk among the "Jawary," or slave women of the palace, and eventually to all the women of the state. This act transcends charity; it is a symbolic rejection of the material wealth and social hierarchy that underpins traditional values. As the rest of the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Set ElMolk's actions are about more than musk distribution; they represent a radical reimagining of women's roles in society.

The story begins with Set ElMolk, aided by her personal assistant Set Elsetat, gathering the women in her palace and encouraging them to share "a word and a smile" along with their aspirations and dreams

(ElSaeed 23). Although seemingly simple, this act of gathering and sharing dreams is profoundly subversive, reflecting a sense of sisterhood and shared concerns. Set ElMolk understands the power of words, recognizing that they can be as powerful as weapons, an idea hinted at earlier in the narrative. Initially, the women are skeptical, viewing Set ElMolk's behavior as irrational, as they have been silenced by tradition and patriarchal rule for so long. They underestimate the potential of words and communication, having lived in a society that has muted their voices. However, as they begin to share their seemingly trivial dreams, the underlying desire for freedom becomes increasingly apparent.

The first woman tentatively expresses a wish to eat "Molokhya", a traditional Egyptian dish banned by the Fatimid ruler Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah. Although the other women mock her for this simple desire, her willingness to speak out inspires others to share their dreams as well. These dreams range from wanting a dish of soup to taking a walk at night without fear of harassment from the police. What unites them is their underlying yearning for freedom, which Set ElMolk uses to fuel a broader, more ambitious plan. She declares "From today we will develop a strategic plan to change all unjust things... The important thing is that we all enjoy freedom" (ElSaeed 25).

This statement marks a turning point in the narrative, as Set ElMolk's ambitions extend beyond individual desires to encompass a collective movement for justice. Set Elsetat, surprised by the plan's audacity, whispers to Set ElMolk, asking what the strategy entails. Set ElMolk's simple response, "We will tell stories," (ElSaeed 25) demonstrates the narrative's emphasis on storytelling as a tool for empowerment. The act of storytelling becomes a revolutionary means for these women to express their suppressed desires, challenge societal norms, and imagine a different reality.

Following this initial meeting, Set ElMolk and the Jawary gather daily to share stories, with the group of narrators expanding as more women join in. The reader soon realizes that the "musk" referenced in the story's title, initially understood as a symbol of material wealth, is in fact a metaphor for the stories themselves. These tales, filled with solidarity and empowerment, become the source of women's newfound strength and freedom. ElSaeed writes that the direct reward the Jawary earn from their storytelling, which involves collective planning and pursuing their dreams, is their eventual liberation. No longer slaves, these women become free, emboldened to follow their aspirations with the support of one another.

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The collective storytelling grows in significance as night after night all the women in the palace gather not to adorn themselves with makeup or musk to please men, but to share their dreams and plan their future. The musk, therefore, takes on a dual meaning: it is both a physical substance and a metaphor for the power that comes from self-expression and solidarity. When the women are eventually freed, Set ElMolk calls an emergency meeting and asks what they should do for the Jawary who remain outside the palace, still confined by what society dictates on them and unable to imagine a different future. Set Elsetat replies: “We will gather them and expand our dreams with theirs and the greater our numbers, the greater our dreams and the greater our strength” (ElSaeed 26-27).

When Set ElMolk dies, she leaves behind eight hundred jars filled with musk—symbolizing the collective stories and empowerment of the women—which are distributed to every woman in the kingdom. The story’s final lines emphasize the transformative power of storytelling:

Day after day, a new Jarya (female slave) joined us, until they became eight hundred. All of them were strong women, and when they went out at night, the night guards themselves feared them... Set ElMolk died and left us this legacy: a group of female slaves and jars filled with musk of stories, filled by eight hundred female slaves who now knew the taste of freedom, all of them modern women" (ElSaeed 27).

ElSaeed’s story is rich in symbolism, with the musk representing not just material wealth but the potential for change and empowerment through storytelling and women solidarity. Set ElMolk’s decision to share the musk is a rejection of the greed and self-interest that underpin patriarchal societal norms. Her actions challenge the notion that women must conform to predetermined roles, whether as obedient daughters, subservient wives, or silent community members. Unlike Shahrazad, who had to carefully craft her stories to avoid the king’s fury, Set ElMolk’s narrative is one of defiance and boldness, offering an example for modern women to break free from unjust societal constraints.

The story also highlights themes of community, collective empowerment, and sisterhood. Set ElMolk’s actions inspire other women to assert their agency, resist oppressive norms, and create new narratives in which they are active participants rather than passive subjects. This collective resistance contrasts with Shahrazad’s solitary struggle, as the female characters in ElSaeed’s story work together to dismantle

patriarchal structures and create a new world of possibilities for themselves.

Through the story of *Set ElMolk*, ElSaeed addresses issues of gender inequality, social justice, and the status of women in contemporary Arab societies. Her narrative, bold and unapologetic, critiques patriarchal norms and offers a powerful example of the feminist and postcolonial themes running through *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell*. In this context, storytelling becomes a tool not only for survival but for collective liberation, as women reclaim their voices and rewrite the narratives that have historically marginalized them.

Maha ElSaeed and the rest of tlegacy:emporary storytellers in the collection are not merely continuing Shahrazad's legacy; they are expanding and transforming it. They do not whisper their truths in the shadows and privately behind closed door; instead, as Reem Bassiouney argues in "Narrative Strategies and Gender Politics in the Modern Arab Novel," they "shout them from the rooftops, unafraid of the consequences" (Bassiouney 38). Their stories are not shaped by the need to satisfy or appease a male authority figure. Instead, they use their narratives to highlight injustices and demand change and planning action and carrying it out. These modern narratives are not about survival but about empowerment. They are written by women who are no longer constrained by fear but are driven by the desire to rewrite history and assert the rights of women.

The Power of Rewriting from Shahrazad to Set ElMolk: From Survival to Revolution

The act of rewriting old texts is not just a literary exercise for these modern authors; it is a revolutionary act to dismantle hierarchies whether societal, cultural or colonial. By revisiting and transforming the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*, they reclaim the voices and experiences of women that have been marginalized throughout history. The shift from Shahrazad's necessity-driven storytelling to the bold, sometimes even confrontational narratives of modern authors reflects a broader cultural and social transformation.

In this context, rewriting is more than just a feminist reinterpretation of old tales; it is a form of literary resistance. In the opening story of the collection by Sahar Elmougy, the narrator encourages her sister to write, even if it is only writing journals, emphasizing that a women who write is a "warrior" whose weapons are words (7). It is also noteworthy the authors of the collection do not simply retell old stories or complete them; they write new stories as well. They use these narratives, whether old or

new, to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal structures that have long dictated how women should behave and restrict what they should aspire to. As Zipes notes, these modern storytellers “are not just changing the tales; they are changing the very foundations of the world in which these tales exist” (Zipes 130).

Characteristics of post-coloniality in the collection

Despite the simplicity of the stories and the fact that they maintain the general feel and atmosphere of folk tales, the collection has all the major characteristics of a post-colonial work that takes into consideration writing back to the old collection influenced by orientalist and colonialist mindsets and branded as exclusively “Arabian” as the following discussion attempts to prove.

Subversion of Orientalist Tropes

The tales in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* effectively subvert the Orientalist tropes that have historically dominated Western perceptions of Eastern cultures and women. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* emphasizes how Western literature and scholarship have constructed the East as an exotic, backward, and static entity, portraying Eastern women as voiceless, oppressed, and subservient (Said 3). The rewritten stories in this collection directly challenge these stereotypes by reimagining female characters as active, powerful, and complex figures who navigate and influence their social and even political worlds. When Set ElMolk, for example, leads women to voice and demand their rights to freedom is akin to some kind of revolution that freed all women in the state.

Characters like Scheherazade herself are often viewed through a lens that emphasizes women’s cunning and survival skills within a patriarchal context. However, the stories in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* go beyond this to present women who are not merely survivors but also leaders and visionaries. In one rewritten tale, a character is depicted not only as a storyteller who uses her wit to survive but also as a political strategist who influences the course of events in her kingdom. This reimagining shifts the focus from survival to agency, showing how women can be central figures in shaping history and culture.

The rewritten narratives also tackle the portrayal of Eastern women as passive or purely domestic figures. In traditional Orientalist discourse, women are often depicted as part of the “harem” or as mere objects of male desire. Marina Warner highlights how the harem has been used in

Western literature as a symbol of Eastern sensuality and excess, often stripping women of their individuality and agency (Warner 76) and portrayed them as sex objects. In contrast, the women in these rewritten tales are shown as individuals with their own desires, ambitions, and moral compasses. For instance, in one story, a female character rejects the role of the obedient wife after being betrayed by her husband and instead embarks on a journey of self-discovery, confronting societal norms and carving out a space for herself in a male-dominated world. This narrative not only subverts the traditional Orientalist trope of the submissive Eastern woman but also presents a powerful message of female empowerment and independence.

Through these examples, it becomes clear that the act of rewriting these tales serves as a form of cultural resistance. The authors are not merely retelling stories but are actively engaging with and challenging the Orientalist narratives that have shaped Western perceptions of the East. By presenting women as complex, autonomous individuals who are deeply rooted in their cultural and historical contexts, the authors reclaim their cultural heritage and assert a narrative that is both empowering and authentic.

Empowerment through Voice

The theme of empowerment through voice is central to *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell*, where female characters are given the space to articulate their experiences, desires, and agency in ways that challenge traditional gender roles. In the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, women often play secondary roles or are confined to narratives that reinforce patriarchal norms. In contrast, the rewritten stories provide a platform for these women to assert their identities and challenge the power structures that seek to silence them.

This act of giving voice to previously silenced characters is a critical element of the feminist project. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern highlights the challenges faced by marginalized groups, particularly women, in making their voices heard within dominant discourses (Spivak 104). The women in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* can be seen as subaltern figures who, through the act of storytelling, resist their marginalization and assert their presence in the cultural narrative. In one story, for instance, a character who was previously portrayed as a background figure in the original narrative is reimagined as the central protagonist, whose thoughts, emotions, and decisions drive the plot. This shift in narrative focus not only challenges the traditional portrayal of

women as passive objects but also affirms their role as active subjects who shape their own stories.

As Lila Abu-Lughod argues, storytelling can be a powerful means of resistance, particularly for women who have been historically marginalized (Abu-Lughod 42). The collection at hand exemplifies this idea, as the authors use the act of storytelling to challenge dominant narratives, assert women's agency, and create new possibilities for understanding women's roles in society. By reclaiming their voices and telling their own stories, the women in these narratives disrupt the power structures that have historically silenced them and open new spaces for collective female empowerment.

Intersections of Gender and Postcolonialism

The intersection of gender and postcolonial perspectives in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* provides a rich framework for understanding how these tales function as tools of resistance and empowerment. By addressing both the patriarchal norms embedded in the original narratives and the colonial narratives that have historically shaped the reception of these stories in the West, the authors engage in a dual process of decolonization and gender emancipation.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is crucial in understanding how these stories navigate the complex terrain of postcolonial identity. Bhabha describes hybridity as the "third space" where new cultural forms emerge, challenging the binaries of colonizer/colonized and male/female (Bhabha 112). The stories in this collection can be seen as a third space that blends traditional Middle Eastern narratives with contemporary feminist perspectives. This hybridization allows the authors to create new narratives that are not confined by either traditional or colonial frameworks but instead represent a fusion of both.

The implications of presenting these tales to contemporary audiences are significant. By reimagining these stories from a gender-sensitive and postcolonial perspective, the authors contribute to the decolonization of cultural memory. Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that decolonizing the mind involves "reclaiming our stories, our languages, and our ways of seeing the world" (Ngugi 87). The rewritten tales in *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* are part of this broader project of decolonization, offering stories that are empowering, authentic, and rooted in the lived experiences of Middle Eastern women.

Furthermore, these narratives have the potential to influence how contemporary audiences understand both gender and postcolonialism. By

presenting women as complex, autonomous individuals who are deeply rooted in their cultural and historical contexts, the authors challenge the dominant narratives that have shaped our understanding of both the East and women. The stories do not merely serve as a critique of the past but also as a blueprint for imagining new possibilities for the future, where women's voices and agency are central to the cultural narrative.

In conclusion, *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* reveals how the intersection of gender and postcolonialism can transform traditional narratives into powerful tools of resistance and empowerment for women and for post-colonial societies in general. By subverting Orientalist tropes, reclaiming women's voices, and exploring the intersections of gender and postcolonialism, these tales offer a new and enriched understanding of both the original *One Thousand and One Nights* and the cultural and political contexts in which they were produced.

Conclusion

This analysis has explored the ways in which *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* empowers women through the reclamation of their authentic voice, and the enrichment of traditional narratives by intersecting gender and postcolonial perspectives. The tales challenge the long-standing stereotypes of Eastern women as passive, submissive, and voiceless, which have been perpetuated by both the original *One Thousand and One Nights* and its Orientalist interpretations in the West. By reimagining female characters as complex, autonomous, and central to the narrative, the authors of this collection not only resist patriarchal norms but also decolonize cultural memory of Arab societies. These stories present women as active agents who shape their own destinies and challenge the power structures that have historically silenced them.

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that these narratives serve as powerful tools of resistance, challenging both the traditional gender roles embedded in the original stories and the colonial narratives that have shaped the reception of Eastern cultures. By blending traditional Middle Eastern narratives with contemporary feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the authors create a hybrid form of storytelling that offers new possibilities for understanding both gender and culture.

Implications of the collection

The broader implications of this work extend beyond the realm of literature. As the stories in this collection are read by contemporary audiences, they have the potential to influence how societies understand

and value women's roles in history and culture. By challenging the stereotypes and power structures embedded in traditional narratives, these stories contribute to a broader movement towards gender equality and cultural decolonization. They offer a vision of a world where women's voices are central to the cultural narrative and where their agency is recognized and celebrated.

Moreover, the act of rewriting these tales also highlights the importance of storytelling as a tool for social change. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, storytelling can serve as a means of resisting dominant narratives and asserting marginalized voices (Abu-Lughod 42). The stories in this collection exemplify this idea, demonstrating how the simple act of telling a story can be a powerful form of resistance and empowerment.

Future Research

The reinterpretation of classic tales through a postcolonial and gender-sensitive lens opens numerous avenues for future research. One area of interest could be the impact of these rewritten tales on contemporary Arab literature and culture. How have these stories influenced the way that modern Arab writers, particularly women, approach storytelling? What role do these narratives play in the broader cultural and political movements for gender equality and decolonization in the Arab world?

Another area for future research could be a comparative study of how similar projects have been undertaken in other cultural contexts. For example, how have writers in other postcolonial societies engaged with traditional narratives to challenge colonial and patriarchal norms? A cross-cultural analysis could provide valuable insights into the global dynamics of storytelling, resistance, empowerment and decolonization.

In a nutshell, *The Narrators Told What Shahrazad Did Not Tell* is more than just a collection of rewritten tales; it is a powerful testament to the enduring importance of storytelling as a means of resistance and empowerment. By challenging traditional narratives and offering new perspectives on gender and culture, these stories open up new possibilities for understanding and imagining the world. The implications of this work extend far beyond the pages of the book, offering valuable insights for scholars, writers, and activists engaged in the ongoing struggle for gender equality and cultural decolonization.

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