

A Thousand and One Nights between Orient and Occident

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No other country is influenced in its political, social and cultural structures by both western and eastern mentality such as Lebanon, and hardly any other country has such a pivotal function. In this mediator function it can be compared with a literary work, that merits its role in world literature as hardly any other piece of literature in regard to the co-operation of Orient and Occident. I am thinking of, as you might have already guessed, the collection of *A Thousand and One Nights*, or with its original title *Alf Laila wa-Laila*.

At first *A Thousand and One Nights* in the arabic societies was not really highly regarded, stories that can be found in collections like *A Thousand and One Nights* were considered as light fiction.¹

Only in the 18th century, when Antoine Galland got to know an early version of *A Thousand and One Nights* and translated it to French, people were recognizing its value. Since then it started its triumphal procession in Europe and around the world.²

With the detour via Europe it was finally estimated in the oriental countries as well, though even today there remain many prejudices against this masterpiece. Even today many reseachers share this negative opinion about *A Thousand and One Nights* although many Arabian writers of the 19th and 20th century were inspired by this collection, for instance Rafik Shami, Taha Husain or Taufik el-Hakim.³ In my lecture I would like to try to focus on the European look towards the Orient and vice versa the Lebanese view on Europe even though I am surely no expert of your country, but I will try my best. As a wanderer between the worlds the collection of the Arabian Nights plays an important role for both literary traditions as I will try to show. For this reason I will mention quickly the genesis of *A Thousand and One Nights* and its reception in Europe of the 18th and 19th Century. After that we'll take a look on the function of *A Thousand and One Nights* and the role of Europe on the Lebanese Literature with the example of the works of Elias Khoury.

Alf Laila wa-Laila, the islamic version of the collection is first mentioned in the 8th century. At the same time a Persian collection existed which was titeled *Hezâr Afsane*. Nevertheless the origins of *A Thousand and One Nights* can probably be found in India and not in Persia.⁴ In later versions of the collection of tales you can find Persian or Jewish elements as well as motifs from Egypt or Syria. The question of the age of the original collection is difficult to answer clearly, because it depends on the preliminary model you choose. So the earliest version might date to the 8th century, the 13th or even as late as the 15th century.⁵

The art of narration was highly appreciated in the early times of the Abbasid caliphs; it was one of the qualifications for a career at the court. Nevertheless story telling like in *A Thousand and One Nights*

¹ Wiebke Walther: Tausend und eine Nacht. Eine Einführung. München und Zürich 1987, S. 23; Robert Irwin: The Arabian Nights. A Companion. London 1994, p. 9.

² Hans-Günther Schwarz: Der Orient und die Ästhetik der Moderne. München 2003, pp. 78-80, Walther 1987, p. 160.

³ Irwin 1994, p. 4, Walther 1987, pp. 160-165.

⁴ Schwarz 2003, p. 79.

⁵ Irwin 1994, p. 62.

was not appreciated much. We can get an idea of what that means from an account of the historian of literature Suli of the year 932: Suli was the teacher of Prince Mohammed, and he writes:

“Servants of the Grandmother of the Prince came in while he was teaching, and took all the books of Prince Mohammed they could find. When they brought them back later, the prince answered: Tell the person who gave you this instructions, that you have seen the books. There are only books about religious laws, historical reports or books of scholars, that sort of books in which Allah gives the reader perfection and benefit. You didn't find that kind of books you have been looking for like the miracle of the sea, the story of Sindbad or the Cat and the Mouse.”⁶

The first historical personality who liked to hear stories at night was Alexander the Great. But he did it for a serious purpose: for staying awake. Entertainment as an end in itself was regarded with suspicion.⁷ Stories like the *Arabian Nights* were considered as *chorafa*, as stories that were telling only lies.

It was only the lucky chance of its early translation to French and the fact that it corresponded with the European taste of the 18th century that saved *A Thousand and One Nights* from oblivion. And it was European interest in this kind of stories that gave rise to the first Arabic edition of the *Arabian Nights*. This first edition was published between the years of 1814 and 1818 in Calcutta by an institution of the East India Company.⁸ The reception of *A Thousand and One Nights* in Europe started with the translation of Antoine Galland at the beginning of the 18th century (1704-1717).

In Germany it was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who established the term world literature (Weltliteratur). This generated a greater interest in the stories of the *Arabian Nights* in Germany. *A Thousand and One Nights* was one of the favoured books of Goethe, and through his whole life it had a great influence upon his work. Already as a child he got to know the fairy tales of this collection through his mother and his grandmother. His mother had a great talent for story telling, like Sheherazade she interrupted the fairy tale when it was getting most exciting. And she continued the story only the next evening so the little boy Johann Wolfgang had the whole day for inventing the end of the story.⁹ This method had a deep impact on Goethe. He related this kind of interrupted storytelling with the whole technic of narration. He even identified himself with Sheherazade in his writings and he compared his whole life-work with *A Thousand and One Nights*.¹⁰

At the age of 65 Goethe learned the Arabic language. But he never travelled to the Near East. His idea of the Orient is only fictionally, an imaginary one.¹¹ It is hard to understand but he even projected his view of the Orient on the German landscape. Despite of the foggy weather of autumn he suddenly compared the German landscape with the warm colours of an oriental tent or carpet in one of his poems.

⁶ Walther 1987, p. 23 (Translation J.G.)

⁷ Walther 1987, p. 22.

⁸ Irwin 1994, p. 43.

⁹ Katharina Mommsen: Goethe und 1001 Nacht. Berlin 1960, p. 5.

¹⁰ Mommsen: Goethe und 1001 Nacht, p. 66.

¹¹ Schwarz 2003, p. 226.

Loveliness¹²

Over there, what's that bright awning
Linking up the sky and hillside?
How the dazzling mist of morning
Blurs the sharpness of my vision.

Are they tents, the Vizier's quarters,
Where his lovely women hide?
Are they carpets for the feasting
When he weds his dearest bride?

Red and white, all mixed and scattered,
Greater beauty can't be found;
Tell me, Hafiz, how your Shiraz
Lands on our dark Northern ground?

Yes, it is the poppies bright,
Spread out close by one another
Decking, in the War-god's spite,
Fields with strips of friendly cover.

So raise flowers in this way
For use with beauty's aftermath,
And may sunshine, as today,
Transfigure them upon my path.

Liebliches

Was doch Bunt es dort verbindet
Mir den Himmel mit der Höhe?
Morgennebelung verblindet
Mir des Blickes scharfe Sehe

Sind es Zelte des Wesires,

¹² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Poems of the West and East. West-Eastern Divan - West-östlicher Divan. Bi-Lingual Edition of the Complete Poems. Verse Translation by John Whaley. With an Introduction by Katharina Mommsen- Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt a.M....: Lang 1998 pp. 28-29 (= German studies in America 68).

Die er lieben Frauen baute?
Sind es Teppiche des Festes,
Weil er sich der Liebsten traute?

Rot und weiß, gemischt, gesprenkelt
Wüßt' ich Schönres nicht zu schauen,
Doch wie, Hafis, kommt dein Schiras
Auf des Nordens trübe Gauen?

Ja, es sind die bunten Mohne,
Die sich nachbarlich erstrecken,
Und, dem Kriegesgott zum Hohne,
Felder streifweis freundlich decken.

Möge stets der so Gescheute
Nutzend Blumenzierde pflegen,
Und ein Sonnenschein, wie heute
Klären sie auf meinen Wegen!

As you see, Goethe does not compare the German landscape to a real oriental landscape, but he compares it to something artificial, estetic like a carpet or the poems of Hafis. The text of a poem and the texture of a carpet share etymologically the same root in the Latin language. So the texture of a carpet can be transformed easily into a poem about a landscape.

This image of the Orient has nothing to do with the real Orient. The situation in Europe after the French Revolution was most repressive for writers with a critical view, so the Orient served as a valve for many European writers to escape this pressure. The image of the Orient had become the opposite of all western life, it seemed that all things impossible in the restricted political climate in Europe could become possible in the eastern way of life.¹³

This kind of thought is very interesting, because the idea of the Orient as solution for the own problems works also vice versa in the eastern literature. You can find the thought of an imaginary western life that has the function of escape also in Elias Khourys novel *The Gate of the Sun* from 1998. But first I want to show the relations of this novel to *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Khourys novel is about a 40 year old Palestinian named Khalil. Once an officer and a doctor in the Lebanese civil war, he is now degraded to a nurse in a hospital at Beirut. The only duty for Khalil is to nurse a former Palestinian war hero named Yunes, despite of the fact that Yunes is considered to be

¹³ Schwarz 2003, p. 42 and 54.

clinical dead. Even though all the others have given up Yunes, Khalil tries to keep him alive and even to wake him up by telling stories.

Certainly you remember the frame story of the *Arabian Nights*: Here Sheherazade is married to king Shahriyar, who is disappointed by the infidelity of women. So he decides to marry every day another woman and to get rid of his wife by killing her after the wedding night.

Sheherazade can only escape death by telling stories during the night and by interrupting them in the morning just in time when the stories reach their climax. For example one story is about a fisherman who once casts his net bringing out of the water a jar with a Jinni. The fisherman frees the Jinni, but instead of offering a reward, the Jinni addresses him:

"I lay in that ocean a hundred years, and I said in my heart, 'Whoso shall release me, him will I enrich for ever and ever,' but no one came. So I lay there four hundred years more, and I said in my heart, 'Whoso shall release me, to him I will grant three wishes,' but still and still and still nobody came. Thereupon I waxed wroth with exceeding wrath and I swore to myself that whoso should release me, him would I slay, giving him only the choice of death that he should die.'

But with this speech of the Jinni, Shehrezade perceived the coming of the day and fell silent. 'What a strange tale this is', said her sister Dunyazad. 'Indeed so', said Shehrezade, 'but it is as nothing to what must follow if my Lord will permit me to live until the coming night and will spare me from his wrath.' And the sultan said to himself, 'By Allah, I shall not kill her until the tale be told.'"¹⁴

In the following nights, it is quite clear that Sheharazade repeats her trick of interrupting stories again and again. *A Thousand and One Nights* is the prototype of storytelling for one important reason: for staying alive. Only the excellent storyteller can save his life, failing in the method of telling stories means the death of the narrator.

In the *Gate of the Sun* you can find a constellation which reminds one of that frame story of the *Arabian Nights* with reversed premises: In the *Arabian Nights* there is a woman, a victim of disappointed believe in fidelity, that tells stories to a man for saving herself from death. In the *Gate of the Sun* we find a man, who is victim of disappointed fidelity. He is suffering for his adulterous lover Shams, who has been killed by soldiers. Even though Khalil has nothing to do with this murder he takes refuge in hospital because he's afraid of the revenge of her family.

Like Sheherazade he is an innocent victim and like her he tries to save not only his own life but he tries to save another man, Yunes. During seven month he tells stories of Yunes' life and his own life, and the story of the Palestinian people. Like Sheherazade he does not invent stories by himself, but he tells stories that he has heard from other people or stories of his own experience. Not inventing stories is a reference to the medieval literary tradition when no one was proud of inventing stories.¹⁵ And like

¹⁴ The *Arabian Nights* or tales told by Shehrezade during a Thousand nights and One Night. Rendered into English by Brian Anderson and embellished by Michael Foreman. London: Victor Gollancz LTD 1992, p. 19.

¹⁵ Irvin 1994, p.111.

the reproach of lies in the *Arabian Nights* Khalil complains, that Yunes had turned him into a liar.¹⁶

Later, however, Khalil regards telling lies as an advantage and not as a deficit:

“For three month I've been telling you stories, some of which I know and some of which I don't. And you're incapable of correcting my errors, so I make mistakes once in a while. Freedom, Father [Yunes is called sometimes Father by Khalil, J.G.], is being able to make mistakes. Now I feel free because with you I can make as many mistakes as I like and retract my mistakes whenever I like, and tell story after story” (Gate of the Sun, p. 241).

The stories of Khalil are the typical mixture from *A Thousand and One Nights* of heroic stories, stories of adultery, merry tales like the one of a young man whose hair turns white and who earns his money by turning from a grandfather into a young man again, when he dyes his hair for his audience.

At least Khalil achieves that Yunes mutates physically into a child again. Like Sheherazade who gives birth to a child in this period of story-telling, Khalil expects an awakening of Yunes or, his rebirth in the ninth month. But unlike Sheherazade who is a successful storyteller who is pardoned by the king in the end, Khalil fails. So why does he fail?

We see that Yunes is dying just in the moment when Khalil loses his ability of telling stories. As we have learned from *A Thousand and One Nights* narrating boring stories or finishing telling stories at all means always death. When Khalil leaves the hospital for some photos of Yunes to stimulate his imagination again, Yunes dies just in this moment:

"Didn't we agree to buy life with these long days and long nights spent in this hospital room, as we told stories and remembered and imagined? I told you it would cost seven months, and we've made a dent in the seventh month, and your child-features are beginning to take shape. I told you it was the beginning: 'We've reached the beginning, Father, and now you'll become a son to me.' Why did you do this to me? I never intended this to happen. I decided to leave you for an hour to go get the photos so we could start the story over again. But I didn't make it back until morning. I saw Zainab [the nurse, J.G.] waiting for me at the door of the hospital. She ran toward me, laid her head on my shoulder, and wept. I asked her what was wrong, and she shook her head and said: 'A heart attack.' [...] I swear the only reason I left was to go to your house and get the photos. I thought I'd go and get the pictures of you and Nahilah and your children and grandchildren, and we'd begin the story. I felt my memory had dried out and my soul had gone dead, and I thought that only pictures could renew our story. I'd go to the photos, put them in front of you in the hospital room, and we'd talk. I thought instead of talking about love, we could talk about the children and grandchildren. I thought we could tell their stories one by one. That way, with them, we'd make it through these two remaining weeks of our seventh month in death's company and make it into the pains of childbirth. Isn't that the law of life? Didn't we agree we'd try to reach the depths of death so we could discover life?" (Gate of the Sun, pp. 525-526). But the story that Khalil narrates is also the story of the Palestinian people; a story of an endless migration from one village to another and back. The figures in the novel are travelling from a village

¹⁶ Elias Khoury: Gate of the Sun. Bab al-Shams. Translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies. Brooklyn: Archipelago

to the capital, from the capital to foreign countries; they are always on the road. The life of Yunes, for example consists of traveling; only a few days in the year he gets back to his wife Nahilah. Even the motif of traveling links the *Gate of the Sun* with *A Thousand and one Nights* – you hardly find another piece of literature in which the motif of traveling around without intention and without aim is so important like in *A Thousand and one Nights*.¹⁷ Literature is the stimulus of all things in the novel and it is the beginning of the plot: As Khalil says:

“Like the rest of my generation, I'd had no serious schooling. After elementary school we joined the cadet camps of the various military forces. We set of to change the world and found ourselves soldiers. We were like the soldiers in any ordinary army, the only difference being that we talked about politics, especially me. I started my active military life as an officer, a political commissar with the commandos of al Assifa because I loved literature. I used to memorize long passages of what I read. I liked Jurij Zeidan and Naguib Mahfouz, but my favorite was Ghassan Kanafani. I learned *Men in the Sun* by heart, like a poem. Then I broadened my horizons and memorized whole sections of Russian novels, especially Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. How I felt for Prince Mishkin! [...] Literature was my refuge. In the days after Kafar Shouba, when we were exposed to the arial bombardement, sheltered only by the branches of the olive trees, those books were my refuge. To stay alive, I would imitate their heroes and would speak their language. I became a political commissar because I loved literature, I became a soldier because I was like everyone else, and I became a doctor because I had no choice” (*Gate of the Sun*, pp. 150-151).

You may wonder about the causality between literature and politics, and this special relationship is not explained in the novel at all. In Khoury's own life the causality of this relationship was the opposite. At the beginning his writing abilities were an additional advocacy to his journalistic works, the priorities changed only with his novel *Little Mountain*.¹⁸

In the opinion of Khoury the civil war gives birth to the Lebanese novel – of course novels existed in Lebanese literature before the war, but they were dominated by poetry.¹⁹ With these informations in mind I think the causality between literature and politics in the *Gate of the Sun* is made to fool the reader, because the novel itself tells us the contrary:

Reading Literature in the *Gate of the Sun* never leads to political action, on the contrary it is a method to escape reality. As we have seen, the eastern Literature was a means for European writers to forget the pressure of reality, especially for those who never travelled to the Orient.

Although Khoury has been living in Paris from 1970 until 1973, where he studied at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and visited philosophical and literary seminars of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, in the *Gate of the Sun* western literature functions as well as an escape from reality. So

Books 2005, p. 9.

¹⁷ Mommsen: Goethe und 1001 Nacht, p. 150.

¹⁸ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi: Über die Notwendigkeit, die Gegenwart zu schreiben. Elias Khuri und die ‚Geburt des Romans‘ im Libanon, in: Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pflitsch, Barbara Winckler (eds.): Arabische Literatur, postmodern. München 2004, p. 68.

¹⁹ Mejcher-Atassi 2004, p.70.

Khoury quotes a literary tradition, he does not report in a realistic manner his own experiences abroad, for example.

For instance Khalil at the hospital gets to know another woman named Siham, who reminds him of Shams. He falls in love with her, but Siham soon is leaving Lebanon for Denmark. Khalil asks himself:

"Why didn't I go to Denmark with Siham? I see her walking in the streets of Copenhagen and turning around as though she's heard my footsteps. That was how our story, which isn't even really a story, began. She came to the hospital complaining of stomach pains. When she lay down and uncovered her belly, I trembled all over. A shimmering little sun appeared, coated with olive oil. I prescribed a pain killer [...] From that day on, whenever I saw her on what was left of the roads of this devastated camp, she'd turn around and smile, because she 'd heard my footsteps [...] Then she went abroad." (Gate of the Sun, pp. 53-54)

When Khalil thinks about staying with her, Denmark suddenly turns into the literary Denmark of Shakespeare's Hamlet and Khalil himself identifies with Hamlet hesitating when he asks:

"Should I go to her? Or stay? Indeed, why should I stay? But what would I find in Denmark? Siham doesn't care because she doesn't understand that I'm almost forty and that it's difficult for someone of that age to begin again, starting from zero. 'But you are at zero now,' she told me one day. She's right. I have to acknowledge this zero in order to begin my life. But what do I mean by 'begin my life'? When I say 'begin', does it mean that everything I did before doesn't count?" (Gate of the Sun, p. 54)

The passage shows that the identification with the literary figure Hamlet is carefully prepared by Khoury: it is first made by Khalil's melancholic memories of a woman which he has lost and his hesitation. Then Khalil seems to imitate the famous beginning of Hamlet's monologue *To be or not to be?* by the choice of his words "Should I go to her? Or stay?" At this point, Khalil gets so much worked up in this matter, that he sees parallels to Hamlet everywhere:

"I think of Siham and try to sleep. I go with her to Denmark and become a prince like Hamlet. Hamlet lived in a rotten state, and I live in a rotten state. Hamlet's father died, and my father died. True, my uncle didn't kill my father and marry my mother, but what happened to my mother was perhaps more horrible. Hamlet went mad because he was incapable of taking revenge, and I'm on the verge of going mad because someone wants to take revenge on me. Hamlet was a prince watching the world rot around him, and I, too, am watching mine rot. Hamlet went mad, so will I" (Gate of the Sun, p. 54).

The same happens when Khalil later is on the way to the stadium where many Palestinians are waiting for leaving their country: Khalil feels like joining Odysseus, like being part of the Odyssey:

"On my way to the stadium, I imagined myself part of a Greek epic setting out on a new, Palestinian Odyssey. I'm not sure if I imagined that Odyssey then or I'm just saying that now because Mahmoud Darwish wrote a long poem about such an odyssey, even though he didn't get on the Greek boats that would carry the Palestinians to their new wilderness either" (Gate of the Sun, pp. 97-98).

Here we see a double approximation through intertextuality: The contact with foreign cultures is made by literature, a greek epic like Homer's *Odyssey*, and at the same time the foreignness of Homer is softened by the adaptation of Mahmoud Darwish. The unknown and uncertain future is transformed into something well known, a literary pattern which takes away the uncanny.

As it seems the idea of foreign countries transforms life into literature, into literary patterns. The unsatisfactory reality is smoothed by an esthetic touch. As we have seen, in the *Gate of the Sun* Khoury mentions many writers such as Shakespeare, Homer, Jean Genet, Dostojewski, Tolstoi, and Mahmoud Darwish (with the latter Khoury was working together in the years from 1973 until 1979). And we have seen the similarities between the *Gate of the Sun* and the *Arabian Nights*. So it might seem strange that he does not mention the *Arabian Nights* explicitly in his novel. But there is one passage in the book, where Khalil talks about his time in China during the war, when he and his companions feel acting like heroes in a novel without author" (*Gate of the Sun*, p. 216). This is a reference to *A Thousand and One Nights*, a book without a single author in which Khalil thinks to play a role.

A reference more explicitly to *Thousand and One Nights* you can find in another work of Elias Khoury, in the novel *The Mysterious Letter* (no English translation is known to me, its original title is *magma al-asrar*). This novel seems to be totally the opposite to the *Gate of the Sun*. As we have seen, *A Thousand and One Nights* is never mentioned explicitly in the *Gate of the Sun*, although in its structure and motifs it follows closely the *Arabian Nights*. In *The Mysterious Letter* we have a reference to *A Thousand and One Nights*, when Khoury reflects upon the problem of naming the literary figures. And here he draws a distinction between *A Thousand and One Nights*, where the problem of naming does not exist, because naming in fairy tales serves for characterizing types while naming in the modern novel signifies individuality. But this distinction is only pretended, because on the other hand Khoury does not choose names that are unique for his protagonist Ibrahim Nasar. He does not even invent this name, because choosing names as Ibrahim and Jakob Nasar is an intertextual reference to the novel *Chronicle of a death foretold* by the Columbian writer Gabriel García Márquez. Khoury plays with this title, because in Márquez' novel the murder of the Arab Santiago Nasar is announced by the murderers and so it happens, while in Khoury's novel there is an announcement of the death of Hanna as-Salman who is accused of having murdered three persons. But in the end it is not Hanna as-Salman who is going to die but his friend Ibrahim Nasar. Khoury pretends that the protagonist of Marquez' novel Santiago Nasar is the cousin of Jakob Nasar of his novel *The mysterious letter*. The link between the two stories is made by the names and a letter, the *mysterious* one of the title, in which Jakob is told of the death of Santiago Nasar. The letter's nature remains mysterious, because Khoury leaves open if this letter exists or if it is only an invention of the sister of Jakob Nasar. Nevertheless because of this letter Jakob decides not to emigrate to Columbia. Many years later his son Ibrahim thinks about emigrating to South America, but first he wants to open the casket with all family documents:

“Before leaving he desperately wanted to open the casket and read the old documents which his father had declared to contain the families’ secrets. Ibrahim expected to find a description of the tomb, in which the women were interred. Furthermore, he hoped to come across the mysterious letter containing the news of Santiago Nasars’ death, which would be mentioned lateron by the Columbian writer Gabriel Garcíá Marquez in such a way, as if describing the assassination of Abd al Djalil on the square at Ain Kisrin during the terrible massacre of 1860. As if describing how Abd al Djalil Nasar staggered under the blows of the short scimitars for an entire hour and how he collapsed and died while trying to gather up his intestines.²⁰

Ibrahim will not find the mysterious letter in the casket but only old pieces of paper which are completely unreadable. Needless to say that Ibrahim remains in Lebanon. In these two novels Khoury establishes contacts with other cultures with the help of literature, and exclusively so.

In fact literary texts contain cultural specifics, but the main problems and conflicts in world literature can be understood everywhere. In this point of view cultural exchange can be seen above all as an exchange of texts and stories: An exchange of literary patterns, narrative strategies and motifs. Every culture enriches stories from other countries with own experiences and sends these enriched versions back just as it happened to *A Thousand and One Nights*, which was only succesfull due to the cooperation of the west *and* the east.

²⁰ Elias Khoury: *Der geheimnisvolle Brief*. München 2000, p. 195 (Translation Hermann Genz).