

- 4 Long, p. 194; Hutchins, 'Introduction to King Oedipus', pp. 273-5, 277, 280, 283.
- 5 About the textual history and reception of the *1001 Nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights. An Encyclopedia* (forthcoming), which also contains references to the influence of the work on Egyptian theatre.
- 6 S. al-Qalamâwî, *Alf layla wa-layla*, reprint: al-Qâhira 1976.
- 7 Cited in: P. Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower. A Critical Study Tawfiq Al-Hakim*, London 1987, pp. 184-5.
- 8 Long, pp. 8, 86; Starkey, p. 38.
- 9 There are several Arabic editions of the play; references here are to the English translation by W. Hutchins, in: id. (1981).
- 10 Long, p. 132.
- 11 Starkey, p. 41.
- 12 Long, p. 32.
- 13 Hutchins, 'Introduction,' p. 3.
- 14 Starkey, p. 38.
- 15 Id., pp. 43, 127.
- 16 R. Van Leeuwen, *The Poetics of the Journey in the Thousand and One Nights*, in preparation.
- 17 See about these approaches to spatial constructions: M. Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction; Derrida's Haunt*, Cambridge/ London 1997.
- 18 Scene four, Shahrazad, p. 155.
- 19 Scene three; Shahrazad, pp. 152-153.
- 20 Scene seven; id., p. 171.
- 21 Scene seven; id., p. 169.
- 22 Id., p. 169.
- 23 The story of the 'Serpent queen' can be found in the Bûlâq edition, Nights 482-537; see also: Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen.
- 24 Scene two; Shahrazad, p. 146.
- 25 English translation: *Porphyry, The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (A rev. text with translation), Buffalo 1969.
- 26 See: M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, New York 1983.

FACES IN THE MIRROR. IMAGES OF SHEHERAZADE ON THE EGYPTIAN STAGE

Nehad SELAIHA

It never ceases to amaze me how the popular mind in the Arab world can condone the most atrocious crimes committed by males against females and how lying and wiliness are extolled as feminine virtues and classed under the rubric of wisdom. In a seminar at the AUC last winter, after a lecture by Iraqi scholar Feryal Ghazouli about Sheherezade, Mona Ibrahim, a young assistant professor at Cairo university, wondered aloud about the validity of the image of Sheherezade propagated by *The Nights*. The reforming of the rake theme, familiar in European fiction and drama in the 18th and 19th centuries, was here stretched beyond the bounds of credibility. Far from an ordinary rake, Shahrayar was a downright brutal murderer. 'How could a woman tolerate being nightly raped by such a man and then treat him like a baby, sending him to sleep with bedtime stories?' Ibrahim validly asked. The answer was 'fear' and the survival instinct. Sheherazade had to spin out the web of her days with yarns, Ghazouli said.

Though the stories of *The Arabian Nights* have inspired many writers and provided material for scores of films and plays, their narrator took some time to arrive on the scene. The first person to air Sheherezade on the Egyptian stage, as far as I can discover, was Sayed Darwish in a four-act comic operetta that carried her name and for which the pioneering colloquial verse writer, Biram El-Tonsi, wrote the lyrics. It was performed by Darwish's own company in 1919 and was later revived, according to an extant theatre bill, in 1926, under the direction of the first acknowledged Egyptian theatre director, Aziz Eid, with comedian Bishara Wakim (whose lively comic performances are preserved in old movies) and Alia Fawzi in the leading parts. Long before the theme of the good ruler being corrupted by his evil entourage became rampant in the drama of the 1960s, after Nasser's accession to power, El-Tonsi and Darwish presented us with a startling image of Sheherazade as a dissolute queen, spoilt by her vicious, power-grabbing court, and turned into a ruthless autocrat. Rather than spend her nights taming Shahrayar (here conspicuous by his absence) and ridding him of his ferocious blood lust, she amuses herself with chasing after prospective handsome lovers, even as the country faces the threat of foreign invasion. Fortunately, however, Za'bulla, a valiant, virile officer, comes to the rescue, arriving timely on the scene to subject her to a long and tempestuous process of edification which steers the play to a happy end.

Za'boulla, the hero, a simple, upright man of peasant origins, is a budding symbol of the national hero (modelled perhaps on Sa'd Zaghoul – remember 1919 was the year of the famous national popular uprising against the British) and he is deeply in love with one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, also originally a peasant. When the flighty, selfish and pleasure-loving Sheherezade (a clear symbol of the ruling royal family then) falls in love with him and tries to seduce him with promises of wealth and power, he resists and remains steadfast. Eventually, after many trials and ordeals, he manages to 'knock some sense' into her and she promises to reform, to dismiss her villainous stooges and become a good queen. Salah Abdel-Sabour was to return, years later, to the same skeletal plot-frame in his verse drama *A Princess Waiting* (1971).

In 1934 Tawfiq Al-Hakim dragged Sheherezade onto the stage once more and made her into an emblem of the mystery of life. She was projected purely through Shahrayar's eyes and became the focus of his agonized philosophical-cum-existential quest for the truth and of his reflections on the paradoxes of appearance and reality. In Al-Hakim's hands, the tangible reality of the woman and her solid presence seemed to dissolve into thin air, making her into a diaphanous symbol of the inscrutability of life and the unknowability of the truth. The 'battle of the sexes' theme, which frames her relationship with Shahrayar, both in the *Nights* and in the popular mind, was here waived aside or, rather, transmuted into a juxtaposition of subject and object, of meaning and experience, of reality and representation in the creative mind and subjective consciousness of Shahrayar as El-Hakim's surrogate. A profound theme indeed, but quite unwieldy stage-wise. This may explain why Al-Hakim's *Sheherazade* had to wait until 1966 to make its way to the boards. And even then, when the climate was more tolerant of new theatrical forms and experiments, and despite a good cast headed by Sanaa Gamil and Mohamed El-Sab', and with the brilliant Karam Mutaweh (fresh from his studies abroad) in the director's seat, the play proved baffling and attracted few audiences.

In this respect, Sheherazade fared better with Ali Ahmed Bakatheer (a prolific and unfairly ignored dramatist). In *The Secret of Sheherazade*, performed with great success at the old Opera House in 1953, with Amina Rizq in the title role, the heroine of *The Arabian Nights* occupies the centre of interest and recovers her traditional image as the ideal female who tames with kindness and stoops to conquer. Besides her beauty, wisdom, moral uprightness, eloquence, artistic and literary accomplishments and many seductive arts, she is also a bit of a psychiatrist. Not only does she cure Shahrayar of his sexual impotence (triggered by his wife's adultery and the root cause of his murderous misogyny in the play), she also manages to rid him of his obsessive sense of guilt and to save his soul.

Bakatheer, however was essentially a romantic moralist in an Islamic vein and the psychological perspective of the play remains superficial. The real message, as summed up in the Qur'anic epigraph to the printed text, is simply that it only takes a good woman to reform the worst rake. But even if one swallows this stupendous fallacy, there remains the intractable fact that the rake in question is a homicidal maniac who has nearly decimated the female population of his kingdom. The reader is asked to accept: firstly, that a depraved fiend like Shahrayar is capable of love and repentance and, secondly, that a young woman, let alone an intelligent female whom he drags into his den and rapes, could actually love him. Bakatheer obviously worked from the premise that madness in great men forgives all crimes, especially when the victims are women, and that maleness *per se* excuses everything.

As hero, Shahrayar literally gets away with murder. Bakatheer, however, craftily camouflaged the monstrous side of Shahrayar under the mantle of sexual impotence, confident that his audience, predominantly male with occasionally a sprinkling of brain-washed females, would view it sympathetically as a perfectly acceptable motive for the worst atrocities. Indeed, the play's concentration on sexual impotence and healing largely accounts for its popular success at the time, particularly since the author took all possible precautions not to cause offence or challenge any deep-seated assumptions. It was at once excitingly daring in theme and thoroughly conventional in mental outlook and moral attitude. Not surprisingly, despite many erotic, purple patches and a strong streak of sexual titillation, *The Secret of Sheherazade* maintains a didactic, preachy tone and abounds in moral sentiments.

More irking still is the insistent harping of the text on the blackness of the slave with whom Shahrayar's first wife is suspected of having committed adultery. It brings out all the traditional negative associations of blackness and slavery and seems intended to make the wife's offence appear more heinous than if she had committed it with a free, non-black man. It is tempting and could be worthwhile to ponder the streak of racism strongly discernible in the *Nights* and see if it could be linked with the shameful involvement of Arab merchants in Africa in the slave trade in the 19th century or even before; but this is not the place for it. It is, however, a point to be heeded by future deconstructivists of *The Nights*. One wishes Bakatheer had paid even scant attention to this and other issues, or had not swallowed the conventional attitudes embedded in *The Nights* and in his patriarchal culture in such a wholesale manner, without the slightest degree of critical scrutiny. As it seems, he did neither. In *The Secret of Sheherazade*, it did not seem to matter to him how many innocent women Shahrayar, had killed. The

main thing was to pamper and cure the insane ruler and then everything would be alright.

Worse still, in 1955, Aziz Abaza, a redoubtable poet, wrote a verse drama called *Shahrayar* in which that butcher of a king became the object of desire fought over by both Sheherazade and her sister, Doniazade. Once more, Sheherazade was reduced to a symbol, this time of superior knowledge, while her sister became the embodiment of carnal pleasure. As if a woman could not combine both! And why should women always be condemned by writers to the status of symbols?! The battle between the two sisters over the hoggish sultan results in the conversion of Shahrayar to a near mystic and ascetic moralist. It was once more a case of using Sheherazade as a prop on which to project the dilemmas of Arab males and their deeply-divided, fascination-revulsion attitude toward women.

In the 1970s, Sheherazade popped up again in a musical comedy at the Balloon theatre, written by Rashad Rushdi, directed by Galal El-Sharqawi, and starring Libliba. Rushdi was the first dramatist to invest her with a positive political dimension as the symbol of Egypt. Refreshingly, she escapes the palace of Shahrayar (the corrupt ruler and symbol of Nasser's autocratic regime) and teams up with the popular hero, El-Shatir Hassan (played by comedian Mohamed Awad) to expose the corruption of the state. The production had a distinct Egyptian flavour and atmosphere and was rife with theatrical, topical allusions. It felt as if Sheherazade had suddenly been transposed from Haroun El-Rashid's opulent court in 8th century Baghdad to a popular quarter in present-day Cairo and reborn as a typical Egyptian *bint* balad.

In the 1980s, Sheherazade not only kept her political dimension, but acquired a definite feminist one. In a verse drama staged at the Youth theatre, Sheherazade finally rebelled and decided, at the hands of playwright and poet, Fatma Qandil, to cast off her long-inherited robes and appear as a real woman and a revolutionary. Qandil's play made her into a thorough rebel who denounces both her husband's male chauvinism and his despotic rule. Rather than indulge Shahrayar's whims or bewitch him with her tales, she conspires against him and leads a revolution that eventually destroys him. Predictably, this new image of the legendary charmer did not meet with favour. The heroine of the *Nights* was projected here as an outspoken feminist who reads *against* the text of *The Nights* in order to undermine the image imposed upon her by its successive authors, or by the popular mind in general. In Qandil's hands, the tales were clearly interpreted as a political ruse, a manoeuvre to hoodwink the tyrant Shahrayar and lull him into a false sense of security. Once more Sheherazade was allowed to escape his iron

grip and redefine herself as a social and ideological rebel and militant feminist.

No one however has gone as far as Nahid-Na'ila Naguib in ideologically deconstructing the frame-story of *The Nights*. Naguib takes up the character of Sheherazade and gives it a new, startling interpretation. She begins with the premise that mental and physical coercion cannot breed sane characters. Imagine a woman living for years in total oppression, under fear of death, and having to succumb daily to sexual and mental abuse. What can you expect? In the *Harem*, leading a life of idle luxury and sensual indulgence, under fear of death for disobedience, women can only rot, Naguib argues. How can you expect wisdom out of such fetid, paltry stuff. Naguib presents us with a Sheherazade who, after years of imprisonment in the court of Shahrayar, of impotent inaction, churning out silly tales, has become thoroughly corrupted. She is projected as scheming, lustful, greedy and morally degenerate. This new image, however repellent, has a lot to justify it in terms of realistic psychology. It is only logical to assume that a life of isolation, bored indolence and cloying sensuality can eventually erode the toughest mind. Needless to say, Naguib's message did not prove palatable to the censor who refused permission for the text to be publicly performed. When the writer asked for an explanation, she was told she had tampered with the national heritage, distorting one of its hallowed symbols. Indeed, it is doubtful that any play by a man or a woman which dares controvert the traditional image of Sheherazade will see the limelight or be sympathetically viewed if it does.

Ezzat El-Amir's *The Reign of Sheherazade* (also of the seventies, but staged at the National in December, 1994) attempted to be bold without being outrageous, steering a middle course between the traditional view of the character and the political interpretation she received in the 1970s and 1980s. It presents us with a Sheherazade who is at once a freedom fighter and a typical slave girl, a rebel, spear-heading a revolution against a despotic tyrant, and a faithful, loving wife to that same deeply hated and universally resented and damned tyrant. The compromise does not work and the old formula of the conflict between love and duty which the author calls to his aid fails to reconcile the two faces of the heroine.

Indeed, in her performance of the title role (her third stage appearance), film star, Raghda, seemed to be hopping between two different texts all the time, while Ahmed Maher's sudden plunges, as Shahrayar, from light-hearted comedy into the depths of melodrama were quite disconcerting. They were at their best in the battle-of-wits scenes, or when engaged in sexual bantering. For the rest, their performances seemed belaboured and artificial. But one could hardly blame them; the text itself is more like a debate than a drama and, as such, could only

sustain the interest of the audience for half an hour. Instead, it was stretched over two hours and embroidered with many songs and dances which served only to repeat the play's already obvious and banal political message. Slides were used too, as well as a short puppet show and, at one point, director Mahmoud El-Alfi drowned the stage in smoke – all in the interest of visual vivacity; but nothing – not even Raghda's voluptuous beauty and Ahmed Maher's vivid ranting – could relieve the boredom as the minutes ticked away. At the heart of the play one sensed an absence. It was not simply that Sheherazade was split down the middle, she had also been made into a mere mechanical and most unconvincing mouth-piece for the author's somewhat stale political ideas and reduced to a lifeless symbol of the nation and the guardian-angel of Shahrayar, the ruler.

In February 1995, within two months of El-Amir's play, Sheherazade surfaced again at Al-Hanager Centre in Abu El-Ela El-Salamouni's *Diwan Al-Baqar* (The Chronicle of Cows). This time, however, she appeared incognito, as Norhan, the Europe-educated, intellectual daughter of an honest, enlightened vizier in some imaginary country. Like Sheherazade, the westernized Norhan, played by actress Nahid Rushdi, tries to use her wits and narrative powers to knock some sense into the head of the sultan who had fallen under the spell of a Tartuffe-like sanctimonious rogue who had virtually usurped his powers, assumed his authority, and turned his people, through his wives and frenzied preaching, into a herd of cows. In Karam Metaweh's production, her efforts land her in deep waters. She ends up on the stake, condemned to death by fire. In the original text, however, she is saved when, in a desperate, last bid for survival, she defies the charlatan's hypocritical, fanatical sermons by appealing to the people's inherent love of dancing. She urges a former *ghaziyyah* (a kind of gypsy dancer) to tear off the veil she had been forced to wear and display her banned art. The *ghaziyyah* obliges and all is saved. As an antidote to bigotry and fanaticism, her dancing proves more effective than all Norhan's stories. Talk of the power of the body!

Three months later, in May the same year, and at the same venue, French-trained actor and director Gamil Rateb staged a revival of Tawfiq Al-Hakim's 1935 *Sheherazade*. The production was a repeat of an earlier one Rateb did in Paris with French actors and bore the marks of the French classical tradition – the cool, elegant surface, the intense passion, the simple, austere design and the resonant vocalization. In it, Al-Hakim's seemingly dry, intellectual drama came alive and gained in urgency and tragic stature. The rigidly schematic conflict between the male and female principles, the mind and the body, essence and transient manifestation was charged with visual poetry and intense emotion. Rateb distilled the two major extended metaphors in the text – the Circle and the Mirror – and repro-

duced them visually on stage in the set design, the lighting and the movement.

Recently, on the last two days of the Independent "light comedy" festival, held at Al-Hanager in the first week of July this year, Effat Yehya and Nehad Abul-Enein staged a play-reading of a new venture into the magical realm of Sheherazade. *Once Upon a Time*, written collaboratively by Yehya and Tunisian actress Amel Fadji, a member of Fadil Gu'aibi's prestigious *Familia* company, features an imaginary meeting between the Arabian princess and her Greek, oppositional counterpart, Antigone. The project germinated in an international symposium on Greek Drama and *The Arabian Night*, held in Marakesh, in the year 2000. At the end of the two-week grueling lecture-sessions, as Effat tells me, the participants were given four days to prepare an intercultural dialogue, in dramatic form, and asked to team up with one or two members of the group to produce something that related to the event. In the early 1990s, Yehya had built a play, *Desertscape*, round the first act of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. The idea of women from different ages and diverse geographical and cultural background meeting outside the ordinary geo-temporal frame had intrigued her and resulted in an intelligent adaptation which brought together Churchill's Pope Joan (a brilliant scholar who passed herself off as a man, was appointed Pope and killed when she became pregnant) side by side with Sheherazade's docile and lovely "Anis El-Galis," the perfect embodiment of the ideal odalisque. No wonder Yehya jumped at the proposition: to stage an encounter in the afterlife between Sheherazade and a Greek character was an irresistible opportunity.

The first draft of the dramatic project, according to Yehya, did not focus on the stories of either Sheherazade or Antigone. Rather, it sought to distill the essence of both, and combine the image of the female rebel with the theme of taming a powerful, possessive male in a third fictional figure drawn from *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, a book of fables by the 8th century Abbasid Persian writer, Ibn Al-Muqaffa'. It told the story of a Moorish princess who had mystical longings and succeeded in taming the king who fell in love with her. Rather than join his *Harem* to entertain him with her feminine charms or stories, she managed to persuade him to allow her to go her own way and remain alone in the desert, dancing under the stars, singing to the moon and conversing with the deity. This initial draft of the project found favour with the sponsors of the workshop and in July, 2002, Yehya was allowed one week in Paris with Fadji to develop it further. The two women worked closely for that space of time and the result was a highly poetic text in terms of construction and verbal texture, but somewhat puzzling in its ideological underpinnings.

With exquisite costumes and a few carefully chosen props and accessories – a dainty teapot, burning incense in an antique dish, enveloping the gallery at Al-Hanager in a grayish-blue aromatic haze, and traditional Turkish music playing softly in the background – Effat and Nehad read or recited their parts, emphasizing the points of contact and juxtaposition between the two legendary figures. The stories of both women – Antigone, the woman who never said ‘yes’, and Sheherazade, the woman who never said ‘no’ – are foregrounded; and though they differ in course, detail and direction, they ultimately constitute two variations on the theme of the oppressed woman. Paradoxically, by the end of the dialogue and intersecting monologues, Antigone’s ‘no’ and Sheherazade’s ‘yes’ become ambivalent. Antigone never said ‘yes’ but failed to get her way; Sheherazade never said ‘no’ and yet achieved what she set out to do. Both women, however, are losers. Though sexually surfeited, Sheherazade died just as unfulfilled as the virgin Antigone. Both lived in the shadow of death, which forms a major point of intersection between the two stories.

It was to save her father, her sister and herself from death that Sheherazade threw herself into Shahrayar’s arms, and her cryptic allusion to her brutal rape at his hands on their first night together – in the form of a few splintered verbal images – is quite painful. More shattering still is the fact that when he raised his sword at dawn to murder her, she clung to him desperately to arouse him sexually once more though she was, as she admits, in great pain. The stories came later, she confides to Antigone, and, ironically, what freed her finally from her bondage and the fear of death was the sight of her father lying dead. Antigone, on the other hand, had to bear the burden of the curse put upon her parents and all the deaths it entailed until it was finally her turn. Despite her long acquaintance with death and her heroic, rebellious confrontation with Creon, the text vividly portrays her panic when she finds herself entombed alive.

What *Once Upon a Time* ultimately seems to suggest is that, in the context of a patriarchal culture, whether a woman says ‘yes’ as a rule and succumbs to the dictates of the status quo or opts for clear, straightforward opposition, she is doomed. Both women were deprived of the joy of life early on in youth. Antigone never got to enjoy Haemon’s love and Yehya’s Sheherazade had to give up Qamar El-Zaman, the man she really loved. By way of vicarious compensation, she wove him into her stories and slept with him in her imagination, using the body of Shahrayar as a surrogate. When Antigone asks her if in time she came to love the tyrant, she simply says: “I loved his body.” Equally, Shahrayar, as she admits, never really knew her. He slept with a different woman every night, all fictional fabrications.

But enchanting and occasionally gently humorous as this imaginary encounter was, I could not at the time help feeling a bit uneasy about the two women’s obsession with their fathers and their total oblivious disregard of their mothers. It felt as if, like the mythical goddess, Athena, reportedly conceived in the thigh of Zeus, both women were engendered exclusively by men. And yet, at one point, Yehya’s Sheherazade tells Antigone that when her father died she felt the load of fear lift off her shoulders. She went to Shahrayar and boldly told him that from now on there would be no more stories. She wasn’t afraid then; nothing seemed to matter; she didn’t even feel angry; anger seemed such a useless luxury, she says. When Shahrayar begs her for one last story after which he will set her free, she tells her own and he falls silent. I remembered Tunisian actress, Galila Bakaar, telling us during a meeting of creative Arab women in theatre, held in Susa some years ago, that she could never really come into her own as an actress and feel free with her body on stage while her father was alive. I think Effat’s Sheherazade was freed in a similar way. When Antigone asks her to forgive as she has forgiven all who have wronged her, the woman who never said ‘no’ stoutly declares that she will never, ever forgive. To do so would mean unlearning the lesson and going back into bondage.

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