

Eastern literature and the Western reader

THE IMPACT OF "ON THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHT" ON EUROPEAN LITERATURE BY ABDUL JABBAR AL-SAMARRAI-

الأدب الشرقي والقارئ الغربي

أثر ألف ليلة وليلة في الآداب الأوروبية لعبد الجبار السامرائي

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Abstract:

The study aims to highlight the role of literature in global acculturation, through the openness of the text of "One Thousand and One Nights" to the cultural, historical, and social structures of the Western world. The study concludes that Western readers have produced new texts unprecedented in Western culture after being influenced by the text of One Thousand and One Nights, which politicians translated during the Crusades to understand the Eastern mind.

Keywords: The Western Reader; One Thousand and One Nights; The Other; Influence and Impact; Translation.

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ملخص:

تهدف الدراسة إلى إبراز دور الأدب في الثقافة العالمية، من خلال افتتاح نص "ألف ليلة وليلة" على البنى الثقافية والتاريخية والاجتماعية للعالم الغربي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن القارئ الغربي أنتج نصوصًا جديدة لم تعهدها الثقافة الغربية بعدما تأثر بنص "ألف ليلة وليلة"، الذي ترجمه السياسيون خلال الحروب الصليبية لفهم العقل الشرقي.

كلمات مفتاحية: القارئ الغربي، ألف ليلة وليلة، الآخر، التأثير والتأثير، ترجمة.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The text of *One Thousand and One Nights* was unveiled to the Western reader through the Orientalist movement, when political figures attempted to understand the Eastern mindset via linguistic materialism. At that juncture, they were captivated by its stories, prompting them to translate it into several languages across different eras. Consequently, the aesthetic of the vertical reception of this text manifested itself in various parts of the world. This is attributed to the reader who engaged in an interpretative activity that brought it to fruition in a creative movement; this text was realized when it influenced Western literature, their writings, and their artistic productions.

In this study, it has been attempted to highlight the importance of reading and its role in stimulating the reader's engagement through a critical study of the book: *The Impact of One Thousand and One Nights on European Literature* by Abdul

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Jabbar Al-Samarrai. This leads us to pose a problematic issue within a critical methodological framework. Thus, how was the transformation of reading into cultural resistance articulated in this critical work?

To address this problematic issue, the following assumptions are proposed:

- Highlighting the aesthetic reception of *One Thousand and One Nights* necessitates referencing the principles of reception theory and its terminological apparatus, which is closely related to the cultural context of Western literature.
- Reception theory emphasizes aesthetics and the act of understanding in any reading process. Its significance lies in its focus on issues related to meaning, the literary work, its function, and the reader's position and relationship to the work.
- Reading and writing reveal the implicit cultural patterns within texts and discourses by deconstructing linguistic materialism and revealing the ideologies embodied through it.

2. The Reception of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the Western World

2.1 The Impact of *One Thousand and One Nights* on the Western Reader

A cultural exchange occurred between the Arabs and the Spanish, with Al-Andalus serving as the bridge that conveyed

Arab heritage to Europe. This influence manifested in poetry, storytelling, and theater. This phenomenon became evident when the Arabs connected with Europe in the early eighth century AD in Al-Andalus. Consequently, Jauss observed that a work of art always remains connected to the "other," meaning the reader, who is considered a conscious recipient of the text.

This impact manifested itself in Spanish theater, as noted by Menéndez Pelayo in his book *Orígenes de la Novela* (The Origins of the Novel), where he discussed two plays written by Calderón de la Barca. The first play is titled *La vida es sueño* (Life is a Dream), and the second is titled *La fierecilla domada* (The Taming of the Shrew), both of which bear resemblance to the tale of "The Sleeper Awakened" in *One Thousand and One Nights*¹. This influence also extended to European stories, poetry, and literature. One European researcher even stated about *One Thousand and One Nights*: "It was only surpassed in fame by the Torah, as it is one of the most widely read books, with the broadest imagination, the greatest strangeness, and the richest in mythology... Its impact on the souls of Europeans was so profound that some began to write new books... It is considered one of the masterpieces of world literature. Thus, the text of *One Thousand and One Nights* embodies the principles introduced by reception theory and the contribution of readers in producing numerous texts from a single text.

Furthermore, the general public used to recite popular Byzantine songs through which an epic narrating "the deeds of Byzantine military men who were killed in the battlefields between the Arabs and Byzantium, such as the Digenis Acritas epic" was sung. This epic depicts those Byzantine historical

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events; as "scholars agree that this epic was translated literally or with adaptations from some of the nights of One Thousand and One Nights". When reading this epic, the reader finds that it repeated those historical events that appeared in the book: One Thousand and One Nights, which was open to the historical pattern. This is what is known as the horizon of expectation for the recipient. Moreover, the understanding in which "the individual's own horizon merges with the historical horizon"² is the understanding that is achieved when the reader returns to the historical and cultural standards of the events present in the text.

As for English theater, the author discussed Shakespeare's plays, which were influenced by the tale of "The Sleeper Awakened." A connection exists between it and the play *Life is a Dream* in Spanish theater.³ John Brand Trend, in *The Heritage of Islam*, pointed to the relationship between the tale's theme itself and William Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*. This engages the reader in a dialogue, prompting them to question the text by posing numerous questions, the answers to which change over time. "There is a wider scope for those who wish to conduct a comprehensive comparison between Shakespeare's plays and their characters and the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*". This can be achieved by focusing on three factors: the audience's prior experience with the text's genre, the form and themes of previous works assumed to be known, and the contrast between poetic and ordinary language—that is, the contrast between reality and fantasy.

2.2 The Role of *One Thousand and One Nights* in Stimulating the Western Reader

Reception theory has placed significant emphasis on the reader, considering them a secondary producer of meaning in multiple and diverse ways. The discerning reader or recipient is capable of production, modification, and interpretation due to their prior disposition. This is what Wolfgang Iser pointed out in his concept of the "repertoire," where he observed: "The new text reminds the reader of the totality of expectations or formal frameworks established in their mind by previous texts, and through readings, these expectations are either confirmed, corrected, changed, or simply recalled".⁴ The reader possesses a repertoire that they evoke during reading, which indicates that the text has its own repertoire. Therefore, the repertoire is considered "the totality of social, historical, and cultural norms that the reader evokes as essential tools in their readings, and these constitute the reader's abilities at a given moment". So, the textual repertoire is the totality of necessary references, such as previous texts, external contexts, and all the prior knowledge the reader has acquired that helps them in interpretation when reading the text.

One Thousand and One Nights also inspired Voltaire to develop a new style of attacking the political and social conditions in France, especially after the feudal system created entities that spoke in its voice, such as the religious ideology that misled members of society into believing they were created to serve the lords. Their deception was revealed when Orientalists interacted with Muslims during the Crusades and discovered the absence of a "clerical class in Muslim countries".⁵ "They began

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to portray the King of France as a caliph and the Church as a mosque, attacking the King and the Church most fiercely".⁶ This coincided with the emergence of the Enlightenment, during which poets and thinkers communicated through written letters, especially between the French and the British, who exchanged ideas to enlighten minds from the ideology of the feudal system and the false clergy. Thus, the features of the end of the feudal system began to appear with the spread of awareness and the rise of rationalist philosophy, which influenced the most prominent creators who criticized religion and the ideology of Western thought that served political power. This transforms reading into resistance, an act of reading that manifests itself after the awareness spread by purposeful words in the reader's mind, which takes effect in reality, such as the outbreak of the French Revolution on July 14, 1789, preceded by a cultural resistance manifested in poetry, theater, and other arts.

At that time, slogans of freedom and equality were raised, the feudal system fell, and the Enlightenment movement emerged, characterized by "a firm belief in the ability of reason to solve social, intellectual, and scientific problems"⁷, away from the theological ideas of the Church. This was due to the fact that "the impact of ideological clergymen on intellectual societies had been sweeping as a result of their focus on researching jurisprudence concerning the management of people's affairs".⁸ They were altering facts and exploiting religious authority for their personal gain during the reign of Louis XVI in France. However, the situation changed with the spread of awareness after most writers were influenced by rationalist philosophy. In

this regard, Voltaire made a famous statement about Christianity: "écrasez l'infâme", or "Crush the infamous thing". Consequently, he was imprisoned in the Bastille⁹, located in France, which was one of the strongest instruments of the ruling authority and was established to suppress anyone who considered rebelling against the government.

3. The Historical Framework and the Text of *One Thousand and One Nights*

3.1 The Historical Framework and the Text of *One Thousand and One Nights*

Regarding the reception of texts across time, the text of *One Thousand and One Nights* acquired its historical value in both the Eastern and Western worlds. This was highlighted by Abdul-Jabbar Mahmoud Al-Samarai in his book *The Impact of One Thousand and One Nights on European Literature*. He pointed to the significance of this text, which was translated into multiple languages and discovered by Europeans during the Crusades waged against the Eastern world. He stated:

"The European West's attention to the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* was renewed whenever the West renewed its sense of the East's existence, regardless of the nature of this sense. The West felt the East's presence strongly after the Crusades".¹⁰

The author also noted the role of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the decline of French classicism and the rise of Romanticism. The text influenced the ideas of figures like Voltaire, Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu. It led them to criticize the political and social conditions in France by drawing comparisons between Caliph Harun al-Rashid and

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his democratic governance, and King Louis XIV of France, who symbolized tyrannical rule. Harun al-Rashid was known for disguising himself to wander the markets, observing the conditions of his subjects, delivering justice to the oppressed, assisting the poor, and distributing gifts to those in need.

Thus, Orientalists discovered the truth of Islam. However, some refused to acknowledge it due to their Eurocentric mindset. Instead, they selectively adopted elements that benefited them, transferred these elements to their countries, and worked on developing them.

The text of "One Thousand and One Nights" has become a focus of attention for many readers, especially when many researchers in the field of comparative literature proved that the West used this text in its creation of epics, novels, and theater. It also contributed to an openness to the history of the East, which led the Orientalist John Brand Trend to discover the link between "One Thousand and One Nights" and the biography of the knight Cífer, a book on chivalry. As for the Orientalist Cosquin, he pointed to the collection of stories "The Decameron" written by the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio, who was influenced by "One Thousand and One Nights" in that collection of stories; as it was written in the same way that the text of One Thousand and One Nights" was written. Here, the merging of horizons across history is evident, which contributes to the production of new texts, after the text opens up to the historical record, giving that aesthetic distance between texts across different times.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Reception and the Fusion of Horizons in the Text of *One Thousand and One Nights*

Jauss focused on the reader's horizon of expectation more than the horizon of expectation. These expectations, occupy his mind with modern works that deny tradition in comparison with classical works on the one hand, and modern literature that shocks the reader's expectations on the other. These are the negative moments that create a reaction in the recipient. "When the recipient encounters a literary text whose features do not match the familiar actual images he has, he collides with a moment of disappointment." "We use the concept of the horizon or disappointment of expectation, while identification is the agreement of the reader's horizon of expectation with the horizon of the text."¹¹ Changing the horizon is considered an aesthetic shock for the recipient, which contradicts his horizon, creating a new horizon. It is considered "the methodological basis in reception theory; as the term 'horizon' was taken from Gadamer."¹² Regarding the horizon of expectation of the French reader, the author says: "The French and those who took their culture from them thought that it was a true image reflecting the life of the Easterners, and they added it to the wonders of travels, and they adopted it as a description of earthly paradise."¹³

When a reader finds in the text what contradicts their expectations they have formed about that literary genre during their previous readings, a disappointment of expectation occurs—they experience a "horizon of expectations" mismatch. This leads them to revise their previously acquired horizon and renew their perspective on the genre. Therefore, the French readers believed Galland's statement: that *One Thousand and One Nights*

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is the East with its customs, morals, and its special peoples, and that it is its true image. We do not exaggerate if we attribute a part of the Orientalist movement and its spread to what this immortal work left in the souls of Westerners. Consequently, the mechanism of reading becomes dynamic, creating a unique dialogue between the reader's revised horizon and the text. As Al-Samarrai explains, The East appeared to the West as a world of luxury, wealth, and opulence...a perception skillfully conveyed by the storyteller through their narrative art.

Based on this perspective, we can infer that the storyteller adapted the book in ways that enhanced the text's aesthetic appeal. This adaptation added a layer of imagination to reality, further solidifying the enchanting image of the East in the minds of Western audiences. As Al-Samarrai explains, this image was intensified by the tales of literati and artists who visited the East, blending what they observed in the palaces of kings and sultans with detailed descriptions of Eastern markets and homes, as vividly portrayed in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Western readers often perceived the society depicted in the book as an accurate representation of the East as a whole. However, the horizon formed in their minds painted a picture of "an East teeming with jinn and sorcerers; the East of caliphs, judges, and mystics; the East of magnificent treasures and astonishing adventures; the East of miracles and civilization. This horizon was shaped through repeated readings of various texts, serving as a standard by which readers constructed their interpretations. The recurring themes and imagery across different narratives created a framework that shaped the reader's vision of the East.

Accordingly, Western tales linked to this text include the Grimm Brothers' Tales. The author highlights a significant connection between these tales and *One Thousand and One Nights*. The Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, acknowledged that they derived the origins of eight of their stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*. These stories include, *The Fisherman and His Wife*, *"The Cunning Servant and His Master"*, *"Six Who Made Their Way in the World"*, *"The Golden Mountain"*, *"The Three Birds"*, *"Ayn Al-Haya"*, *"The Jinni in the Jar"*, and *"Mount Simeli"*, the last being inspired by the story of *"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves"*. This reflects the concept of "vertical reception" discussed by Jauss, which explores the horizons of the past and their relationship with the present horizon. This concept emerges when the reader synthesizes texts or considers the historical trajectory of the literary genre they represent. It demonstrates how past narratives influence and reshape contemporary literary works and their reception.

In the same context, reception can give aesthetics to the text through the contrast that exists between the horizons, which is the distance between the existing horizon of expectation and the new work, and "this distance can be measured by the reactions of the readers with the judgments of the critics."¹⁴ We find that the aesthetic distance arises when the horizon of the text does not match the horizon of the reader. On the other hand, *"One Thousand and One Nights"* allowed the European reader a way to escape to a strange world that seemed free from the gloom of his world resulting from the strict classical traditions that weighed him down, just as the sky of the East was clear compared to the cloudy sky of Europe."¹⁵ Thus, *One Thousand and One Nights* opened new horizons for imagination for

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Westerners, although, those same stories were made of non-rational imagination, they helped prepare the minds of the general public for the rationality of the enlightened age, and their comprehensive intellectual influence spread widely throughout Europe.

Here, a reaction occurs for the reader who makes judgments and interpretations on that text, giving it more aesthetics because the recipient creates during his construction of the new meaning of the text.

The Act of Reading and the Readers: is based on the implied reader, which is "an embodiment of the text's schematic visions, elevating its language above ordinary language, providing a complete picture of characters and events, and filling in the gaps to create coherence from scattered and incomplete elements." Thus, "the act of reading serves as the key to decoding the text."¹⁶ It is realized in the text by filling in the blanks and interpreting phrases and characters. This is what is called horizontal reception; that is, the interaction between the reader and the text. This is what we observed in this study when "*One Thousand and One Nights*" presented wonderful images that influenced the Western recipient, especially the French public. In the 18th century, "the French compared the world of 'One Thousand and One Nights,' distinguished by democracy, with the world of the Catholic Church, full of suppression, injustice, and tyranny."¹⁷ At that time, the rulers in France relied on Christian clergymen to impose their authority on their

subjects. However, reading plays a significant role in raising an individual's awareness or alerting them to something they were previously unaware of.

Readers recognized the difference between Arab rulers of that era and the French kings known for their arrogance and tyranny. While Harun al-Rashid personally checked on his subjects and ensured their well-being, the French king indulged in his selfishness, reveling in his wealth and neglecting his people, who languished under the burden of poverty and hunger.

In the same context of the study, Iser agreed with Ingarden on the idea that the text is not complete without reading. The text is composed of blanks, gaps, deficiencies, and fissures that are filled and repaired through reading. Hence, the literary work has two poles:¹⁸ "the artistic pole, which is the author's text, and the aesthetic pole, represented by the achievement related to the reader." That is, meaning is produced through reading the text and the interpretation that reflects the experience of the conscious reader who contributes to the production of the aesthetic aspect, which leads to the creation of texts that do not match "One Thousand and One Nights," but its impact remains prominent because the reading took place in the middle ground between the artistic and aesthetic poles.

Thus, the reader can adapt or manipulate the original text and this is what was observed in the Western reader who received "One Thousand and One Nights." The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio, who wrote The Decameron, wove his stories in the style of "One Thousand and One Nights," where the narrator moved from one story to another. "Europeans did not know this familiar framework in Eastern storytelling except

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thanks to the translation of '*One Thousand and One Nights*'.¹⁹ These stories offer a critique of Western society, especially the moral corruption that existed among Christian monks and priests. The researcher points to the prominent difference between "*One Thousand and One Nights*" and *The Decameron*, which lies in the implied reader, who is derived from the concept of the implied author. As Iser states, "He is the bearer of all the necessary predispositions to allow the literary work to have its effect, and there are predispositions granted not through an empirical reality but through the text itself."²⁰

Therefore, it would be easy for "*One Thousand and One Nights*" and *The Decameron* to influence the group that had been betrayed by the other party. The former was written to console men whose wives betrayed them, while the latter, on the contrary, was written to solace women in the face of men's betrayal. The implied reader of "*One Thousand and One Nights*" is represented by men who were betrayed by their wives, while the implied reader of *The Decameron* is represented by women who were betrayed by their husbands. Moreover, Iser states, The roots of the implied reader as a concept are firmly planted in the structure of the text, and it is not a phenomenon of being synonymous with the actual reader; strictly speaking, it is a guide followed by the real reader, and consequently, the act of reading is established. Here lies the role of the implied reader, who guides the actual reader so that they do not completely adhere to their own subjectivity during the construction of meaning. This is what happened to King Shahryar, who retreated

from the idea of revenge after listening to the stories told to him by Scheherazade in a clever way that had its effect on his mind.

The author of "*One Thousand and One Nights*" did not know the fate of this text because it fell into the hands of many readers, including the naive, the expert, the encyclopedic, and the model reader. Readers are of various types, including readers who created new texts after reading it, contributing to changing their social reality, such as Voltaire, Shakespeare, and Giovanni Boccaccio. This is because they possessed reading tools acquired through their reading experiences, which enabled them to produce new meanings according to their own intentionality. In addition to the works of these, we mention the epic *Nibelungenlied*, which "appeared in southern Germany during the twelfth century, containing epics and marvels similar to those in 'One Thousand and One Nights,' telling the story of a group of dwarves ruled by King Nibelung who managed to seize the treasure of the Rhine maidens."²¹

Additionally, the creation of many literary works was influenced by *One Thousand and One Nights*, such as the story of the knight, the young man, whose tale was shaped by *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the 15th century, *One Thousand and One Nights* had an impact on storytelling, and we can trace its influence in English literature. The credit for discovering this oral impact goes to the Orientalist Professor Kabb, who added... The tale of the knight and the young man is nothing more than one of the stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* that likely reached Europe through traders from the Black Sea region.

This creativity was the result of the act of reading, which contributes to the creation of imagination: "A process of directed

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illusion intended to evoke a specific response from the audience, initially beginning with imaginative images... The process exerts its effect when it evokes the stored experiences of the audience, aligning with the provided imaginative images, thereby creating the intended excitement."²² Thus, this epic was produced as a result of the imagination that formed in the reader's mind.

As for the impact of this text on theater, "from the 14th to the 17th century, Spanish literature was rich in manifestations of deep influence from Arabic story collections such as *One Thousand and One Nights* and others, as they were orally transmitted in Spanish popular circles."²³ Additionally, readers discovered narratives in which Arabic *maqamat* (*Arabic prosimetric literary genre of picaresque short stories*) are mixed with stories from *One Thousand and One Nights* and others. Some female characters in picaresque stories, which reached their peak in the seventeenth century, such as Zaynab the Trickster and Delilah the Deceiver

Among those influenced by the tales of "*One Thousand and One Nights*" was the German narrative poet Christoph Martin Wieland, who drew from this Arabic work his major poems, including his long poem 'Winter's Tale,' and he explicitly stated that it is inspired by a tale from '*One Thousand and One Nights*' taken from the story of 'The Fisherman and the Genie. Here, the role of the self in the production of meaning emerges, which is the role played by the reader in reproduction. The reader plays an important role in deciphering the text's codes. Since "*One Thousand and One Nights*" is full of enigmas, it requires an

experienced reader, someone who is receptive and insightful, to fill its gaps.

4. CONCLUSION

The reader remains an active, reactive, and influential agent. The reader is the second tool in interpreting the text and reconstructing it. Thus, the reading process will remain a process of giving and taking—taking from the text and giving from the reader's literary and cultural reservoir. In this way, the absent and present texts interact to produce a new text, and this is what was embodied and manifested in the European creative works that were influenced by "*One Thousand and One Nights*."

- The text of "*One Thousand and One Nights*" influenced Western literature through the act of reading, which contributed to the production of new texts and creative works by prominent Western writers. Some of them adapted its stories and wove new tales in its style that aligned with Western culture, while others left the stories as they were. This was discovered through comparison and intertextuality between Western works and the original text.

- The reader has a record that they bring forth during reading, and this indicates that the text has its own record.

- We conclude that the text is an influence that can be exercised. Therefore, according to Iser, task of interpretation is to unleash the semantic and potential meanings embedded in the text.

- Interpretation is not achieved solely through the use of reason, but rather through cooperation with the self. Interpretation is achieved through imagination.

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