El-ihyaa journal, Volume: 25, Issue: 36, January 2025, p-p: 729 – 738
ISSN: 1112-4350 EISSN: 2588-2406

Purposes of the adoption of Eastern thought by Jorge Luis Borges in his book “The Aleph”

مقاصد تبني الفكر الشرقي عند خورخي لويس بورخيس من خلال كتابه "الألف"

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Received in: 16/03/2024 Accepted in: 08/10/2024

Abstract:

This article will deal with the presence of oriental thought in narrative work of the 20th century of Jorge Luis Borges. So, throughout this work we will talk about the origin of Jorge Luis Borges' strong passion for Arab culture, which was part of his narrative. Then, we will address the role that *The Thousand and One Nights* played in changing his thinking and literary style. In addition, we will analyze in detail his work, *The Aleph*, in which the presence of the eastern Arab culture was noted. For this, our objective is to study through what Borges had contact with the Eastern world, how the culture of this world influenced his thinking and how he introduced it as a present and constant element in his literary works.

Key words: Oriental thought; The 20th century; Jorge Luis Borges; The Thousand and One Nights; The Aleph.

الملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال حضور الفكر الشرقي في العمل السردي لخورخي لويس بورخيس في القرن العشرين. لذا، سنتحدث خلال هذا العمل عن أصل شغف خورخي لويس بورخيس القوي بالثقافة العربية، والذي كان جزءًا من روايته. وبعد ذلك سنتناول الدور الذي لعبته ألف ليلة وليلة في تغيير تفكيره وأسلوبه الأدبي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سنحلل بالتفصيل عمله "الألف" الذي يظهر فيه حضور الثقافة العربية الشرقية بشكل ملحوظ. ولذلك، فإن هدفنا هو دراسة كيفية اتصال بورخيس بالعالم الشرقي؛ وكيف أثرت ثقافة هذا العالم في تفكيره وكيف قدمها كعنصر حاضر وثابت في أعماله الأدبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفكر الشرقي؛ القرن العشرين؛ خورخي لويس بورخيس؛ ألف ليلة وليلة؛ الألف.

Introduction:

The cultural and literary situation of the Western world advanced in the acquisition of new knowledge. The middle of the 19th century, from European countries and through contact with the cultural reality of the Arab world, awakened the interest of Western thinkers in Arab culture and its literary production.

From there, since the end of the 19th century, the great writers of the West made the effort to study orientalist works, with the translation of several fundamental works, among which we mention the Arabian Nights, considered the "soul" of the Arab people, a work that expressed the Arab culture and nation in its universal dimension.

The dissemination of these translations was an important stimulus for new philosophical and literary reflection in the Modern Age. This leads us to wonder how the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges communicated with this oriental work at the beginning of the 20th century? And what impact did his oriental thoughts leave on his Argentine work The Aleph?

To answer these questions, we will carry out an analysis of the cultural relationships between oriental literature and Argentine thought. Furthermore, we will shed light on the creative production and aesthetic fruit that the writer Borges forged around the combination of Eastern cultures in his literary work from the conformation of his curious young spirit of the most literary East to the most symbolic Eastern imprint of your book.

1. Borges' first contacts with oriental culture

In the words of Said Edward, there was, in the 20th century, "a true epidemic from the East in Europe that affected all the great poets, essayists and philosophers of the time" (Said, 2013, p. 76). Here, we are not referring to that eastern culture of Asia, but to that of Arabia, a geographical area of a cultural and moral entity whose nourishing force is Islam.

Among the great thinkers of the moment, who were affected by the Islamic East, we highlight Jorge Luis Borges, Argentine writer, poet and essayist, born in the city of Buenos Aires, on August 24, 1899.

The family environment in which the boy Borges grew up paved the way for him to join the art of Literature, through the narrative that emerged in Argentina, at the end of the 19th century.

Among the main causes that allowed Borges to lean towards this literary movement is the fact of being "bilingual." Borges, at the age of four, mastered two languages, first English and then Spanish. Borges himself said that "when I spoke with my paternal grandmother, I did it in a way that I later discovered was called the English language, and when I spoke with my mother or my maternal grandparents I did it in another way that later turned out to be the Spanish language" (Borges, 1970, p. 12).

In this way, his perfect command of the English language allowed him access to his father's library, which was filled with literary works, of Arabic origin, translated into the English language by the great authors of the time, which is why his early foray into Arab culture turned out to be in English. In this regard, Borges declared that this library had been the fundamental reference of his life. He added that Arab culture allowed him to admire it, embrace it and evoke it until it became one of the main references for him in Latin America (Borges, 1970, p. 14-15).

At that time, Borges traveled to the East, at first, by reading universal books. According to this, Beatriz Sarlo said that Borges' contact with Eastern culture was born in his childhood and youth, through learning the first letters, the fascination with the East, at the same time exciting and terrifying, was established forever in the imagination of Jorge Luis Borges (Sarlo, 1993, p. 27).

2. The influence of The Thousand and One Nights on Borges' thought

The first reading of oriental works, considered by Borges as the threshold of this world, was The Thousand and One Nights, a compilation of stories by anonymous authors that were discovered by Westerners, when translated into European languages (Woscoboinik, 1996, p. 63).

In turn, Evelyn Fishburn maintained that the stories of the Arabian Nights contain other stories within them and it is easy to get lost in them, as in a labyrinth (Fishburn, 2004, p. 144).

Borges read Burton's English translation. This work allowed him to delve into the oriental world and culture. Juan Goytisolo noted that Borges was the greatest reader of The Thousand and One Nights, a novel that allows the freedom of the reader. Borges, Goytisolo continued, "was fascinated to compare the different translations of the book by Mardrus, Lane, Galland and Cansinos Asséns, to discover how the translators had added or subtracted as they pleased" (In Kristal, 2002, p. 69).

The choice and reading of different versions of The Thousand and One Nights allowed Borges to enrich his knowledge about Arab culture and facilitated the citation of the Arab and Islamic element in Argentine literature (Crelis, 2004, p. 19).

In turn, Ana María del Pilar Bidondo Quevedo maintained that the knowledge of the origins of this work, of its translations, of the contents that Europeans introduced into the West, are recreated by Borges in several articles, many of his stories being developed in a atmosphere similar to that of One Thousand and One Nights (Quevedo, 2013, p. 3).

Thus, Borges's interest in the Islamic tradition was born from his discovery of Eastern culture in the aforementioned work, defended in his critical studies and also reflected in his narratives. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni spoke of Borges' work, saying that it is one of the most explored and studied literary spheres inside and outside the American continent (Di Giovanni, 1973, p. 112).

The same author added that: “Borges profusely uses Eastern, Arab and Islamic sources to support his narratives. From the Alcoran to popular Arab stories, his fiction is nourished by a strong orientalism (Di Giovanni, 1973, p. 114).

In this way, we will deal with this Islamic culture that played a decisive role in the Latin American narrative, in general, and Argentina, in particular.

This contact and awareness of this culture marked his first steps in the domain of literature. In accordance with this, Djibril Mbaye expressed that the surprising images and numerous orientalist readings accompanied him from his first immersions in the world of literature, thanks to two family influences, that of his father and that of his paternal grandmother, supports that favored the conquest of the horizon of the precocious writer who would achieve the translation of a story full of images of the East, “The Happy Prince” by Oscar Wilde, which Georgie published when he was only eleven years old (Mbaye, 2016, p. 219).

Regarding this, Maryam Ghafouri shows us her disagreement, stating that Borges does not copy the stories of The Thousand and One Nights with a desire for orientalism. As an author very attached to the best Western literary tradition, he prefers to create a universe of mixture, of miscegenation, that summarizes the best of the East and the West (Ghafouri, 2017, p. 250). Thus, his texts, in poetry

and prose, featured characters with Arabic names and, sometimes, with quotes from the Quran.

3. The Arab presence in the work of *The Aleph*

The presence of this orientalist culture is very noticeable in his work *The Aleph*, published in different Buenos Aires magazines, starting in 1949. *The Aleph* is an emblematic story of the author, who travels the world in his name and its popularity lies in what the images and affects embedded in the thirty-eight elements awaken (Fishburn, 2004, p. 146).

Here, in this work, Borges contributed to uniting two worlds, the Arab and the Latin American, because several themes stand out, metaphysics, literature, labyrinths, infinity and death, with, also, several settings, Greco-Latin Antiquity, the medieval East and of course South America.

In *The Aleph*, we find a collection of seventeen short stories and among them, we will highlight only five that deal with Arab-Islamic culture:

1. Averroes's Search
2. The Zahir
3. Ibn Hakam Al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth
4. The two Kings and the two Labyrinths
5. The Aleph.

These, according to Echavarría, constitute solid narratives of Islamic nature (Echavarría, 1983, p. 222). Borges said that *Aleph* is the first letter of the alphabet of the sacred language and this language here is Arabic whose first letter is read *alif*.

In this way, from a first general point of view, we observe that Borges incorporated in this work several stories of an Arab character and Eastern tradition.

Echavarría pointed out that this presence of the Islamic element is done from two perspectives: On the one hand, it allows Borges to substantiate his thematic notions such as time and the labyrinth. On the other hand, it acts as a source of narrative inspiration or material to plot imaginary or real stories (Echavarría, 1983, p. 223).

4. Analysis of the five stories of *The Aleph*

The Argentine writer, Borges, went beyond the difficulties of communication between literatures, enriching his Spanish linguistics with

another imaginable perspective of Arabic literature, to write his narrative aesthetic *The Aleph*, which included the following brilliant pieces:

4.1. Averroes's Search

In Averroes's Search, Borges told the story of a boy named Averroes who lived in Córdoba in the 12th century. First, he began his story with how Averroes played muezzin and imam with his friends in the patio. Then, he returned home and entered his own library, to begin, from there, his task of reading and writing books of wisdom.

Throughout this story about Averroes, Borges included a set of words and quotes of Arabic origin. We will see, below, some examples of that Arab presence in the story of Averroes's Search:

1. The use of striking names, of Arabic origin, for its protagonists: Averroes, whose transcription is "ابن رشد" (Ibn Rushd).
2. The use of the word *The Fetnah* "الفتنة"to refer to the violent war that took place in Córdoba, between the Caliphs in their struggle for power (Borges, 1962, p. 127).
3. The use of the poetic verse of the Arabic Zuhair Ibn Abi Sulma:

رأيت المنايا خبط عشواء من تصب
تمـته و من تخطـئ يعمر فيهـــرم

The literal translation of the poem was: "I have seen destinies charge like a blind camel: those who get it right they kill and those who miss it live and live long" (Borges, 1962, p. 154).

In this translation, Borges wrote "destinies" to refer to the word المنايا (manáia) and "blind camel" to refer to the word عشواء ('ashwae).

4. The introduction of the titles of Arabic works, when Borges said that: "Averroes, consulted the *Mohkam of Abensida, Tahafut Al-falasifah* of the Persian writer Al-Gazali [...], opened *Quitab ul-'ain* of Jalil thinking with pride that in all of Córdoba there was no other copy of this perfect work" (Borges, 1962, p. 155).
5. The use of Islamic words: *"There is no other god like God, Muhammad is the apostle of God"* (Borges, 1962, p. 159), which means, in Arabic, " لا إله إلا الله, محمد رسول الله" .

4.2. The Zahir

In The Zahir, Borges told us about a man's obsession with The Zahir, which refers to a twenty-cent coin from the city of Buenos Aires. The title of the

story itself was a word of Arabic origin, whose transcription is "ظاهـــر". Regarding him, Borges pointed out that "Zahir:

1. In Arabic, it means notorious, visible,
2. In Islam, it is one of the ninety-nine names of God,
3. In Muslim lands, it is said of "beings or things that have the terrible virtue of being unforgettable and whose image ends up driving people crazy" (Borges, 1962, p. 160).

That's how it was, when the main protagonist of the story will end up going crazy for not thinking about anything other than The Zahir.

4.3. Ibn Hakam Al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth

In Ibn Hakam Al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth Borges summoned Islam, not only as a support for his aesthetic philosophy in the concept of a labyrinth, but also as an illustration of his oriental conception.

This story told the story of two young Englishmen, Dunraven and Unwin; these try to explain the dark circumstances surrounding the death of King Ibn Hakam Al-Bokhari, at the hands of his cousin Zaid.

In this story, Borges began his story with a Quranic epigraph that belongs to surah number twenty-nine, entitled The Spider, which in Arabic is called سورة العنكبوت: ﴿مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ كَمَثَلِ الْعَنكَبُوتِ اتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا ۖ وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ الْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ الْعَنكَبُوتِ ۖ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾.

The translation of this Quranic verse says: "Those who take patterns, ignoring God, are like the house that uses the spider. Certainly, the weakest house is the spider web. If only the wicked knew!" (The Quran, XXIX, pp. 41-40).

Thus, Borges opened the story of him, referring to the two young men, like the spider, who built a labyrinthine web to trap their victims. So, the Labyrinth refers to the spider's web "بيت العنكبوت"

Borges used the term "Labyrinth", which Luce López Baralt said that the symbol of the infinite verbal labyrinth is central in Ibn Hakam Al-Bokhari, Murdered in his labyrinth (López Baralt, 2012, p. 119).

In accordance with this, Ernest Lewald noted that the symbol of the labyrinth has not only been adopted by Borges, but appears elaborated in many of his texts (Lewald, 1962, p. 631). In turn, Antonio Fernández Ferrer (2009) stated that the surname Borges is now inseparable from the word labyrinth (Fernández, 2009, p. 12).

In accordance with this, Djibril Mbaye expressed that Borges used, here, a part of the verse and it does not refer to the fragility of the spider's house, but rather to the spider's web, which is one of the best images of the labyrinth (Mbaye , 2016, p. 225).

In this way, both young people, within this labyrinth, tried to suggest the condition of the tragedy of the King's death, listing the following points in response:

1. First, that house is a labyrinth.
2. Second, a slave and a lion watched over him.
3. Third, a secret treasure vanished.
4. Fourth, the murderer was dead when the murder occurred.

4.4. The two Kings and the two Labyrinths

In The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths, Borges told us the story of two kings, one of Babylon and the other of Arabia. For both labyrinths, the first is a human creation and the second is a natural creation of God.

In the story, there was a relationship between the two aforementioned kings and the two labyrinths, which began with the first King in the first labyrinth and ended with the second King in the second labyrinth. The first king of Babylon received the king of Arabia and invited him to enter the labyrinth that had been built in the courtyard of his castle. The King of Arabia was able to get out of the labyrinth with the help of God and left the King of Babylon who also had a labyrinth in Arabia that he promised to show him one day. But, when he returned to Arabia, the King led his army to Babylon, attacked the territory and imprisoned his King. Afterwards, he took him to the Arabian desert and told him that this was his labyrinth. Then, he left him in that place alone, until he died of thirst and hunger in search of a way out.

Here, in this story, Borges used Arabic place names: Babylon and Arabia. Furthermore, he referred to the “second labyrinth” with the term “desert” which is an Arabic element, too.

4.5. The Aleph

In The Aleph, Borges tells us the story of two characters, Borges and Daneri, who became friends after the death of the latter's wife. Borges visited Daneri, at his house, to talk and discuss the poems that Daneri wrote (Borges, 1962, p. 179).

Throughout this story, a foreign word from Latin American literature appeared, which is The Aleph. This term is of Arabic origin and refers to the first letter of the alphabet. In accordance with this, Jaime Alazraki expressed in his *Narrative and criticism of our Latin America* that this letter corresponds to the spiritual root of all letters and, therefore, of all human speech (Alazraki, 1977, p. 41).

Borges felt this term of El Aleph in a sphere located in the home of his friend Daneri, through which he could see the entire universe. From there, he used this word, in his story, to refer to the universe and all the things it encompasses.

Conclusion:

Finally, we confirm that culture has no borders and Islamic tradition is a universal heritage as The Thousand and One Nights have already been. Borges considers these oriental, Arabic and Islamic writings as a source of inspiration, which constitutes a determining component and support in his stories such as The Aleph.

In each of the aforementioned stories, Borges used his knowledge of Arab culture in a metaphorical and symbolic way. This gives us motivation to continue searching in this field, in future research, analyzing other Latin American works with oriental traces.

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