

## The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights

*Muhsin J. al-Musawi*

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*The Islamic Context of the Thousand and One Nights* by Muhsin J. al-Musawi contains seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. It addresses the Islamic factor in global times, the unifying Islamic factor, the age of the Muslim empire, and the burgeoning of a text. It also examines the role of the public, non-religious displacements in popular tradition, namely, the duality between Islam and culture—as well as the public role in narrative theorizations, that is, the impact of literary criticism. Finally, the author explores Scheherazade's nonverbal narratives in religious contexts, demonstrating the underlying Islamic character of the work.

Musawi's recent work is a most welcome and long-needed addition to scholarship in the field of Arabic literature. Well-written and well-researched by one of the senior scholars on the subject, *The Islamic Context* demonstrates how the *Thousand and One Nights* operate within the parameters of the Islamic faith. A portrait of life in all its aspects, the work would never have reached us had it not been the product of a strong Islamic literary and cultural climate. Although rife with erotic escapades, sexual sins rarely go unpunished in the work. Despite all the morally deviant behavior displayed in the work, many of its tales are cautionary; they communicate ethical messages and promote the good and forbid the wrong through warnings grounded in Islamic law. While there is no shortage of sex in a multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural society, much of the merrymaking is motivated by love, instead of lust.

Although the tales derive from a wide array of sources, Islam serves as their unifying factor—spreading a message of love, brotherhood, intimacy, compassion, and good work. Instead of encouraging evil, the work simply presents all sides of society—the good, the bad, and the ugly. The *Thousand and One Nights* does not demonstrate the *ideal* of Islam: rather, it exposes the *reality* of Islamic society, featuring both the virtues and the vices of the Muslim masses. As the author shows, the work is saturated with subtle social criticism with many of the stories warning that wealth and luxury herald the downfall of Islamic hegemony. As such, it should come as no surprise that many of the mendicants' tales in the work are actually Sufi stories.

Importantly, the *Thousand and One Nights* presents the image of an Islamic society, which is both benevolent and tolerant. Although the understanding of Islam on the street is not always orthodox, it is often open and eclectic, drawing from the dominating schools of Sunni jurisprudence. As the author explains, “these schools shunned extremism and catered to the amiable climate that is the dominating tone in these tales” (280). While no sociopolitical and economic system is perfect, and utopias only exist in the imagination, the *Thousand and One Nights* present an Islamic society which is vibrant, full of life, and loaded with love.

Still, as the author points out, the presence of Shi'ites and Kharijites in the *Thousand and One Nights* is conspicuously absent—the result of the 'Abbasid institutionalization of religion, which required the repression of dissenting voices. Motivated by their anti-Shi'ite attitude, the 'Abbasids employed Islamic market inspectors to coercively marginalize literature that was deemed politically undermining. It was the specific purview of the market inspector to prohibit educators from reciting Shi'i poetry and relating the life and martyrdom of Imam Husayn, his family, and relatives. In fact, even the slightest allusion to such events was outlawed and punishable by law. As al-Musawi explains, the suppression of Shi'ism contributed to the countercultivation of spirituality. As a result, Sufism became even more infused with a Shi'ite undercurrent. Curiously, although Jews and Christians are subjected to stereotypes, the presence of these religious minorities was not suppressed in the tales.

Frowned upon by many myopic Muslims and Arab scholars who fail to appreciate the breadth of Arabic literary culture, the *Thousand and One Nights* has been cast aside with contempt for centuries by both literary and religious sectors. As ashamed and embarrassed as it may make some ideal-

istic Islamists and misguided Muslim clerics, the work injects a more complex picture of life than the one espoused by their puritanical perspective.

In Egypt, recent calls by Islamist lawyers to withdraw the latest edition from circulation, censure its more salacious passages, and even ban the book altogether have been met with outrage by Egyptian intellectuals. In the eyes of these lawyers, ironically-named “Lawyers without Shackles,” the *Thousand and One Nights* is unacceptable according to the standards of Egyptian society. While feigning to defend Islam, and denouncing the defenders of this universal classic as apostates, the Egyptian Taliban is actively engaged in a war against Arabic-Islamic culture and heritage. Ignorant of their own religious tradition, which openly discusses erotic issues, they appear oblivious to the fact that “there is no shame in religion,” and that Islam encourages individuals to discuss societal issues unreservedly.

Fortunately, thanks to the diligent efforts of both Arab and non-Arab authors, many of whom are deeply devoted Muslims soundly grounded in the true teachings of Islam, the *Thousand and One Nights* is starting to receive the respect it deserves. Furthermore, thanks to the investigative endeavors of Muhsin J. al-Musawi, the religious dimension of the *Thousand and One Nights* is finally being rightly recognized. One can only hope that this more enlightened attitude will open new avenues of academic exploration because *Alf laylah wa laylah* has yet to give up all of its treasures.

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