

September 2009

Book Review: Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam

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Recommended Citation

Benmessaoud, Sanaa (2009). Book Review: Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 231-234.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/19>

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Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam. 2006. Suzanne Gauch.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 174 pp. \$24.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Sanaa Benmessaoud¹

“Everything you think you know about *the Arabian Nights* is probably wrong,” asserts Frost (2001). Gauch lends him credence in her book *Liberating Shahrazad*. According to her, Scheherazade, the *Nights*’ legendary storyteller, never stopped talking. In fact, Gauch aims at exploring the ways in which “women writers and filmmakers from the Islamic world” use Scheherazade’s voice and Scheherazade-like storytelling “to combat symbolic and political violence at home and to struggle against co-option by imperialist or anti-Islamic critics abroad” (xi-xii). To achieve this objective, Gauch examines the literary works of four North-African postcolonial writers, namely Fatima Mernissi, Taher Ben Jelloun, Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar, and a film by the Tunisian filmmaker Moufida Tlatli.

Gauch first debunks several of the myths surrounding the *Nights* by taking the reader on a journey of their multiple translations, and indeed transformations, over the centuries. The stories have no “one original authorized by either the signature of an author, or traceable, transparent origins in the Arab Middle Ages” (1). The fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript on which Galland based his translation, the first in Europe, counted no more than 270 nights. The remaining nights together with the tales’ closure were thus the creation of the Western translators. But by silencing Scheherazade at the end of the nights, these translators ended up portraying her as a submissive victim of her patriarchal culture, and not as the agent of change she effectively was, whose sang-froid, shrewd intelligence and political astuteness enabled her to transform her condition from one of weakness to one of power.

Against this backdrop, Gauch explores her corpus starting with Moufida Tlatli’s film, *The Silences of the Palace* (1994). Set on the eve of Tunisia’s independence from France, the film discusses problems of sexual servitude and social segregation facing servant-class women in the Tunisian patriarchal society. With its female-centered perspective, its open-ending and narrative techniques drawing on the model of repetition so reminiscent of *The Nights*, the film “gives a nod to the narrative art of Shahrazad” (16). Gauch then examines Fatema Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* (1995). This fictional story taking the guise of an autobiography describes life in a Moroccan Harem in the forties. Using Scheherazade-like storytelling skills and frequently alluding to stories of women in *The Nights*, Mernissi draws a picture of the Harem women different from “those bleak images of Muslim women silenced, disenfranchised and physically and psychically violated”. The third work analyzed by Gauch is Ben Jelloun’s *The Sand Child* (1987). Telling the story of a child born girl but brought up as a boy, this novel problematizes the very notion of sex. Primarily about social and religious injustices towards women in pre-independence Morocco, the novel foregrounds the idea that sex is a social and cultural construct “in need of radical reimagining” (56).

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Gauch also examines three novels by the Algerian writer Assia Djébar. In *A Sister to Scheherazade*, Djébar draws on the role of an often ignored character in *The Nights*, namely Scheherazade's sister Dinarzade, to explore themes of women's solidarity and how it might enable them to further objectives of freedom. This theme pervades two previous novels by Djébar: *Women of Algiers in their Apartments* and *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*. Both set in postcolonial Algeria, where independence failed to bring liberation and self-fulfillment to women, the novels tell the story of Algerian women's resistance to oppressive traditions. The last work that Gauch explores is Leila Sebbar's trilogy *Sherazade: Missing: Aged 17, Dark Curly Hair, Green Eyes* (1982); *The Notebooks of Sherazade* (1985); and *Mad for Sherazade* (1991). This is a work that, according to Gauch, destabilizes many a stereotypical conception of the Arab woman. Telling the story of 'Sherazade', a French girl with Arab heritage and a "fractured identity" (114), the trilogy also addresses the theme of hybridity and identity negotiation.

The Nights were translated and retranslated in Europe ad nauseam. The 18th century alone counted eighty different English versions of the tales (Haddawy, 1995: xvi). Although the original underwent, in the process of translation, so many transformations, including substantial additions, the translators maintained that the translations "were much more accurate than any travel account" (ibid. xxi). Consequently, *The Nights* shaped a stereotypical representation of what has come to be seen as an "Arab culture", and more specifically of the "Arab" and "Muslim" women (Jacquemond, 1992: 150). These women were invariably depicted as uneducated and oppressed sexual objects. It was precisely such stereotypes that informed and, indeed, legitimized 19th century's Western calls for the necessity of liberating these "Arab" and "Muslim" women, or what Ahmed (1992) dubbed "colonial feminism". These stereotypes, being "arrested, fixated [forms] of representation that deny the play of difference" (Bhabha, 1983: 27), did not evolve with time. Hence, just as Lord Cromer called for setting the Egyptian woman free from her backward culture at the turn of the Twentieth century (Ahmed 1992), so voices are calling today for military intervention in some Islamic countries to liberate Muslim women, thus co-opting the feminist discourse for political purposes (see Hunt and Rygiel 2006).

In this context, Gauch's *Liberating Shahrazad* comes as a timely illumination of a subject that "has fascinated Western audiences since precolonial times [...]: women in Islamic societies" (xiv). By following the tracks of Scheherazade in the works of North-African feminist writers and filmmakers, Gauch brilliantly brings out Scheherazade's authority over herself and her listeners, and gives a much needed insight into how contemporary women, including writers and artists, from Arab and Muslim countries produce a resisting discourse that subverts dominant discourses both at home and abroad.

Gauch also moves easily between genres and languages as her examination of the corpus takes her from a film in Arabic to an autobiography in English to a multiple-narrator novel in French. More importantly, it would seem that Gauch, in her call for "multiple Shahrazades, to address all manner of rulers" (131), has herself become one insofar as she uses techniques similar to those of the iconic storyteller, mainly the fractured repetitions. Much like Scheherazade, Gauch embeds all the chapters within the same frame, that of the tales, as she keeps going back to Scheherazade and her nights at the beginning of every chapter. This gives the work a coherence that would not have been easily obtained given that every chapter deals with a different story, a different novel.

Liberating Shahrazad has, however, its limitations. The subtitle “Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam”, is rather misleading. While the book does engage with feminism and postcolonialism, it barely touches on the issue of women in Islam. Besides, the corpus is a selection of works by five North-African artists representing personal views about their respective countries. So Gauch’s use of the categories of “Muslim”, “Arab” and “North-African” interchangeably is an essentializing simplification perpetuating the false perception that all Arabs are Muslim and all Muslims are Arabs and that they both constitute one distinct homogenous entity. The majority of the world’s Muslims are not Arab and the Arabs, according to Hatem (1998), display such a complex cultural and religious makeup that it would be hard to discuss their social or cultural problems in generalizing terms.

Although Gauch states at the beginning that the artists she examines belong all to a place that is neither the Orient nor the Occident (Maghreb in Arabic means west), and that, as such, they speak “from a space that presently incarnates the very much contested and quite porous line between Occident and Orient” (xiii), she fails to bring out how their works might not, and in fact do not, reflect the situation in all Arab or Muslim countries, or even in their respective home countries. Actually, almost all the works Gauch explores address more a western audience than home audiences, as they are penned in the former colonizer’s language. Mernissi’s *Dreams* addresses only an Anglo-American audience as it is written in English, a language barely spoken in Morocco, a former French colony. Even Tlatli’s film which is in Arabic uses an oriental décor and architecture that, according to Rice (2007: 38), “provide a seductive environment for these [Orientalist] misreadings and even encourage them,” which has resulted in many critics viewing the film “through an Orientalist lens” (ibid.). Likewise, Ben Jelloun has been fiercely criticized for self-orientalizing and reinforcing centuries-old Orientalist stereotypes of victimized Arab women (Majid 1998; Kaye and Zubir 1990).

In fact, not only does Gauch overlook the implications of her restricted and therefore non-representative choice of works, but she also gives short shrift to the criticism leveled at Ben Jelloun. Far from being justified, it calls, according to her, “attention to the exemplary self-performance required of postcolonial writers both abroad and at home” (57). Gauch thus displays a patronizing feminist stance, the same that allowed one of her critics to say that “it is important that their home audiences not see North African writers and filmmakers as over-identifying with the West” (Ashley 2007).

However, *Liberating Shahrazad* remains an excellent and fascinating read, one that takes the reader to a multiplicity of stories: the stories in the novels and the film and the stories these stories tell about women’s resistance, self-representation and perpetual negotiation of identity in a transnational context. Gauch explains that by “liberating Shahrazad” she refers to Scheherazade’s agency and ability to liberate women. However, through her book, she also set the storyteller free from dominant discourses writing her off as a submissive, uneducated sexual object. Most significantly, Gauch also liberates her from a spelling and a pronunciation that made her name sound strange to her for centuries.

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