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## “Myopic Feminist Individualism in A.S. Byatt’s *Arabian Nights’ Tale*: ‘The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye’”

By Kathleen Williams Renk<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

I take as my point of departure Jane Campbell’s view that Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” “exposes the gaps ... between the worlds in which twentieth-century women live,” as I situate Byatt’s story within its literary, political, and feminist framework. Viewing “The Djinn” as a condensed pastiche of what Byatt terms “the greatest story ever told,” *One Thousand and One Nights*, rather than a fairy or wonder tale, I read this tale in relation to Chilla Bulbeck’s insights in *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. I argue that in her *Arabian Nights’ Tale*, Byatt has created a myopic orientalized, first-world feminist point of view that relies heavily on the tenets of liberal feminism, ignoring how gender as “fate” is shaped by national history, religious affiliation and the material conditions of women’s lives. Byatt’s *Arabian Nights’ Tale* does not fulfill the promise of its antecedent text – that of saving women from death. Instead this *Arabian Nights’ tale* views third-world women’s lives as coincident with death. Their oppressed lives are hopeless and futile; they appear to be living in a limbo world likened to the world the pre-enlightened medieval Griselda inhabits.

*Keywords*: liberal feminism, third world feminisms, orientalism

Critics have positioned A. S. Byatt’s Booker-winning *Possession* as a postmodern classic that plays with genres, combining elements of the detective novel, Victorian poetry, the epistolary novel, fairytales, and metafiction, as well as a post-postmodern text that returns us to “traditional” storytelling. While *Possession* epitomizes Byatt’s approach to narrative, it also underscores Byatt’s scathing critique of literary scholarship and theory, as well as her view of academic feminism, exemplified in her satiric representation of the American feminist scholar Leonora Stern. Stern and other scholars in this novel are criticized and sometimes mocked because of their derivative work that Byatt positions as inferior to the creativity and imagination of the artist/genius. Stern, in particular, is made to seem ridiculous as she writes about the female sexuality that she locates in Christabel LaMotte’s poem the “Drowned City of Is,” arguing, in a letter to another feminist scholar, Maud Bailey, the “drowned women in the city might represent the totality of the female body as an erogenous zone if the circumambient fluid were seen as an undifferentiated eroticism ...” (154).

Byatt does not ascribe to a particular feminist ideology and is often critical of academic feminism and women’s studies, yet Byatt says, “[o]f course I am a feminist” (Coyne 12), an “older, more individualistic feminist” than feminists of the 1970s and 80s

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(Campbell, 2004, 17) and “[a]ll my books are about the Woman Artist—in that sense, they’re terribly feminist” (Tredell 66, quoted in Campbell 2004, 1). However, Byatt’s relationship with feminism has been called “ambivalent” (Campbell 2004, 4; Franken 88).

In this essay, I am interested in critiquing Byatt’s depiction of feminism and first and third world women in her novella “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” (1994), what I term her version of the Arabian Nights’ Tale. I will read this Arabian Nights’ Tale in relation to Chilla Bulbeck’s insights in *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women’s Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (1998) in order to expose Byatt’s orientalist first-world feminist stance.

Most scholars view Byatt’s work positively in relation to women’s issues, accentuating the liberatory nature of her work, especially her fairytales. According to Annegret Maack, the purpose of Byatt’s fairytales, including “The Djinn,” is to “liberat[e] and transfor[m]” women’s lives (145), while Jane Campbell acknowledges that “The Djinn” “explore[s] the possibilities and limitations of women’s lives in the contemporary world” (“Forever Possibilities” 135). Moreover, Campbell argues that Byatt’s story “exposes the gaps ... between the worlds in which twentieth-century women live” (2004, 186-7). In addition, while Campbell notes that “from one perspective, ‘The Djinn’ is an essay on feminist narratology” (183), Maack emphasizes how “The Djinn” is concerned with the protagonist Gillian Perholt’s “fate” (124) as an aging woman. These insights are useful yet do not go far enough in situating Byatt’s novella within its feminist and literary framework.

“Ambivalence” towards feminism does not describe Byatt’s approach to feminism in “The Djinn.” Byatt appears to support feminism in this novella. Unlike her satiric stance on the academic feminist in *Possession*, Byatt does not blatantly lampoon this British scholar, Gillian Perholt, even though her work, like Stern’s, is viewed as derivative, since she is a narratologist, a being of “secondary order” (96) and not a creative writer. Yet, Byatt’s approach to feminism in this novella, despite its seemingly positive portrayal, is not without its flaws. Byatt’s own view of feminism based on a short-sighted feminist individualism<sup>2</sup> shapes this tale in pernicious ways.

Reading Byatt’s Arabian tale in relation to Bulbeck’s insights demonstrates Byatt’s myopic first-world orientalist feminist view that largely ignores how “gender as fate” is shaped by national history, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and the material conditions of women’s lives. Arguing that “there is no pure west and east, people, goods, ideas, and texts travel backwards and forwards across the borderlands” (6), Bulbeck not only criticizes the orientalist point of view that places East and West in binary opposition, but western feminism as well because western feminism is largely based on a notion of “possessive individualism” that “privilege[s] the self-determining individuality of desire and destiny” (12). She underscores that:

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<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Spivak in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” argues that Jane Eyre is a feminist individualist who attains her liberation, in part, at the expense of the colonial madwoman, Bertha Mason. Continually seeking her personal freedom, impatient with the pinions of Victorian womanhood, Jane does not acknowledge Bertha’s womanhood or humanity and she achieves her own fulfillment through Bertha’s self-immolation.

[w]estern feminism is part of [the] philosophical tradition drawing on humanism, utilitarianism, marxism, and liberal individualism to construct its understanding of (white western) women's place in the world. (13)

Placing the protagonist, Gillian Perholt, in this context, we can see that Gillian can best be characterized as a representative of liberal western feminism. Gillian is concerned with her individual rights, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. Although contemporary western feminism, through critiques by women of color and Marxist feminists, has made inroads into considering how interlocking oppressions of race, color, and socio-economic class affect gender, from the perspective of third-world feminisms, western feminism generally excludes analysis of how issues of nation, ethnicity, and religion shape gender in the contemporary world. And, although western feminism emphasizes "sisterhood," it does not generally ascribe to "solidarity" as defined by Chandra Mohanty, a "mutuality, accountability, and recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities" (7).<sup>3</sup> Viewed in this way, Byatt's version of the Arabian Nights' tale is blind to the way in which third-world women's lives are shaped by nationality, ethnicity, and religion, as it positions the western woman as more enlightened and free. And the tale fails to build alliances between first and third-world women, even though the novella, set during the volatile First Persian Gulf War, seems to be predicated on the notion of exchanged storytelling between East and West that will hopefully effect reconciliation of these opposed geographic, cultural, and political locations.<sup>4</sup>

Byatt's choice of the model for her form and the way she shapes this choice are vitally connected to both her orientalism and first-world feminism. While several scholars have categorized this novella as a "wonder" or fairytale (Campbell, Maack, Todd), in my view, Byatt appropriates what she calls the "Greatest Story ever told," *One Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>5</sup> In Byatt's view, *One Thousand and One Nights*, a model for storytelling that connects us with our mortality, "is a maze, a web, a network, a river with infinite

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<sup>3</sup> Mohanty notes that just as it is "difficult to speak of a singular entity called "'Western feminism,' it is difficult to generalize about Third World feminisms" (46). Rather than defining Third World feminisms, Mohanty draws on Benedict Anderson's notions of "imagined communities" and applies these ideas to what she imagines are alliances among women across national boundaries; third-world women are "linked" by their histories and struggles ... against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capitalism" (46).

The term "third world" is problematic for several reasons, including the inherent hierarchical enumeration that relegates the "third" world as lesser, backward, and "inferior." It's also problematic because, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was designated the "second world," the descending numerical hierarchy doesn't fit. Yet, the term "third world," which is at best provisional, signifies an overexploited and underserved world that seems to coincide with formerly colonized countries.

<sup>4</sup> I deliberately use the terms East and West to designate the "imaginary boundaries of identity rather than any real geography." Although the terms have been placed in polar opposition and are highly "inaccurate" (6) as Eva Sallis says, they are nevertheless useful because it is precisely this opposition that needs to be overcome in order to bring about conversation and reconciliation.

<sup>5</sup> In her history of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Sallis notes that the nights "has a history of transformation," which includes appropriation by other cultures (2).

In the frame tale the cuckold King Shahriyār marries a virgin each night and has her murdered each morning. Scheherazade is one of the virgins and she tells stories within stories to the king and delays the ending, thus saving herself and other maidens from death (Sallis 85-9).

tributaries, a series of boxes within boxes, a bottomless pool. It turns endlessly on itself, a story about storytelling” (“Introduction” xiii). Byatt’s novella is a “story about storytelling” that connects us to our mortality, merging an Eastern form with Eastern and Western tales, including tales from *Gilgamesh*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Chaucer’s “The Clerk’s Tale” of Griselda, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, and Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” as it focuses on the issue of human fate and mortality, especially in relation to women’s lives.

The narration of this Arabian Nights’ Tale and the creation of a character who is an erotic male djinn, a genie, are both aspects that indicate an orientalist point of view that is fascinated with the supposedly exotic East and its method of storytelling. The narrator in Byatt’s tale is a first-person narrator who speaks as a Scheherazade would, weaving tale after tale through the voices of other storytellers, including the magical, sensual djinn and Gillian Perholt, whose own realistic English stories, which the djinn argues are “strange, glancing things,” “peter out” (237).<sup>6</sup> The narrator also imitates what is described as a Turkish storytelling method -- “where stories are introduced *bir var mis, bir yok mis*, perhaps it happened, perhaps it didn’t” (254) and where the narrator easily digresses and sometimes seems uncertain rather than omniscient. For example, the narrator states “Who can say if she traveled [East to Turkey] because she was English and stolid and could not quite imagine being blasted out of the sky, or because ... she could not resist the lure of seeing ... the shores of Europe and Asia face to face?” (97) This narration while drawing on a doubtful and digressive form also clearly suggests that Turkey, as a place where East and West meet, potentially is a threatening, violent locale, completely separate from the civilized, orderly, and peaceful West.

The erotic and exoticized djinn are another convention of the tale that indicates blatant orientalism. The djinn who eventually makes love with Gillian also tells the mesmerized Gillian tales of harems and sultans. Michela Ardizzoni’s description of the West’s fascination with the East in nineteenth-century travel narratives informs our understanding of Gillian’s interest in the djinn’s stories. “The images invoked by descriptions of powerful and despotic sheiks and sultans with many wives at their disposal ... suggested a new space where the male European could indulge in sensual fantasies” (631). While this orientalism describes male sexual fantasies, the tales Gillian hears draws her, as a female, into a world of sexual intrigue and mystery, a world that she already fantasized about and romanticized as a child when she dreamt of wearing a veil and marrying the “devoted” Thief of Baghdad (135).

While Byatt’s orientalism seems obvious, her intentions to draw on the Arabian Nights may have had some merit, since the original Nights were stories that Scheherazade told to save women from death. Yet, unlike the original, this Arabian Nights’ tale does not save women from death but views third-world women’s lives as coincident with death; their oppressed lives are hopeless and futile; they appear to be living in a limbo world likened to the world the pre-enlightened medieval Griselda inhabits.

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<sup>6</sup> Impatient with modernist narrative form, Byatt is highly critical of High Modernism, which she says: tried to do away with storytelling, which it thought was vulgar, replacing it with flashbacks, epiphanies, streams of consciousness. But storytelling is intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape ... We are all like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of ourselves as narratives, with beginnings, middles, and ends. (“The Greatest Story Ever Told” 166)

In Turkey, at the conference entitled "Stories of Women's Lives," Gillian offers as her story Chaucer's version of the tale of Griselda, often viewed as a tale that models Christian duty and submission to God. Yet because the self-effacing attributes of ideal womanhood coincide with those of the exemplary Christian, Griselda's tale unsettles contemporary feminists, Gillian included. The medieval Griselda lacks the individual rights that liberal feminists – from the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries fought for – including individual voice and recognition of her humanity. Allowing her husband Walter to remove her children with the intention of killing them, Griselda, the peasant turned queen, is also removed or rejected by her husband who favors a younger version of the obedient woman. Eerily and ironically, Griselda's story parallels Gillian's own since her husband has also replaced her with a younger woman. Yet Gillian's reaction to her dismissal is radically different from Griselda's. When Gillian's husband faxes her to tell her that he's left her, Gillian experiences a sense of relief and release of "stopped energies". In being released from the confines of marriage and childbearing, she "felt ... like a prisoner bursting chains ... like a gas confined in a bottle, that found an opening, and rushed out" (103). On the other hand, Griselda feels no relief or dissatisfaction. She merely submits to Walter's requests without question or emotion. Walter also "asks [Griselda] to return to the castle and prepare the rooms and the feast for his new young bride" (115). When Walter reveals that the new bride is their daughter and that the son is also alive and well, that his plan had merely been a "test" of Griselda's faith, he says the couple "could now be reconciled" (116).

This story of "faith" and submission to male will is too much for Gillian who seems overcome by the telling of the story. Precisely at this point in her narrative, Gillian experiences a vision that silences and terrifies her. She sees a hag, a "huge, female form, with a veiled head bowed above emptiness and long slack-sinewed arms, hanging loosely around emptiness," "a flat-breasted" creature with "withered skin ... exposed above the emptiness, the windy hole that was its belly and its womb" (117-18).

Even though Gillian is liberated in the Western sense, she fears old age and the limitations and deficiencies imposed by it, as well as the way she will be perceived as an old woman. She also fears that old age will prevent her from fulfilling her promise as an individual. The vision of the hag, which represents Gillian's withered, aging self that will be swallowed by death, as well as the empty, superfluous, imprisoned Griselda, a woman of "stopped energies," overcomes Gillian. She eventually recovers herself to announce the "discomfort of this terrible tale" (119). Severely criticizing this story of submission, Gillian expresses "outrage – at what was done to Griselda," viewing her story as emblematic of the "stories of women's lives" that are "the stories of stopped energy" (120). Gender as "fate" is Gillian's meditation and our own as we contemplate the impact of these "stories of stopped energy."

The most troubling aspect of this scene, however, relates to how the death hag is conflated with the Islamic women who sit in the "front row ... with their heads wrapped in grey scarves." The narrator relates that "the scarves were a sign of religious defiance" in the secular state of Turkey. These young women "never meet the speaker's [Gillian's] eyes" and they tell Orhan, Gillian's Turkish male colleague, that they dress as they do because their "father[s] and fiancé[s] say it is right" (108). Their justification about why they veil themselves resonates with Griselda's compliance to male prerogative. Not only

do the contemporary Muslim women's attitudes coincide with medieval Griselda's but Gillian sees the death hag directly behind the scarved women:

[Gillian] could move neither fingers nor lips, and in the body of the hall, behind the grey-scarved women, she saw the cavernous form, a huge female form, with a veiled head bowed above emptiness. (117)

This eerie juxtaposition suggests that the veiled Griselda, the death hag, and the Islamic women share profound and troubling similarities. The Islamic women's scarved heads and the hag's veiled countenance are part of Gillian's view – the two cannot be separated, suggesting that Gillian conflates the two versions of the veiled woman and both represent death. In juxtaposing the veiled hag with the veiled Islamic women, Byatt categorizes the veiled women as oppressed and hopeless, and as victims without agency or minds of their own, much like Griselda, and she views the veil as a monolithic signifier of oppression and death because it is associated with what Byatt perceives to be a loss of individual will and rights. The vision aligns the veiled women with the medieval Griselda and thus with a medieval world – a less advanced civilization. However, this story's use of the veil to indicate oppression of women disregards the multiple meanings of the veil. According to Bulbeck, “the veil does not carry a single unvarying message” (33). While the veil has come to represent “Arab nationalism” (30) and is often used as a mode of upholding tradition and “putting women back in their place (veiled, obedient to father, husband, or son, publicly punished even unto death for presumed sexual transgressions)” (29-30), and a weapon that enforces the mandate of an entrenched patriarchy,<sup>7</sup> the veil can also be a “tool of political action” for some women (31). Referring to the adoption of the veil by Islamic women in colonial Algiers during the Algerian struggle for independence from France, Bulbeck notes that women wore the veil as a way to reject French rule and to protect women from “the French denuding gaze” (31).

Besides being a mode of anti-colonialism, the veil, even in covering a woman, may not represent her political ideology. For example, Cheryl Benard in *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance* notes that members of R.A.W.A., the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, were forced to wear burquas and yet did not ascribe to a fundamentalist Islamic position. Bulbeck also reveals that it is possible to wear a veil and still call oneself a feminist:

It is claimed that the custom of veiling arises from the Qur'an's injunction that the believers are to ‘cast down their eyes ... and reveal not their adornment ...’ This does not clearly enjoin women to wear the full veil and indeed requires men to cast down their eyes. Thus Iranian Islamic feminists have recommended that both men and women should wear simple clothing which covers the body in a non-arousing fashion. (30-1)

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<sup>7</sup> Farookhron Parsa, the first woman member of the Iranian cabinet, was killed because she advocated removing the veil. The Ayatollah Khomeini “had [her] wrapped in a sack and machine-gunned; she had directed schoolgirls not to veil and had established a commission to produce non-sexist curriculum” (Bulbeck 32).

And in discussing the issue of the “veiling” of Islamic French girls, Michela Ardizzoni notes that the headscarf is not a veil and may be a “symbol of hybridity” and a way for Islamic French girls to “re-invent tradition” (642). The narrator’s equation of the veil (and scarves) with death does not recognize any subtleties in regard to why or how the women may veil themselves. Their veils merely represent their oppressed and futile condition that is the polar opposite of Gillian’s liberated, supposedly enlightened position. In these characterizations, Byatt fails to note how gender as fate is shaped by nation and religion.

Mervat Hatem’s essay “Through Each Others’ Eyes,” concerned with the writings of “European Orientalist and Egyptian nationalist women” during the Victorian era and early twentieth-century may help explain Gillian’s failure to conceive of or understand these Turkish women’s lives. Hatem says of European and Egyptian women that:

[b]ecause they viewed each other as alien, they were not able to relate to each other’s experiences, learn from them, or to integrate them into an understanding of the dilemmas that were also their own (35). By thinking of themselves as all powerful and free vis-à-vis Egyptian women, Western women could avoid confronting their own powerlessness and gender oppression at home (37).

First-world academic feminists, as represented by Perholt, often view Muslim women as “alien” and fail to comprehend that gender is shaped by nationalism, political struggle against colonialism and globalization, and religion. And, even if Gillian, in her liberation, sees herself as partially encumbered by the constraints of twentieth-century womanhood, she can view her position as markedly more free than the Turkish women, even if she still faces gender oppression and powerlessness at home.

Like the Western women Hatem describes, Gillian, as an academic feminist, fails to build alliances at the conference and later with Middle Eastern women when she visits Hagia Sophia, a museum that had once been a church and later a mosque. Thinking she would like this place because it was a “meeting-place of cultures, of East and West, the Christian Church and Islam” (170), her vision of reconciliation does not come to fruition; instead this site becomes a locale of conflict between East and West and Gillian and the women she meets there. Viewing a pillar traditionally used for “wishing,” Gillian and Orhan, her Turkish male colleague, meet a Pakistani man and his wife and daughters. Although the Pakistani family, including the girls, touch the “fertility” wishing stone, Gillian does not wish to; yet the women, described as “subdued birds” (171), “make her touch the inside of the pillar” (173). Ascribing her avoidance of the stone as the “English hygienic horror of something touched by so many” (172)<sup>8</sup>, Gillian seems unable to relate to these women and she leaves the museum saying that “she didn’t like Hagia Sophia” after the Pakistani man, who has assumed that Gillian is Orhan’s “quiet Muslim wife” (174), has announced “the West was evil ... and decadent, and sliding into darkness ...

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<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* also expresses a similar sentiment when Indian flesh rubs against her English flesh in the Marabar Cave scene.

True religion would bring the cleansing sword and destroy the filth and greed and corruption of the dying West ...”(173).<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect of the novella that presents an orientalized, first-world view is the storytelling exchange between the djinn and Gillian in which the Gillian and the djinn both flatten and universalize all women's experience and assume that all women ultimately desire individual rights rather than collective rights. The exotic and erotic male djinn speaks for Middle Eastern women whose stories of confinement closely parallel his own since he is often imprisoned in a bottle. The stories that he tells suggest that all women regardless of nation, religion, and ethnicity share replica experiences and desires.

Imprisoned three times in a bottle, the djinn “lived much of [his] life in harems” (202), especially among famous and powerful women, such as his “cousin” and love, the Queen of Sheba, who desired to remain free from the “prison house of marriage” (205). Although the djinn loves her, and advises that she retain her freedom because “freedom was her true good” (206), she longs for Suleiman who “deflowers” the queen and then forces the djinn back into his bottle. Thrown into the Red Sea where he remains for 2500 years, he eventually finds his way into the hands of a Christian slave girl, “thrown off a cliff” by her master (217). In his last “incarceration,” Zefir, a woman artist who has no audience for her art, finds the djinn. Although, according to the djinn, her art “rivals” the great Leonardo's, she is not acknowledged and she realizes that “she was eaten up with unused power” because she was a woman. An innovator who speaks many languages and who has been tutored in mathematics by the djinn, Zefir wants to be able to flourish as a human being, to unfold and develop all of her artistic and intellectual gifts; yet she is ignored and despised. She realizes that “if she were a man, these things she thought about would be ordinarily acceptable” (220). The djinn concludes that Zefir “would have been happy as a teacher of philosophy” (233).

All of the djinn's stories, which are mediated by a male point of view and told through a male, albeit sympathetic, voice, emphasize that Middle Eastern women as far back as the powerful Queen of Sheba sought release from “the prison house of marriage” and all sought personal freedom, independence, and self-autonomy, the values of liberal feminism, values that Gillian shares. Seemingly, according to this tale, women everywhere treasure feminist individualism and see no other valid approach to women's rights. As Fatima Mernissi notes, however, for Muslims “the individual ... in the philosophical meaning of the word is nonexistent” (quoted in Bulbeck 74). And Bulbeck states that “Muslims see individual identity as a disturbance of collective harmony” (74). Viewed in this way, Muslim women may find the notion of the individualist and, in particular, the feminist individualist, problematic. Middle Eastern and Eastern feminists, such as Chinese feminists, are often more interested in attaining collective rights through “conciliation and collaboration” rather than individual rights through self-assertion and protest(69). Of course, individual and collective rights are not mutually exclusive objectives. Muslim women may seek individual rights, such as the right to divorce and freedom from domestic violence through collective strategies, much in the same way that women in the West sought these individual rights. Byatt's emphasis though continues to

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<sup>9</sup> Although a reader may want to give Byatt the benefit of the doubt and believe that Byatt is pointing out Gillian's shortcomings as a feminist, this example, whereby Gillian fails to build alliances with Middle Eastern women, is a clear example of Byatt's orientaling discourse.

underscore that individual rights and female autonomy are the only objectives of feminism yet these objectives are only partially explanatory of third-world feminists' goals.

Gillian also contributes to universalizing assumptions about women as she relates her stories. One of the stories that Gillian tells as part of her share of the storytelling exchange conflates all women's powerlessness, while it ignores the drastic material differences between Gillian's experience and those of her narrative subject, a starving Ethiopian woman who was "part of a story—a film—made for the Save the Children Fund." Gillian tells the djinn,

And they interviewed the old woman. I remember it partly because of her beauty, and partly because of the skill of the cameraman – or woman – she was angular ... and she had one long arm at an angle over her head, and her legs extended on this bench – and the photographer had made them squared, as it were *framed* in her own limbs – she spoke out of an enclosure made by her own body ....(243)

Gillian continues by informing the djinn that the woman said, "there was no food, no food any more and the little girl would starve' ... and then she said, 'It is because I am a woman, I cannot get out of here, I must sit here, and wait for my fate, if only I were not a woman I could go out and do something'" (243). Characterized as the most distressed and circumscribed of the women in the novella, the Ethiopian woman has no ability to be mobile, as Gillian is, to save herself and her daughter. Imprisoned in a woman's body, she is powerless and hopeless. However, her immobility is radically different from Gillian's who can escape her geographical circumstances. Yet, rather than recognize this woman's limited mobility in a severe patriarchal and exploited third world country, Ethiopia, in which children and women are not fed so the working males can eat, Gillian only underscores a problematic commonality between herself and the Ethiopian woman. Both wish that they were not women.<sup>10</sup> They both wish to be free from the constraints of their gender, and Gillian goes so far as to wish to be a man. Reversing the male Hebrew rayer thanking God for not making the individual man a woman, Gillian, ironically, as a feminist individualist, would rather forget about women entirely and instead become a male.

Ultimately, Gillian decides that the only way to fully achieve liberation as a woman is to deny the possibility of her old age. Gillian wishes to lessen the impact of death by softening its edges, making herself seemingly more powerful by making her body younger, fertile, and beautiful. The djinn grants her wish to secure a younger, more attractive, and empowering body. And she uses another wish to secure higher academic prestige as she asks to be designated a key-note speaker at an academic conference, signifying the type of feminism that Mohanty says privileges the individual western woman's career rather than requiring and acquiring social and political transformation. Mohanty criticizes Western feminisms, especially "U.S.-based feminisms," for the

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the Ethiopian woman may wish to be a man despite her limited mobility, but the narration underscores that she makes this wish because, as a woman, she has no ability to move away. She must submit to her fate.

class-based gap between a vital women's movement and feminist theorizing ... that has led in part to a kind of careerist academic feminism ... that becomes a way to advance academic careers rather than a call for fundamental and collective social and economic transformation. (Mohanty 6)

Both of these wishes emphasize Gillian's need for self-fulfillment, empowerment, and autonomy as a woman. In some cases, Gillian's fulfillment can only be attained by rejecting femaleness and assuming male power as an aspect of her mid-life transformation, which may be associated in some cultures with "male" power as women shed their femininity. Yet, Gillian fears old age and does not become a wise woman as she advances in years. Her other wish also belies the sense that she becomes more powerful in middle age, since she wishes for a younger body. Her fulfillment ends up being ironically and inextricably tied to the "prison" of the woman's body – the younger, beautiful body associated with sexual power and legitimacy. Ironically, Byatt's feminist individualist considers herself free and enlightened in relation to the alien and oppressed Middle Eastern women that she encounters, yet Gillian's desire to obtain a younger, more powerful body contradicts the sense that she is powerful in her own right. Ironically, she can only be powerful when she possesses a body that is fertile and attractive to men. Like Griselda and others, she ultimately succumbs to male prerogative.

Throughout Byatt's *Arabian Nights' Tale*, Byatt has created a myopic orientalized, first-world feminist point of view that relies heavily on the tenets of liberal feminism, ignoring how gender as "fate" is shaped by national history, religious affiliation and the material conditions of women's lives. Byatt's *Arabian Nights' Tale* does not fulfill the promise of its antecedent text – that of saving women from death. Instead it inscribes Middle Eastern women's lives as coincident with death. While Jane Campbell acknowledges that Byatt's narrative "exposes the gaps ... between the worlds in which twentieth-century women live," my reading demonstrates that this gap is a chasm between first and third-world women, one dug by an entrenched first-world feminism.

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