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**Narrative, Imagination and Reason:  
A Critical Study of *The Arabian Nights* and *The Panchatantra* as an Eastern Discourse**

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**Abstract:**

*Since time immemorial the East or the orient has been conceived by the western intellectuals, philosophers and writers as chaotic, devoid of reason and a veritable land of mystery, charm and magic. The frame story narrative technique, itself a hallmark of eastern literature is a major landmark in the process of transition from orality to literature and is itself a triumph of imagination. The Arabian Nights and The Panchatantra, the two most well known books of Asiatic origin, developed in this narrative pattern, virtually show the exaltation of judicious reason over the erroneous judgment. The paper thus aims to navigate into the issues of narrative, imagination and reason and tries to propose that western conception of East as a land of chaotic imagination at least does not apply for these two representative texts, because here ultimately reason wins over imagination with the tool of frame story narrative technique which is itself a indigenous form of imagination.*

**Keywords:** Narratives, Imagination, Reason, Orient.

It is by nature, human beings are imaginative. S.T. Coleridge in his unfinished half-written poem *Kubla Khan* (1816) shows what it means by imagination and also what it assumes, when it does not respond properly at the instigation of the writer. But the poem is sacred for more than this, as it simultaneously equates imagination with the orient, the East, for we know Kubla or Kublai was the Mongol emperor of china, the famous descendent of Chengiz Khan. Kubla's intricate scheme of palaces, his pleasure garden, and the Abyssinian maids are not the inhabitants of Europe or the West rather they are the 'other' of Europe that help to navigate the identity of Europe or West with a singularly opposed doctrine. But the poem rather ends in a chaos. So for Coleridge at least, orient is specifically a symbol for imagination and chaos. Even before Coleridge, the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell in his famous poem *To His Coy*

*Mistress* (1650) urges his reluctant lady love to accept his love, because they had no much time to search for rubies in Indian Ganges. The meaning is simple, primarily it would take too much time, secondly, Ganges is infested with rubies as the poem suggests very clearly, but there is also another meaning that it is the place where people do not abide by the normal rules of civilized western society as they pass their precious time by searching rubies. There is also the subtle, embedded sense in the poem that suggests the search is somewhat futile. The construction of the conception of orient or greater Asiatic people as leisurely, imaginative and chaotic is thus not a modern phenomenon but rather it is associated with the European minds from the very past and is very much interlinked with their thought process and construction. Thus Bond's Film *Octopussy* (1983), made on Indian context profusely shows the elements that westerners or Europeans love to associate with the orient. There is the abundance of snakes, elephants, tiger etc., and also the beautiful dames living gorgeously on the banks of Ganges in Benaras, the holy city. Joseph L. Mankiewicz's film *Cleopatra* also shows this oriental opulence according to the taste of West par excellence.

However the aim of the present paper is not to show or eulogize the Europeans' envision of East or orient as a chaotic mixture of profound imagination and leisure etc., but to deliver the proposition that it simultaneously portrays reason and whenever there was slight chance of its corruption, at least literature is always prepared to erase the greasy blinds from its window and makes it clear to see both the in and out with clear eyes. Thus for the present essay two representative texts of orient are chosen to prove that there is, as well as there was sufficient supremacy of reason as to negate the specific identification of East by West as an embodiment of chaotic and somewhat irrational imagination. Human literature was primarily oral before the outcome of alphabetic representation of the orality. Gradually, the shift from orality to literacy encompasses various genres such as lyric, narrative, drama, philosophical works, biography, autobiography, historiography and several other forms that constitute modern way of writing. Of these the most important genre in relation to the shift from orality to literacy is narrative, primarily because it is nearer to its earlier form that is oral literature. Human knowledge is the result of time with its unrestricted flow and even behind the abstractions of science there is narrative that comes out of observations, based on daily happenings. Behind the proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, philosophical findings, thought process and rituals there is the human

experience which is comfortable to express itself in the terms of narrative than anything else. Developing a story line is to at once arrest the flowing time as well as to mark and guide that flow reasonably to a proper end.

Although it is found in all cultures, narrative is thus more functional in the discourse of primary oral cultures than others. Havelock in this connection aptly pointed out that knowledge is rather unmanageable in scientific abstractions. On the other hand the oral culture is rather alien to such categories, and thus the story of human and their action or even of the anthropomorphic people is rather indispensable for them to cater the knowledge to common masses and even to wider literate people. The stories of Trojan war among the ancient Greeks, the stories of *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, numerous folk tales of different aboriginal people were thus very popular across the cultures because they do not only express the stories but also they do represent the people concerned with their cultures, customs, rituals etc., prevalent among them. The extensive nature of this sort of narratives thus comprises the greatest repository of oral cultures across the globe in different indigenous customs and cultures. Secondly, narrative is particularly relevant in the discourse of oral culture because it can bind together diverse and substantive elements in a narrative form and make it durable than in any other mode.

The frame narrative technique is particularly popular and prevalent in mediaeval literary works that makes use of a connecting narrative or mother narrative to bind together diverse elements and narrations, however, the common goal is decisively the same with the mother story. The mother story is used here as a frame that anchors the other stories in its lap. Thus the frame employs the technique where an introductory main story is presented, that may be in parts, for the basic purpose of erecting the joined platform for more than one narration, a specific fictive universe and lastly coming to the mother story with a definite conclusion and thus different streams concluded into one. Thus the frame story leads the readers through its course into the smaller stories which are used to highlight, comment and explain the mother story. However this is not the hard fixed rule, as for example in *The Mahabharata*, we have been presented with the vast plethora of early Indo-Aryan universe, the whole history of *kurukhestra* war with its numerous diversions which are in a sense more wide and rich than the opening mother story. Though there are examples of this narrative technique in European literature, literature critics

and historians do point out the source of this specific genre in the East that is in ancient Indian and Persian literature basically.

Recently there is ground breaking study in the fields of narrative and narratology by diverse critics like Genette, De Jung and many others. De Jung's study of narrative that focalizes on *The Iliad* has successfully inducted narratological readings in the modern critical writings and narratology has become a sufficient tool for modern research. The critical paradigms like feminism, post colonial readings, science fiction criticism, Marxism all developed their specific narratological discourses with their own terms and adaptations. On the other hand, there are also the attempts to include in it not only the more common forms of literature like lyric, drama, novel, poetry etc., but also the common everyday conversation and the like for specific purposes. As a result narrative and its study do not contain itself in the strict boundaries of ancient and mediaeval literature.

Narrative itself is a very sufficient and competent subject for historical study. Scholes and Kellogg have pointed out some of the ways by which narrative of the West has been modeled on its Asiatic sister which is older in age and arguably more dignified in manner. So it is reasonably clear that however chaotic the region may seem to them, there is no lack of imagination in the fields and terms of literature at least as the development of narrative strategy bears the sufficient proof for this. For the present purpose of the essay we have chosen two texts from Asia or Asiatic origin to prove the proposition, these are *The Arabian Nights*, and *The Panchatantra*.

*The Arabian Nights* is a tale that tells about the whole middle-east people, not only projecting the Arabs as the name, rather falsely hints at. A vast canvas of life, customs, culture, rituals, religion, with its every possible suggestion is presented before us, which is rich in its form and matter, representing the people from a vast geography, having a specific history. Ulrich Marzolph points out in this connection, "No other work of fiction of non-western origin has had a greater impact on western culture than the Arabian nights" (Marzolph XXIII). It is not simply a vast treasure trove of pleasant stories for entertainment but also represents a vast panorama of human life, and various issues that strive to bind the people into a single fold and a single cultural name and which are at the same time definitely distinct from others. It is also in a way responsible to construct the vision of orient in European minds as an essential other because it is

alien and opposed to them in the sense of the term. However in the learned literary world this does not remain as alien but rather it is for them that this work transcends the boundaries of time and nation. Its names, people, country etc., are variously translated into different languages throughout the world and becomes synonymous with the distinct representation of a different cultural identity that westerners though see as dangerous yet feel lured by it.

The origin of the book is also elusive like the name itself. Though preserved in Arabic compilation, the collection has its root in the Persian prototype that existed even before the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E and some of its stories can be traced back to the Mesopotamian and Indian culture having similar prototypes in those cultures. However the collection comes to its present form in the pre-modern Arabic culture and it came to be known as *Alf layla wa-layla*, which can be translated as ‘*A Thousand Nights and a Night*’ or more perfectly ‘*The Thousand and one Nights*’. In fact, this book is a major and definite contribution of the East to the world literature. However there is scanty of information over its reception in the home stable, the only mediaeval writer to express his opinion on *The Arabian Nights* is Ibn al-Nadim who thinks this as an inferior work and remarks this as a coarse book without having the warmth of telling. His complain probably hints at the prose style of the book which is relatively simple than the prevalent works of Arabian literature at his time. We see that the major works of Arabian literature consists of rhymed prose in that time. But *The Arabian Nights* has primarily its reputation for the ways in which one narrative is grafted within another. Daniel Beaumont in his ‘Literary Style and Narrative Technique in the Arabian Nights’ collected in *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (2004) comments, “In view of the Persian-Indian origins of the core material of the nights, this feature is usually thought to derive from Indian works such as *Pancatantra*, but in formal mastery it might be said that the pupil has out done the teachers” (3). However the overt didactic tone of its Indian counterpart or predecessor is not omnipotent in *The Arabian Nights*. Rather it heralds its modernity by somehow doing away with the tone of didacticism, at least superficially. However the aim remains the same.

Story telling is the subject of *The Arabian Nights* and the book simply is concerned with the story telling and probably except Coleridge’s *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* (1798), no such literary work of undaunted and undiminished reputation exists that concerns about story telling. *The Arabian Nights* opens with king Shahriyar who inherited from his father a mighty

kingdom that consists of countries of India and china, possessing numerous troops and guards and servants and domestic helps. Now this expression should not be taken literally, but he was mighty king, it is very clear. He governed his subjects judiciously; as a result, all the inhabitants of his country and the whole empire loved him. This king had a younger brother named Shah-Zeman who was the king of Samarkand. The administration of their governments was conducted with principles, ethics, morality and each of these kings ruled over their people with justice during a period of twenty years with peace, enjoyment and happiness for all the people concerned. After this period the elder king, Shahriyar desired to see his younger brother. So, he ordered his *wezir* or the chief minister to set out for a journey towards his brother's land. He also gave orders to prepare handsome presents such as horses decorated with gold and costly jewels, and beautiful virgins and expensive stuffs etc., according to the advices of his counselors. He then wrote a letter to his brother expressing his great desire to see him and after sealing it, he gave it to the *wezir*. The king ordered the minister to prepare for the arduous journey and use all expedition in returning as soon as possible so that he can have the news quickly. The *wezir* undertook the journey as par the king's order and presented himself before the king Shah-Zeman and greeted him with a prayer for the divine assistance in his favor and for his kingdom. He further informed him of his brother's desire to see him and gave him the king's letter. After entertaining the *wezir* for some days, the younger brother sent forth his tents and camels and servants and guards towards his brother's kingdom. As a ritual he appointed his *wezir* to be the governor of the kingdom during his absence and set out towards his brother's dominion. But at the midnight, however, he remembered that he had forgotten a valuable article that he had thought previously to present his brother, the king Shahriyar. Therefore without any further delay, he returned to the palace to fetch it. Upon his arrival, he there saw his wife sleeping and attended by a male negro slave who had fallen asleep by her side. Seeing this heinous scene the world became black before his eyes for this was beyond his possible imagination, and he pondered within himself that if this is the case when I have not departed from the city what will be the conduct of this vile woman while I shall be gone with my brother. At once, he drew his sword and killed them both in the bed after which he immediately returned to his tent and departed for his brother's capital at once. Shahriyar also witnessed the same thing as his wife behaved likewise, cohabiting with male-slaves. He beheaded his wife after witnessing the

treachery of the damsel with the *jinn*. This invokes in him the conclusion about the vile nature of all the womenfolk. He thenceforth makes it a regular custom that every time that he takes a virgin to his bed, he will only kill her at the expiration of the night, because he does not believe in the chastity of women any more. Thus he continues to do during a period of three years and the people protest against him and flee with their daughters. The country almost becomes void of the women of marriageable age. This was the case when this king ordered his *wezir* to bring him a virgin according to his custom, and the *wezir* could find none. Now this *wezir* had two daughters. Shahrazad, the elder one, was aptly conversed with many books of histories and the lives of preceding kings, stories of past generations. When the *wezir* relates to her the matter she said, “By Allah, O my father, give me in marriage to this king, either I shall die, and be a ransom for one of the daughters of the Muslims, or I shall live, and be the cause of their deliverance from him” (8). This is the context on which *The Arabian Nights* stems and gradually Shahrazad becomes capable of inducing king to the multiple realities of life which was negated by the earlier acts of the king. Thus the world of Arabian nights is a virtual triumph of reason over the imagination, the reason that the king had banished because by only some instances he conceives a rule which may be also be an exception.

*The Panchatantra* on the other hand contains one the most widely read and popular stories in the world. Arthur.W. Ryder in his introduction of the translation of *The Panchatantra* further says, “If it were further declared that the *Panchatantra* is the best collection of stories in the world, the assertion could hardly be disapproved, and would probably command the assent of those possessing the knowledge for a judgement”(Ryder 3). It assumes various forms in its country of origin, India, and then travels in translations and translations of translations through Persia, Arabia, Syria, and the civilized countries of Europe through several centuries. The fact is that through different centuries and different ambience these stories claim the same charm as we have instances of translation of this collection even in the *mughal* period. These stories have for more than twenty centuries brought entertainment to millions throughout the world. Since the stories collected in the *Panchatantra* are very ancient and since they can no longer be ascribed to their respective cultures, it is not possible to give an accurate report of their genesis or source perfectly, thus much in their subsequent history will always remain obscure to arrive at a definite conclusion. Dr. Hartel believes that the original work was composed in Kashmir, about 200 BC.



At this date however many of the individual stories were already ancient. He then enumerates no less than twenty five versions of the work in India. *The Panchatantra* is ascribed as a veritable *nitishastra*. The word *niti* means roughly the wise conducts of life that should be followed by people and this is responsible for happiness both in this world and the world hereafter. As Ryder further comments, “Western civilization must endure a certain shame in realizing that no precise equivalent of the term is found in English, French, Latin or Greek” (5). All *niti* presupposes that one has virtually rejected the very possibility of living like a saint. These should be practiced only by a social being and by the judicious adhering of these rules one could get the total satisfaction from this world as well as be benefitted for the world hereafter. The point is that for a Hindu, this world is important but the world after this is perhaps more important than even this. The word *panchatantra* means five books and each of the books is independent consisting of a framing story with numerous inserted stories told, to point out the specific end of the main narrative. The device of framing story is familiar in oriental cultures, the instance best known to the Europeans being that of Arabian nights. However, the mother story of *The Panchatantra* opens with a king in the southern country who was well conversed with all the works of treating the wise conduct of life. So here again we got a king who was like Shahriyar well affluent but the point of difference is that this king is also wise in his manner and knowledge. The narrator heaps upon the king all the praise by telling that the king’s “feet were made dazzling by the tangle of rays of light from jewels in the diadems of mighty kings who knelt before him” (13). This king had three sons. Now when the king perceived that they were adverse to education, he summons his counselors and said, “Gentlemen, it is known to you that these sons of mine, being hostile to education, are lacking in discernment. So when I behold them, my kingdom brings me no happiness, though all external thorns are drawn. For there is wisdom in the proverb:

“Of sons unborn, dead or fools,  
Unborn or dead will do;  
They cause a little grief, no doubt,  
But fools, a long life through” (13-14).  
And again  
“To what good purpose can a cow  
That brings no calf nor milk, be bent?

Or why beget a son who proves

A dance and disobedient ?” (14)

And the counselors assembled in the court replied to the king that at first one learns grammar in twelve years. If this subject has somehow been mastered properly only then one could progress to the books on religion and practical life. Then the intelligence awakens. Then another counselor said:

“O king, the duration of life is limited, and the verbal sciences require much time for mastery. Therefore let some kind of epitome be devised to make their intelligence....now there is a Brahman named Vishnusharman with a reputation for competence in numerous sciences. Instruct the princes to him he will certainly make them intelligent in twinkling” (14).

When the king had listened to this he summoned Vishnusaharman and said “Holy sir, as a favor to me you must make these princes incomparable masters of the art of practical life. In return I will bestow upon you a hundred land grants”(14-15). And Vishnusharman answered to the king “O king listen. Here is the plain truth. I am not the man to sell good learning for hundred land-grant. But if I do not, in six month’s time, make the boys acquainted with the art of intelligent living, I will give up my name” (15).

When the king had listened to the brahmin’s highly unconventional promise, he was struck with wonder and instructed the princes to him. Meanwhile Vishunsharman took the boys to his abode and made them learn by heart five books which he composed and called respectively: 1.The Loss of Friends. 2. The Winning of Friends. 3. Crows and Owls. 4. Loss of Gains and 5. Ill-considered Actions. These the princes learned in six months time and they mastered the knowledge of the world. Since that day this work on the art of intelligent living called *Panchatantra* or the five books has travelled the world through translations aiming at the awakening of intelligence in the people raising them from the dark of ignorance.

Thus we see these two books though abundantly use the imaginative or fictive patterns in the elements of narrative, characters, story, having all sorts of persons from both this world and all the mythic universe, they by the sheer use of story insert reason at last to the persons, namely the king Shahriyar and the three sons of the king in *The Panchatantra* who had abandoned

reason in a sense of the term. The two characters namely Shahrazad and Vishnusharman act as an agent to bring that effect and are prototypes of each other. Thus here the western view of East as completely dominated by chaotic imagination and devoid of reason does not apply, rather these texts attest the use of judicious imagination for the betterment and implication of reason. The frame story narrative technique which can be seen as a triumph of imagination in the narrative pattern of these two canonical texts thus also work as a efficient tool to prove the point.

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The collection of Arabian Nights Stories is the most famous literary product of a classical Islamic Civilization that was formed through a merging of Arabic culture (especially religion) and the great imperial traditions of the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian empire of the Sassanians. Ironically, the work was not widely accepted as serious literature by the intellectual and literary elite of the Islamic world. This rejection reflects the Koran's condemnation of fictional narratives as lying. Most traditional Arabic narrative was didactic or religious - history, useful knowledge moral instruction. Imagination and fantasy were more commonly expressed in poetry which had a tradition in Arabic life pre-dating Islam and was not constrained by religious concerns. THE ARABIAN NIGHTS<sup>TM</sup> or, more accurately, "The Thousand Nights and a Night"<sup>TM</sup> (Alf Leilah wa-leÁlah)<sup>TM</sup> have gained a popularity in Europe, since they were first turned into a modern language by Galland in 1704, which rivals, if it does not exceed, their regard in the East. They opened up to Europe a wealth of anecdote, a fertility of daring fancy, which has not ceased to amuse and to interest. For this reason, native historians and writers seldom range the stories in their literary chronicles, or even deign to mention them by name. But the "Nights"<sup>TM</sup> cannot be a translation from the Persian; for the other two books mentioned by Masudi are in the Arabic collection. Lane supposes the relationship to be that of the "Aeneid"<sup>TM</sup> to the "Odyssey."<sup>TM</sup> The discourse about the Arabian Nights illustrates the ways through which hegemonic poetic and literary discourses crystallized themselves, while developing a set of distinctions as a yardstick for the estimation of literary works, as more. The discourse about the Arabian Nights illustrates the ways through which hegemonic poetic and literary discourses crystallized themselves, while developing a set of distinctions as a yardstick for the estimation of literary works, as well as the connections between these various distinctions<sup>TM</sup> namely "realistic"<sup>TM</sup> and "fantastic"<sup>TM</sup>, East and West, and oral storytelling and folklore versus written literature. This article focuses on the discourse about the Arabian Nights in the field of modern Hebrew literature. The anthology includes a few samples of literary criticism in which the genre of the Eastern tale or the Thousand and one nights more specifically are discussed. It was generally thought that the art of storytelling had historically originated in the East, and that the Thousand and one nights was a proof of this supposition. In the beginning the work was generally appreciated and applauded, but as the genre of the Oriental tale developed, more and more criticism arose saying that the tales were rather futile and trivial. Muhsin Jassim Ali, Scheherazade in England: a study of nineteenth-century criticism of the Arabian nights, Three Continents Press, Washington 1981. Pike Conant, The Oriental tale in England in the eighteenth century, Octagon Books, New York 1966.