



Orientalism in Arabian Nights: Translation, Mythmaking, and Cultural Misreading

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Abstract:

This research investigates the construction of the 'Orient' through European translations and adaptations of Arabian Nights (One Thousand and One Nights). Drawing upon postcolonial theory, translation studies, and cultural criticism, the paper argues that Orientalist interventions reshaped the text into a fantasy of exoticism, sensuality, and despotism. The study examines how translators modified narratives, how colonial readership shaped interpretation, and how modern visual culture—particularly Disney's Aladdin (1992) and its 2019 adaptation—reproduced long-standing myths about the East. By analyzing textual transformations and cinematic representations, the research demonstrates how literary translation operates as a political act. The project ultimately calls for a historically grounded and ethically responsible reading of Arabian Nights.

Keywords: Arabian Nights

1. Introduction

Arabian Nights is one of the most circulated narrative collections in global literary history. Its stories traveled across regions—India, Persia, Iraq, Syria, Egypt—long before they entered Europe. However, the version known to most Western readers is not the original manuscript tradition but a translated and culturally reconfigured text. The European encounter with Arabian Nights coincided with colonial expansion, and therefore the act of translation was entangled with structures of power. This research explores how Orientalism shaped the Western imagination of the East through translation, mythmaking, and modern adaptations.

Orientalism and Knowledge Production

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism explains how the West constructed the East as an object of knowledge and domination. The Orient was depicted as timeless, irrational, sensual, and inferior. Such representation justified colonial intervention by presenting Eastern societies as incapable of self-governance. Arabian Nights became a crucial cultural text in this framework. Rather than being read as a layered historical archive of storytelling traditions, it was simplified into a fantasy of magic lamps, genies, harems, and tyrants.

2. Translation as Ideological Intervention

European translators did not merely translate—they transformed. Antoine Galland's 18th-century French version introduced tales like Aladdin and Ali Baba that were absent in earlier Arabic manuscripts. Richard Burton's 19th-century English translation amplified erotic and exotic elements to appeal to Victorian fascination with the 'mysterious East.' These translation strategies reshaped reader perception. The Orient became a spectacle rather than a lived civilization.

Translation thus functioned as ideological mediation. Cultural details were either exaggerated or misunderstood. Political satire embedded in original tales was muted, while sensual descriptions were foregrounded. The result was not faithful transmission but imaginative reconstruction.

Mythmaking and the Fantasy of the East

Arabian Nights contributed to durable myths: despotic rulers ruling without law, passive women confined in harems, endless deserts, magical creatures, and irrational justice systems. Such motifs circulated in European art and literature, reinforcing stereotypes. Scheherazade's intellectual resistance against tyranny was often overshadowed by her romanticized portrayal.

Disney and the Reinvention of Oriental Myths

Modern popular culture continues this legacy. Disney's animated film 'Aladdin' (1992) and its live-action remake (2019) adapted the Galland-influenced narrative. While marketed as family entertainment, the films reproduce Orientalist aesthetics: exaggerated architecture, desert landscapes, mystical marketplaces, and accents coded as 'foreign.' The fictional city of Agrabah merges Arab, Persian, and South Asian elements, collapsing diverse cultures into a single fantasy space.

The opening song of the 1992 version originally described the land as 'barbaric,' reinforcing the trope of Eastern savagery. Although later revisions softened the language, the visual grammar of the film—curved daggers, dark marketplaces, hyper-sexualized dancers—continues to echo colonial imagination. Even when the 2019 adaptation attempts to empower Princess Jasmine, the narrative framework remains rooted in exotic spectacle.

3. Cultural Misreading and Global Circulation

When texts travel without context, they are vulnerable to misinterpretation. Western audiences consumed Arabian Nights as fantasy literature detached from Islamic Golden Age intellectual history. The tales contain moral reflection, commercial ethics, maritime history, and philosophical discourse. Yet Orientalist reading reduced them to entertainment. Such misreading shaped policies, education, and cultural attitudes toward the Middle East.

Reclaiming Narrative Complexity

Contemporary scholars argue for contextual re-reading. Arabian Nights reflects trade networks, migration, class tension, and gender negotiation. Scheherazade represents narrative agency—she transforms violence into dialogue. Reclaiming these dimensions challenges simplified myths. Instead of viewing the text as an exotic relic, it should be recognized as a dynamic, evolving literary archive.

4. Conclusion

Orientalism transformed Arabian Nights into a site of fantasy aligned with colonial ideology. Through selective translation, aesthetic exaggeration, and cinematic adaptation, the East was imagined as magical yet backward. Disney's adaptations demonstrate how such myths persist in global media. A responsible scholarly approach requires acknowledging translation as political practice and resisting simplistic cultural binaries. Arabian Nights remains significant not because it confirms stereotypes, but because it exposes how stories are shaped by power.

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