

Jacqueline Kahanoff on the Margins of *A Thousand and One Nights*

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In addressing Jacqueline Kahanoff's essay on *A Thousand and One Nights*¹ I hope not to tire the reader with the transitions between bracketed stories: her midrashic interpretation of the *Nights*, her life story, and my midrash of her midrash and life story. Primarily, Kahanoff makes a compelling case for us to read the tales as an organic whole but also as an open-ended text soliciting actualization in the present. The embedded stories must have had, in her view, unforeseen consequences on the fictional reality framing them. The infinite regress of embeddedness applies to her essayistic practice as well: *A Thousand and One Realities* reads the title of her essay, suggesting that the stories of the *Nights* continue to be told by being framed in new historical contexts.

Kahanoff first turned to writing to recover a real world that was lost and in retrospect seemed quite unreal. She was born in 1917 to a well-to-do Jewish middle-class family in colonial Cairo, a place of a pluralism, both frail and effervescent. Her parents were immigrants: the father an Iraqi merchant from Baghdad, the mother an educated woman hailing from the Tunisian Chemla family, who took pride in being the first woman to have read Proust in Egypt.² The house spoke French and Jacqueline went to the *lycée français*, and had a British nanny. Though born in Egypt, and attached to the place, she was part of a Europeanized bourgeoisie inevitably estranged from the Muslim majority. In one of her essays, she recalls that as a girl she was once asked by an English

1 The essay was probably written originally in English but the whereabouts of the original are unknown. The essay now exists only in Aharon Amir's Hebrew translation in *mi-mizrah she-mesh*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 177–92. This book however has been out of print for years. The cited passages have been retranslated by me into English. In *Mongrels or Marvels*, a volume of Kahanoff's selected essays in English, the editors Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh reverted to a similar method in order to include valuable essays whose original version could not be retrieved. It seems to be part of Kahanoff's fate as writer to have neither a genuinely *native* language nor a fixed original. Her mediation to the Hebrew reader through the filter of Amir's translations is not without difficulty, as Amir, a 'Canaanite' author and prolific translator, held a somewhat rigid ideology of language and was not very attuned to Kahanoff's delicate modulations of voice.

2 Matalon 2001, p. 35

lady on the beach in Alexandria about her origins: "Thinking of my grandparents, I replied that I was Jewish and Persian, believing that Baghdad, the city they came from, was in the country from which all beautiful rugs came".³ Her mother later chided her for not saying she was European. This farce of identities was a collective experience at a peculiar historical complex of geography, politics, and culture. Kahanoff is today mostly remembered for recording the experience of herself and her fellow Levantine women in a cycle of essays entitled *The Generation of Levantines*. I will quote one passage at length to give an idea of that world from within:

Our parents were pro-British as a matter of business and security, and we were pro-nationalist as a matter of principle, although we knew few Muslims of our age. We felt this nationalism to be an inevitable step on the road to liberation and true internationalism and sensing that we might be sacrificed to it, we accepted it as unavoidable and even morally justified. We hesitated between devoting ourselves to the "masses" and going to study in Europe, to settle there and become Europeans. [...] We felt cut off from the people and the country in which we lived, and knew that nothing would come of us unless we could build a bridge to a new society. Revolution and Marxism seemed the only way to attain a future which would include both our European mentors and the Arab masses. We would no longer be what we are, but become free citizens of the universe.

There was in us a strong mixture of desperate sincerity and of pretence, a tremendous thirst for truth and knowledge, coupled with an obscure desire for vindication, from both the arrogant domination of Europe and the Muslim majority which, we did not quite forget, despised its minorities. We would be generous and get even with the Muslim masses by introducing them to hygiene and Marxism.

Perhaps in our own time, we would witness and share in the undoing of Europe's dominion, the fall of all its barracks, and even perhaps, a return to the Promised Land. What would we, the Levantines, do in that world which would be ours? [...] Perhaps our ways would part, but together we belonged to the Levantine generation, whose task and privilege it was to translate European thought and action and apply it to our own world. We needed to find the words that would shake the universe out of its torpor and give voice to our confused protests. We were the first Levantines in the contemporary world who sought a truth that was neither in the old

3 Starr and Somekh 2011, p. 4.

religions nor in complete surrender to the West, and this perhaps, should be recorded.⁴

Their cultural hybridity was inscribed in their names: the Silvies, Enriettes, Rosies, and Jacquelines. I use the term hybridity with no intent of romanticizing. There was richness but also suffering in that life, an emotional erosion from self-deceit, a genuine displacement and double bind not easily lived through. This passage was written originally in English, the language in which Kahanoff found her voice, a 'neutral' universal language that bridged between her Latinate cultivation and the blank spot of the Arabic she never learned. In her maturity she recognizes the foolishness of the disdain with which she and her friends dismissed Arab letters. The version of the *Nights* she was reading was J.C. Mardrus' French translation and, though in some respect this distance was enabling,⁵ there is an undertone of regret for not being able to read it in Arabic. This essay might then have been of special significance to her, as she reached for that deeper self which knew no distinction between East and West: buried in its place in the East, it could be re-lived only in her mature voice in English.

Kahanoff subtitles the essay 'On the Margins of a Thousand One Nights', and I hope that by now it is clear why. Writing on the margins also signifies a certain contiguity with the text, and Kahanoff's manner of telling has strong affinities with the infinite bracketing of stories in the *Nights*. Kahanoff wrote one novel and several short stories of uneven value; the genre she ultimately mastered was the short narrative essay merging her personal perspective with broader social, cultural, and political concerns. This was the best medium she could find to represent a life in fractions, as she felt the life of her Levantine generation to be. The Israeli novelist Ronit Matalon, whose mother also belonged to that generation, suggests why this genre was adequate to the experience. Matalon describes her mother as a storyteller analogous to Kahanoff: '[my mother], who never tells a straight story, always gets caught up in its wide margins, in parentheses, in the small story that, in its way, illuminates the big story, both enriches and crumbles it; and at times, turns it upside-down'.⁶ The deviation from the common well-trodden narrative is thus perceived as constitutive of a personal accent of identity. Yet in these margins everything is desperately boundless: one does not know where a story ends or begins, when

4 Starr and Somekh 2011, pp. 11–12.

5 Kahanoff's manner of reception of the *Nights* is surely indebted to Mardrus' fanciful and elegant re-writing of the tales, as is her focus on psychoanalysis, sex, and gender issues. Her marginal note thus consciously comments on yet another deviation from a supposed original and continues the creative midrashic process of hermeneutic re-telling.

6 Matalon 2001, p. 34.

identity is this or that. The dynamic negotiation between myth and personal identity, big story and small story, in the nested tales of the *Nights* appealed to Kahanoff. In its margin there opens a field in the image of the mother-text: pregnant with danger and opportunity, full of sudden changes of fortune and shifting identities.

The essay's opening shows Kahanoff trying to adjust the essay's form to its content while retaining her sense of play and ironic distance:

Some say – but Allah is wiser and more benevolent – that the source of the legends in a thousand and one nights is those very ancient Indian and Persian tales; other wise men say – but Allah is wiser than them too – that all legends were made up by Man Son-of-Eve Our Mother, presenting himself with questions (always the same questions) about his nature and his relation to other creatures, and that through these tales he settles his quandaries, like a child telling himself stories to explain the world around him.⁷

The stories of origin are just more constructed stories and don't have to matter. Pragmatically put, the stories simply work in making sense of the world, an inescapable need if we wish to learn living with others and knowing ourselves. By transforming desire into communicable forms, Kahanoff maintains, the stories teach us to adjust to the reality of outside world and other people: '[stories] reveal our true nature in all its splendour and horror and since we are social animals, they help us adjust to our being and to the reality of others; [they] turn desire into love, which is eventually, where we find happiness.'⁸

As we shall see, Kahanoff's interpretation of the stories concentrates primarily on *ethos* rather than *logos* or *mythos*, on character and social context rather than rhetoric and plot. From this follows a psychoanalytical mode of reading, already apparent in the implicit association with Freud's ideas in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*). Yet whatever theory she utilizes, Jacqueline paints her midrashic derivation with strong subjective colours of her own life as a woman of letters in the Levant.

Here is a brief summary of her decoding of the frame story: Shahryar, the analysand, is the bigger king and has to suffer grandly for the monstrous humiliation he believes himself to have suffered. It is a fiction by which his schizoid state is fed. His objectifying of women bespeaks profound helplessness: a

⁷ Kahanoff 1978, p. 177.

⁸ Kahanoff 1978, p. 178.

fear of being loved and giving love. But behind his mad frenzy of conquest and immediate annihilation there hides a subtler fantasy of being lovingly contained. His absolutist law runs on automatic and is therefore isolating and dehumanizing. So, while he wishes to keep it, he equally wishes to escape it. Scheherazade, omniscient narrator, sage and analyst all at once, is aware of this inner ambivalence. She comes to him of her own accord and thereby asserts her self-assured subjectivity and confidence in his potential to be cured. As the stronger side intellectually, she acknowledges his suffering and suspends judgement on his moral conduct; he concedes that there might be a law other than his own madness in order to be saved from isolation. Hinging on tenuous ambivalence on both sides, the rules of the game are changed. A joint transitory fiction called transference comes into being, a contract based on initial cautious trust. The analytical process lasting about three years ends in miraculous success, as Shahryar learns to recognize women as subjects and thereby opens his sympathy to the human world in its entirety.

Sketched in broad strokes, this seems quite a standard reading of the frame story. But Kahanoff carries this interpretation further. Scheherazade is presented as an archetype of womanhood cast in Kahanoff's mold. She is portrayed as gracious and tactful, learned yet unassuming, a cosmopolitan woman of worldly taste and culture. She is the complete universal woman in a Levantine localized version. Further along in the essay it is argued that this sense of tact cuts across all classes of society represented in the *Nights*, from the shoeshine to the Caliph. The ideal is so powerful, says Kahanoff, that even the logic of Muslim orthodoxy is subordinate to it. And the chief virtue of this cultural and social gestalt is that it can recognize women's sexuality and treat it with humour. In this respect, Kahanoff suggests, the East of the present has fallen far behind that of the past. The deceit, fornication, and lies attributed to women in the *Nights* are actually weapons to retain their freedom of choice and self-dignity in battling 'that Plague of the East' – the objectified woman.

Here we reach the heart of the matter – where psychology intersects with politics and culture – but let me first pause to look deeper into Scheherazade's figure as archetype. Henry James approvingly cites the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev saying 'that the usual origin of a fictive picture begins almost always with the vision of some person or persons' who solicit elaboration, presenting themselves as vivid images *en disponibilité*, at the disposal of the novelist. A novel's germ lies in a 'Portrait of a Lady', and only from there come 'the necessities of unspringing in the seed'.⁹ Kahanoff's imagination is likewise stimulated by human individuals, mostly women, and she fictionalizes them in her

9 For James' ideas on character see: Kermode 1979, pp. 78–9.

non-fiction by providing them not only with a face but also with background and dress to increase their multi-dimensionality. Whether herself or others, these women stand at oblique angles to their milieus and the grand plots surrounding them. The biblical narrative commanded Jacqueline's attention as a set of mythical stories where character takes precedence over fable, as even the Biblical God is personalized, almost physically present in the unfolding of his people's destiny. The complex pattern by which the fates of Biblical characters are woven appealed to her self-conception. And she will work out her vision of humanity as the Bible does, around the small nucleus of the family: mother (Scheherazade), father (Shahryar), children. This would be the emotionally crowded arena where battles of opposing forces in culture and society are waged: families into which one is born and from which one escapes by establishing a new dynasty. It is still a prevalent paradigm by which society is represented in Middle Eastern fiction, both Jewish and Arab.

Kahanoff explores Scheherazade a fictional relative but, more to the point, as an actual possibility of her identity, a female type from which the Levantine cosmopolite is a deviation. Apart from Kahanoff, Scheherazade is said to be the patron-mother of a whole clan of Eastern women, who, though largely illiterate, are ever resourceful and self-possessed, educated in folktales and common know-how. They're the mothers, and especially grandmothers who are 'the real lords of the house, who never cease loving the wise Scheherazade and cultivating the memory of women from great periods of Islamic and pre-Islamic societies – educated, inspired, quick-witted, masters of themselves, their assets, and their families, a type which never entirely disappeared from the East'.¹⁰ This point is central because it makes the argument about women's rights as more than just an enlightened cause; indeed it ventures to say something about the secret *interior* life of women, their ancient wisdom which, from a progressive stance, would perhaps seem a barrier to progress, tall tales, and backward superstitions.

Kahanoff does not delude herself into implying that women actually run the show. So, let us briefly follow the political avenues in Kahanoff's thinking. Scheherazade is a strong force of culture but not self-sufficient; she shapes behaviour and values but stays clear of visible political power. Her contract with Shahryar is not merely psychoanalytical or nuptial; it is a frail social contract by which Shahryar is reinstated as a stable sovereign. And so it must be: there is no escape from the powers of the State and political authority. But what enables the radical reform is a fictional game in which the most asymmetric power relations in terms of muscle are revealed to be oppositely asymmetric.

¹⁰ Kahanoff 1978, p. 187.

Scheherazade knew all along the inner mystery of the human condition, its 'horror and splendour', and this is a real strength without which the king and his people suffer a wilderness of violence and misery. She embodies plurality, a thousand and one realities, without which society dries up. She holds multiple things together in precarious and charming illogicality and so instructs how to avoid moral absolutes. Though a member of the savagely disenfranchised, she doesn't play the victim. And why should she uphold the myopic pathos of victimhood? She has real power and can allow herself to forget resentment and show generosity of spirit. This stance is linked in Kahanoff's mind to moments of civil disobedience and non-violent revolutionary movements such as those of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, traditions of peaceful protest towards which she was very sympathetic.

So the marriage of Shahryar and Scheherazade prompts Kahanoff to propose a model in which governing power and culture, justice and virtue obtain as separate elements in tension without cancelling each other out. In another essay, Kahanoff recounts a story she used to conjure in her Egyptian childhood, about Pharaoh's rod, the phallic symbol of brute power. It had a ruby in it, an emblem of feminine taste and wisdom, but this emblem was stolen by a wicked priest. Pharaoh, weary of the rod with no ruby, delegated authority to the priest and became a dead god. The priest replaced the precious stone with a plain red one to deceive the people of Egypt, who were then condemned to self-oblivion, to endless misery the cause of which they would never know. Getting a tip from Pharaoh's daughter, Moses found the ruby but had to discard it due to the demands of realpolitik, when God sent him to exact ruthless vengeance upon Egypt for enslaving the Israelites.¹¹ Such is the story of the contagiousness of brutalized political power divorced from play, wisdom, and moral feelings.

At its most universalizing and abstract, this understanding of the frame story is about immortality through the perpetuation of the species: Shahryar is Everyman and Scheherazade his Salvation and Extension of Life. Interpreted allegorically, vitality and will-to-life are doomed to exhaustion without variability coming from culture and its differentiations. We should recall that Kahanoff acquired her refinement as part of a Cairene middle class, and that the original circulation of the *Nights* as a book has to do with the growth and expansion of a Muslim middle class in the Mediterranean basin in tandem with the decentralization of the Islamic empire. Mobility, geniality, and open-mindedness – along with the codes of conduct that regulate their dissemination – were core values of this civilized mercantile class. The plurality of realities

¹¹ Starr and Somekh 2011, pp. 9–10.

Scheherazade teaches the king to acknowledge came to be as a result of the rise of merchants, artisans, and entrepreneurs, a process so meticulously and richly described by S.D. Goitein. On the other hand, pure morality and culture without will-to-life is suicidal and leads to extinction. Kahanoff's vision for the future is built on an organic metaphor of a couple in unstable balance as necessary requirement for conception and procreation.

But her tale unfolds more concrete lessons and here we need some contextualizing. Kahanoff immigrated to Israel in 1954, choosing to live in the tribe's midst. Previously, she spent a brief spell in Paris, some significant educational years in the USA, but eventually felt dissociated from the collectives in both places. Israel was then a nation in the making. Though messy, in economic austerity, and ruled by an Ashkenazi political elite, it afforded a chance to make a difference as an intellectual outsider. In Israel her sense of estrangement was more familiar, the rhythms of the place more like the ones she knew from Egypt. Kahanoff introduced a new voice into the Israeli intellectual milieu, Matalon writes.¹² She spoke in empathetic, sober tones, and brought with her a Latinate European education very different from the stern moral temperament of Ashkenazi men raised mostly on Russian letters and trends of political thought. She became one of the first intellectuals to give voice to the Mizrachi element in Israeli society, to Arab Jews regarded as second-rate citizens by the Ashkenzai establishment.

The essay on the *Nights* isn't dated, but it is likely to have appeared in the late sixties, after the so-called glorious victory of Israel in the Six Day war. There was an ominous, messianic intoxication in the air. This was surely not the Promised Land Kahanoff had in mind. She was a moderate Zionist but firmly insisted that Israel should be Levantinized, adapted to the culture of the place, even though it left so much of that culture in ruin. The Messianism, the celebration of military prowess, and the chauvinism that accompanied it were, in her eyes, a step in the direction of the dry rod, brute monolithic power that hollows out democratic pluralism. The portrait of Scheherazade and the Muslim society she reflects – open, varied, imaginative – was an indirect yet bold way of stating the case and calling for more good sense to offset false Zionist dreams of grandeur.

The essay ends however with a critique directed not towards Zionism but towards the Arab world. To a large extent, this critique was latent all throughout the essay. It concerns what Kahanoff perceives to be the disease of women's objectification. Scheherazade, as Kahanoff understands her, exposes the social lie and hypocrisy practiced in Arab societies, which deny women sexual

12 Matalon 2001, p. 35.

freedom despite valuing their sexuality. This observation is translated into the political realm at the close of the essay: ‘The people also dream of freedom, but dare not fight to attain it, burdened by the recognition that morals and obedience are one and the same. Only against the foreigner, or the ruling princes serving the foreigner, are the people willing to rise in revolt, without dealing directly with the real problem – their own freedom.’¹³ With obedience she unequivocally means the fear of the leader–father figure whose widespread cult uses an ideology of freedom as pretext for repression of women and minorities at home. This unfreedom is tightly bound up with cultural and political servility of the whole social organism. She did not live to witness the Arab spring. Yet the fact that it was not preceded by the kind of secularizing national movement promoting civil liberties for which she had hoped is possibly important for how things unfolded.

Matalon remarks that female identity is the litmus test Kahanoff applies to see what passes as reality or ideology in a given society.¹⁴ And applying this test, Zionism, in Kahanoff’s opinion, fared relatively though not exquisitely better than Arab nationalism. Matalon recounts that when she made a snarky remark about Zionism during the 1982 Lebanon war, her mother protested angrily by saying: ‘don’t you take my Zionism, you hear? Thanks to it I got rid of your father, my father, my brothers, and the prison they prepared for me in Egypt.’¹⁵ So to the extent that Zionism helped Jewish women be recognized as independent, it was valid, as a means not an end in itself. Elsewhere Kahanoff claims that unless Arab-Muslim societies make a breakthrough in that domain, that pluralistic Middle East, a fragment of which she carried with her, will not be realized. And Western Leftists uncritically defending the causes of Arab anti-colonial struggle, which seemed to worsen the condition of women, should think carefully, she said, whether it is not reactionary to sustain an idiotic male imperialism over the female half of humanity. The essence of concentrating on the *Nights* is to call attention to a living potential in the here and now waiting to be realized and become socially effective. Scheherazade is an archetype instantiated in subtypes and variations; Arab women with that wisdom are there, but still largely invisible.

Kahanoff illustrates this with a story from her childhood. As a girl she had one Muslim friend, Kadreya. Kahanoff told her friend about the story in the Haggadah, namely, that the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, ergo, by a child’s wild exaggeration, the Muslims enslaved the Jews. Kadreya was incredulous:

13 Kahanoff 1978, p. 192.

14 Matalon 2011, p. 36.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

'It's not possible. I swear that not my father, or his father, or my grandfather's grandfather would do such things to your father, or his grandfather's grandfather. I love you; you are my friend'. 'Father also says Palestine is our Promised Land', Jacqueline replied, 'maybe I'm not Egyptian like you'. At this point Kadreya began to weep and Jacqueline had to calm her down: 'look, now that you are Muslims you aren't the same people as in Pharaoh's time, and you aren't like the Christians, always sending us all to burn in hell'. Kadreya suggested that as her father goes to Mecca and is still Egyptian, Kahanoff would make a pilgrimage to Palestine and live in Egypt so they could stay friends. Jacqueline was sceptical. She knew the Promised Land was more than a place of pilgrimage. Kadreya then steered the conversation to a surprising conclusion:

"If I could, I would give you the Promised Land", Kadreya said, "but you know the English are there, like in Egypt", she sighed and added honestly, "but I'm not so sure about my brothers giving it to you. Men are different. Listen, I'll tell you something if you promise not to tell". Jacqueline promised and Kadreya whispered in her ear: "I would like a religion where God is also a woman, not only a man".¹⁶

The humour and secular wisdom in this brief tale demonstrates Kahanoff's mastery of narrative and dialogue. It is this child-like perspective that she strove to attain in her writing, the source of candour and impudent protest, giving the lie to false pretense and scrambling social identities in all kinds of funny games. That lost innocence is perhaps the native land Kahanoff shares both with Kadreya and Scheherazade.

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¹⁶ The brief conversation with Kadreya appears in the essay 'Passover in Egypt'. See: Starr and Somekh 2011, pp. 14–19.