

Oriental Taste in Select Tales of *The Arabian Nights* by Richard F. Burton

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Abstract

In spite of the polarity between the East and the West, an everlasting quest prevails in exploring the Oriental values through various depictions in literature. Irrespective of the age or period, readers from various fields of study are dragged towards certain piece of literature namely Oriental literary pieces like *The Arabian Nights*. The ever fresh insights into tasting the Oriental features through literature, forms the basis for the readers and researchers to still indulge in the process of academic depictions as well as scholarly explorations. It is amazing to denote that the Oriental pieces captured much of the Western readers in the past unlike the Easterners due to the epitomizing effect of the Eastern Culture along with its distinctive qualities. Unlike being a complete Westerner, Richard F. Burton emerged as an Easterner at heart to display the events in his *The Arabian Nights*, which serves the purpose of highlighting the Eastern characteristics in the manner of a collection of tales as if meant to be narrated at night like bed time stories with all its newness and simplicity of characters. With the concept of suspense and postponing the end of every tale to the next night initiates the curiosity of the readers which indeed reflects the curiosity of the King Shahriyar to postpone the execution of his wife Shahrazad. Burton's exhibition of the choice of diction induces the readers to have the satisfaction of having visited such Arab desserts and acquainted with such characters.

Keywords: Eastern culture and Academic depiction; Near east; Oriental values; Polarity.

Introduction

It has been an area of interest and a space for admiration to the writers and scholars to deal with the setting that is erotic and adventurous and

at times really amazing. To touch upon Orientalism without quoting Said is inevitable. The challenge of representing the Orient was recalled with the question of J. M. Robertson which was remarked again by Balfour as:

'What right have you to take up these airs of superiority with regard to people whom you choose to call Oriental?' The choice of 'Oriental' was canonical; it had been employed by Chaucer and Mandeville, by Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron. It designated Asia of the East, geographically, morally, culturally. One could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood. (Said 31)

As per Said's opinion, there can be no thought of superiority in finding out the disparity between the East and the West. But, the British considered the East with their own understanding of them through the lens of superficial knowledge.

I take up no attitude of superiority. But I ask [Robertson and anyone else]...who has even the most superficial knowledge of history, if they will look in the face the facts with which a British statesman has to deal when he is put in a position of supremacy over great races like the inhabitants of Egypt and countries in the East. We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know the civilization of any other country.... It goes far beyond the petty span of the history of our race, which is lost in the prehistoric period at a time when the Egyptian civilization had already passed its prime. Look at all the oriental countries. Do not talk about superiority or inferiority. (32)

Apart from a number of Oriental writers to have contributed to the field of Oriental encounters, Richard Burton is one such very renowned writer especially with a special reference to his work, *The Arabian Nights*. Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was one such Orientalist before which he was an English Scholar and an explorer. On his curious expedition to visit forbidden Muslim cities, he discovered Lake Tanganyika for which he was notably known. He continued his mastery over several languages like French, Italian, the Bearnais, the Neapolitan dialects as well as in Greek and Latin even after his exploration in the East. As a subaltern officer in the 18th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry during England's war with the Sindh, he inculcated his language skills and mastered Arabic, Hindi, Marathi, Sindhi, Punjabi, Telugu, Pashto and

Multani. In total, he learnt 25 languages and numerous dialects. His literary contributions were numerous as 43 volumes were based on his explorations and 30 volumes on love related to translations inclusive of the complete translation of *The Arabian Nights* with ethnological footnotes and daring essays which formed the basement for his enmity with many of his contemporaries of the Victorian Society. Some of the funded translations of Orientalist erotica were manuals namely *Kama Sutra* (1883), *The Ananga Ranga* (1885), and *The Perfumed Garden* (1886), which was also known as *The Scented Garden* that was burnt by Burton's wife after his death. The full title of Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights* was, *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*.

His wife, Isabel Burton being an orthodox Catholic and a dedicated wife of Burton intentionally burnt his journals upon the suggestions of her husband after his death. Along with that, she also burnt *The Scented Garden*, fearing of the sensual invocations in it which might spoil many a men and yield Burton to hell. Despite being answerable to the Creator, she decided to be answerable to her own dead husband whose passion was to complete this book in an awful morning that never came. He concentrated more on sensual topics or erotics related to the East in his writings. *The Scented Garden* would have been a source of everlasting treasure for this widow because *The Arabian Nights* was just a baby tale in comparison to it. In *The Romance of Isabel, Lady Burton*, (Book 3 Chapter 1), Isabel Burton's decision over the burning of this voluminous work was elaborated as per her representations in her letter to *The Morning Post* as:

I sat down on the floor before the fire at dark, to consult my own heart, my own head. How I wanted a brother! My head told me that sin is the only rolling stone that gathers moss; that what a gentleman, a scholar, a man of the world may write when living, he would see very differently to what the poor soul would see standing naked before its God, with its good or evil deeds alone to answer for, and their consequences visible to it for the first moment, rolling on to the end of time.... What would he care for the applause of fifteen hundred men now for the whole world's praise, and God offended...will you let that soul, which is part of your soul, be left out in cold and darkness till the end of time, till all those sins which may have been committed on account of reading those writings have been expiated, or passed away perhaps for ever?... Not only not for six thousand guineas, but not for six million guineas will I risk it'. Sorrowfully, reverently, and in

fear and trembling, I burnt sheet after sheet, until the whole of the volumes were consumed. (Wilkins)

Although the voluminous work, *The Scented Garden* was not available; the available work, *The Arabian Nights* has been an ever fresh area of study for those who are interested in the field of Orientalism. It surprises the readers with the technique of handling the interlinking of a tale-within-a-tale that seems to be very realistic in nature and at times, inevitable too. 'The Hunchback's Tale' appears to be a maze-like story where several characters are connected by chance and not by intensions, but still together contribute to the framing of 'The Hunchback's Tale' which forms tentacles to various other tales relating to the characters involved with the harming of the Hunchback. The characters like Nazarene Broker, Reeve, Jewish Doctor, Barber and Tailor are involved in this tale who thereupon narrated their experiences or the incidents that they faced in their life in the form of 'The Nazarene Broker's Tale', 'The Reeve's Tale', 'Tale of the Jewish Doctor', 'Tale of the Tailor', 'The Barber's Tale of Himself', 'The Barber's Tale of His First Brother', 'The Barber's Tale of His Second Brother', 'The Barber's Tale of His Third Brother', 'The Barber's Tale of His Fourth Brother', 'The Barber's Tale of His Fifth Brother' 'The Barber's Tale of His Six Brother', respectively and ending up with 'The End of The Tailor's Tale'.

Apart from the above said characters, some other characters are repeated in these stories namely the Sulthan, Wazir, Badawin, Caliph, Governor, old woman, moon like women, eunuchs and slaves. The methodology of beginning the tales of *The Arabian Nights* and continuing the tales for a thousand and one nights, finally Shahrazad captivated the cruel King who killed his wife before every morning to avoid being cuckolded by her and married another lady every morrow. After having married Shahrazad, it was mentioned that, through her apt exploitation of her knowledge in the available space that was applicable for her, she had spinned the wheel of telling a tale every night and retaining it till the dawn and resuming the denouement of the tale for the next day. In this way, she played intellectually to wipe away the evil in the King Shahriyar's mind and successfully crossed one thousand and one nights after which this couple already had three children out of their happy union, and finally, Shahrazad safeguarded the women folk from being killed by the King.

The Oriental taste of storytelling with simple mindedness and with assort of ignorance at times also plays a vital role in explicitly showing situations that are interconnected to get tangled sources of power in twining around a single source tale to build around numerous tales of unexpected turn-

ings which ends with a humane end and then a humorous as well as an exciting moment.

'The Hunchback's Tale started with the merry making and enjoyable moment of the Tailor and his wife who invited the Hunchback for dinner during which a gobbet of fish got strucked in the throat of the Hunchback and caused his death. Fearing the consequences, the Tailor and his wife executed a plan and left the Hunchback at the house of a Jewish Doctor mentioning to prescribe medicines for their son who had chicken pox. Surprising, the Jewish Doctor stumbled on the dead body of the Hunchback and shocked to see him dead. He along with his wife planned to place him on the wind shaft at the top of the house of his neighbour, the Reeve, who was a Muslim, a cook at the Sultan's palace. The Reeve on visiting the terrace of his house found the Hunchback and assumed him a thief to have stolen oil and meat from his home. But, actually cats and rats often stole them from his home. On misjudging, he gave blows to the already dead Hunchback and found him falling down dead from the wind shaft. With great awe and fear he took him and placed at the dark part of a street where a drunken Nazarene found the Hunchback and considered him as the thief who once stole his head cap and gave severe blows to him. On interference from the Charley, the watchman, he understood the real picture of the dead body. So, the Nazarene was about to be hanged by the Wail or the Governor, when the Reeve interfered and told his acquaintance with the Hunchback, whereas the Tailor interfered and revealed his acquaintance with the Hunchback. Now on confirming the one who was the reason for the death of the gobo, the Reeve was about to be hanged, when the messenger from the Sultan wanted the dead body of the Hunchback along with the four members involved in his death as his jester's (the Hunchback's) Tale was very interesting to him. Here, the Oriental taste of revealing the simple-mindedness of the Orientals in handling some serious things in a trivial way which seem to result badly but ultimately, no harm has been made to any of the characters. The end stands in effect of the reflection of the ever humane attitude of the Orientals.

The Sultan insisted all the four the Tailor, the Jewish Doctor, the Reeve and the Nazarene to narrate "a more wondrous tale than that of my Hunchback" (364). The Majesty's insistence on the victims to narrate stories give way for them to explain the truth in accordance with their creativity to capture the heart of the King thereby to avoid dangerous punishments for them. Then the Nazarene narrated the story, 'The Nazarene Broker's Tale' of a young man who asked him to sell a great stock of sesame for an awesome price and delayed in getting his money. He was rather not ready

to dine even at the house of this Nazarene. Upon passing several months' time, he accepted to dine but with his money only ate with the left hand and disclosed his loss of his right hand on stealing a purse for the sake of a lady love. That young man later on gave back all his money along with his riches, eunuchs and all resources like a great stock of sesame etc., to the Nazarene itself. This story reveals the Oriental taste of relentless philanthropy of the Orientals.

Then, followed the Reeve, 'The Reeve's Tale' which mentioned the story of a son of a merchant of debts, who settled all his father's debts and began to lead a steady business, during that time he got intertwined in relationship with a lady love (business woman) for whom he had to answer many shop owners until she settled down the debts for the goods she bought. He had got the approval of the Lady Zhubaydah to get that slave lady for him after a crucial supervision from her. But, pathetically, he got his thumbs cut off by a razor by his lady because he failed to wash his hands after eating the Cumin-Ragout at the night of his wedding and approached his lady. The disgusting smelling caused her severe illness and so she decided to cut off his thumbs and big toes. He revealed his fate to the visitors of the party where the Reeve was also a member. This story interestingly highlights on the Oriental taste of exotic feeling that a man had for a woman due to which he had lost his thumbs and toes.

As the Sultan was not yet impressed much, the Reeve was followed by the Jewish Doctor who started narrating, 'Tale of the Jewish Doctor', where he represented the son of a Mosul whom he met at the house of the Sahib for he was very sick. The man's manners were of pride and position but, later, the Jewish Doctor was astonished to find the lack of his right hand and then that man told him the reason behind his loss of his right hand was due to an affair with a moon like lady who betrayed him by using his rent house as a place to kill her beautiful sister. On trying to hide this murder he could not reach his home town and became poor. The temptation by Satan took him to selling the necklace of the murdered lass and he was caught by the Police as well as stripped off his right hand, and was brought before the Governor who rescued him by accepting his story as he already knew this case of killing his younger daughter by his own elder daughter. To settle down the sufferer, he gave his youngest daughter in marriage to the young man and got a fine amount from the police for punishing the man. Hence, the man was blessed with richness from his father and also from father-in-law. This story throws light on the belief in beauty that perishes the believer. The Oriental taste of 'the innocents to be rewarded' is exposed through this story.

Still, storytelling was continued by the Tailor, 'Tale of the Tailor', where he was invited for a wedding-feast. There appeared a foreign youth who was found to be lame. He entered the place and then tried to return back anxiously on seeing a Barber. When the Host convinced him to accompany them, he narrated the story of how this Barber was a source of trouble for him and a bane that led to his loss of his leg. He insisted on his love for the Kazi's daughter whom he proposed to meet during the Friday prayer, just before which he wanted this Barber to shave his head; but this Barber was really a prattler and gabbler who advised the man to be careful of the day's party or events as the constellation forecasts him disasters. He gained a grand feast from him for his guests and followed him to the Kari's house making yells and uproars with the accompaniment of ten thousand people crying for the life of the young man. This led to the disclosure of the secret meeting between the Kari's daughter and the man, which made him sell his estates and houses and desert in his native place for safeguarding his name. But, he met the Barber even in this new place which made him anxious. Here, the Oriental quality of the 'hero worship' nature of the Orientals is revealed.

Upon enquiry by others in that wedding-party, the Barber replied with all solace that only by his wits, the young man's life was saved and he had lost his leg alone. Then, the Barber began narrating his story, 'The Barber's Tale of Himself', while he got arrested along with the gangsters of ten members who looted the Caliph. As per the commands of the Caliph, the Headsman beheaded in a fashion of one after the other reaching the tenth. The Caliph still commanded him to behead the Barber who was left alive: but the Headsman confessed that already he had beheaded ten members. Upon enquiry, the Barber was left free from guilt. But, he wanted to narrate his story to the Caliph to impress him that he was 'The Silent Man' amongst his six brothers who were known for a disability and lack of wit. His excitement induced him to narrate the stories of all his six brothers. 'The Barber's Tale of His First Brother' was about a prattler who was a hunchback. By profession he was a tailor who was deceived by a young lady and her husband to stitch them all that they wanted free of cost and finally they fooled him by marrying him a slave girl and compelled to go round the mill instead of a bull which became useless, or a whole night. Afterwards he was initiated by that lady but was summoned before the Prefect blaming him of breaking the rules of "the Harems of honorable men" (423). Hence, the Barber took care of his first brother at his home.

The Barber continued with 'The Barber's Tale of His Second Brother' who was a babbler and a paralytic. His second brother was tricked by an old

woman to meet a young lady at the Weir's house. Yielding to his sense of lust towards the young lady he accompanied the old woman where he was toyed, given cuffing on the nape of his neck, pillowing, fruits pelting along with eyebrow dyeing and shaving off his beard and plucking off his mustachios. All the more, finally, he was induced to rush nude after that young naked lady who brought him bare before the public in the market place and was punished by the Chief of Police. He too was taken care of by the generous Barber.

The Barber could not stop telling the story, 'The Barber's Tale of His Third Brother', who was a gabbler and a blind man. Once he visited a house asked for alms. As he failed to reply for the question, "Who is at the door?" the owner carried him to the terrace and left him there as a punishment. So, the brother got rolled down the stairs and had his head injured. Later he joined his two blind friends who planned to share the money that they gained. In order to loot their money, the house owner followed the three blind men and ate with them, but was caught by them and received beatings. Intellectually, the third brother wanted to meet the Governor regarding this case, but got tricked by the house owner who lied that they were friends and they shammed to be blind to bring shame to the veiled women. As a result, the house owner was gifted with the amount of money he expected and made the blind men to be banned from the city. Thence, the Barber took care of the third brother too.

Along the Caliph was happy with the Barber's stories, the Barber could not resume from telling the story, 'The Barber's Tale of His Fourth Brother'. His fourth brother was a long necked gullet, a butcher who was blind of an eye. An old man with new silver coins betrayed him as the coins turned out to be papers and when he tried to complain him to the people. The old man's magical power altered the flesh of ram into the flesh of man, which enraged the crowd: he also plucked off one of his eyes and the fourth brother was punished and banned by the chief. Having settled in another town, he encountered the king on horseback after which he was beaten up for the king disliked the one eyed man. Searching for a place to settle, he had the horses of the king approaching. He tried to enter into a house where he was mistaken for a thief and was given severe blows. This brother was also under the care of the Barber.

The Caliph was still meant to listen to the Barber's story; 'The Barber's Tale of His Fifth Brother' was a beggar whose both ears were cropped of. Planning to earn a lot he invested his hare of his father's money of one hundred dirhams in buying glass-wares. Having arranged the glass-

wares on a bench, he leaned over a wall on the roadside and daydreamt of becoming rich, richer and the richest, and also getting married to the Weir's daughter but possessing a severe and stern attitude towards her without even ready to ease her with love, instead he thought of kicking her by the time he knocked the bench of glass-wares that got shattered to pieces. Showcasing his agony, he shouted in a fashion for which none heeded ears but a young lady gave him some money. Knowing this an old woman followed him and requested to perform ablution at his house. And then she induced him to accept the offer of a woman who helped him to meet her. Accepting the offer, he was taken to a nice house where he was caressed by a lady, got bashing with a sword blade from a black-moor and was thrown among dead bodies. He avenged them in the already mentioned fashion in disguise and killed the old woman, slave girl and black moor but left that young lady, who betrayed him from giving the riches at the house and escaped. He took the leftovers from that house but by destiny he had to surrender them to the Governor and became empty handed. While leaving for another town, the thieves stripped of his ears. Even the fifth brother was also under the care of the Barber.

The Barber was 'The Silent Man' who could not resume from telling, 'The Barber's Tale of His Sixth Brother'. The sixth brother was a man of many-clamours and got his lips shorn of. He went to gain favours from a Wazir who invited him cordially and hosted him a grand feast, all meant to mock at him. He insisted him to taste every different kind of food items mentioning them through words and actions. Nothing was found in reality. As a result of the sixth brother's patience, he was hosted with all those food varieties mentioned by the Wazir and he spent his luxurious life in palace for twenty years. After his death, the Sulthan had captured everything and ordered him to leave the town. He was captivated by a desert Arab on reaching the outskirts of the town who tortured him by cutting off his lips to surrender money for his life. In his absence, his wife advanced to him and he too got induced and placed her on his lap which was noticed by the Arab who cut off his yard and left him in mountains. This brother was also given domestic needs by the Barber only. On finishing the tales of the six brothers of the Barber, the Caliph banished him from the city for his loquacity. The Oriental taste of humour is expressed through the character of the Barber who being The Silent Man could not stop his insights from telling stories of his six brothers to the Caliph. But upon being a prattler, he tormented the ears of the Caliph for which he was banished. Here, the ignorance of the Barber in believing him to be the silent man is humorous.

He then reached Baghdad and met that young man who became lame and then the Tailor in the Wedding-party. So, the Tailor and others imprisoned him for his loquacity. The Tailor concludes his tale with 'The End of the Tailor's Tale' that details his return from the wedding-feast after which he took out his wife and returned for supper. He bought fried fish for them as well the Hunchback whom they met was a merry man. Unfortunately, the gobbet of fish got strucked in his gullet and he passed away. The Tailor's narration possessed realistic nature of the Orients. This inspired the King of China and so, he yearned to meet the Barber who was released from prison. The Barber enquired the cases of the Tailor, the Nazarene, the Reeve, the Jewish Doctor and the Hunchback. He too examined the dead body of Hunchback, artistically removed the fish bone from his gullet. Surprisingly, the Hunchback stood up with full of life that amazed everyone. The entertained King lavished his gifts to all the members involved in telling the tales and offered the Barber to be his cup mate as well as Barber-Surgeon and the Tailor to be his personal tailor. Hence this most exciting story was recorded and kept in the royal muniment-rooms for reference. The tradition to safeguard the Oriental values was done as a process of reference of this story in the royal muniment-rooms which adds enrichment to secure the originality and the real features of the Orients.

The astonishing characteristic of this evergreen Oriental work is the concept of tale-within-a-tale which would have taken the readers to a new world. Remarkably, 'The Hunchback's Tale' was interwoven with a sequence of several other intertwined tales which denounces with an end that is unexpected but fascinating. In particular, this article highlights the extravagance of verbatim by Burton with special comments on 'The Hunchback's Tale'. Yet, generally, this is what his style in writing the stories in his *The Arabian Nights*.

Geoffrey Nash shared his views on various Orientalists in his book *From Empire to Orient: Travellers to the Middle East 1830-1926* as: "Richard Burton, Charles Doughty and Wilfred Thesiger might be known to the general reader as upper-class Englishmen who quitted civilization in search of adventure, inspiration, or sheer escape from the industrial world" (1). With relevance to the wordings of Nash, in the "The Translator's Foreword" to *The Arabian Nights*, volume I, Burton has explicitly played with words to paint an evergreen picture of his adventurous activities exhibiting his sheer interest in highlighting the settings and the features of Arabia in a way of "a reminiscence of some by-gone metempsychic life in the distant Past" (Burton 11), woven with the fine silken threads of the blooming charms of that fairy-land. Several adjective phrases exploited by Burton

enchanted the readers to have acquired his spirits towards his attachment and craze for that fairy-land which is Arabia, and indeed, offered an opportunity for those who wish to have a visualization of such a fairy-land through reading. For instance, there were several adjective phrases in the following, "the woollen tents, low and black, of the true Badawin, mere dots in the boundless waste of lion-tawny clays and gazelle-brown gravels, and the camp-fire dotting like a glow-worm the village centre. Presently, sweetened by distance, would be heard the wild weird song of lads and lasses,..." (11), that aid in providing the visual effect to the readers and thereby contributing to their inner satisfaction of having visited such places and enjoyed such sights.

Conclusion

Andrew C. Long's *Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication, 1880 - 1930* is a book depicting the cultural imaginary during the period 1880-1930. It focuses on the writings of "Captain Richard Francis Burton, Charles Montagu Doughty, Robert Cunninghame Graham, Marmaduke Pickthall and T. E. Lawrence. All of these writers were writer-adventurers who built their popular reputations in good part through writing about the Near East and North Africa" (1). Long's view on these Eastern lovers can be admitted especially relating to Burton's *The Arabian Nights*. Although a westerner his acquaintance with the Easterners made him the sense of being an Easterner at heart seeing things with an admitting and admiring outlook by having concern for the Easterners. This attitude of him testifies the value with which this book has been treated and researched upon for the understanding of both the Orientals and the mindset of some of the Westerners who were considered the Near East. So, *The Arabian Nights* would suffice in serving the Oriental savour to those who yearn to sup on it. Hence, the varieties of spices like Oriental qualities of the characters dealt in the stories along with the trivial or simple or exotic or surprising or foible-like incidents pour essentials oils to have a better taste for the readers to enjoy the Oriental taste through this work.

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