

Self-fulfilling Prophecy of *The Arabian Nights* As Reflected in Feminist Young Adult Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the social-psychological phenomenon of Self-fulfilling Prophecy (SFP) through *The Arabian Nights*, and the feminist Young Adult (YA) literature. Significantly, the literature of two extreme ages and cultures provides universal messages. Application of Social- Neuroscience concept of Predictive Processing (PP) simplifies the understanding of SFP. In the troubled age of One Thousand and One Nights, Scheherazade narrated strange and intriguing tales to King Shahryar. The folktales provided a unique insight towards peacefully resolving a dreadful conflict. Ignorant of the supposition or reality of the gripping stories, the absolute ruler meditated on Scheherazade's recitals like a follower. Her mesmerizing presence and tapestry of words calmed him. The Emperor gave up his ruthless decisions of executing a woman every day, and he developed a sense of forbearance with her stories as they helped him to transcend the mistrust of women. Today's YA texts are also like Scheherazade's narratives in tough times. The nobility of thoughts, courage to lead, and critical analysis can help humankind to emerge in a brave new world. Through her brilliant wit, leadership, care, and didactic philosophy, Scheherazade elevated herself from a 'storytelling slave' to 'First Feminist'. The Arabian Nights resembles the innovative literary universe of YA literature with absorbing themes, current world issues, mythological adaptations, and speculative fiction. Reading about female leaders in YA literature awakens the world towards alternative solutions to critical world problems. These texts cultivate vital thinking and problem-solving skills in adolescents preparing for adulthood.

Keywords: *One Thousand and One Nights, Predictive Processing, Scheherazade, Social Neuroscience, World Literature, Self-fulfilling prophecy, Feminist Young Adult literature.*

Introduction

William Isaac Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas put forth Thomas Theorem in 1928. It is a fundamental theorem in the field of Social Sciences, and states that "If men define situations

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Received 13 Oct. 2024; Accepted 18 Oct. 2024. Available online: 25 Oct. 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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real, they are real in their consequences” (Merton). This recent proposition has age-old manifestations in many celebrated tales like *Oedipus Rex*, and *The Arabian Nights*.

Historical Recollections

The Arabian Nights is an epic collection of ancient folktales. It has an assimilated wisdom of the world in itself. Widespread readership, various adaptations, and multiple translations of the Middle Eastern fairy tales have secured a special place for it in Literature’s ‘Hall of Fame.’ Lang (2008) noted that “The storytellers dressed the fairy stories up, and made the characters good Mahommedans, living in Bagdad or India” (sec. Preface, para. 3). The stories are inspired by events that took place during the reign of Haroun-al-Raschid, the great Caliph and ruler of Bagdad and his vizir from 786-808 AD (sec. Preface, para.1). This epic story collection of witches and djinns, trust and bravery, tricks and wit, has a clear connection of its existence in fantasyland and human existence.

The middle Persian book of Hazar Afsan(e) (i.e., Thousand Stories) was translated into its Arabic version entitled *Alf layla wa-Layla*. The original and shorter Pahlavi version was set in the golden Islamic period. In around the 10th century, a bibliographic-biographic, Al Nadim, compiled lists of books (‘*Kitab al-Fihrist*’) in Baghdad, and discovered that Sassanid Kings of Iran practiced the tradition of “evening tales and fables” (Pinault, 1992). In the list, he mentioned the famous frame tale of the successive killing of wives by the cruel King. The collection has clear influences of Persian, Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Indo-Chinese, Syrian, Egyptian, African, and Jewish tales. Possibly, owing to the Indian belief of adding ‘one’ at the end of the number as a sign of ‘positivity,’ the original title Thousand Nights was modified, and thus, One Thousand and One Nights emerged.

Analysis of the Frame Tale

The frame tale or the main unifying story of *The Arabian Nights* is set in the Middle East in the medieval period of history. It mentions two prosperous rulers, Shahzaman Shahryar, their unfaithful wives, Shahyar’s Vizer, and Vizer’s two daughters, Scheherazade and Duniyazad. Shahryar is the elder brother, and Shahzaman is the younger one. They ruled their kingdoms peacefully until Shahzaman discovers his wife’s secret physical relationship with a slave. Shahryar also experiences a similar turn of events.

Shahzaman throws a fit of fury to find his wife cheating upon him with a slave. Instantly, he slit their throats in rage. When Shahryar learns about Shahzaman, he feels sympathetic towards his brother and soon learns about the betrayal of his wife with a slave. Heartbroken, he wanders around in his miserable state looking for some respite. However, he soon witnesses the unfaithfulness of a young female captive imprisoned in a treasure chest and submerged underwater by a djinn. This incident severely affects Shahryar, and he completely loses his wits and is rendered hopeless. He steadfastly believes that females cannot be loyal in their relationship with their man. He changes his demeanour after experiencing shock and misery and metamorphoses into a misogynist. Soon, he gets his wife executed, but his anger does not subside. He develops resentment against womankind, and with it, all hell breaks loose.

The powerful Emperor, Shahryar, marries a beautiful young maiden from his kingdom every day, only to get her executed the next morning before she could even think about cheating on him. Gradually, Scheherazade perceives the growing difficulty of her father, Shahryar's Vizer, as he is in charge of finding a new maiden daily for the enraged King. She urges her father to convince the Emperor to marry her. She believes that she could rescue the maidens of her kingdom from the clutches of King Shahryar, and her father. Scheherazade tells her father, "I would like you to give me in marriage to King Shahryar. If I should live, I'd become the ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems and rescue them from his hands and yours" (The Arabian Nights, 2015, para. 3).

Scheherazade was thankful to her father when he told the King about her decision to marry him. "When the grand vizier returned to Scheherazade, she thanked her father and, observing him to be much afflicted, consoled him by saying that she hoped he would be so far from repenting her marriage with the sultan that it would become a subject of joy to him for the remainder of his life" (The Arabian Nights Entertainments, 2006, p. 20). Scheherazade and her younger sister, Dunyazad, devise a clever plan to delay her execution and break the murderous tradition. She paves her way, day by day, by extending her lifetime through her touching oratory.

On the first night, as planned, Dunyazade, the younger sister, beseeches Scheherazade to tell one last story before her execution at sundown. Her first story, "The Story of the Merchant and The Demon," germinates a seed of thought, arouses curiosity, and rekindles reason in the mind of the disquieted King. The 'bloodthirsty custom' of killing the new bride is broken as

Scheherazade bargains her life for just a day until the King listens to the end of the story on the second night. However, the trick had just begun; she embeds three stories of three ‘shaykhs’ (respectable old men) into the first one.

Through her stories, she indirectly conveys important messages to the King. Like, she urges the King to spare her life, just as in the story, the three Shayaks advocated for the Demon to spare the merchant’s life if the Demon liked their tales. Gradually, the King took heed of Scheherazade’s messages and kept delaying her execution daily.

With this frame story, scholars, authors, and translators worldwide handpicked and filled the collection with diverse influences and traditions. It is a global masterpiece of world literature that has evolved over time. It is a combined effort of many story collectors, storytellers, and writers who put it together.

Over a period, Scheherazade makes the King experience feelings of love, sorrow, pain, joy, confusion, anger, kindness, and many more by transferring memories directly or indirectly. Gradually, as he begins to experience varied forms and degrees of emotions through Scheherazade’s stories, he releases the paleness of his blind fury. He acquires wisdom by experiencing the feelings of the characters in the tales.

Various Translations

According to Burton’s translated version, “A plain and literal translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainment...” (R. F. Burton), Scheherazade was a humble and knowledgeable girl, “She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts, and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well-read and well-bred” (p. 15). Her primary intention in marrying the King was to end the King’s killing spree and save womenfolk in her kingdom.

The French scholar Antoine Galland introduced the first complete translation and edited version of the Syrian manuscript of Arabian Nights in French entitled *Mille et une nuits* (1704–06), which had content for 282 nights. Soon, the English translation of the tales of Arabian Nights was published by Grub Street Publishing as *The Arabian Nights Entertainment* in 1706 (‘TAN’, sec.Synopsis para. 2). Later, Edward W. Lane in 1840 and Sir Richard F Burton in 1885-86 gave some of the most interesting and detailed translations of the tales of *The Arabian Nights*. In 1984, Muhsin Mahdi prepared a critical edition from the Arabic reconstruction of

the fourteenth century's surviving Syrian manuscript *The Arabian Nights*. This Arabic interpretation was translated into English by Husain Haddawy and edited by Muhsin Mahdi in 1990 (Mahdi).

A Compendium of Tales and An Inspiration

Many stories from the 8th to the 10th century were printed in the initial collection. Later, more 'orphan tales' (like "Alibaba") with varying literary techniques of local folktales and 'short story cycles' were included. They shared characters, settings, and themes (like "Seven Voyages of Sinbad"). It was done to increase the number of stories to justify the title of One Thousand and One Nights. These stories suggested peculiarities of low art like "...many [stories] showing a preoccupation with sex, magic or low life" ('History,' para.6). Other independent heroic tales were later added as the book travelled through Syria and Egypt.

This world literature book laid the foundation for several classical writers like Giovanni Boccaccio's similar frame narrative (The Decameron), which inspired Chaucer's creation of embedded stories (Canterbury Tales). The narrative techniques, story, and character inspirations of *The Arabian Nights* have long appeared in the works of celebrated Western writers like "Sindbad, the sailor" was the inspiration for ST Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Roozbeh, 2019, sec. Discussion, para. 3).

Similarly, the influence of Thousand and One Nights is reflected in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "Cristobel". In Robert Southey's celebrated poems, "Thalaba: the Destroyer" and "Curse of Kahomah" also its dominant contribution is observed. Lord Byron's poems "Giauor" and "The Bride of Abydos" are also influenced by its stories (Roozbeh). "Shakespeare's vision of the Orient" (J. Burton) in his play *The Taming of the Shrew* has shared its plotline with the story of "The Sleeper and the Waker" from *The Arabian Nights* (p.3). Writers like Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, Paulo Coelho, and many more writers have also drawn their inspiration from these tales.

Understanding Self-fulfilling Prophecy (SFP) with Social-Neuroscience

In his scholarly work, Merton (1948) argued that "The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the

originally false conception come true” (p. 195). The false mental build-up about future happenings in a person’s mind could lead to new behaviour in that person. When the person revises this new behaviour repeatedly, he brings the original false idea into the new reality. However, there could be an error in this prediction as well. As per the latest cognitive and computational neuroscience study, the human brain is described as a tool that minimizes the signs of prediction errors. Those signs showing a mismatch between real and anticipated sensory stimulations are prediction errors (Clark).

In his journal article, *A nice surprise? Predictive processing and the active pursuit of novelty* (2017), Clark explained that a logical and reasoning brain has no direct contact with receptors of sensory inputs. The brain processes multiple blended signals received by the body. These combined signals include internal signals like blood flow, hunger, and heart pounding and external signals like sight, taste, touch, etc. The brain has to produce fruitful and logical judgments based on varied inputs collected and the reasons for receiving those inputs. The brain should also use this knowledge for future Predictive Processing (PP) events and store it to update the existing data set of inputs for the future. The brain puts PP to work to understand the received input signals. This is the main notion of PP, and it is not free of prediction errors.

As thinking beings, we humans construct our precise predictability of the future to keep ourselves safe and increase our understanding of future events. Our brain does this to improve its speed and predicting capabilities, considering past signal processing errors. These are important parts of our existential awareness and knowledge of the world (Clark). The aims of skill development and human improvement also depend upon these anticipations. Therefore, for people, their current actions are a means to fulfill the expectation that arises from the response to their reasoning of the future (Frith). Prediction mistakes are reduced by dynamic reasoning and by performing actions to achieve the purpose (Seth et al.). Dynamic reasoning produces physical movements or other acts to overcome anticipatory mistakes. These predicted mistakes result from inconsistency between purpose and experience (Kelly et al.).

SFPs are the outcome(s) predicted when the conditions for prediction (inputs received by the brain) under which they are most likely to arise are encountered. PP initiates a series of steps to be taken to accomplish the predicted outcome. The brain determines an SFP based on internal and external inputs. There could be a miscalculation by the brain in understanding or analyzing the inputs, leading to faulty predictions. Nevertheless, as a prediction machine, the brain is a

dynamic device. It continuously records, updates, and stores a multitude of information to minimize prediction errors.

Self Fulfilling Prophecy (SFP) in *The Arabian Nights*

A significant SFP of *The Arabian Nights* is foreshadowed in King Shahryar's raging words of murdering hundreds and thousands of virgins to satisfy his wrath. He prophesied that if he ever faced betrayal at the hands of his wife, as his brother Shahzaman had, he would bring about the executions of women in his kingdom. In Haddawy's translation, Shahryar swears to his brother, "By God, had I been in your place, I would have killed at least a hundred or even a thousand women. I would have been furious; I would have gone mad" (Mahdi 9). When Shahryar's worst fear (of his Sultana's betrayal) comes true, he gets infuriated but controls himself to verify the fact in person. He watches the state of affairs in the secret garden and still holds his sanity.

However, when Shahryar discovers the infidelity of a slave woman despite all the locks and restrictions imposed on her, he is blinded by rage. He then returns to his kingdom and orders the execution of his Sultana. He believed no woman on earth could be chaste ('TAN'). He then vows to marry a new fair virgin of his kingdom every day and have her executed the next morning so that no other female could ever stand a chance to betray him.

Shahryar's predictive statement about his reaction to sharing a similar fate as Shahzaman brought about the 'execution of thousands of women' as an SFP. When Shahryar predicted his life's supposed event (originally a false situation), it got set in his mind. The future course of events is in such alignment with this thought that it results in the slaying of women in his kingdom for the next three years (*The Arabian Nights*). Shahryar was originally a good king, but after learning about his wife's betrayal, he became outraged and acted whimsically. Shahryar's disturbed mental state can be rightly described in the following words: "Evil emerges from the failure to make the right choices rather than any inherent personal quality...choosing the easy way and the way leading to personal gain automatically leads to association with evil" (Fenske).

Introduction to Feminist YA Literature

Clark (2018) suggested, “We humans often seem to actively seek out surprising events, deliberately harvesting novel and exciting streams of sensory stimulation” (Abstract section, para. 1). YA literature explores and tests new ground with almost every book bringing about adventurous, tabooed, dark, and mysterious subjects for the growing teenagers. They pack the punch of “developmental” and speculative texts (Cart). Since the 2000s, YA literature has entered the second golden age and matured as literature. It is propelled by the willingness of adolescents to peek out of their cozy quarters and imagine the heightened emotions of the tumultuous times. YA literature is formless and resembles its component terms. ‘Young Adulthood’ is characterized by an energetic sturm-and-drang period of a person’s teenage life ruled by transformation.

In the 1960s, the term YA literature first changed its everyday use, and it was considered for modern-day real-world ‘adolescent fiction’. This new variety of literature provided a platform for YA readers, roughly in the age group 12-18 years. It brought new perspectives and expressions of turbulent and dominant issues, which teenagers primarily experienced during this growth period (Cart). When adolescent readers read about other teenagers experiencing similar situations, the events comfort them in their difficulties, offer advice, and suggest alternative perspectives. Voyage, dystopia, epistolary, LGBTQIA+, family, and relationships are the popular genres of YA literature. The emerging category of efficient female storytellers with female lead heroines highly influences this novel category.

Populated with off-beat, rebellious, and kick-ass girlish protagonists, the feminist YA literature portrays lead characters in their teenage. These girls have become an archetype in the reading world. They blow a whistle on dystopian practices and lead in an exemplary manner. They challenge injustice, acquire a positivist position that introduces radically new ideas, and affirm their dominant roles. They are nifty and brilliantly wield the power to kill, compel, influence, and protect their followers.

Scheherazade Leading the Bandwagon of Female Storytellers and Protagonists in 21st Century YA Dystopian Literature

Reading YA literature is awakening but dangerous, comforting but dark, emphatic but testing, ground-breaking but critical. The stark events like WW I and II, the atomic bomb explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the WTC 9/11 attack, Sudan-based sexual violence in the name of ethnic cleansing, COVID-19 and many more such breakouts provide fertile grounds for

dystopian writings. With their outstanding and outsmarting deeds, heroes like Scheherazade have sown seeds for the rebellious adolescent YA females of this day dystopian novels. In these YA novels, the teenage protagonists take responsible and intense measures in many exemplary roles to protect their community and surroundings.

The contemporary YA female storytellers reflect in Scheherazade's technique of redemption through gradual and effective growth-promoting and inspiring narratives. As in *The Arabian Nights*, the tales aided the psychological and personality reconstruction of the traumatized King, so the present-day writers also try to revive and rebuild the glorious old memories of the women who walked the earth as rulers, saints, warriors, deities, apothecaries, politicians, mathematicians, and scientists among others. Through the stories of impressive females in ancient memorabilia, narratives, and epics, the feminist YA writers restore the splendid old sagas. In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade, being the weaker 'Other' of the patriarchal society, was the most unlikely one to put an end to the King's whims. However, she stood up to the challenges of her times. She expressed her disapproval of the oppressive social order set by the King that sought to control, use, and jettison her.

Through the tales of *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade elevated herself from a "storytelling slave" to "First Feminist" (Scheherazade) empowered with the nobility of thoughts, brilliant wit, and therapeutic recitals. She was a master communicator and powerful content creator. The universal themes of co-existence, love, faith, and tolerance are the common threads that bind many rich stories together. Today's female authors, just like Scheherazade, balance the arts and crafts to support their survival in a gender-based society. The female YA writers write for self-liberation and for the next generation of females to provide them with new horizons.

As Scheherazade calmed Shahryar with her narration, the King gave up his murderous thoughts against women. She developed forbearance in the King and educated him. Likewise, she enlightened her sister Dunyazad and the readers through the medium of her stories. Such is the element of transcendence and power of stories. In the same way, today's feminist YA literature is a fine example of didactics, cautionary stories tending to the interests and needs of its readers. It recognizes the process of identity formation and maturation in teenagers. Their growth stage is temporary but has unique, diverse needs- corporeal, intellectual, emotional, and social (Cart).

Shahryar's misogynistic sexual practice and "sexual politics" (Millett) terrified the entire population of his kingdom. All citizens of the kingdom followed his orders unopposed.

Uniquely, Scheherazade was the “New Woman” (Stevens 27) of the ancient Arabic world. Though she was under the pressure of being executed (for any misplaced word or doubtful act) by the King, she took control of her situation. With the wealth of her knowledge, she decided to protect the womenfolk of her town (Day et al.). Single-handedly, she led the open battle, and won her social and personal rebellion against the all-powerful King. The “personal is [was] political” (Hanisch).

Discussion

In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade would run one recitation into another or embed many stories into one story to cautiously maintain their flow. Innovative and captivating storytelling techniques, detailed dramatic descriptions, poetic renderings, Islamic principles, philosophical justifications, and sexual humour provided a talking cure to King Shahryar. An acclaimed performer, Scheherazade is emblemized as a wise, curative, and unforgettable narrator. She had a unique insight towards a peaceful resolution of the dystopian times. Artfully, day after day, she tricked the King into sparing her life for just another day on the pretext of an incomplete story, as she would pause at the story’s climax every night. This made the King a curious listener who yearned for the end of the story. Scheherazade’s definitive sagas of what can now be seen as ‘edutainment’ led King Shahryar in the troubled times to a haven and towards ending feminist dystopia.

Other Agents of SFP – Dreams and Visions

Other SFP forms are seen through the intervention of a seer, fortune-teller, *Dues ex Machina*, a vision, a dream, or a belief. In *The Arabian Nights* vol. 4, the tale of “The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again Through a Dream,” a poor man’s dream prophesies that he will be rich again when he finds treasures in Cairo. He travels to Cairo, but there, he is beaten and jailed by the Chief of Police (Wali) for mistaken identity. Upon inquiry, the Chief learns about the poor man’s faith in his dream and his travel to Cairo for the treasures.

Wali trusts the poor man’s dream completely and narrates his dream in response to the ruined man’s dream. “The Wali laughed till he showed his wisdom-teeth” and said, “O man of little wit, thrice have I seen in a dream one who said to me: There is in Baghdad a house in such a district and of such a fashion and its courtyard is laid out garden-wise, at the lower end whereof is a jetting-fountain and under the same a great sum of money lieth buried” (R. F. Burton, 1894,

p. 290). The poor Baghdadi, who earnestly wanted to be rich, retraced his path back to Baghdad. The wayfarer entrusted Wali's dream, and with faith in the dream, he found the great treasure underneath the fountain.

Conclusion

Today, YA texts are also like Scheherazade's narratives, which propose that in tough times, through the nobility of thought and critical analysis, humankind can emerge in a brave new world. Scheherazade inspired the King, the females, and the kingdom. It set an example for the world with the victory of words over war. In addition, just as Scheherazade worked dauntlessly and generously to save her kingdom, the female protagonists of modern YA literature act wisely as they display their power of the mind in crucial times. They "...[have] no wish to become a martyr"; instead, "...the female hero must recognize and assert the value of her life" (Campbell). A civilization can flourish with love, peace, and harmony between God's creations. Likewise, engaging and encouraging modern-day YA novels help innovative female novelists look forward, just as these mysterious tales helped them look backward.

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