1001 NIGHTS WITH ANIMUS

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Abstract: This paper provides a Jungian interpretation of the frame story of 1001 Nights. Using a psychodynamic approach, the key characters in the frame story are considered as different pieces of the female psyche during the journey of individuation. This reveals the story’s hidden content about inner enemies of the female psyche, such as a tyrannical animus that feeds from an oppressive environment. With a happy ending that represents the union of the ego and the animus, 1001 Nights highlights a path to women’s empowerment and social harmony that involves facing inner and outer demons. The essay also argues that with its emphasis on freedoms as a source of individual and social peace, 1001 Nights captures the Zeitgeist of the period from which it emerged, namely 9th-century Abbasid rule, particularly under the reign of Caliph al-Mamun.

Keywords: 1001 Nights, Jung, psychodynamism, individuation, animus

1001 Nights is among the most well-known works in Middle Eastern folk literature. Original Arabic texts of the collection have been translated into all major languages since the 18th century and have received worldwide interest. Yet, it has also stirred much debate. While its captivating stories have attracted readers for centuries, 1001 Nights has been strongly criticized in conservative circles for its unusual sexual explicitness. On the other hand, while some feminist readings have contested the repeating theme of cheating and seducing women, others have focused on the role of the female hero, as a savior of social harmony, and thereby considered the story inspirational for women.

This paper considers the frame story of 1001 Nights (Alf Layla Wa Layla) from a Jungian perspective. Using a psychodynamic method, the paper will explore the story’s content in regard to the captivity and deprivation of the female soul, women’s various attempts to get more from life (from marriage to adultery), and eventually their discovery of the path to healing and maturation.1 Thereby, the paper contributes to a feminist reading of the story. The paper also considers the historical context of 1001 Nights and highlights the exceptional level of intellectual and political freedoms in the Arab world during the 9th
century, especially under the rule of Caliph al-Mamun, as an inspirational environment for the emergence of *1001 Nights*.

In this regard, this interpretation makes three arguments. First, *1001 Nights* demonstrates that oppression slowly kills the human soul and is the enemy of social harmony. While the story focuses on the oppression of women, the pro-freedom message of the story can be generalized to other members of the society. The oppressor and the oppressed are both prisoners of fear and freedom empowers both. Second, the oppression of women (and men) is not always external: inner predators and tyrants may be as dangerous if not more so than autocratic rulers and family members. Liberation therefore not only requires the absence of outside oppression but also a psychological fight against internalized critical voices.

The first part considers the central problem in *1001 Nights*, namely the oppression of women by hostile forces, such as a tyrannical animus and a patriarchal culture that reinforces it. The second part briefly describes the Jungian approach to fairy tales. Then the frame story of *1001 Nights* is presented and interpreted using a psychodynamic approach. Finally, the historical context and implications of the story are considered.

**The Captivity and Emancipation of Women**

*1001 Nights* has multiple layers of meaning, which consider women’s search for salvation and happiness. According to most feminist views, male oppression prevents women from having a more fulfilling life. This oppression is a typical consequence of patriarchal fears, which constitutes a key theme in *1001 Nights*. The betrayal of King Shahrayar by his wife and his aggressive reaction, that is the killing of not only his cheating wife and her lover but all female members of the society one by one after marrying them, until he meets Shahrazad, constitutes the backbone of the story. Thus the story places patriarchal dilemmas and solutions at the center. Resulting from male weakness itself, the patriarchal dilemma is defined by Shamma as “the struggle between a deep suspicion of women’s morality and their necessity for biological and social continuity” (Shamma, 2017: 252). The typical “solution,” as observed in many patriarchal societies involves restricting women’s presence to family life in the private sphere and limiting their access to the outside world. This order is maintained by the institution of an asymmetrical power relationship where men control women’s self-expression, from where they can go, with whom they can be, to what they can wear or what they can say. While patriarchal norms are enforced socially or legally, disobedience is punished through a variety of means, from social isolation to execution.

*1001 Nights* also elaborates on the link between patriarchy and autocracy. Shahrayar being not only a husband but also a king, means he is defied in both of
his roles. This situation presents an opportunity to consider the connection between both roles, namely being a patriarchal husband and an autocratic ruler of a society. The link between patriarchy and autocracy is not merely theoretical but also empirically evident. The Middle East, which provides the predominant geographic context to 1001 Nights, is a typical example. Studies on the cultural sources of autocracy in the Middle East find that when it comes to individual attitudes, Middle Eastern people are not significantly different from others, regarding their values on democracy, liberalism, or political violence. Yet when it comes to gender attitudes, significant differences exist (Esmer, 2002; Fish, 2002). This empirical evidence suggests a link between autocratic political systems and patriarchal societal values. Fish reminds us that “to hold a man down, one has to go down with him” (Fish, 2002, p. 30).

In a similar vein, Pleck argues that “patriarchy is a dual system, a system in which men oppress women and in which men oppress themselves and each other” (Pleck, 2004: 64). For Pleck, this is because “in patriarchal systems, to defend manhood, men have to keep other men away from their women” (Shamma, 2017: 242). Thus, there is constant effort to oppress others, women and men, in order to retain one’s dignity. In other words, patriarchal fear causes autocracy.

Certainly, patriarchy is not the only form of autocracy but rather a subset of the latter. Still, understanding patriarchal fears and patriarchal autocracies also allows for the understanding of other forms of autocracy, which result from similar fears and weaknesses. The belief that one has to prove one’s dignity by controlling others lies at the heart of all forms of autocracy. A perception of a zero-sum game is also shared by all autocratic systems, where one man’s dignity is based on the submission of others. In an autocratic solution, the autocrat views his power at the expense of others.

Autocracy can be considered as a shadow version of authority. It is typically a response to a lack of legitimate authority, namely an inability to attain consensual compliance. When rulers are strong, they are respected. The rules they enforce seek to solve collective action problems rather than benefiting the ruler. Such rulers provide harmony, order, balance, rationality, and stability to their communities. In return, people voluntarily comply with their rules. Their power is impersonal and lies in the position they fill; that is, authority is institutionalized. When leaders are weak and face defiance, they may become tyrants. They bully and use crude force, displaying controlling and oppressive behavior, such as lifting the freedoms and rights of others.2

According to the psychodynamic approach, oppression does not always take place between an individual and an external authority. Subconscious processes can work against an individual and discourage their attempts of self-expression (Jung, 1981[1959]). Thus, women’s liberation does not merely depend on a variation in
their immediate socio-political environment. While a patriarchal society directly contributes to the problem, unconscious influences that keep the female psyche captive must also be understood and fought. That is, demons can be present both outside and inside.

Previous analyses of *1001 Nights*, which considered it from women’s studies perspectives, typically reached two conclusions. The general tendency in the literature is that the story has a sexist message (Attar & Fisher, 1991; Sabbah, 1984; Najmabadi, 2000; Shamma, 2017). These studies based their arguments on two observations: 1) Most of the stories in the collection, including the frame story, has a recurring theme of cheating hypersexual women, which leads to social chaos, thereby justifying patriarchal fears, and 2) The only way harmony between the two sexes is restored is when finally Shahrazad, the hero, proves to her husband, King Shahrayar, that virtuous women exist. Accordingly, the story justifies patriarchal solutions, suggesting that a harmonious society can only be restored when women convince men that they will be “good.”

Other studies have disagreed and highlighted that Shahrazad actually presents a positive model for women in the Middle East and elsewhere (Malti-Douglas, 1997; Sallis, 1999). Accordingly, depicting *1001 Nights* as a sexist tale reflected Western stereotypes and was biased. For them, the message of *1001 Nights* was actually inspiring for women. After all, a social crisis that threatened the continuity of the human race was resolved only by the intervention of a hero, Shahrazad, who tamed and stopped a patriarchal, misogynist force.

This paper contributes to studies that consider *1001 Nights* as an empowering message for women (and men). However, while previous studies paid more attention to women’s liberation through positive changes in the social environment, this paper focuses on fighting inner demons. Relying on a psychodynamic interpretation, the paper will consider women’s growth as a function of their awareness of the unconscious content of their psyche. On the other hand, considering that the unconscious does not entirely consist of personal experiences and ideas, but also includes collective ones, the study complements society-centric approaches to women’s liberation, rather than competing with them.

**Jung and Fairy Tales**

According to Jung, psychological empowerment, called individuation, involves the different pieces of the human psyche connecting and supporting each other in a harmonious way (1959). This is not an easy task, as some elements of the psyche remain in the unconscious. These unconscious elements include the “shadow,” which is the compartment of repressed aggression, sexuality, and other feelings unwelcomed by the individual or the society, or the anima/animus, which is the
psyche’s counter-sexual identity that carries qualities associated with the opposite sex (Sharp, 1991; Shiraev, 2017). Childhood traumas, core beliefs, repressed feelings, and desires can be buried in the unconscious. On the other hand, not all unconscious content is personal. Many are inherited from and/or shared with other members of our species. The unconscious does not entirely consist of personal elements. Some of the unconscious content comes from the collective unconscious. These are ideas, images, or expectations (archetypes/archetypal themes and situations) we share with other human beings and are transferred from past generations, which make them rather timeless.

Psychological growth thus requires the ego, the master of the conscious self, to take action and look into the world of the unconscious, in order to discover and connect to the other pieces of the psyche that lie in the dark (Sharp, 1991). For Jung, if the ego ignores, dismisses, and represses unconscious elements, then they start messing with conscious processes and the conscious becomes sick (Shiraev, 2017). This is when a person’s judgment becomes flawed, they feel confused, begin making mistakes, and lose their creative energy to solve them. Healing goes through recognizing unconscious parts of the psyche and activates their powers to assist the ego.

Developing an awareness of the unconscious content and calling the pieces of the psyche into action may require therapeutic intervention (Sharp, 2001). The guidance we need can come from the experience of previous generations. As many of our traumas and wounds are in fact typical to humankind, how similar problems have been dealt with by others for thousands of years can help us. According to Jung, this collective knowledge we can borrow from is present in the collective unconscious, waiting to be demystified.

For Jung, fairy tales and myths carry societies’ cumulative wisdom to future generations. Archetypes, namely shared concepts that emerge as themes or characters, represent this content; pro-archetypes, namely shared concepts that emerge as themes or characters, are representative of this content and constitute a bridge between the conscious and unconscious. Through archetypes, fairy tales show us how previous generations achieved the very task of individuation, and thereby guide us through our personal journey of psychological growth (Estes, 1992). These archetypal situations or characters illustrate major turning points one can encounter in a lifetime (e.g., marriage, birth, or death), dangerous situations (e.g., encountering a predator), or coping mechanisms which may not always work (e.g., adultery, addictions), and finally paths that actually lead to liberation and growth. Thus fairy tales and myths should not be taken literally but need to be interpreted through a psychodynamic approach in order to discover their hidden message (Sharp, 2001).

To the extent that socio-political problems emerge from unresolved problems and complexes of the human psyche, individual healing can lead to social healing as well. Thus Jungian analysis of fairy tales can be used for shedding light on the
psychological origins of important political problems, such as the persistence of patriarchy or other forms of autocracy. In this way, they can contribute to society-centered theories of politics, which argue that individuals shape the relations of power in their surroundings (more than or in addition to institutions and economic structures). In this sense, although its unit of analysis is individual (rather than societal), the Jungian approach contributes to social solutions for the emancipation of women.

A Summary of the Frame Story of *1001 Nights*

Shahrayar, the King of Persia, China, and India, marries a young woman. In standard versions the woman has no name, or she is merely referred to as “Sultan.” We do not know how she meets Shahrayar and how she agrees to the wedding. Maybe it was his charms, maybe the status that came with marrying a king, or maybe the longing for an easy life. As Estes (1992) suggests, few can say they are not familiar with any such mistakes. To Sultan’s disappointment, the marriage does not bring her the happiness she expected. She soon realizes that she made a big mistake and finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage. Escape does not come easy, so her soul begins to die slowly. With a starving soul and desperation, coupled with her inexperience, she makes a second mistake: she ends up having an affair. Her lover is her big, muscular slave, Masud. Shahrayar eventually finds out and is furious.

Shahrayar’s initial reaction is to travel, possibly in order to plan his response, with his brother Shahzaman who has also been betrayed by his wife. However, their experience during the journey only makes the two brothers more bitter. The men encounter a terrifying genie who has a beautiful woman locked in a box. As the genie unlocks the box and falls asleep, the woman attacks the two men and forces them to have sex with her. Kidnapped on her wedding night by the genie and kept locked under the sea most of the time, the “box woman” takes any opportunity she can to escape the genie’s control to sleep with other men.

When Shahrayar finally returns home, his rage is greater because the “box woman” reminded him of his wife. He has Sultan and her lover executed, but he does not stop there. He extends his rage to all womankind. He begins to marry another maiden every day and after consummating the marriage on the wedding night, he has his bride killed on the following morning. Every day another young woman agrees to marry the king, refusing to acknowledge his bloody past and repressing her vital instincts that warn her against him. Yet their fate is no different from each other. A hundred women are killed in a hundred days, until one day when one smart and confident young woman says enough is enough. She is the elder daughter of the king’s vizier and her name is Shahrazade. Shahrazade has the clarity to see the facts as they are. She understands that the king is a misogynist
killer and he must be stopped for the survival of womankind. She hatches a plan with her younger sister, Dunyazad. Despite the objections of her father, who is worried about her life, she marries the king. On their first night, she tells the king that she has just one wish before she is executed. She would like to tell her sister Dunyazad a bedtime story before she goes to sleep. The king agrees and Shahrazad begins. She tells the most captivating stories and at every dawn, when it is about time for the king to execute her, Shahrazade ends the story, for it to be continued the next evening. With his curiosity to hear the rest of the story, the king keeps postponing the execution of his new bride, for 1001 nights. At the end of these 1001 nights, the stories come to an end. By that time though, Shahrazade has three sons, and the king has evolved into a different person, who no longer needs to kill her, or other women. The killer inside the king is dead and womankind is saved, as social harmony is restored.

Psychodynamic Interpretation of 1001 Nights

A psychodynamic approach allows the consideration of the key characters in the frame story of 1001 Nights as different pieces of the psyche during the process of individuation. While it is possible to interpret the story from the perspective of the male ego, this study explores what 1001 Nights offers for the growth of the female psyche. Accordingly, all key characters, Sultan, her lover Masud, the “box woman,” the hundred executed wives, Shahrazad, Dunyazad, and even Shahrayar and the genie represent elements of the female psyche.

Sultan and the other hundred dead wives of Shahrayar represent more primitive forms of the psyche. Sultan is an inexperienced, curious young woman. She fails to find a healthy outlet for her feelings and marries the wrong man. Quickly, she finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage. Among all kinds of mistakes, some of the worst involve falling into traps. A woman who falls into a trap and finds herself in captivity faces a slow and painful death. The worst part is that she blames herself for her captivity as she was the one who stepped into that trap, as opposed to being chased and hunted by some predator. This trauma leads to a terrible disappointment with oneself, and dislike and lack of compassion toward oneself can be deadly as it kills the creative energy one needs in order to find an exit. Thus all healing starts with forgiveness and acceptance toward one’s own mistakes and sees them as stages for growth. After all, if characters do not take risks, stories can never begin.

Sultan pays for her mistake, first with the deprivation of her soul. Estes (1992) argues that such deprivation triggers existential survival instincts, but after a long hunger the psyche may be too weakened to take the right steps to escape the situation. The desperation to find an exit can lead an individual toward instant...
gratification, which can lead to other disasters. As in the story, adultery is one typical example. Sultan begins to cheat on her husband.

Cheating on the king with a slave is a slap in the face of the king, the patriarchal autocrat. However, this kind of disobedience does not function as full resistance. The victim’s expectation is not really emancipation but merely a challenge to the figure of authority to escape control, albeit in a limited way. Losing control over most aspects of her life, the unbearable pain of lost freedom, repressed desire to escape, and repressed aggression toward her captor explodes via Sultan’s adultery. In other words, adultery represents the psyche’s encounter with its shadow. She turns to adultery as soon as the opportunity arises. Yet this rebellious act does not lead to freedom – it brings death. The path to salvation is more complex, but at least the murder marks the end of the period of captivity.

The hundred maidens who marry Shahrayar and are executed consequently, despite Shahrayar’s fame as a killer, represent the psyche’s helplessness and blindness to its reality. The tale uses a hundred repeated deaths to highlight this weakness. Within the bodies of the hundred executed brides, the captivity and death of Sultan is repeated over and over. Salvation requires creative energy, and it only comes after acceptance of the danger on the one hand and through compassion and cooperation with oneself on the other. Sultan eventually realizes the sadness of her situation and tries to respond but cannot find a healthy exit. Neither can the other hundred young women. The cycle of death continues until the hero breaks it. The repetition of death suggests that breaking free is not an easy task. A woman may have to die a hundred and one times before she identifies what kills her. But the power she needs to come back to life is internal to her.

The necessary creative energy appears through the entry of Shahrazad in the tale. Shahrazad appears as the hero archetype. A hero seeks to reach a goal, overcoming obstacles, and transforming and actually “becoming” a hero through this process (Shiraev, 2017). The goal of Shahrazad is to prevent extermination of the female kind by the revengeful king. For this, she needs to connect to, understand, heal, and form a happy union with the king.

Shahrazad’s role represents the ego’s task during the psyche’s individuation. Ego is a major agent during the individuation process. As the main subject of the conscious self, ego seeks to explore the unconscious and connect with its contents. As Jung (1981[1959]) explained, “The hero’s main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious” (ibid.: 167). This is indeed what Shahrazad seeks. Rather than running away from the hostile force, she decides to face it. And as soon as she does that, that is since her first night with Shahrayar, positive change begins. As Shahrazad and Shahrayar become connected, not only via wedlock but also spiritually, over the course of 1001 nights, healing happens. The ego faces
the unconscious, connects with the hidden parts of the psyche, understands and responds to them, and the psychic condition begins to shift. A thorough transformation and healing is not easy and may take as long as 1001 nights, but eventually it happens.

Shahrayar, the angry murderous king, represents the animus, the male identity in the female psyche. Animus constitutes a significant part of the psyche’s unconscious content. A collection of characteristics the psyche considers as masculine that come from either personal experiences (such as the male role models present in her life during growing up) or the collective unconscious make up the image of “the masculine” in her psyche. The ego’s relationship with the animus plays a critical role in the female psyche’s well-being.

The psyche can be negatively influenced by the animus if the ego cannot identify it as a separate voice. When the ego fails to differentiate itself from the animus, two options may follow: the animus is projected onto external subjects or it is entirely introjected (Garnermann, 1991). In the former case, women attribute all “masculine” qualities to others, such as the men who enter their lives, expect them to live up to these ideals, and adopt a passive role for themselves. In other cases, they identify with the animus and try to obtain worth by assuming a “masculine” role in the outside world. Meanwhile, they deny their feminine side, or introject negative feminine stereotypes, such as seducer, cheat, or hypersexual being. The “box woman” represents this negative feminine stereotype that emerges as a result of an extremely tyrannical male force, represented as the genie. The possessive animus is hostile, judgmental, and destructive of the personal and positive feminine characteristics. In daily life, women with an excessively dominant animus feel paralyzed by a constantly critical and degrading inner voice. This discourages them from expressing themselves in the outside world, such as in giving an opinion in public, defending their rights at work, letting out their artistic abilities, finishing projects or realizing their dreams.

According to Estes (1992), a culture that devalues the “feminine” can also play a role in women’s difficulty with the development of a healthy relationship with their animus. Patriarchy discourages women’s self-expression and presence in the outside world. Patriarchal societies aggressively separate women’s inner and outer presence. While praising their role in the private sphere as wives and mothers, patriarchy considers women inept for outside roles. Not only are women’s presences in the public sphere portrayed as a challenge to social harmony, but women are also described as incapable of performing outside roles that are traditionally reserved for men. This kind of an environment may sabotage women’s efforts to discover and activate their personal animus against hostile forces.

The animus can be beneficial if the ego becomes aware of it as a separate existence in the unconscious. In that case, the activated animus can come to the help of
the psyche. It can release positive “masculine” energy and allow women to access their courageous, objective and rational sides (Garnermann, 1991; Sharp, 1991: 47). Some feminist critiques have argued that the classical Jungian approach has sexist biases, especially when gendering personality traits. Accordingly, the theory of animus and the depiction of certain qualities as masculine (such as courage or rationalism in its positive form and oppression or aggression in its negative form) are problematic (Karaban, 1992; Jones & Mattoon, 1989). On the other hand, contemporary psychotherapists such as Estes (1992), have suggested that fixing these gender biases was possible, mainly through reinterpreting Jungian terminology. Accordingly, “masculine” and “feminine” categories do not represent men and women, but they only describe types of psychic energy. Estes also argues that, in contrast to previous assumptions, women’s creative energy is a feminine and internal force. However, its release has to do with the animus, to the extent that negative masculine influences can obstruct the way between a woman’s productive side and her self-realization. For Estes, associating the animus with rationality means that it functions as a bridge between a women’s creative energy and her determination to use this power to what she needs from the world. The male–female dichotomy is used to understand the female unconscious, not because certain qualities are considered foreign to women, but because of the gendered state of unconscious content. On the contrary, encouraging the view that the female psyche as a home to both sexual identities, psychodynamic treatment has allowed women to strip away stereotypical gender roles.

In fairy tales or dreams, the animus appears as a collective body of men. A muscleman, father, king, or a spiritual leader are archetypes that represent the animus. In 1001 Nights, we see several of these images. The muscular slave with whom Sultan sleeps, Shahrzad’s father, but most significantly King Shahrayar, represent masculine archetypes. Shahrayar’s role as the misogynist tyrant highlights how a transgressive animus can turn against the female psyche. This situation can push women into negative female stereotypical roles or make women repress their feminine side entirely.

In 1001 Nights, an earlier attempt of the psyche to deal with the tyrannical animus is manifested in Sultan’s affair with Masud, the muscular slave. Masud represents the emerging, personal animus of the psyche, which she calls to assist her against the king that is the collective animus. The muscleman in fairy tales and dreams is typically interpreted as a less progressed form of animus (Sharp, 1991). In the case of Masud, he is also a captive man. Therefore he does not stand a chance against the king. Yet the affair between Sultan and the slave shows that a new, emerging personal animus is at the service of the psyche. The psyche attempts to avoid the negative effect of the collective animus, activating her personal animus. However, this turns out to be a failed attempt because the personal animus is at a
very primitive stage. Sultan and the slave’s affair ends with both of them being killed. Building a more balanced relationship with the animus will take more effort.

Shahrazad’s father, who is the king’s vizier, is another appearance of her animus. His inability to stop the massacres of the women reflects his weakness. Although the vizier is in a stronger position than the slave, he is still vulnerable vis-à-vis the king. He is on Shahrazad’s side and wants to protect her but does nothing more than try to dissuade her from marrying the king. The incompetent father who cannot protect his daughter is typical in fairy tales, from *Snow White* to *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* (Panttaja, 1993; Glathey, 1991). The failed father in an early stage of the fairy tale indicates that he needs to be replaced by a superior male figure over the course of the story. According to the psychodynamic approach, this masculine force is not foreign to the female psyche. In other words, he is not another person. What must be replaced and improved is an internal piece of the female psyche, namely her own animus. Indeed, this is what happens when Shahrazad does not listen to her father and goes through with her plan. She realizes that in the absence of anyone else stopping the king, she must take things into her own hands. She understands that simply running away from her fear is not going to help her in the long run because if the king is not stopped she will eventually be dead anyway.

Nevertheless, the story has a happy ending. Shahrazad manages to stop Shahrayar’s murders by transforming him. She heals Shahrayar, night after night, through her therapeutic tales. At the same time, her own position changes slowly, from a captive awaiting execution to a powerful queen. The patriarchal dilemma is resolved, social chaos is over. The salvation of womankind is achieved, not by proof of woman’s fidelity, but with woman achieving authority. Just like it consists of stories within stories, *1001 Nights* involves two layers of psychodynamic therapy through fairy tales: while Shahrazad treats Shahrayar with her stories, *1001 Nights* seeks to heal all readers.

The happy ending in the marriage of Shahrayar and Shahrazad represents the union of the female ego and animus. The animus is no longer obscured: the ego can see it, identify it, and connect to it. It neither denies nor is assimilated by the animus. Now that it is discovered, the negative influence of the animus ends, like a bubble that pops when touched. A balanced relationship with the animus allows the female psyche to open up to the outside world in a stronger way. She now has access to her clear, logical and brave side. Building a healthier relationship with the animus, the ego has been transformed from a tyrannical, hostile power to a supportive partner. After spending 1001 nights with the animus, she comes out victorious, but it is a mutually winning game.

What lies in Shahrazad’s success? How is she different from other women subject to Shahrayar’s rage? Shahrazad is described as a highly-educated woman who
also has superior artistic abilities. Attar and Fisher (1991) point out that before her encounter with Shahrayar, Shahrazad is already a “liberated” woman. However, she is not a hero yet. Thus, her success lies not in her possession of certain skills but the initiative she takes, to use them to fight her demons. A few characteristics allow Shahrazad to transition from an intellectual and talented woman to a hero, the courage to face her fears, the commitment to use her creative side, and to protect her inner child.

Shahrazad shows the readers that facing the demons is the first and most important step in overcoming them. According to the psychodynamic approach, once aware, hostile forces in the psyche tend to shrink. Hence, the question is “What is out there?” more than “What to do about it?” Once aware of what poisons it, the psyche will be able to develop its own unique antidote. Thus, a distinguishing characteristic of Shahrazad is the clarity of her mind and her awareness of what she is dealing with.

Second, as Enderwitz points out, Shahrazad is an exceptionally fertile woman in “biological and mental” terms (2004: 195), where her procreative strength in bearing three children in 1001 nights is only matched by her ability to tell the most captivating stories. Estes agrees that while a poisonous animus is the enemy of a women’s productivity as it discourages self-expression, the best defense against the negative effects of animus is insisting to use the creative side. This requires practicing to react and to make choices every day, despite the critical inner voice that suggests otherwise. The creative side needs to be protected, consciously, every day. Shahrazad sets a good example by insisting on telling her tales every night, even when it looks like it could be her last night.

Finally, it is important to note that Dunyazad, Shahrazad’s little sister, also plays a role in the resolution of the story’s central problem. Without her cooperation, Shahrazad could not execute her plan. Dunyazad represents the child archetype, namely the innocent and energetic piece of the psyche, while Shahrazad, the older sister, represents wisdom and capability. The older-sister archetype has characteristics of the mother archetype, and we often meet her in stories where a mother is absent. In 1001 Nights too, there is no mother, until Shahrazad bears children at the end of the story. A mother that dies early in a fairy tale but continues to live in the child’s memories is quite common and is actually a necessary condition for the story to begin. This is similar to the gradual separation and independence from parental protection in real life, and it is healthy for the maturation of the child. On the other hand, an entirely absent mother in a fairy tale describes a different situation. Here, the child has never received what s/he needed to receive from the mother in the first place. This important gift that needs to be passed from mother (or other primary caregiver) to child is intuition, according to Estes (1992), and its deprivation can halt rather than contribute to psychological growth.
Intuition is the inner voice that knows what we need (which is not equal to what we want) and warns us against traps and hostile forces. We can conclude that some of the problems of the female psyche in *1001 Nights*, including her harmful relationship with the animus, has to do with not having received enough mothering. Many women, whether they actually had a mother or not while growing up, feel scarred because they have not received sufficient motherly care. It is still possible, however, for a grown-up woman to “reparent” her inner child as a way to heal the trauma that results from physical or emotional absence of the mother (Cori, 2010). Shahrazad’s role as the older sister and her compassionate relationship with Dunyazad sets an example of this way of inner healing. At the end of the individuation process, that is at the end of the story, we see finally that the mother image is restored, as Shahrazad becomes a mother herself to three sons. In some interpretations of *1001 Nights*, Shahrayar pardons Shahrazad at this point because now she is a mother, while a literal interpretation could conclude that such an ending where Shahrazad’s motherly role is celebrated has a patriarchal message. However, from a psychodynamic perspective, what is celebrated is the psyche’s restoration of the personal-feminine against the negative influences of the animus.6

On the other hand, in Shahrazad’s relationship with Dunyazad, the latter is not always on the receiving end. Dunyazad makes a critical contribution to Shahrazad’s plan against the king. After all, Shahrazad’s tale-therapy starts with her explaining to Shahrayar that Dunyazad needs a bedtime story, and Shahrayar ending up listening to the stories, as they are so captivating. In this sense, Dunyazad is at the center of the *1001 Nights* and plays a key role, in the healing of Shahrayar and the happy union between Shahrayar and Shahrazad. According to Jung, the child archetype represents spontaneity, creativity, and growth. Activating her inner child and bringing her lively spirit to assistance has helped the psyche to mobilize the much-needed creative energy in finding her own voice.

**Cultural Context of 1001 Nights**

Fairytales have universal themes, which give them a timeless quality. Yet, they do not take place in a void, and they offer insight into understanding the cultural context from which they have emerged. Oppression of women, which is the central problem in the tale, has been experienced across time and place. Yet, forms of oppression differed and so did forms of resistance in various historical and geographic contexts. While the oppression of women both by male authorities as well as the female’s own psychic elements are the central problems in the tale, this message about freedom and social harmony can be generalized. In this regard, *1001 Nights* also sheds light on some mysteries of Arab society during the time the story began to emerge.
It is hard to argue that *1001 Nights* is entirely about a certain culture or a certain historical period. Yet, the fact that the earliest references to the tales are from the 9th century indicates that this is when the tale emerged or surfaced. In addition, the tales make specific and repeated reference to the rule of Harun al-Rashid. This suggests that the golden age of the Abbasid dynasty (9th century) provides context to the story. This is important because this has been intellectually, spiritually, and politically an exceptional period through the history of the Muslim Middle East. Levels of intellectual freedom and political openness achieved during this period remain unmatched. Thus, with its emphasis on freedom as a source of psychological balance and social harmony, *1001 Nights* truly captures the Zeitgeist of this period.

Political authority in the Arab world experienced an evolutionary process in the 9th century. Until then, the Abbasid rule had incorporated vast boundaries, so political authority was highly sovereign. Yet, its legitimacy was debated, which constituted a weakness. Harun al-Rashid, who is frequently mentioned in *1001 Nights*, was a just ruler, and although he lacked the intellectual sophistication and wisdom of his son, his rule marks the beginning of the evolution of political authority in the Muslim world. Before he died, he authorized his sons to replace him after his death, rather than allowing the people to elect their caliph, thereby treating the Caliphate as a monarchy. His son al-Mamun who took over the Caliphate developed an interest in philosophy and sought to improve himself and his society, which was followed by major political openings, marking a turning point in Abbasid political history. This period witnessed the political and religious authority to face its biggest fears, as political openings allowed oppressed political and religious ideas to come to light. Even the most marginal groups and approaches were welcome. One of them was the Mutaliza school’s idea that the Quran was a creation of God rather than God’s words and that it had to be approached through the filter of rationality (Akın, 2016; Azimli, 2016). The Sultan/Caliph al-Mamun, who was highly interested in philosophy followed his intellectual curiosity to the extent of engaging with this deviant group, Mutazila, who had the most extreme ideas about Islam, not for its own time, but even by today’s standards. It is during this period when an academic institution, Bayt al-Hikma, was founded as a free platform for intellectual studies and exchanges (Azimli, 2016). Within the doors of Bayt al-Hikma, most untouchable subjects were touched, unspeakable ideas were uttered, dogmas were challenged, and political criticisms were raised. With its exceptionally liberal atmosphere, Bayt al-Hikma became a magnet for the intellectually curious from various countries and religious groups. For 30 years Mutazila freely expanded its ideas within the palace and the society. Rigid applications of Quranic texts were replaced by *ijtihad*, namely interpretation and adaptation. Nevertheless, this major attempt at political opening came to an end. The shadow that escaped its prison cell now did not want to risk it again and started to consume its environment. Mutazila
began to degenerate by adopting Jacobin tendencies. This cycle was broken with al-Mamun’s death and Mutazila being overthrown by the traditionalists. With the reinstitution of a traditionalist authority and the doors of *ijtihad* getting shut, political progress was interrupted. In contrast to *1001 Nights*, the story of political authority in the Middle East does not have a happy ending yet. The shadow is pushed back in its cell, but the anxiety this creates continues to poison state–society relations in the region. Yet, as *1001 Nights* shows the path to freedom is full of failed attempts, the good news is that each failure has a role in the growth process. There may be a long way to go, but *1001 Nights* provides an important blueprint.

**Conclusion**

This study has considered the characters in *1001 Nights* as different aspects of the female psyche during its search for balance and becoming whole. Accordingly, Shahrazad’s relationship with Shahrayar is considered as the ego’s heroic struggle in facing a hostile and masculine inner voice, a tyrannical animus. Shahrazad’s 1001 nights with Shahrayar resembles the soul searching and eventual healing that comes with psychodynamic help. The happy ending of the story where the killings of women stop and the hero becomes a queen, and a mother represents the restoration of feminine powers against hostile forces.

Finally, in addition to revealing the mysteries of the human psyche, *1001 Nights* also invites readers to an exceptionally progressive era in the history of the Middle East. The consideration of authoritarian fears as a source of autocracy and the facing of such fears as an inevitable step on the way to true empowerment of both men and women captures the progressive spirit of the Abbasid rule during the 9th century. Thus, *1001 Nights* does not only provide a roadmap for liberation but also reminds readers of past accomplishments.

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**Notes**

1. This paper on *1001 Nights* is limited to the frame story although many other stories support the main message of the story. This is not only for space limitations but also because of the distinguishing characteristics of the frame story. As Enderwitz (2004: 189) suggests, the frame story “stands out by its special status” because Shahrazad is the hero but also the narrator there. For similar reasons, Eva Sallis (1999: 87) describes the frame story as the “signature story” of the whole collection.
2. According to Gilette and Moore (1990), while one tyrant may be a typical shadow version of authority, another one is a weakling. A weakling adopts a passive role on the outside while fantasizing aggression inside, or reflecting his aggression towards weaker subjects. That is, the tyrant and the weakling are two sides of the same weak psyche.

3. The complexes of the male psyche have been a typical focus of 1001 Nights’ interpretations in the past. For a successful example see “Madness and Cure in the 1001 Nights” (Clinton, 1985) where Shahrayar’s “madness” and his tendency to treat women not as equals which eventually lead to his wife’s infidelity are traced back to childhood trauma and a mother complex.

4. As Estes notes, other examples can include drugs, overeating, alcohol abuse, etc.

5. In the 20th century there has been more interest in the character of Dunyazad. Several writers suggested that the character deserves more attention. For example, see Barth’s (1972) “Chimera,” Djebar’s (1987) “Ombre Sultane,” or Telmissany’s “Dunyazad.”

6. For the argument about the role of Shahrazad’s childbearing in the happy ending of the story, see Enderwitz (2004: 190–191).

References


