

**APPLICATION OF NEW HISTORICISM AND STYLISTICS ON THE  
“SLAVE GIRL” OF THE *ARABIAN NIGHTS*; CENTERED ON  
BARMAKIDS HOUSE OF VIZIERS**

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**Abstract**

*One thousand and one Nights* is a mirror which reflects many cultures and nations through history. Scheherazade puts the stories of all nations together and saves the girls of her time, becoming a border-free figure who steps out for justice. Iran, or the ancient Persia and its house of Barmakids are one of these nations who play important parts in the narrative of the *Nights*. Barmakids, a Persian family from Balkh who became the viziers of the Abbasids, appear frequently in the stories of Scheherazade as the viziers of Harun. Figures such as Ja'far, can be rooted in historical documents as well. Masudi, Ibn- Nadim and some other historians prove their presence and importance in the 9th century of Baghdad. The story of the Slave Girl is one of the stories in which Ja'far appears and will be touched upon in this article. The Slave Girl as a case study is to be analyzed by the tools of Stylistics and the tenets of New Historicism. New Historicism is our main stream inasmuch as it enables the readers of the *Nights* to investigate the truth and facts which make the foundation of the *Nights'* tales and stories. We will also benefit from the tools of stylistics, namely, implying, assuming, equating and contrasting. The goal of this paper is to investigate how the house of Barmakids as a Persian representative is represented in the tale of the Slave Girl.

**Keywords:** Barmakids, Manipulation, History, Ministry, Stylistic, Marginalization.

## Introduction

18th century is considered as a turning point in the life of the Arabian Nights. Antoine Galland's (1701-1771) translation introduced the Nights to the west and the Europeans in 18th century and along with it came a plethora of articles and translations dedicated to this world literature. Afterward, lots of translators and literary elites put hand in compiling new versions of the Nights and the result of those endeavors is a library full of versions of the tales each conveying the same values and lessons through different wordings.

Generally, Most of the European translations of the tales in *Nights* have been from Bulaq, Macnaughten (Calcutta II) and New Leiden. These compilations of the *Arabian Nights* served as the source texts and are said to “belong to the Egyptian manuscripts” (Pinault 127). We know that no documents have been found from the 3rd or 4th century hegira, where first the *Arabian Nights* came to life. The oldest compilation of the book dates back to 14th century (8th and 9th century hegira) being the Syrian manuscript that is kept in Paris and contains 300 tales. However, some historians such as Al-Mas'udi (956) and Ibn- Al Nadim (995) who lived in the time of the Abbasid's dynasty mention a book called HazarAfsane which served as the base for the *Nights* and was a Persian heritage written in Pahlavi language belonging to “pre-Islamic era” (Marzolph 588). Marzolph brings some other names who mention the existence of the HazarAfsane and dates its first translation into Arabic as early as 8th century.

There have been so many debates on the origin of the Nights. Al-Mas'udi in his *Muruj al-dhahab* (Meadows of Gold) refers to the book of HazarAfsane and considers it as the origin of the Arabian Nights; he mentions that the book had been translated to Arabic as *Alfa Khurafa* and was generally called *Alf Layla* (Marzolph 641). Burton believed that “the fairy tales in the *Nights* were purely Persian”, and the major influence of Iranians on world history was undeniable (Volume 10 p. 64).

Being allowed to go through the historical documents, regarding the Barmakids and the historical context of the 3rd century where the Abbasids and Barmakids found their way to the Nights, we come to know about the sources of alterations and the Persian elements which are pushed under the shadow of the Arabian Nights. Having history as one of the discourses that affects the interpretation of a text and tools of stylistics on the other hand, the article aims at unraveling the possible reasons and sources of alterations in the tale of “The Slave Girl and Imam Abu Yusuf”.

It is compulsory to go through New Historicism and Stylistics toolkit so that the tale could be analyzed systematically. The following lines are dedicated to the tenets of New Historicism and Stylistics' toolkit.

New historicism emerged in 1970s and 80s in response to the rejection of historical marginalization of literature. It emphasized on the role of historical context in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in interpreting history (Brannigan 4). Discourse is defined as being a social language created by particular way of understanding human experience. Discourse is said to be the role of language as the vehicle of ideology and the overlap of discourses means negotiating exchanges of power. New historicism views historical accounts as narratives, stories that are inevitably biased according to the point of view, conscious and unconscious of those who write them. Greenblatt and Montrose declare that all history is subjective, and similar to language, is one of many discourses or ways of viewing the world. New historicism then, highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities, admits its own prejudices and gives a more complete understanding of a text. In the eyes of New Historicists texts are vehicles of politics since they “mediate the fabrics of social, political and cultural

formation” (Brannigan 3). Brannigan states that New Historicism breaks down the simplistic distinction between literature and history and “opens up a dialogue between them” (3). New historicists don’t see history as a set of facts outside the written text and vice versa. They place literary texts in an “unprivileged exchange with historical forces in the time of their production” (12) so that they could be examined in greater details.

As a practitioner of New Historicism, Brannigan believes that literature is not just a medium for the expression of historical knowledge, but it is an active part of a particular historical moment which constructs a cultural sense of reality. This sense of reality lead us to the object of study within New Historicism framework; “literature in history” (3).

Clifford Geertz is an anthropologist whose ideas have been taken in New Historicism. His definition of thick description is in accord with Foucault’s. He believes that “it’s not important whether the self- fashion is true or not, it is important to know how and why such a group or individuals fashion themselves in particular way” (Brannigan33). These ‘how and why’ are considered as one of the major subject of study and investigation for New Historicists. Geertz through his ‘Thick Description’ descends into details and investigates the possibilities that led into the self-fashioning of a particular group or to be more literal, the creation of a piece of literature. In the eye of New Historicism, literary texts are the space in which power relations are made visible. By the help of this approach we are able to sort out the powers which are active in a piece of literature. It also enables us as the reader to see how and why some groups have been marginalized, pushed down and erased.

As New Historicism asserts, *1001 Nights* acted as a vehicle of power in which the preferred events were added to. It is our goal then to treat the related history of third century hegira as the base in which these tales of the nights were enmeshed and re-narrated. We will see how the tales were added and devised in the *Nights* and why they were represented in such a way by the power New Historicism bestows us. It is only through the glasses of this approach that we can see how power relations in the *Nights* are made visible.

Reading between the lines, New Historicism allows for other methods and approaches to mingle and aid practitioners of New Historicism in achieving their goals. Stylistics in particular is used here as a back up to our hypothesis. Using Implying, Assuming, Equating and Contrasting as our four tools will be of help in order to resurface the tale’s potential alterations. Jeffries states that using assumptions and implications in order to make ideologies is considered to be one of the main power of language in general (Jeffries 2010). It is important to note that what we assume or imply is powerful, because these assumptions are not explicitly stated in sentences, thus being exempt from questioning or scrutiny. Jeffries further explains that presuppositions are “used to refer to assumptions that are built into the text” and sometimes remain “elusive as they are not encoded directly by the text, but are at the background upon which it is built” (94).

The other concept, being equating and contrasting, argues that if texts construct some versions of the world, then one of the things that they do is to tell us “ what they (or their authors) see as equivalent and what they see as contrasting” (51). If we agree that no language is ideology-free then we have to consider how texts structure the world in terms of equivalence and opposition. Jeffries argues that texts can create relationships that are normally thought of as existing out of the text. One of the syntactic triggers that allow for such equivalence or contrasting is that of parallel structures. It means that through this structure two ideas are equated by placing them in a parallel structure with somehow identical wording (54).

Historical documents on the character of Ja'far

He is the second son of Yahya, who is said to be younger by two years than Harun al Rashid (Bladel). Bouvat claims based on Tabari's words that Ja'far was close to the caliph and had influence on him due to immoral character of Harun (95). It is also claimed by Bouvat that Ja'far was called the Sultan of Baghdad (94) because of his power and influence on the caliph. Gorgani quotes from Ikram al Naas that whenever people came to plea in the court, the caliph would get tired and ask his vizier Ja'far to settle the problems with fairness and in accord with caliph's wishes. The caliph would say: "there is no gift like you" (82). Gorgani also cites from the Barmakids' History, the oldest extant manuscript of the life of the Barmakids, and writes that the Barmakids sons including Ja'far were the most generous of their time and "unsurpassed in forgiveness" (40).

As said earlier the Barmakids were known for their knowledge, wisdom and eloquence. The presence of Indian physicians, scribes, poets and authors in their system is the proof. IbnNadim names Jabir ibnHayyan the recognized Persian chemist, philosopher, astronomer, and physician as one of the members in Barmakids' court and one of the close companions of Ja'far (636). Jabir was originally from Khurasan. Tabari writes that like his family, Ja'far was fond of poetry and composed some verses (277). Kanpoori states that Ja'far was interested in philosophy and astronomy (229). He also writes of Ja'far's generosity and examples of the ways he helped the poor (220).

It is quoted from Jaheshyari the well-known historiographer of mid Abbasid dynasty that Harun had more feelings for Ja'far than his brother Fadl (Gorgani 58). Hugh Kennedy too writes on the closeness of Ja'far and Harun as companions (32). Gorgani also quotes here that in the reign of Harun a quarrel happened between two preachers. The judge of Basra failed to solve the problem. Judge Abu Yusuf, whom we will see in the Nights as Kazi, sent a man to solve but no achievement was gained. After many tries for a year and half the caliph asked Ja'far to settle the problem and he did (81-82). Tabari records a similar account of a quarrel that happened in ash-Sham in 180 hegira (140). He writes that Harun sent Ja'far to settle the problem and on his return the caliph kissed his hands and foot (142).

Poets have written on the generosity and wisdom of the Barmakids and Ja'far in particular. In Tazkerat al-Sho'ara (Biography of Poets) by DolatshahSamarqandi, there are examples in which Barmakids munificence is emphasized (381). QatranTabrizi too has a poem in which he admires Ja'far's munificence and chivalry. He writes that "fate filled and then emptied the world with Ja'far's deeds and munificence" (122).

The Concept of Vizierate

Persian viziers have been famous throughout history. Jan Rypka speaks of Bozorgmihr the vizier of Anushirvan the Sassanid king as being a perfect type of a wise minister (55). The story of deciphering the game of chess of the king of India and invention of Nard in return is brought as an example by him. The presence of many different books on viziers such as 'the history of seven viziers which is listed in IbnNadim's *sal-Fihrist* (Rypka 57) and *KhodaayNaama* (Book of Kings) which is a comprehensive work on the history of Persian kings and viziers (Rypka 58) are proofs of the long history of vizierate in Iran before the advent of Islam.

The Arabian history of vizierate starts with Khalid the vizier of Saffah the Umayyad caliph. He was first chosen as the secretary of Saffah and then his vizier. He held his post until Mansur caliphate (Kanpoori 80-85). Sourdei in *Cambridge History of Islam* writes that Khalid controlled the administration in the caliphate of Saffah (199). He also writes that the Abbasid

Caliphs chose Persians as their aides. It is said that Khalid arranged the land tax in Khurasan at the time of Abu Muslim. He was fair which made Khurasanian grateful to him (Frye 69).

The Barmakids served as scribes, secretaries, and viziers in the Arab courts. Khalid ibnBrmak first became the scribe of Saffah and then was appointed as his vizier. He kept his post in the caliphate of Mansur as well (Kanpoori 80-85). As mentioned above he was in charge of land tax in Khurasan and his fairness granted him the gratitude of Khurasanian. Sharon Allen writes that viziers were considered trusted counselors to the kings and usually came from royalties themselves (p.113). She believes that the Barmakids in medieval Islam were highly influential in the court and exercised control that was equal to the caliphate.

Ulrich Marzolph's explanation of viziers in the Arab world which is included in the following gives a comprehensive insight into this post held by the Barmakids. He states that vizier is the highest 'administrative official in Muslim empire' (732). He further explains that in the Umayyad dynasty the prime ministers were called secretary or scribes and fulfilled the bureaucratic practices. Along with adopting the bureaucratic system of Persia the concept of vizierate was introduced in the Arab world. It is said here that during the reign of Abbasids and Harun in particular "the vizierate was a source of great power and wealth for the Barmakid family" (732).

*Cambridge History of Iran* defines viziers in Umayyad and Abbasid courts as spokespersons of the caliph who were regarded superior to the army (Frye 79). Kanpoori defines two different meanings for vizierate based on Arab scholars' words; submission vizierate and validation vizierate (128). In the former, the vizier is given full authority by the caliph and can make important decisions alone. The latter refers to a post in which the vizier has to execute the orders of the caliph and give reports to him. Kanpoori further explains that the Barmakids were appointed as the former.

## Tale Analysis

Ja'farBarmaki appears in the tale from the very beginning, accompanying the Sultan. In the first lines we have the conversations of the vizier and the caliph. Considering the following sentences, we can equate and contrast their speeches.

H: sell her to me.

J: I will not sell her

H: then give it to me

J: nor will I give her

H: Be Zubaydah triply divorced and thou shall not either sell or give her to me!

J: Be my wife triply divorced and I either sell or give her to thee!

From the beginning, Ja'far's speech follows the same pattern and uses the same structure as Harun's. As the caliph commands to sell the girl, Ja'far openly rejects his order and uses 'will not' in order to refute it. We can see how Ja'far is equated with Harun in his status, allowing for such open rejection of the Caliph's order through using the same pragmatic structure. Furthermore, use of oath in their speeches shows the degree of their decisiveness in the matter. Ja'afar uses the exact grammatical structure in rejecting the caliph's order. However it is said that after the tipsiness was over tables turned and ja'far turned into the complaisant vizier. Considering these lines, it is supposed that Ja'far and Harun are more than just vizier and caliph and their mutual relationship is much stronger than that of the dominator and the subordinator. It is implied then that Ja'far's power is more than a mere vizier and can stand in opposition to the caliph's demand. History speaks the same and describes their relationship as a friendly one, too.

Another instance of implying and assuming is when the caliph asks the Kazi in the middle of the Night and tells him that, “advise us upon a grave matter.” It is not explicitly mentioned that lying with Ja’far’s slave is a grave matter, though we assume it to be true through Harun’s endeavor in order to have her fortnight. Being with the girl is such a grave matter that it cannot wait one more day and costs the caliph a lot of money.

The tale goes on to the male slave who is married to the girl in order to evade the oath sworn by Ja’far and Harun. When the slave is asked to divorce the girl for a thousand dinars, he says: “Doth it rest with me to divorce her, or with thee or with the Commander of the Faithful? He answered, “It is in thy hand.” “Then by Allah,” quoth the slave, “I will never do it; no, never.” The presupposition is that slaves should be submissive to their masters and obey whatever comes, however his reply is contrasting what is expected in this situation. The slave is put in an equal status with the caliph that allows such refusal to his master’s command. Another implication is that the male slave is equal to Ja’far in his degree that is capable of opposing the caliph while Ja’far remains complaisant to his Sultan and we see no other speech or dialogue of him.

When the problem is finally solved by the Kazi through circumventing the rules of religion, the caliph is capable of lying with the slave girl. Kazi’s words implies the fact that such pleasures and immoral acts can be purified through knowing the rules of religion and equates his act of judgment to the will of god by saying that: “There is no easier nor shorter road to the goods of this world and the next, than that of religious learning.” He equates the goods of this world with the next, being the life after death by the use of the conjunction ‘and’ thus making his way of judgment equal to the God’s and justifiable.

The last lines of the tale are dedicated to its message that is said to be the complaisance of Ja’far to his caliph, the wisdom of the caliph and the excellent learning of the Kazi. Knowing the background of Ja’far and his alias which was given to him by historians; the true Sultan, our presupposition would be Ja’far’s wise solution to this dilemma and his active role in solving the matter, however what is explicitly stated is that he is submissive to his Sultan wholeheartedly and shows no sign of his wisdom in the tale.

The tale explicitly refers to the wisdom of the Caliph which is absent in the tale and what the reader sees of him is his desire to reach the bed of the girl; all the rites being done by the Kazi and others. Given that the history has praised Barmakids’ and Ja’far’s wisdom and eloquence, we see how these characters are contrasted and somehow devised in order to change the presupposition about Barmakids’ wisdom and ruling ability.

The last message is pointed to the Kazi. He is praised for his learning in religious thought and it is implicitly stated that such behavior and actions can be made lawful by the words of God. The other implied message is that the Kazi’s excellent learning and judgment is compared and contrasted with that of Ja’far. The Kazi praised himself and the caliph while he only refers to Ja’far as being complaisant. The presupposition is that the Barmakids were famous for their benevolence, wisdom and generosity, however, what is present in the story is their complete obedience and degradation of their status. A slave has been given more freedom of speech than the vizier. In the time of Abbasids, the army regarded the viziers as the spokesmen of the Caliph and, they were considered as superior (Frye 79). On the contrary, what reader confers from the text is that the role of the vizier is to be complaisant and obedient to his Caliph.

In New historicism framework, we come to know about the altered power, wisdom, eloquence, and sagacity of the Barmakids house and their role in Abbasid’s dynasty. Meisamirefers to them and their treatment of love and behavioral code, different from the Arabs

of the 8th century, and calls them respected and tactful. However, their entrance into the *Nights* has been with some alteration and degradations.

Ja'far appears in the *Nights* as a submissive vizier who is obedient all the time and does his commander's orders without consideration. The only time he speaks and opposes the caliph is when he is said to be drunk. His equal status and power is implied only in the first lines of the tale and from then on he is totally absent. Thus, the tale is negating the presupposition held on the Barmakids' power and behavioral codes, degrading their social status.

Another degradation is equating the slave with Ja'far since more freedom is given to him and he is able to reject Caliph's and Kazi's demand while Ja'far is deprived of his right to his slave girl. Ja'far's role as a vizier is degraded in the sense that he is only a servant fulfilling his commander's order while the slave and Kazi are seated in a higher position.

Taking all the implications, explicit or implicit, presuppositions and equivalences and contrasting as a whole, it can be concluded that Ja'far's role as a vizier does not match his true status and power in History, and the *Nights*' tale serves to degrade him and his family, highlighting the devised features of Harun. What the tale represents then is a deviated and manipulated representation of the history of the house of Barmakids and their political and social status. The characters are manipulated; some with positive features, some deprived of those features.

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