EVENT REVIEW

Scheherazade in Classical, Modern and Postmodern Worlds Conference

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The School of English hosted a one-day international interdisciplinary research conference, entitled ‘Scheherazade in Classical, Modern and Postmodern Worlds’ organized by the PhD student, Bushra Juhi Jani, in collaboration with her supervisors, Professor Sue Vice and Dr Katherine Ebury on 19 May 2016 in Humanities Research Institute (HRI). The main aim of the conference was to provide a forum in which to debate the most up-to-date research on Scheherazade and an opportunity for researchers and academics to share their knowledge on this topic. It also aimed to explore the idea that Scheherazade is a feminist icon, a role model and an inspiration for Muslim women who are seeking a stronger role in Islamic society without abandoning their religion or their culture. The conference also explored the influence of The Thousand and One Nights on world literature and its historiographical development.

The conference, which was free and open to everyone, brought together 30 academics and PhD students from as far afield as Egypt and Turkey, as well as those from across Europe and those based more locally. The day began with the keynote speaker, Dr Richard van Leeuwen, from the University of Amsterdam, giving an illuminating opening speech on women narrators, predecessors and successors of Scheherazade. The day consisted of four thematic sessions, ‘Scheherazade as a role model for Arab Women’, ‘Scheherazade as an inspiration for Arab female writers’,
‘The influence of the Arabian Nights and its historiographical development’ and ‘Scheherazade: Gender Politics’; papers were diverse in both their topics and presenters.

The variety of papers was astonishing, ranging from the insightful and thought provoking paper, ‘writing is precisely the very possibility of change’ by Nesreen Salem, a doctoral student at Birkbeck University of London, which looked at the how the Arab female’s perception of Scheherazade has evolved in the light of postmodern cultural, political and economic upheavals in the Middle East in the 21st century and how this view has been reflected in many literary and film works, to the captivating paper of Dr Amany Neiazi Khalil, from Cairo University, titled, ‘The Image of Women in A Thousand and One Nights’ which looked at the Islamic vision of Scheherazade in One Thousand and one Nights and how it was employed in the tales, to the poignant and current paper ‘The Early Arab Feminist: an Arabic Critic’s view of Scheherazade’ by Mohammed Asiri, a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter, who took on tough and sensitive issues regarding how Scheherazade changed the image of Arab women by saving them from being neglected and marginalized by the Arab masculine society. One of the presentations was on Skype because the presenter, Rasoul Aliakbari, a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, Canada, who was in Iran at the time of the conference, could not attend due to visa issues. His paper, “Egyptian Publication of the One Thousand and One Nights and the Formation of Modern Female Cultural Citizenship Based on Scheherazade” looked at how when the Arabian Nights was released in print, it was re-appropriated – mainly through the downplaying of perceived erotic elements – to meet the needs of female readers.
Speakers were at different stages of their academia careers and represented a range of academic subject areas, including Roxanne Douglas, a 1st year PhD candidate at the University of Warwick's English and Comparative Literature Department presenter who explored and analysed the ways Arab women writers articulate taboo (awra) experiences of womanhood, particularly focused around the body and how these writers radically undermine, recreate, or dismantle oppressive patriarchal discourses around the female body, and 1st year Algerian PhD candidate at English and Creative Writing Department, Lancaster University, Hiyem Cheurfa who challenged those who try to diminish the role and status of the postcolonial woman and frame her subjectivity and, to a certain extent, that of Scheherazade, and final year PhD candidate, Bushra Jani’s paper ‘The reincarnation of Scheherazade as a figure in the fictional narrative of Saturn Ladies’ which examines how Scheherazade is incarnated in the work of the Iraqi prolific writer, Latifiya Al-Dulaimi, particularly in her novel, Saturn Ladies, which emphasizes the role of story-telling as a strategy for survival.

Other papers which deserve recognition include a paper by Dr Sylwia Frach, a Research Associate in Film Studies Research Associate (Sorbonne University, Paris 3) on ‘eroticism and exoticism of The Arabian Nights by Pier Paolo Pasolini’ which shows how it is fascinating that the film image can question the stories from The Thousand and One Nights as an important source of knowledge about ancient ways of life. Also Dr Shilan Fuad Hussain, from the University of Urbino, Italy, whose paper, ‘Albertine Peri: the imprisoned Shahrazad in Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu’ examines the reception of The One Thousand and One Night in Marcel Proust’s novel À la recherche du temps Perdu (1909-1922) and how Paris is portrayed as the ancient Baghdad where Proust himself wanders during the ‘night’ in the alleys.
of the city, evoking the magic stardust of *The One Thousand and One Night*. The dynamic Dr Nadia Fayidh Mohammed, a post-doctorate fellow at King’s College, London, taught us the true meaning of the literary theory ‘revisionism and mythmaking’ which tries to reintroduce cultural myths in literary works, in her paper titled ‘Lifting off Scheherazade “Orientalist” Veil: myth-revisionism in Mohja Kahf’s collection *Emails from Scheherazade* (2003)’ and Dr Neslihan Demirkol, a Turkish instructor in the Social Sciences University of Ankara gave an excellng paper, titled, ‘Old Wine In A New Bottle: Huru On the Road to Feminism’ on Güneli Gün’s *On the Road to Baghdad*, which tells us the story of a 16th century figure, Huru, a narrative character mostly inspired by Scheherazade and how both, Huru and Scheherazade, re-write the old tales of *the Arabian Nights* and also tell the reader a new story of female empowerment. Also Anthony Prince, a final year PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield, gave a captivating and thought provoking paper, titled, ‘The Power of “Tell-tale Women” in *Richard III*’ which remarkably shows how Queen Elizabeth, Lady Anne and the ex-Queen, Margaret, in Shakespeare’s play, insist on remembering and retelling the stories of Richard’s criminal actions and cursed nature, and of the deeper historical past, a retelling which ultimately plays a significant part in disabling Richard’s newly established tyrannical regime. Although Mina Masoudi Rad an M.A. Student at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran, couldn’t be present, her paper was evocative and stimulating, entitled ‘Barmakids’ Stylistic portrait in the Slave Girl of the *Arabian Nights*; a New Historic Reading’ and was presented by its co-author, Mahdi A. Ziaei, Teaching Assistant, Department of English Literature, University of Edinburgh.

Enough time was given to every speaker to present their papers, which explored the character of Scheherazade from different angles and following different
literary theories. All the presentations sparked heated discussions amongst attendees, whose questions and comments showed the wide interest in the subject and provided useful feedback for presenters.

One of the achievements of this conference is that it provided a platform to discuss the topic “the male author vs. female storyteller” which brought into question many texts, usually highlighted in the world literary canon as ‘feminist’ books authored by male authors, such as the *Thousand and One Nights*. The question was discussed from different points of view and deserves further discussion. Another topic raised in the conference discussions was the development of Scheherazade’s character in *The Thousand and One Nights* and how modern authors around the world reclaimed the character to redeem the controversial ending of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Refreshments and lunch were provided. The lunch included biryani, which fit with the theme of the conference (both the dish and Scheherazade are originally Persian). After lunch, the leftover food was taken by two students from the Students’ Union to a children’s shelter.

The conference was successfully concluded with a closing statement in which all participants and sponsors were thanked. It also included information and instructions to the speakers about the publishing of the proceedings of the conference. Speakers were told that Cambridge Scholars Publishing, which is an independent academic publishing house, has offered to publish the conference proceedings as a book. They were also told that the possibility of publication in other locations, either as a journal special issue or edited volume will be explored.

The conference was well received by delegates with feedback including comments such as “the papers were fascinating, and it was excellent to meet people
from so many backgrounds, and to hear the idea of feminism debated in relation to Scheherazade,” and “It was really interesting to hear different points of views on such an immortal figure. The organization of the conference was great!”

I would sum the day up by saying that every single paper was interesting, engaging and fluent and everything ran smoothly and the timing was perfect. All in all, a fantastic success and a pleasure to be a part of, all of which would not be possible without the support and guidance of Professor Sue Vice and Dr Katherine Ebury and also the generosity of The University of Sheffield Arts and Humanities Postgraduate Research Forum (AHPGR Forum) and the Alumni Foundation. Special gratitude is extended to those who chaired the sessions including Yasir Al-Jumaili and Anthony Prince. A thank you is also extended to those who aided in the organisation of the event, Saja A. Muhsin, Rasha Al-Saedi, Nihad Al-Furaiji and Sukaina Al-Bairmani from the University of Sheffield and Athraa Juhi Jani from the University of Liverpool, Rebecca McKone, HRI Coordinator, James Pearson and Ian Staves who were on hand to help with Skype, and finally everyone who presented a paper and attended the conference.

For those of you who missed the event, you will be pleased to hear that you can view the whole experience online at the Scheherazade conference website: https://scheherazade2016blog.wordpress.com/