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# Toward a Postcolonial Storytelling: Deciphering the Eastern Storytelling Conventions in Salman Rushdie's *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*

## Sömürge Sonrası Bir Hikâye Anlatımına Doğru: Salman Rushdie'nin İki Yıl Sekiz Ay Yirmi Sekiz Gece'sindeki Doğu Hikâye Anlatım Geleneklerini Deşifre Etmek

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**ABSTRACT**

Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie in one of his most recent novels, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights,* adopts a language having the characteristics of his cultural hybridity to reassert the conventions of Eastern storytelling narrative over a Eurocentric written paradigm. Salman Rushdie is capable of successfully conveying the distinctiveness of a cultural tradition unknown to most Western readers because his language and narrative enable him to capture the flavor of Eastern storytelling tradition through a contemporary gaze. It is also worth noting that in the novel Rushdie repeatedly refers back to Islamic history by narrating the life of Ibn Rushd, who has a romantic affair with a fictional *jinni* Dunia (meaning universe or world). Dunia is able to give birth to 5 to 19 babies at a time, each of which will carry a distinct role in the modern world. Having already been quietly preoccupied with the reasons of his exile, notwithstanding the rumors that his wife is a jinni. The extended dispute between the exiled philosopher and highly respected Islamic theologian and philosopher al-Ghazali is embedded into the narration with a taste of *One Thousand and One Nights*; unsurprisingly, the title of the fiction is implicitly referring to it when the math is done correctly, and Rushdie's style is strikingly similar to Shahrazad's. This study elucidates to what extent Rushdie utilizes the oral tradition of the Eastern heritage to reintroduce them to the Western world through a palimpsestic interpretation of them, with its references to Eastern traditions of oral narration, as with Shahrazad, and Islam.

**Keywords:** Dunia (world), Ibn Rush, jinn, Salman Rushdie, Shahrazad

**ÖZ**

Sömürge sonrası edebiyatın isimlerinden Hint asıllı İngiliz romancı Salman Rushdie, *İki Yıl Sekiz Ay Yirmi Sekiz Gece* adlı en son romanlarından birinde, kültürünün sözlü anlatım anlatımını Avrupa merkezli bir yazılı paradigma üzerinden yeniden yorumlamak için dili ve kültürel melezliğini kullanır. Rushdie çoğu Batılı okuyucuya bilinmeyen bir kültürün farklılığını başarılı bir şekilde aktarabilir çünkü dili ve anlatımı, Doğu hikâye anlatımı geleneğinin atmosferini çağdaş bir bakış açısıyla yakalar. Rushdie, bu eserinde kurgusal bir cin Dunia (evren veya dünya anlamına gelen) ile romantik bir ilişkisi olan İbn Rüşd'ün hayatını anlatarak İslam tarihine defalarca atıfta bulunduğunu belirtmek gerekir. Dunia, her biri modern dünyada farklı roller oynamaya devam edecek olan beş ila on dokuz bebeği bir seferde doğurabilir. İbn Rüşd, karısının cin olduğu söylentilerine rağmen sürgüne gönderilme nedenleriyle çok meşgul olduğundan bunlara kulak asmamaktadır. Anlatı sayılar doğru toplandığında bize 1001 sayısını veren bir Bin Bir Gece masalı tadına bürünerek, sürgün edilen filozof ile saygın İslam ilahiyatçısı ve filozof El-Gazali arasındaki anlaşmazlığa odaklanır; şaşırtıcı olmayan bir şekilde, kurgunun adı örtük olarak ona atıfta bulunur ve Rushdie'nin tarzı çarpıcı bir şekilde Şahrazad'ınkine benzer. Bu çalışma, Rushdie'nin İslam efsanelerini ve/veya İslam mirasını

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Batı dünyasına palimpsest bir yorumla yeniden tanıtmak için ne ölçüde kullandığını veya kötüye kullandığını, Şehrazad'ta olduğu gibi Doğu sözlü anlatım tarzına ve bir kez daha İslam'a atıfta bulunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** cin, Dunia (dünya), İbni Rüşd, Salman Rushdie, Şehrazad

## Introduction

Having been on debate since the publication of his notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, Salman Rushdie is very much attached to his Eastern background through his use of various aspects of religion and oral narrative as in one of his very recent novels *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights.* Rushdie defines the novel as "It might be the funniest of my novels" (Maddocks, 2016) in his interview with Fiona Maddocks for *Guardian Books* sharply prior to its publication. Following a non-fiction, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, this one is Rushdie's quest for escaping from non-fiction and writing a fiction: "I think what happened is that after I'd finished writing the memoir, I kind of got sick of telling the truth. I thought, it's time to make something up. I had this real emotional swing towards the other end of the spectrum, towards high fabulism. I had so much enjoyed writing the books for my sons that I thought about that source material again, not for children but for grownups" (Maddocks, 2016).

Rushdie, in most of his novels, tries to establish a balance between Eastern myths and tales and Western interpretations of them provided through postcolonial perspective; and the title of the mentioned one, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, indirectly and evocatively alludes us *One Thousand and One Nights* when the math is done correctly. Rushdie's way of interpreting *One Thousand and One Nights* is located in somewhere between history, mythology, and fairy-tale in the narration starting in "Peristan or Fairyland" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 1) where *jinns* live, or it is the world that separates *jinns* and human. Overdriven by magical realism, the narration goes back and forth between the real world and that fairyland. Though we are not given direct references to the places in real world, it is clearly observed that the narration starts in Andalusia even if it is told by an unidentified futuristic voice.

The novel, one of Rushdie's shorter ones, also borrows from the Eastern culture, more specifically, Pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures. It is grasped that the novel sets in New York, though it is implicitly given, in the near future where it was struck by a storm which grants Geronimo, a gardener and a prominent figure for the narration, and Dunia, princess of *jinn*, the Pre-Islamic mythic creatures, with a gravity-resistance or gravity-defying powers. The novel discloses the reader what the *jinn* is as it may be a bizarre and different term for the reader with an attitude moderately close to Islam even in its pre-Islamic prospect: "The *jinn* are not noted for their family lives (But they do have sex. They have it all the time.) There are *jinn* mothers or fathers, but the generation of the *jinn* are so long that the ties between the generations often crude. *Jinn* fathers and daughters are rarely on good terms" (Rushdie, 2015, pp. 72–73). In the timeline of the novel, the references to Eastern myths and stories such as *One Thousand and One Nights* or Panchatantra (Pençetantra) are adverted and evoked frequently, brilliantly, and with greater intensity. In his novels, Rushdie's emphasis on the stories of Eastern myths and beliefs from otherwise random events and on Western discourse to combine East and West in a mutual myth presents the discourse of him as a binding force that directs and determines the construction of the East as the explanative and reinterpretable world through mutual myths.

Rushdie interprets the term *jinn* in English as "(in Arabian and Muslim mythology) an intelligent spirit of lower rank than the angels, able to appear in human and animal forms and to possess humans." (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). From his interpretation we get the basic inference and understanding that the word almost totally refers to Islam or Pre-Islamic period. However, the crowd-pulling aspect of Rushdie's adopting this word into English through making uses of the 18th and 19th centuries' translations denotes his direct references to the culture he grows up into. In English, the word genie (spelled as genie) is used to refer to *jinn*, and it might be proposed that the word was introduced to the use around the 18th century when the *One Thousand and One Nights* was translated into Western languages.

### Traditional Oral Narrative in the East and Postcolonial Theory

In preserving culture, traditional oral narrative is regarded as a pioneering component. The traditional oral narratives in the Eastern world are the products of collective imagination and imagery so that it surpasses the limitations of individuals and time. In this tradition, text which is narrated orally conveys didactic messages to its audience/listener. Taken as a reflection of the consciousness, oral narratives include tales and stories having a bilateral function. It should be noted that, on the one hand, the tradition has had a deep-seated history in the East, which contributed to the verbal imagery and imagination through its particular taste. And "[o]n the other hand, tales respond to a variety of needs cultural, social, religious, etc. that emerge constantly from the individual's interaction with the surrounding, as well as from the influence of the society on the individual" (Adıgüzel, 2008, p. 107).

Parenthetically speaking, the socio-cultural as well as historical function of traditional oral narrative is quite intense in the East that it might be claimed it continues in the form of magic realism in postcolonial period. Postcolonial literature has been a dominant theoretical analysis in the last century as a consequence of the end of colonial period. After colonial discourse provided the dominant discourse or imperial discourse in other words a legacy of fragmentation, postcolonial period followed by using these fragmentation and discontinuity as a constructive response to previously told stories and histories. In doing so, magic realism turned out to respond to the unanswered questions of the past from the "other" side. Magic realism now in postcolonial literature taking on the responsibility of a "speaking mirror" "magic realist texts implicitly suggest that enabling strategies for the future require revisioning the seemingly tyrannical units of the past in a complex and imaginative doublethink of 'remembering the future" (Slemon, 2015, p. 21).

Mostly based on the conventions of storytelling, magic realism is one of the dominant literary movement tendencies recently, especially with works of postcolonial writers since these authors are both inside and outside the culture of the colonizer and the colonized. Although storytelling is not restricted to one particular geography or culture, the improbability of talking about basic rules or characteristics of it is clear from the records. It is universally admitted that stories in human history played a leading role to help people understand what they must do to exert control over or restore order to a certain setting while also incorporating cultural lessons and standards. To make a clear understanding of the historical and cultural function of storytelling, we might refer to Steve Reece's "Orality and Literacy: Ancient Greek Literature as Oral Literature" where he analyzed oral traditions and concluded that "All ancient Greek literature was to some degree oral in nature, and the earliest literature was completely so" (Reece, 2015, p. 43).

What cannot be accepted might be the assumption that storytelling habits, traditions, and conventions are identical anywhere at any time. Instead, every culture develops its own taste of storytelling so that Eastern and Western traditions and habits differ from each other. Rich in characters, Eastern stories tend to be more open ended with less happy endings; however, Western stories tend to have more happy endings with a cause–effect relation developed from the beginning to the end. Rushdie, now with this text itself, stands between East and West while he is merging postmodern narrative styles with the storytelling tradition of the East together with an unmistakable sense of belonging to his Islamic background.

## Reinterpretation of Traditional Oral Narrative in *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*

Rushdie's adoption and reinterpretation of *One Thousand and One Nights* into a contemporary narration, to some extent, portrays his own position as a storyteller almost certainly. Between Rushdie and Scheherazade, a connection can be established from the aspect that they tell their stories with different purposes but with real aim. Rushdie in the literary world has been more than an author but a contradictive figure/issue since the publication of his notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. Since then, as it is a widely known and discussed issue, Rushdie has been writing his stories in hiding after the *fatwa* of Ayatollah Khomeini. When the body of his work is considered as a piece of Rushdie's fear of death, it would be noteworthy to propose that he has written his work not to be forgotten under the shade of death threat and in order to show his courage against it, while Scheherazade tells her stories to postpone her death. "the power of [them] forge destinies has never been so memorably and sharply put as it is in this cycle, in which the blade of the executioner's sword lies on the storyteller's neck; *The Arabian Nights* present the supreme case for storytelling because Shahrazad wins her life through her art" (Warner, 2011, p. 5). In other words, while Rushdie's story destines him to death, Scheherazade's stories both postpone and manage to overcome her death. From that aspect, we can conclude that Rushdie on purpose uses the title to refer to *One Thousand and One Nights* not only in the sense of its way of telling stories but also to link himself up to Scheherazade, so that, Rushdie turns into a modern Scheherazade.

It is not only from the title that we deduce the connection between *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* but also from the direct references by the characters in the narration. The narration starts in the 12th century. It narrativizes the polymath Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, or better known as Averroes (Averois) in Western world who is referred in the narrative as a significant figure in history of Islam and philosophy: "History is unkind to those it abandons and can be equally unkind to those who make it. Ibn Rushd died (conventionally, of old age, or so we believe) while traveling in Marrakesh barely a year after his rehabilitation, and never saw his fame grow, never saw it spread beyond the borders of his own world into the infidel world beyond" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 12).

Ibn Rushd is exiled to Lucena on account of his liberal ideas, where he meets a woman named Dunia, meaning world in Arabic, who is not a human being but a *jinni,* a female *jinn*. Dunia and Ibn Rushd do not get married, yet they have many babies together, as she is capable of giving birth to 5 to 19 babies at one time, who will in later centuries spread to other parts of the contemporary world with different roles. From Ibn Rushd and Dunia's random pillow talk, it is noted that not only the reader but also the characters are pretty aware of the connection between themselves and Scheherazade and her sister Duniazát to whom she tells her stories. As well as frame narration, the listener of Scheherazade's stories is also framed; even if it seems like Duniazát is the listener in the original stories, actually they are told to King Shahryar, so their main target is him. Thus, the stories target a double-dimensional perspective.

As Dunia is a lover and housekeeper of Ibn Rushd, their children do not get his surname but instead, they become Duniazát, a direct reference to the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Why Ibn Rushd wants his children to become Duniazát instead of Rushdi is embedded in his words: "It is better that they be the Duniazát," he said, "a name which contains the world and has not been judged by it. To be the Rushdi would send them into history with a mark upon their brow" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 9). Ibn Rushd, as an exilic philosopher, is in need of protecting his children through depriving them of his surname, which once again refers to *One Thousand and One Nights* explicitly. In their very situation on a pillow talk, Ibn Rushd, according to Dunia, becomes "anti-Scheherazade [as…] her stories saved her life, while his put his life in danger" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 9). At that very point, there occurs a tie between Rushdie and Ibn Rushd as well as *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days*.

The tie between Rushdie and Ibn Rushd should be figured out actually from their names rather clearly. Salman Rushdie as a British Indian novelist was born into a "Muslim family who spoke both English and Urdu at home, and who later moved to Karachi" (Appignanesi and Maitland, 1990, p. 1). The family's Islamic background can also be traced from the surname Rushdie, which the author explains in *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* that his grandfather adopted it from Ibn Rushd, he utters the fact in his memoir: "his father, a true scholar of Islam who was also entirely lacking in religious belief, had chosen it [Rushdie] because he respected Ibn Rushd for being at the front of the rationalist argument against Islamic literalism in his time" (Rushdie, 2012, pp. 22–23).

That Ibn Rushd and Rushdie are namesakes and historically connected is not only one middle ground bringing them together; also, the destiny of their writing and thoughts is also another. It is witnessed in the narration as in the real life that the Islamic philosopher is

exiled to Lucena where he cannot speak of his philosophy and all of his writing "had been banned and his books burned" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 3). When Rushdie's notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* was released 2 decades ago, it shared a similar destiny as with Ibn Rushd's philosophy; it was unwelcomed with mass protests and public book burnings. However, what Rushdie fails to notice is that though Ibn Rushd had been criticized and exiled on account of his philosophy, he had also been welcomed a few years later of his exile in the narration. Why Rushdie tries to establish a bridge or a tie between himself and Ibn Rushd is a matter of question for the fact that he aims to form common stories between East and West by re-telling them from a postcolonial gaze.

In doing so, the novel is rather significant in the sense that Rushdie turns into a modern Scheherazade who is telling his stories not to postpone or escape from his death but to bring new insights to Western perceptions of Eastern oral narrative style by combining it with a sort of Marvel-like narration since the narration both focuses on the relationship between Rushdie and Rushd and Rushd and Dunia as well as a fairy world where jinns and jinnias live. Rushdie's adoption of *jinn* into Western narratives is noteworthy to consider, considering that the *One Thousand and One Nights* has been an archetype to introduce jinn into Western conception and understanding.

The *One Thousand and One Nights* including many stories on *jinns* such as *The Fisherman and the Jinni* and *Tale of the Trader and the Jinni* are most probably the first works to introduce the concept of jinn to the Western readers via its frame narrative. Although there are supernatural beings in Christendom, jinn might have been introduced in the 18th and 19th centuries roughly through translations of it. The *One Thousand and One Nights* was first translated into French by Antoine Galland in the 18th century (1704–1717), and the translations circulated in the West since then (Colligan, 2002, pp. 32–33). In 1748, in order to render Arabic jinni, singular of jinn, genie happened to be used accidentally.

The first translation was followed by many in that century both in English and French. In the 19th century, three significant translations were made by Edward William Lane in 1839–1841, by Thomas Dalziel in 1863–1865, and by John Payne in 1882–1884, all of which contributed one way or another to the translation of Sir Richard Francis Burton. Though it was translated into English before, the first translation was not directly from Arabic to English but from Arabic to French and then to English; therefore, it might be proposed that one of the well-known translators is Richard Francis Burton, known also for his Oriental travels, whose translation was rather different from the previous ones shockingly. What makes his translation unique among the others is beyond any doubt the accompanying footnotes, foreword, appendix, and index to the stories where he finds more space to add information selected from his own oriental experience, so to say, a "panorama of Eastern Life" (Colligan, 2002, p. 32). Burton's translation, which took more than 3 decades, might be considered as his search for a sexual exoticism to which references are many. Burton is already aware of the extremism in his translation he embedded into the original work; he defends himself by saying "I don't live in England and don't care a damn for the Public Opinion" (Colligan, 2002, p. 12). Consequently, Burton turns into a translator who has furnished his translation through sexual exoticism that the Orientalists of the period have been searching for.

When it comes to Rushdie, who has been thought as a modern Shahrazad by many critics with the publication of *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* as its title also refers to, it should be noted that the work is an adult one through its pillow talks and details. Prior to the publication of this one, Rushdie's children's books, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life,* have been regarded as a continuation of the Eastern way of storytelling. The style that Rushdie tells the stories in his children's books overflows with the characteristics of the East and Eastern ways of storytelling, which we learn from his confession in *Joseph Anton*. Rushdie lies emphasis on his childhood and on his father's telling and retelling him the Eastern tales: "the stories of Scheherazade from the *Thousand and One Nights*, stories told against death to prove the ability of stories to civilize and overcome even the most murderous of tyrants" (Rushdie, 2012, p. 19). His previous sequels, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Luka and the Fire of Life* also recall *One Thousand and One Nights* in their attitudes of interweaving storytelling. Yet these two do not go beyond being children's books. However, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* adopting a style more like the style in the translations of Burton is an adults-only version of *One Thousand and One Nights* steeped in sex and violence.

When turned back to the narration, between the war of good and evil—with references to the war or dispute between Ibn Rushd and Al-Ghazali—in the 20th century bears the traces of the 12th century with the babies Dunia gave birth. Duniazat, the children of Ibn Rushd and Dunia, spread to the other parts of the world with different capabilities, all of whom meet at a time of crisis when the evil occurs as Zabardast the Sorcerer, Zummurrud, Ra'im Blood-Drinker, and Shining Ruby the Professor of Souls, the evil jinns when "The seals between the Two Worlds are broken and the dark jinn ride" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 156). These four jinns break through the wormholes separating the real world from Fairyland. In the 21st century, the only way to save the world from the evil will be through Dunia and her human descendants: Geronimo Manezes, the British composer Hugo Casterbridge, the young Indian-American graphic novelist Jimmy Kapoor, and a femme fatale called Teresa Saca.

The emergence of jinns suddenly in the daily routines of the modern world pushes the novel into the world of mythical creatures where philosophy and theology are disputed, having been based upon the historical background of Islam. Except for the historical dispute between Ibn Rushd and Al-Ghazali, Dunia tries to collect her descendants saying, "I'm bringing them together, and together we will fight back" (Rushdie, 2015, p. 156). And the narration turns into a bare outline of a movie about superheroes who are trying to save the planet from alien invasion. Dunia, together with her descendants, develops into a superhero who dedicates herself to saving the world in the war between the forces of evil and good.

Though in Rushdie's previous novel it is witnessed that there have been central characters whose story is unfolded gradually, even if it took generations, in *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Days*, Rushdie puts this technique aside and develops a more scattered narrative style where the reader is lost between the worlds. Having claimed himself as an atheist long before the publication of this novel, Rushdie has always been very much involved in Islamic issues and disputes, partially because he is of Muslim origin as his name

and surname suggest, or partially because he has been an author who managed to hold a notorious fame through fictionalizing Islam. For Rushdie introduced himself "[t]o put it as simply as possible: I am not a Muslim" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 405). In this novel, it develops into a chaotic perspective to disclose *jinns* or to make use of Islamic or Arabic history of them. It might seem like an extended dispute to propose that under the effects of popular culture Rushdie directs his ship's wheel to the narrative aura of superheroes and science fiction, which might to some extent be interpreted as overdriven by magical realism; however, as his Islamic background has been a deep source of inspiration and a field abundant with raw materials for the Western reader with a postcolonial gaze, it does not seem an easy option to write science fiction free from Islam.

## Conclusion

Noteworthy is the fact that Rushdie and his narratives mostly follow the traces of Eastern narrative styles; however, they refuse to follow a particular one. In most of his fiction, Rushdie was able to portray the conflicts he invented through various characters, points of view, historical eras, and cultural frameworks. The novel following the characteristics of Eastern storytelling tradition with also hints of magical realism is "[A] story from our past, from a time so remote that we argue, sometimes, about whether we should call it history or mythology. Some of us call it a fairy tale. But on this we agree: that to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 184). Rushdie's contributions to postcolonial literature constituted a somewhat divergent part of fiction because, whereas he occasionally excelled at revolting Western narratives, he still managed to establish a balance between two separate narrative traditions. In two years, Rushdie exhibited a different perspective on storytelling while addressing international challenges. Rushdie's fiction was examined from a particularly broad perspective in order to gain a better understanding of Eastern storytelling conventions as well as Western interpretations and reflections of it. This was done in light of the growing recognition that postcolonialism has been a key -ism in understanding the dynamics of the contemporary world and has been a prominent one in shaping the writings of immigrant/expatriate authors. Given the circumstances, it is important to point out that the paper served as the very foundation for Rushdie's position as the representative of Eastern storytelling conventions and as a potential ally of the mainstream.

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**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

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