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## Middle Eastern Themes in Contemporary American Fantasy: The Political and Socio-Religious Implications

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Middle Eastern Themes in Contemporary American Fantasy: The Political and Socio-  
Religious Implications

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

What follows is a Master's Thesis in which an insight is given into four Middle East-inspired contemporary American fantasy novels: *The Desert of Souls* (2011) by Howard Andrew Jones, *Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012) by Saladin Ahmed, *The City of Brass* (2017) by S. A. Chakraborty, and *Alif the Unseen* (2012) by G. Willow Wilson. In the first part of the thesis I disclose the political implications which the mentioned novels carry. These are inspired by the past and contemporary political developments in the Middle East, and are meant to both criticize the said, but more importantly, to depict the existing internal actions for change. By presenting a complex political setting, there is an attempt to combat stereotypes of Middle Eastern political passivism. The second part of the thesis focuses on socio-religious and cultural presentation of the Middle East that is to a great degree fantasized, and as such is meant to entertain and bring about understanding of the Middle Eastern cultures and religions to the American readership.

## Dedication

Dedicated to my late grandparents, Ajša and Neđip Ibiši, whose stories of the past continue to  
be an inspiration.

*Nur vi gorif vo kabur.*

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## Epigraph

“There is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, ... everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political.”

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (20).

## Introduction

Fantasy as a literary genre is taking a more prominent role in contemporary American and world literature and cinema. While its epic subgenre, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, captivated readers for most of the later phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new emerging trend in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century potentially redefines the genre, striving to (re)present a new allegorical approach that has political as well as cultural connotations that are different and opposed to those that are mostly aligned on the right-wing political spectrum. While most of this fiction is set in the West or an allegory of it, the Middle East has also been an important setting, especially when the narratives have political implications.

A number of American writers have sought to represent the Middle East in an allegorical mode that criticizes the authoritarian regimes of the region, but also that counters the presumed political passivism and conformism in the region. This reaction comes at a time around the Arab Spring which occurred in 2010–2012 and still has ongoing effects in some places of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), thus providing a socio-historic argument for the people and against the dictatorships. Aside from its exotic appeal, fantasy works that take place in the Middle East (taking inspiration from the ever-attractive and exotic *Tales of 1001 Arabian Nights*) could help elaborate on the Middle Eastern perception of metaphysical reality – reality which is generally broader and more inclusive than Western secular concepts would allow. Further, it could be used as a vehicle to explain some of the theological doctrines of Islam, albeit to a great degree fantasized and exoticized. This exoticization, however, should be read in a different way than the previous fantasy novels would have been, since it does not only draw on the mixture of Islamic theology and Arab folklore to provide a form of mere escapism, but would as well comment on the Middle East in light of current events that shape its perception, especially in the United States.

For the purposes of this research, I have taken into account a number of recently published novels (post-2010) that locate their narrative in the Middle East or an allegory of it. I ended up selecting four: *The Desert of Souls* (2011) by Howard Andrew Jones, *Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012) by Saladin Ahmed, *The City of Brass* (2017) by S. A. Chakraborty, and *Alif the Unseen* (2012) by G. Willow Wilson. Two of the above authors are male, two are female, and three of the four openly declare themselves as Muslim.

In all four of the novels politics plays a significant role as protagonists strive to find their place within a strict socio-political setting. The polity takes multiple forms: as a caliphate, kingdom, and an emirate. The authors position their protagonists in opposition to the governing elite and their oppressive rule over their subjects, thus three of the four narratives are permeated by anti-establishment sentiment (*Throne of the Crescent Moon*, *The City of Brass*, and *Alif the Unseen*), particularly drawing attention to it when describing the dichotomy between the classes. Naturally, the problem is not only stated in the form of an economic divide, but it calls into question the exercise of political authority that justifies its form of rule on religious grounds. None of the authors actually position Islam as the moral and ideological backbone that justifies tyrannical forms of government, but they do criticize the monopoly over religious interpretation that aims to justify it. The authors seem to argue the contrary; they regard Islam as supportive of economic fairness, and the main characters are generally described as faithful adherents of the selfsame religion, yet they take opposing prevailing political authority. In their more passionate criticism of the aristocratic monopoly of power, one might argue that especially Ahmed and Wilson tend to imbue their narratives with leftist ideas and present their heroes not necessarily as hard-line leftists, but in any case as anti-establishment. As the abovementioned authors strive to be politically aware and present the common Middle Eastern folk as conscious of their subordinate socio-economic position, they also present their manifest yet precarious will to change the regimes. Again,



one should keep in mind that these novels were published or were being written as the Arab Spring occurred, therefore countering the general Western thought of their democratic incompetence and willing subordination.

On another no less important note, there is the element of the Middle East and the fantastic which mainly serves two interconnected purposes. For the first, the intricacy of the Middle East and fantasy were long regarded by the Western public as the epitome of the exotic Orient ever since the introduction of the *1001 Nights* in Europe early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through Galland's translation (Kruk, *The Warrior Women in Islam* 1), therefore the genre and the setting of the novels would target a specific public perception. The second and crucial purpose of these narratives is to provide a familiar yet totally different presentation of the Middle East so as to counter the common stereotypes of "Orientals": their religion, mythology, beliefs, way of life, and so on. These narratives are by no means simplified ones, as there are complex characters which operate in a complex system, thus giving way to a more intimate understanding of the (mainly) Muslim comprehension of existence and reality, at times slightly discrepant in their understanding. By this I mean the authors' employment of the fantastic to (re)present some of the theological doctrines of Islam. Most exotic of these is the existence of the mysterious (d)jinn and their central role in the narratives.

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on the novels' political settings and climates. It will consider the overall political implications of all four novels individually and particularly focus on the despotic establishment and the opposed anti-establishment sentiment and action that is in most novels present and in some implied. Attention will be drawn to the allegory which most probably echoes the conditions in the region for this decade. Elaboration on the political establishment, historically and sociologically speaking, will also be taken into account since a considerable portion of the narrative is allocated toward this development,

mostly criticized while in minor cases justified or ignored. The chapter is expected to follow a certain pattern. First, each of the novels will be discussed according to the chronology of their settings. Second, the socio-economic conditions of each of the settings will be elaborated upon, which are here taken as a measure of overall prosperity (or poverty), particularly focusing on the description of the cities' social life and interaction among the characters and their perception of the said conditions. Since economy and politics are inextricably linked, I will go on to analyze the power structures that establish and maintain the order and their relationship with the common folk. And last, the task is to identify the dissident voices that oppose the political elite, the way they appear and are portrayed in the novels. All of these aspects are significant in that they could be understood as allegorical representations of the Middle East during its golden age and the decline that followed.

My second chapter would elaborate on the twofold roles culture and religion take in the novels. For instance, a crucial argument will disclose the cultural and theological grounds on which the semi-fictional societies operate, and the ways in which elements of fantasy are infused into the narratives to present these societies, but are not and should not be taken for granted as literal descriptions of these postulates as the elements of fantasy are purposefully hyperbolized. However, it is through these exotic themes that the authors attract readership to their work, employing the world of the (d)jinn in an entertaining way by reviving the themes from the *1001 Nights*. As a result of their employment, these entities (which are an integral part of Islamic theology) provide a familiar and “almost tangible” parallel reality. I say “tangible” because they are for most Muslims understood as part of theology, and not mythology. Thus, these fantasy themes are not to be equated with epic-fantasy themes that are based on Western mythology.

While certain parts of Islamic theology are taken as inspiration for a fantasy setting and plots, others are being taken to counter the stereotype of Islam, as it is presumed irreconcilable with modernity. According to Edward Said, some Orientalists (and through them a large number of European and American public) see the image of the modern Orient as unfitting for the modern world, as such it could only stay in the imaginary realm [of the past] (*Orientalism* 101). The Muslim American authors play along with this idea as they do paint the narratives of the Middle East with exotic images from the past, but they all stand opposed to the idea of irreconcilability with political progress through the resistance of their protagonists as most of them struggle against the establishment and have progressive views. Thus, American readers will not find the characters mentally and physically docile, as is perhaps the custom to portray them in the West. However, progress does not mean disassociation with the past or tradition, rather they are presented as capable of coexisting with modernity. The protagonists are in no way opposing religion, but provide space for a wider interpretation. This also includes the role of women in the society. In all four of the novels there is a central or major female character, which breaks all sorts of stereotypes pertaining to an Oriental woman: her subservient status, weakness, passivity, sexuality and promiscuity, and so on. These authors develop smart, strong, resilient female characters who take up not only an active, but a prominent role in the narratives. What is particularly interesting is that the portrayal of women who do not fit the stereotype is undertaken by female American converts in Islam.

Taking all the above into consideration, the authors through their novels ultimately endeavor to present aspects of a different culture, in these cases inspired by Islam, that should not necessarily be at odds with the Western. The Islamic civilization has in the past influenced the Western civilization, and in multiple ways continues to do so in contemporary times. This work thus explores how the Islamic civilization and Middle Eastern culture are

being presented through the works of fiction, that, imbued with political and socio-religious themes, are not only meant to inform, but more importantly, they are meant to ignite changes in both Western stereotyped perception of the Middle East, and also of the socio-political conditions in the said.

### Chapter 1: A Political Statement

High fantasy, it seems, is reorganizing the way in which it was previously thought of. While certainly providing an elaborate imaginative world inhabited by natural and supernatural characters and occasions that serve to conjure escapism, politics plays a pivotal role around which the plot is centered. This focus is not only meant to devise an elaborate plot that would make the readers immerse themselves into, but to send a political message to the readership. It can be read as aiming to recast opinions of and attitudes toward the Middle East among the American public, who have a tendency to associate the Middle East with decadence and political passivity. The type of fantasy that has the Middle East as its setting would obviously include Muslims who are being branded as backward-thinking, and Islam as irreconcilable with the modern way of life, and in some cases perhaps justifiably so. However, not in all cases. The novels position the argument of the will and need for political change (which inescapably requires a price); but what's more, the possibility, or better put, the appropriate reinterpretation of Islam as inherently progressive.

All cases will be presented in a chronological manner according to the timing of the narratives in the four novels. Each of them focuses on a specific time in history, portraying the respective socio-political conditions of those times. The earliest period covered is the time of the Abbasid caliph Harun al Rashid (r. 786-809) in *The Desert of Souls*. Following it is an allegorical representation of the realm of the "Abaseen" in *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, presumably a pun-intended noun to allude to the Abbasid Caliphate. The narrative takes place

during a decadent time, though on certain occasions in the narrative it is hinted that the earlier times were more progressive, thus giving rise to the opinion that it is set in the aftermath of the Islamic Golden Age. The third novel *The City of Brass* is set in the time of Napoleon's conquest of Egypt. Finally, *Alif the Unseen* deals with contemporary Middle Eastern society, particularly the Persian Gulf Region of the Arabian Peninsula. Such proposed arrangement of narratives has the potential to shed light on the progress and then the decadence of the Middle Eastern socio-political scene, but also to present a constant struggle against the political authorities.

Since economy is, according to Marx, the fundamental aspect of any society and constitutes its "base," all other aspects that form the "superstructure" such as culture, politics, religion and so on, are dependent on the nature of this base (Booker 71). Fredric Jameson also observes that the state power is not the only one to be seen as expression of the economic system, but the judicial apparatus acts in a similar way, as well as culture which is expressing the underlying political, judicial, and economic instances (Jameson 39). Accordingly, the state and conditions of the novels' settings are also reflections of the economic conditions. Thus, the analysis of the narratives will progress according to a set pattern: first, description of the cities' societal and economic conditions are to be presented as a measure of civilizational prosperity (where relevant and applicable); second, an insight into how various but similar forms of authorities govern the society and set the standards which are mostly to their benefit will be given; which brings to the third, how do the novelists portray disparate dissident voices of these unequal conditions and what message do these convey.

### *The Desert of Souls*

When it comes to the historical setting of all the novels, *The Desert of Souls* is the earliest, set in the era of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al Rashid. It is a story of two friends, the

soldier Asim and the scholar Dabir, who team up against a vengeful Mazdayasnian priest who plans to unleash the power of the mystical jinni realm on the capital of the Caliphate, Baghdad. While in pursuit of the antagonist across a barren desert, the latter builds a gate of mystically prescribed proportions at the exact prescribed spot, which opens a portal to the fallen city of the Jinn. While the protagonists follow, they are left trapped in the other realm and have to find a way to get out without the use of magic. On their way, they encounter a serpent which presents itself as “The Keeper of Secrets.” The snake is guarding an advanced piece of technology which acts as a telescope and a teleportation device at the same time and needs enough human souls to power up so it can transport the alien snake back to its own unknown part of the cosmos. The protagonists outwit the snake and use the device to teleport back to Baghdad and manage to stop the antagonist before he ruins the city.

Unlike the novels to follow, *The Desert of Souls* gives an image of a prosperous realm governed by a dedicated ruler. The protagonist Asim gives a detailed account of his vision of the city, stressing that he has journeyed many years, and Baghdad having left the best impression on him. He mentions that a few portions of it were filthy and of foul smell, justifying this occurrence for every crowded place behind the [city] walls. He then immediately shifts from this image to present a more soothing one, of fountains, blooming gardens, vast stretches of waterways and canals that are spanned by bridges. Paying attention to the people, he observes the marketplaces that “thronged” with folk running their errands, sometimes with children in tow, or loading mules with baskets and bags, all making a cacophony of sounds, but a joyous one as he accounts.

He then moves towards the gilded palace that he recognizes as “Baghdad’s heart”. There was the outer wall that marked the Round City, as Baghdad’s center was known, watching over the Tigris river from eight spear lengths. The wall was interspersed with taller

watchtowers, the mightiest of which was the tallest in the city. Between this Iron Tower – as it was called for its locked and rusty door – and the triple walls, was the mosque of Al-Mansur. The observer calls it the city’s most glorious structure, with glittering golden spires that dazzled all who stared at them from every part of the city, as it was decreed for it to be polished always to a high sheen. The outer gardens in the inner city were decorated with blooming in verses from the Qur’an. But there were also barefoot slaves that tended yew and cypress belted with jewel-studded metal. Soldiers and couriers were passing along the road, some bound for palaces across the city, others to the ends of the earth, as the narrator assumes (Ch. 3).

The description is by no means a sublime one, but it nonetheless shows the protagonist’s reverence of the city. The description is more or less true to many historical records that affirm the luxury and cosmopolitanism of the era. Indeed, Baghdad was considered a fabled architectural achievement. One medieval visitor has left the account of many neighborhoods having parks, gardens, fountains that stretched for miles on both sides of the river Tigris. There were also many bazaars and finely built mosques (*Islam: The Empire of Faith*). All this development is made possible by and is central to the following argument of economic accessibility and vibrancy.

A crucial aspect of the Arab civilization that was not given consideration in the other novels is trade. Although not providing an elaborate description of the occupation, it is nonetheless present in *The Desert of Souls*, which in of itself provides a historically fair impression of the vibrancy and interconnectedness that the realm enjoyed. Jones mentions the occupation on few occasions particularly important in the case of Baghdad, the geographical position of which is crucial for the effective economic management of the empire. It was one in a number of purpose-built Muslim cities carefully positioned close to the two major rivers

Tigris and Euphrates. As a result, the city would enjoy economic strength as it was an inland secured port city (Lindsay 101). The instance in the novel remains true to more than one historical detail. Subhi Y. Labib argues that the outcome of this prosperity was due to Islam, namely in his words: “Everywhere that Islam entered, it activated business life, fostered an increasing exchange of goods...” (80). This is acknowledged in the novel where the protagonist Asim bears witness to the many boats carrying to and from downriver Basra and beyond. “I knew that woolen garments, silk, porcelain, and perfumes came from Baghdad. From downriver came goods from India, China, and other stranger lands: nutmeg and cloves, teak, sandalwood, tin, and peculiar curiosities” (Ch. 5). This detail, although brief, is very important for what applies later which is to be addressed in subsequent novels, since it takes the argument of prosperity and the presence of wealth within everyone’s grasp, and luxury which is to be allocated only in the hands of the aristocracy in Europe at the time for comparison.

The subsequent novels indeed point to the economic inequality as a major theme. A more present and distributed wealth, purposely consolidated by the governing structure should be considered an aspect of its political genius, keeping in mind the aforementioned detail about the purposely-found cities. While it is certainly expected from the political elite to want a resplendent capital as the center of the empire, Jones provides another detail that could counter the automatic presumption of crude early form of imperialism by providing a soothing image of Basra in mercantile terms, but more importantly in the intellectual heritage that major cities enjoyed at the time.

This image of prosperity comes with a heavy price. The prosperity so far has been attributed to the capable administration of the government embodied in the character of the caliph Harun al Rashid, a philosopher-king who is a minor but controversial figure in the



novel. The solid surface image of prosperity is disrupted with another narrative of the rebellion that has taken place. The brutal crushing of this rebellion in which the wife and friends of the presumed antagonist the Zoroastrian Firouz were killed, seems as a driving motive for his resentment of and revenge against the caliph and the caliphate. Indeed, the plot of the novel revolves around this revenge and the endeavors of the protagonists to stop him. The narrative is by no means a simple one since it provides a dual perspective on the events taking place, which would cast the politics of the narrative as real-life. There are no rigid binary opposing sides as to who is on the right side of history. In order to present a more encompassing and inclusive political scope, let us now present the arguments of both sides.

As stated, the presumed antagonist is driven by a valid motive. The cause of that rebellion is the protest of the citizens of Mosul against the unbearably high taxes. The guards were sent in and the wife and friends of Firouz were killed among many others. In his grief, Firouz fosters revenge which he seeks to accomplish by turning to the dark arts of magic to employ malevolent jinn against the caliph. In the final clash, the dialogue between Firouz and Harun al Rashid occurs in which the former explains his resentment of and justification for destroying the rule of the Arabs: “You tax us into poverty under a guise of protection. You confiscate our properties on any pretext, and slay all who dare cry out against your injustice, killing any innocent on the way. You sit remote, amongst your luxuries, careless of the atrocities committed to secure your ease—” (Ch. 19). This excerpt clearly seems to justify action against the exploiting political order. By this logic, one would be right to presume the exploitation of the nonconformists and hand sympathies to the oppressed. However, the narrative is not divided into simplistic good versus evil, as it provides another crucial glance at the conditions.

For once, there are other arguments in the narrative to suggest a very complicated psychology of Firouz. Even as a Mazdayasnian, he had opportunities to climb the scale of societal hierarchy in various ways and did so, just like the protagonist Dabir did. Perhaps the most prestigious recognition Firouz received was his involvement in the House of Wisdom. According to historical accounts, The House of Wisdom was a repository of intellectual material and a gathering place for scholars of all ethnic and religious backgrounds. It even fostered competition for scholars working in different traditions (Lyons 63-64). Firouz and Dabir were both members. The two characters, Firouz and Dabir, share remarkable similarities and circumstances: both have lost family members in the action of the state, both have studied in the same institution and were interested in the metaphysical realm. Yet there is a crucial difference which becomes an additional motive of Firouz to seek the overturn of the establishment – nationalism. As a Persian, he reminisces about the former glory that was the Persian empire and takes it upon himself to destroy the current and reestablish the former imperialist polity. Jones carefully designs the complexity of the relationship between an individual and a state. What should be extrapolated from this case is that the opposing sides perpetuate their own versions of a political establishment that is based on some form of dominating the Other. Since politics imply a certain regulation or ethical code, Jameson remarks that all ethics predicates certain types of Otherness or evil the consequences of which are necessarily political (60). In this novel, it is difficult, if even possible for the reader to fully sympathize with one side and denounce the other. But in any case, the losing side seems to be the very idea of having to govern and administer, an occupation seldom not having a downside, and as will be seen later on, S. A. Chakraborty has similar views. However seen as just or moral or logical, a ruler has no other choice but to stand by an idea which naturally and always has its opposition, more so when politics are the matter. Governance in this sense

seems as abstract a notion as any. To clarify this difficult occupation, Jones also gives the caliph a voice and a chance to explain his methods.

While given a minor role in the novel, the caliph Harun al Rashid is portrayed in a way that is reminiscent of his portrayal in the *1001 Nights*; there, he is an active and capable ruler in terms of interacting with his subjects (in the “Story of the Three Qalandars,” for example). He does not spend his rule in a sedentary opulent manner detached from the outside world. Towards the end of *The Desert of Souls* he personally negotiates with Firouz and learns of his motives. But, the most controversial of his remarks as a ruler is the difficulty with which the position comes: “‘It is difficult to govern without the spill of blood’ the caliph mused. His voice took on a sad and wistful quality. ‘Someone starts a fire somewhere smoldering and I must send men to stamp it out’” (Ch. 20). The narrator after this utterance depicts the caliph rather doleful and quietly envious of the stations “beneath” him (of his subjects), in that way signaling to the audience the responsibilities with which the title comes and the implication of the impossibility of a just rule. The image of a ruler in this novel stands in stark contrast to the following novels as the author in his vivification of Harun al Rashid from the *1001 Nights* portrays an actively involved and somewhat caring ruler, the rule of which is reflected in the live, vibrant and rich cities’ depiction, but also in his immediate initiative to bring the city back to order by sending out *hakims* [physicians] to help the injured and his troops to prevent looting.

Thus, Jones’ novel can be read as a semi-historical one, as well as a postmodern fantasy appropriation of the *1001 Nights*. It comes at a time of intensified post-9/11 stereotyping of Muslims as a decadent society at odds with “Western” values of progress and liberty. This narrative, although primarily intended as fantasy, provides a glimpse of history of the Muslim society during its “Golden Age,” which is of course not presented as an ideal

one by a wide margin, but nonetheless it consciously or unconsciously aids at putting things into perspective by refusing to homogenize the stigmatized Middle East. Finally, this presentation should be kept in mind as a comparison to the narratives that are to follow, all of which provide slightly different aspects of similar topics.

### *Throne of the Crescent Moon*

Following the chronological order of the settings in the novels, Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon* supposedly takes place in an allegorical medieval caliphate that is in a state of utter decadence, both socially and politically. While the narrative is occurring in a fictional world, it is nonetheless recognizable as an allegory of the Middle East. This narrative among all others included in the analysis possesses the strongest anti-establishment themes as it involves the constant struggle not only against the malevolent supernatural forces, but also against the rigid absolutistic form of corrupt theocracy. The two forms of power structures are interconnected and maintain each other, which is what the apparent political argument of Ahmed is aimed against. Jameson's remark on the fantasy level of a text, such as the *Crescent Moon*, is that it is diverted to fulfill certain ideological functions which are reinvested in what he calls the "political unconscious" (142). This argument rings true particularly in the case of Ahmed's narrative of which there is a legitimate claim to consider it a Marxism-influenced text due to its intensely negative portrayal of class divisions and the power structures that maintain them.

Although not set in the actual historical or geographical Middle East, the very title of the novel suggests its allegorical setting, given that a crescent moon is an easily recognizable emblem of Islam. Unlike *Alif the Unseen* that is to follow, this narrative is set in the distant past. In order to put things into perspective and provide a background information, let us now briefly summarize the plot of *Throne of the Crescent Moon*.

The action of the story is played out in Dhamsawaat, the capital city of one of the kingdoms and the seat of the notorious despotic “Khalif.” The narrative mainly follows the account of Doctor Adoula Maskhloud, an aged expert in ghoulish hunting who is an acting guardian against supernatural forces. He has as his aide the young Raseed bas Raseed, an ill-tempered dervish (Sufi) more apt in his swordsmanship than with his intellectual capacity. As stated, there are two antagonistic forces in the capital, one metaphysical and the other physical. While actively engaged in preventing one from doing harm, Adoula passively struggles against the tyranny of the other, the autocracy. Yet, there is another force embodied in the character of the Falcon Prince that actively opposes the political establishment. He is presented as a Robin Hood-like hero who steals from the rich, gives to the poor, and disrupts unjust public executions. In the meantime, the foremost protagonists in chase of the ghouls meet on the desert outskirts of the city a shape-shifting Bedouin girl who is to become their companion in the struggle against the supernatural forces. Later on, they find a mysterious scroll that uncovers the plan of the necromantic antagonist to destroy the kingdom and humanity through the restoration of the magic-potential Cobra Throne on which the Khalif sits, without realizing its supposed power. Along another plotline, the Falcon Prince also finds out the secrets of the scroll and recognizes his chance to seize the moment of everyone’s struggle against the supernatural menace and both kill the Khalif and seize the throne, using its mystical power allegedly for bringing liberty to the people. The situation then becomes more complicated, and it turns out that both Adoula (who runs to unwillingly preserve one evil to deter a greater one) and the Falcon Prince unite in a joint effort, the former to prevent the necromancer, the latter to seize the throne, and thus depose both evils. In the end, the Khalif and the demon Orshado are vanquished. The aftermath is uncertain as to how the transition of power will occur, Adoula being skeptical of the Falcon Prince’s

honesty. An atmosphere of uncertainty grips the scene in which a civil war is being anticipated.

The essential outlines of the conditions are contained in the cities' description, in its physical appearance(s), and more importantly in the status of the common and aristocratic folk. The author provides multiple perspectives on the different quarters and their staggering difference in terms of economic wealth, clearly giving sympathy to the impoverished citizenry who form the absolute majority in the city and possibly throughout the empire. There are at least three categories of the city which mark out the rigidity of its class division. The uppermost class, which inhabits the domed and gold-gilded palace, is, needless to say, the governing class in whose possession is the absolute authority and utmost richness, both vested in the "Khalif." A hierarchically and economically lower class inhabits the so-called Goldsmith's Row, wherein live the aristocracy and rich merchants, both very few in number. The lowest class inhabits the rest of the city, of which two areas are given a bit more detail and prominence: the Little Square and the Scholar's Quarter. The former is a haven for less prosperous merchants who, the author remarks, were too poor to earn a real shop through honest work or bribery (212).

But perhaps the most intriguing remark is the author's portrayal and supposed resentment of the "high class." On multiple occasions does Ahmed turn to portray the rich parts such as the Goldsmith's Row:

But while the hashi-smokers and whores of the Scholar's Quarter were foul, the men and women here were perhaps even more foul. Here was wealth, as much wealth as anywhere in the Crescent Moon Kingdoms. Here was every opportunity for virtue and learning, with none of the dire incitements to vice that poverty brought. But the Doctor claimed that the people of Goldsmith's Row ignored such opportunity, using their incalculable riches only to devise new and more luxuriant vices. (236)

The element of anti-bourgeois sentiment is clear here, because in this excerpt the narrative does not only criticize the aristocracy and their wealth which is somehow inseparable from status, but the apparently rich citizenry whose selfishness has made them desensitized and detached from the ailments of the majority poor. Moreover, the implication is that the current political establishment that perpetuates this kind of unfair economic divide suits its non-elite (meaning their exclusion from any form of authority) which labels them as the participants in the oppression. This passage also carries another important remark on the decadence of the scholarship and the desire for knowledge and progress. The squalid imagery that is aligned with the Scholar's Quarter is highly symbolic in that it alludes to one of the possible reasons for overall decadence. Without the presence of scientific knowledge and critical thinking it became possible to establish justification for the perpetuation of such a corrupt system. It is useful here to compare these conditions to *The Desert of Souls'* take on knowledge and scholarship which suggests a more positive and lively environment not to be found in *Throne of the Crescent Moon*.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (Marx, Engels 9). This underlying postulate of Marxist thought is, although not openly, indicated throughout the narrative not only in the protagonist's critique of the establishment, but through the third person omniscient narrator's investment on the symbolic establishment and maintenance of the said. At the top of this “gain chain” lies the plutocrat Khalif. Before discussing the modus operandi of maintaining his rule, it is worthy to pay attention to the comparison with the caliph from the previous novel. Unlike Harun al Rashid, this one is completely estranged from his subjects and truly does only care for his own comfort which he maintains through religious symbolism. The religiously-inspired power structure vested in the personality of the “Khalif” is consolidated due to the very symbolism of the position, a position addressed as “His Holiness,” and bestowed the titles of “God's Regent in the World,

the Defender of Virtue, the Most Exalted of Men, His Majesty Jabbari akh-Khaddari, Khalif of Abassen and of all the Crescent Moon Kingdoms” (198/99). Ahmed is careful to structure the establishment’s plan of perpetual rule. The sequencing of pompous titles is aimed at legitimizing the ruling figure through an unquestionable mandate from heaven that requires an elaborate and well organized supporting structure through the court’s symbolic appearance and its retinue, the military elite, but at the very bottom of it are perhaps the most important religious orders.

Religious orders are seen as a kind of establishment that legitimize and unofficially enforce the governing structure. They base their doctrine on the so-called “Heavenly Chapters” that are meant to allegorize a central religious text oddly but not precisely similar to the Qur’an. Snippets of verses that are meant to remind of the Qur’an are here and there provided in the narrative. The quoted verses are understood and applied by the characters in different ways, the most attention-drawing being the “Humble Students” which give way to the interpretation that they stand for the present-day Islamic fundamentalists, and it is these characters that help maintain the establishment. They “were charged with chastising those that needed to be chastised, helping men and women to walk the path of God...[but] did this more out of greed or cruelty than righteousness” (239). This special class of citizens are oddly evoking the familiarity with the religious police that is operating in Saudi Arabia. However, it would be imprecise to suggest that Ahmed is in these cases avowedly critical of religion and religious practice itself. Rather, he introduces in the beginning a character that is prone to this kind of binary thinking which is reflected in the main protagonist Adoula’s apprentice. Raseed bas Raseed, a dervish who is hostile to the Falcon Prince and approving of the Khalif’s regime. However, it can be seen that the character gradually matures under more tolerant and open-minded instructions of his teacher who rarely spares harsh denunciation of the Khalif and is sympathetic to the cause of the rebels. The narrative can thus be understood



as being critical of the indoctrination that has established a monopoly on the interpretation of religion (of whatever kind) which is appropriating the text according to their interests and to the detriment of the lower orders of society.

Working against this exploitative totalitarian system is the Falcon Prince. He is regarded as “the semi-official voice of the poor” with an organized resistance movement made of beggars and thieves (the underdogs of the system) that interrupt the unjust executions. One such execution was of a young boy. After disrupting the act, Pharaaz Az Hammaz (the Falcon Prince’s real name) shouted out to the public: “Do we Dhamsawaatis care more for the ill-earned wealth of bullies than for the life of a child?” (37/38). This exclamation against the aristocracy echoes the voice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century communist anti-bourgeois slogans re-appropriated to suit the time and situation. Adding to his underground guerilla-like warfare is the detachment of his actions from religious connotation, instead he outwardly shuns theological implications of the current circumstances arguing that “God hasn’t given three shits for His children in six thousand years! Do you really believe that He sits in the sky, smiling upon us? Look around you! Look at this mad, bloody, muddy world of ours. He made the world, He made us, and then He left us to fend for ourselves. And so far, my friends, we’ve made it a pile of monkeyshit” (305). From this implication it can be concluded that he is endorsing a more materialist view of the world rather than idealist, which is what Marxist philosophy is based on. However, in his review of *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, Justin Landon argues that Ahmed’s characters and their unique voices are not to be isolated, but to be looked as constituting a whole (Review), again reminding that the text is not avowedly anti-religious.

By giving an overtly melancholic impression of the setting, the corrupt absolutist government aimed at securing riches for the highest class and introducing the resistance

forces that eventually overcomes the said, ushering an atmosphere of a kind of revolution, this narrative certainly endorses the idea of class struggle. Taking all of the former into consideration, a considerable portion of this narrative, then, is to be read as an allegory of the contemporary political conditions, primarily but not exclusively in the Middle East, since an extensive part of it can be extended to apply criticism to any stratified society.

### *The City of Brass*

*The City of Brass* is a fantasy novel in its fullest sense in that it imagines the society of the djinn, their daily interactions with one another, as well as with humans and the so-called *shafit*, which are of mixed *djinni* and human race. It is symbolically, though minimally inspired by the namesake story from the *1001 Nights*. It perhaps has the most complicated political setting of the four novels. Unlike the previously analyzed Ahmed's novel, or the subsequent novel of Wilson, it is increasingly difficult to position oneself on one of the multiple divides of the political spectrum that are represented, which could serve a beneficial purpose of dismantling the stereotypes of the Middle Eastern society as homogeneous. Along this line it shows the political complexities that are deeply rooted in history and have ever since managed to leave lasting effects. Although herself tweeting that her narrative has no double meaning (Twitter), S. A. Chakraborty's debut novel indeed provides an all too familiar (though allegorical) semi-historical recollection of events that took place in what are today Cairo and presumably the Khorasan region in Iran. Thus, political meaning could still be derived and extrapolated to particularly address the contemporary polemical issues of power and identity in the novel provided by multiple points of view, none of them entirely reliable or unreliable. The case being such, it is deemed crucial to provide an analysis of the senior voices and their opposing views on the aforementioned matters, but more importantly, what sort of implications could they carry. The classes to be undertaken are: the ones in

power, the native subjects, the minority, and the ones that belong to one of these groups but are not in agreement with the majority views of their respective classes which would classify them as dissidents.

It is not possible to do justice to the narrative by summarizing it, since there are many characters with extensive plots assigned, each representing a point of view of the over-complicated historical and political background and conditions. An attempt will be given only to superficially give an insight into the main power struggles. *The City of Brass* is a story centered around two teenage protagonists: Nahri and Alizayd. It opens up with the former, who is pretending to be a fortune-teller in Cairo during Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Initially not believing in magic, her circumstances change during an act of exorcism when an *ifreet* (type of a djinn) speaks to her through a possessed girl. Coming to understand that her mysterious origins lead to one race of the djinn who are being retaliated against by another, she is saved by Darayavahoush e-Afshin, a djinn guardian of her special status. On the way to seeking sanctity in the djinni Daevabad (City of Brass), he reveals to her the information about her *Nahid* (one of the sub-tribes of the djinn) background made to look human for her protection. After arriving, it is revealed that the political situation is fragile, as there are three historically adverse tribes: the *Geziri* whose Arab-peninsula Muslim ancestors have conquered the city, the *Daevas* who are its original Zoroastrian inhabitants, and the *shafit* who are half-human and half-djinn and are given asylum by the ruling dynasty. Nahri is revealed to be an alleged daughter of a former Zoroastrian master-healer, the last of her kind. She is immediately given special status and teachings of djinn medicine, completely unlike human.

The plot separately follows Alizayd, a young but well-learned warrior prince of the ruling Qahtani dynasty, who is at odds with his father the King's politics. He is a pious

character who is sympathetic to the *shafit*, a race and class discriminated by the racist *Daevas*, the status of the former being kept deliberately low by the dynasty in order not to provoke an outrage of the later. Later on, Ali befriends Nahri and they exchange information about the two worlds, human and djinn. A chain of events takes place at which the third central character Darayavahoush, an age-old enemy of the Qahtanis secretly plans to overthrow the foreign dynasty, but his attempt fails and he forcefully tries to take Nahri, now his lover, away. In the pursuit to stop him, a bloody battle takes place in which he is overcome, but the consequences of the feud have turned the Daeva resentment into unrest. In the closing scene, Ali and Nahri are ostracized, bound to leave Daevabad, while the Zoroastrian natives grow in their resentment, thus anticipating an uneasy and possibly bloody future for Daevabad.

It could be said that this ethnically vibrant composition to a certain degree mimics the real world and the power struggle among nations. For once, the setting of most of the action in a Persianized Daevabad, positioned on the map approximately in Khorasan, and its Arabicized rulers plays into the historically tight relationship between the two nations dominated by different religions, Zoroastrianism and Islam, each striving to empower their own system of values. This uneasy association is extensively portrayed in the novel, which, for the purposes of possible applicability to the real world, demands elaboration.

The most striking notion about the ruling dynasty is their family name: Qahtani which is to the Arabs immediately recognized as an Arab name. In his explanation of the political conditions of Daevabad, Darayavakhoush speaks about the Geziri (to which tribe the Qahtanis belong) with severest detestation. He shuns their fascination with humans in their land (the Arabian Peninsula) and their adoption of the humans' religion and culture. Regarding the mixed-blood *shafit* as their kin and brethren, they refused to surrender them to

the Deavas (Chakraborty 141). The Geziri thus modified their existential bondage by giving up the idea of ethnicity as the main factor for distinguishing themselves; rather, they adopted a system of values that is based on bondage through a grand idea constituted by religion. The conquering elite, then, have positioned themselves as the “protectors” of the underprivileged mixed-bloods who were being persecuted by Zoroastrian Daevas. But even they are in no way furthering the cause of the underprivileged, but to maintain their power, endeavor to strike a fragile balance with the native population, thus compromising their supposed principles of solidarity. This paradigm shift runs parallel with the history of Islam, and like the first generations of Muslims, the Geziri set out to conquer Daevastana (Persia) under their “black banners” (Chakraborty 117). Yet again, an accurate historical detail if taken into account that the Abbasids were represented by black banners. The text relies more on history than what first meets the eye in that it follows a certain chronological line from the conquests to the Persianization of the conquerors.

According to one minor character, there is explicit detail as to why the conquest took place and it was allegedly to protect the *shafit* (225). But the voices to polemicize this are the conquered, who naturally have a resentful attitude towards the undertaking and regard themselves as second-class citizens. As for the conquest of Daevastana, the dissident Darahavahoush, who is an undead spirit and still remembers the event of war which took place a thousand years ago, describes the conqueror, the founder of the current ruling dynasty as a “bloodthirsty rebel fanatic” (344). This carries the indication of religious zeal for expansionism. This expansionism is not instigated by materialistic, but by ideological and existential motives which were at odds with the already existing in the region based on ethnic exceptionalism. They included (or were covertly justified by) the protection of the *shafit* from extinction. One could here argue the alignment of this plot to historical circumstances behind Islam’s early expansion that is represented in the character of Zaydi al Qahtani (the founder

of the dynasty), especially that the initiative was not materialistic, but ideological. This idea was seen as a potential unifying force that would eventually overcome ethnic differences, and at the same time accommodate various high cultures, such as was the case in history (Fuller 51). In spite of the overt agenda of proselytizing, the subject populations could retain wide areas of autonomy in daily life (Lindsay 21). This is also reflected in the novel in which it was stated that the Zoroastrian Daeva tribe was wealthy and well connected, their quarter being the cleanest and most finely run (348). Over time this ideological initiative was set aside and supplanted by the materialistic, which would signal Chakraborty's opinion on the nature of governing, that the high privileged positions are ultimately corrupting, and may well be a reiteration of the main message from the original story of *The City of Brass* from the *1001 Nights*, that riches and power are bound to doom as death will follow.

But reality shows the misuse of the initial humanistic motive, as the ruling dynasty acquired the palace and the riches. To quote Said: "no vision, any more than any social system has total hegemony over its domain" (*Culture* 186). The advocacy for the underprivileged deteriorate as the dynasty shifted their focus to maintaining status quo by preferential inclusion of the Daevas into all segments of society, even the governing ones as the grand vizier is from among the native "fire-worshippers," while absolutely excluding the former ones. Furthermore, it shows the "Daevasation" (read: Persianization) of the Geziri (read: Arab) rulers in following court rules, originally absent from both the novel and from the historical account of the early Arabs, as well as the establishment of high-class society based on the uneven social structure of the natives. In all, what was initially non-materialistic, became so, which instigated a form of resisting class society by forming organizations which benefit the *shafit*, but as there is little to no benefit, they are necessitated to turn to other more violent means. Their desperate situation lead them to turn to religious fundamentalism, according to which their charity organization – the *Tanzeem* – operates. Such agenda was

noticed by the young prince Alizayd who, being a pious character himself, secretly meets with one of the administrators to illegally lend them money. After this affair was discovered, the administrator who is also a religious official, faced the most brutal public execution, secluding the identity of the financier for his word that the cause will continue. After unwillingly stagnating the cause, there was an assassination attempt by one of the members of the organization as retaliation for the prince's alleged betrayal.

Adhering to Jameson's remark that all literature is to be read as a symbolic meditation on the community (70), all of these socio-political complications in the novel would point to the ongoing problems of dictatorships, sectarianism and terrorism in the broader Middle East. The portrayal of the political structure is indexical to some governments in their privileging one type of society to the detriment of the other(s) and is reminiscent of the conditions under Saddam Hussein in Iraq for example. These in turn helped foster sectarianism, and the most underprivileged resort to desperate acts of violence that ultimately include terrorism. These are then symptoms of large problems, to which it seems Chakraborty has no immediate answer, thus giving rise to the opinion that any kind of power may corrupt, though it may initially be used for good, in this case the salvation of the *shafit*. Action or inaction also fall under this paradox. The well-intended actions of Alizayd are also paralyzed, since restoring the original initiative would cause disruption with the Daevas. All three categories are thus locked into a constant power struggle, leaving the text not answering this fundamental problem, only point out its complicated nature of an unreachable state of the ideal, which would classify this novel as a dystopian one. One could here evoke Said's argument that clearly captures this situation:

Truly this has been the age of Ayatollahs, in which a phalanx of guardians...simplify and protect one or another creed, essence, primordial faith. One fundamentalism invidiously attacks the others in the name of sanity, freedom, and goodness. A curious paradox is that religious fervor seems

almost always to obscure notions of the sacred or divine, as if those could not survive in the overheated, largely secular atmosphere of fundamentalist combat. You would not think of invoking God's merciful nature when you were mobilized by Khomeini (or for that matter, by the Arab champion against "the Persians" in the nastiest of the 1980s wars, Saddam): you served, you fought, you fulminated. (*Culture* 327-28)

But since this is just the first part of an announced trilogy, the final outcome is yet to be determined.

*Alif the Unseen.*

"We don't live in ordinary times," utters one of Wilson's supporting characters in her acclaimed novel *Alif the Unseen* (370). The question behind the puzzling statement ushers a need to examine what is possibly meant by the term "ordinary." Wilson re-examines the distinctions and various definitions of the controversial "ordinary" as she embarks on a quest to depict multiple, but not necessarily opposing viewpoints while unraveling various factors which fall under the term. The most conspicuous of these is class distinction, which permeates the novel on multiple levels in the conventional sense of human social organization.

*Alif the Unseen* is a multi-genre novel with an apparent tendency (among others which will be presented in the following chapter) to uncover and criticize the social organization of Middle Eastern society as it is established in contemporary times. The case of the novel presents these factors on multiple levels that can be systematically observed.

The setting of the novel, an unnamed "City" which the author positions in the Persian Gulf Region close to Saudi Arabia and Oman, closest to both of which are the United Arab Emirates. The narrative does elaborate on the setting, though not giving a precise location, an indicator that it is allegorically applicable to the countries mentioned (71). Taking into consideration the rapid economic and urban development of the region, the established



autocratic political order and its unequal economic divisions are the driving forces before all others that give the City its most apparent identity. The historical background of the division of capital among the spheres of society is openly described in the novel:

The City, Abdullah had once quipped, is divided into three parts: old money, new money, and no money. It had never supported a middle class and had no ambition to do so – one was either a nonresident of Somewhere-istan, sending the bulk of one’s salary home to desperate relatives, or one was a scion of oil boom. (96)

Accumulation of power and wealth at the expense of the proletariat is evident as the author vividly portrays different sections of the city and their radically different economic and urban conditions.

The Old Quarter is surrounded by historic walls; it houses the main Al Basheera Mosque and University, as well as the residences of the royal family and aristocracy. The author refers to this section as the quarter of “old money,” as it suggests that it was rich and vibrant from before the days of the oil boom. The section opposite to the Old is The New Quarter, a business-class district with new buildings which suggests that it was built from oil-driven economy. The author carefully positions this new and modern district on the opposite side of the Old Quarter as an indicator that it was built from scratch, an inference that is supported by the positioning she made for the working-class neighborhoods, most prominent being the impoverished Baqara district. Baqara district when looked on the map, is second in the circle of historical development around the Old Quarter, squeezed in between the two rich ones, which would make sense that those buildings were not demolished as they are the residence of those used to serve the aristocracy from previous times and continue to do so. These sections of the City are referred to as the “no money” districts, as the income of the working class is shown to be extremely modest when compared to the other two.

While developing on the urban distinctions, Wilson also emphasizes the social ones, where the bulk of the working class is made up of “desis,” which is a Hindi/Urdu expression for the people of the Indian subcontinent. The novel points out the patchwork of ethnicities occupying Baqara district: “Baqara district is all imported labor from India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and the lesser Arab countries. *El ‘abeed* [The slaves]. It was one of neighborhoods belonging to nothing” (Wilson 32). Although Alif’s father is presumed to be a native of the land, his mother is of brown complexion and occasionally uses Malayalam words when talking to her only son, which helps to deprive him of equal status with other natives. Dina, the second protagonist, although being an Arab, is still considered an outsider because her family comes from Egypt. The main characters are chosen not only to reflect this distinction, but are utilized as criticism of the elite by the author, who is a convert to Islam herself. By utilization it is meant to show the racial attitude of the governing system, certainly a counter-value to the presumed Islamic ideology they claim to uphold. Every present country of the region has endorsed Islam as their state religion, a religion whose last Prophet commanded equality among its adherents: “There is no preference for Arabs over non-Arabs, nor for non-Arabs over Arabs” (al-Tawbah). Thus it can be classified as a criticism of oligarchic capitalism under disguise of religion which is contradicting, not only on racial divide, but class divide as well.

The character of the Convert is central for better understanding of Wilson’s point. The Convert is a young educated American woman who stands in representation of, if not all, then partial views on Islam as she represents the “Other’s” understanding of the religion. The character explains her reasons for conversion: “Islam was presented to me as a system for social justice...I converted in that spirit” (Wilson 136). One explanation of this decision would be her observation of the polarization of classes in Western society in historical, religious and economic terms. As capitalism endorses the possibility of privatization of even

public goods and natural resources, and communism for collective ownership of means of production, the economic agendas are polar opposites. The Convert recognized in the former a further unequal separation of classes, and in the latter a historic failure, thus seeking middle ground between the two, which she ultimately finds in Islam, as it neither approves of total privatization nor total state ownership of goods, and stresses and incentivizes charity and altruism.

Another character who helps to clarify Wilson's portrait of the economic and political system in the City is Sheikh Bilal. He is an elderly imam of the central Basheera Mosque and well versed in religious studies, which include the political side of it. While giving refuge to the protagonist Alif in the mosque, he reveals his position on the current establishment by comparing it to the past theocratic one. The conciseness of the paragraph calls for the need to be presented almost in entirety:

For many centuries the emirs answered to us, you see... To the *ulema* [scholars] of Al Basheera. We ran the university and acted as judges to the common folk – during the Middle Ages they say that we even ran a well-respected bank. Credit, my boy! Invented by the Arabs... The emirs were enforcers. They protected the City, protected us, sent the young men off to war when they got too rambunctious... This part of the world was never meant to function that way. Too many languages, too many tribes, too motivated by ideas those high-heeled cartographers from Paris couldn't understand... They said a modern state needs a single leader, a secular leader, and the emir was the closest thing we had. So to the emir went all the power... (Wilson 188)

The original function of the emir was a military commander, and the origin of the word comes from the Arabic root امر (a-m-r) which means to command, to order. However, the emirs have redefined their original military role, and appropriated it into (authoritarian) political function, thus obtaining “legal” means to claim most shares of the public goods (in this case oil and its profit). In other words, the emirs became the state.

The kind of preferential totalitarianism described in the quoted paragraphs directly produces a new mentality detached from its characteristics of the past (that of Islamic

integration), and is recognizable in different conducts and manners of the bourgeois. Jameson presents a Marxian orientation that explains the relationship of the superstructures to the base. The theory explains a certain structural function of culture (in this case dominated by the upper level society) which functions as an instrument of class domination, legitimation and social mystification (282). In the novel, the higher strata of society adds to itself a certain “quality” by being in such position and endeavors to separate itself from the lower classes not only with their opulent lifestyle, but in their relationship with others, their language (manner of speech), and fashion respectively.

Relationships between the individuals and families are important in the novel, and a memorable instance portrays this through Alif’s father’s polygamous marriage and the difference of treatment of his wives’ families. His first wife and her “light-skinned” progeny have the preferential treatment in both economic and emotional terms. Wilson further criticizes the unequal treatment by giving the information of Alif’s sister’s relation to him, as she refers to him as “dark little *abd*” (29), meaning slave or servant. Further on, the institution of marriage is also uncovered to be segregationist in the instance of commenting on Intisar’s being well-educated and “well-bred” (42), qualities which would make her a suitable bride for Abbas (The Hand), who is himself a member of the aristocracy. Her reluctance to marry Alif is financially based: “I can’t spend the rest of my days in a two-room apartment in Baqara district...they’ve convinced me that marrying outside your own people can only lead to trouble” (214). The character of Intisar portrays the view of marriage as an inter-class preference imposed by the elitist system, which in turn influences its members to think in terms of class equality.

The differentiation of status is carried out, although not as offensive as the previous case, through the usage of language. The current issue is to give an example how the

language is used to characterize the classes. As mentioned above, Alif quite frequently utters non-Arabic words when communicating with his mother and other *desis*, which can be interpreted as his will to establish a closer bond with the other unprivileged citizens of the City, or could simply be the language he is comfortable with. If the second is the case, then that would mean that he is an outsider to the society and an insider at the same time, which further gives his voice special status in that he acts as an example of the lower class and their circumstances. The usage of language as a mark of status is plausibly applicable to the high classes and is again revealed in the character of Intisar, as her usage of Arabic is described as being “so correct, that her lineage was quickly apparent” (26). Thus it can be remarked that language plays an important part in class distinction and is one of the factors that draws these categories apart. Lukács argues that the division of society into classes has as an outcome their reduced perception of the world and understanding each other, and through such segregation an enclosed space is created for each of them. Lukácsian phenomenon of reification, the fragmentation of individuals’ life and losing sense of different aspects of it comes to mind here (Booker 74). The attitude of the aristocracy in the novel runs parallel with this phenomenon, which is noticeable towards their treatment of the working class.

Then there is another category represented by the Convert, who belongs neither in the low nor the high status but is simply considered an outsider despite adopting the dominant religion of the City. She makes her statement:

It doesn’t matter to you what concessions we make – whether we dress respectfully, learn the language, follow all the insane rules about when to speak and how and to whom. I even adopted your religion – adopted it, out of my own free will, thinking I was doing something noble and righteous. But it’s not enough. You’ll always second-guess every thought and opinion that comes out of my mouth, even when I talk about my own fucking country. I’ll always be foreign. (157)

Such a case is subordinate to interpreting it as a criticism of the mentality she was not expecting to find, taking into consideration her academic background and research of the religion of Islam, which she expected to be a system of social justice. Obviously, neither did the dress code nor etiquette help her integrate into the society which was on one occasion even paraded by Vikram: “These western sisters never know how to dress. It’s all exotic costumes to them” (125). This situation is a possible reflection of the author’s own experience with the same issues and struggle to fit into a new society.

Having shortly described all previous modes of class distinction, it can be inferred that the proletariat, the subordinate people of the City, are better capable of understanding both classes since they are directly involved in the City and its vibrant life, and unlike the oligarchs are conscious of the work they do. They are not detached from “raw” reality, thus arguably have a broader understanding of the conditions in the City, which Alif at one point describes as “gold-covered shit” (215). If the system is to be looked through at from a Gramscian point of view, which focuses on the superstructure through which capitalist society dictates the knowledge production through dominating cultural values, a full institutional hegemony is certainly implied (Booker 83).

Wilson is perchance conscious of this idea and recognizes its credibility by looking at the conditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She reminds us with a brief overview on the situation of academia:

...Arabian Peninsula has been an intellectual black hole since the Saudis sacked Mecca and Medina way back in the 1920s. Palestine is a wreck, so there goes the scholarly tradition of Jerusalem. Ditto Beirut and Baghdad. North Africa still hasn’t recovered from the colonial era – all their universities are in the pockets of autocrats and westernized socialists. Persia is up to its neck in revolutions. (132)

This passage is related to the conditions of the impoverished academia that were previously mentioned in Ahmed and refers to the Islamic Golden Age as presented in Jones. Tantamount

to the mentioned impoverished conditions, Spivak's emphasis of a phenomenon which she terms as "epistemic violence" (78-80) can be useful here. Though the term is originally applied as a criticism of colonialist agenda, it can be given a broader context to include all kinds of "selective" or indoctrinatory education. She reinforces Said's claim of academe's political framework which ultimately had as a consequence the degradation of subject's voices, thus (in)directly justifying the regime. But Wilson chooses to believe differently and sheds more optimism on the possibility to overcome such deplorable conditions. Her clever characters don't fail at noticing the underlying structure of manipulation. She certainly gives hope of possibly overcoming the system.

Here the Marxian interpretation of the historical process (proposed as a dialectical one) could be utilized, as it proposes a theory of conflicts between opposing forces whose resolution leads to historical change (Booker 72). This is nowhere more evident than in the final stages of the novel when the revolution is spread. The progress of the novel stays with this idea. Recent history has justified Wilson's predictions (deliberate or not), and she proved to be a keen observer of the vibrant situation on the field, being that the Arab Spring occurred two years before the publication of her novel, albeit in the countries which do not exactly match the geographical position of the City.

Having above described the socio-political conditions in the novel, the aim was to demonstrate that they not only act as means of criticism of the established regimes in the Middle East, but also serve a didactic purpose to eliminate a prejudiced perception of the "Other" civilization. An insight into class distinctions is vividly portrayed, but still more important, the creation and functioning of class society which mostly benefits the haves (rather than the have-nots) is described, as it was shown how political agenda fueled by capital, penetrates and alters the very culture, and even religion of a society. Perhaps this is

what Sheikh Bilal's utterance "We don't live in ordinary times" means: the way the working class are unconsciously endorsing the conditions that lead to their radical degradation; or it can be that the tolerance of this inequality is aberrant. Whatever the case, Wilson uses allegory to demonstrate such conditions, and to show their incompatibility with Islamic social justice.

It has been seen how the abovementioned authors present the problems of Middle Eastern politics, not avoiding or ignoring the reality of historical and current repressiveness of the political systems, the degree of which varies according to the conditions in each of the novels, but the underlying premise is the need for broader liberties. The forces that are responsible for pushing this agenda are granted the central voice and allocated considerable space in order to act as defendants of the Middle East from stereotypical representation as politically docile. These characters are invested in various ways of dissidence. At the center of their struggle is the cry, primarily for a more even distribution of wealth, but also no less forceful is their engagement for political change. The problematic question is addressed: is that political change even possible, or better put reconcilable with Islam? Can it appropriate such radical a change?

It seems that none of the authors explicitly or implicitly critique Islam per se, but the issue, rather, is to attend to its misuse, misrepresentation, and appropriation to suit the agenda, in these cases of the ruling elite. This is what Ahmed's character Adoula pinpoints while visiting the Khalif's opulent palace: "These Khalifs really do believe they are God's Regents-in-the-World! Everywhere this palace calls out His Names...yet His work is nowhere to be found" (318). The name of God is frequently evoked in all the novels by these selfsame protagonists who strive for political change. It would be an error to point to religion



as something that has to be overcome for reaching political maturity. The authors, it seems, propose a form of “modernization” which could run parallel with religion, a point also argued by some Islamic scholars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fuller 52).

The last crucial remark is that political modernization is not implied by all the authors. For Jones this matter is irrelevant. Chakraborty could only marginally be implying it through two different settings. Although the time is during Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, the djinn world is stuck in the medieval times, with all the political implications that follow the era: aristocratic rule (although not corresponding to European feudalism), religious warfare, ethnic exceptionalism based on mythology, pre-scientific society and others. The implications of the last one in particular give a sense of the main dividing line between the modern and the past. It was then necessary for her to position the world of the djinn in the past pre-scientific society with one crucial exception: Alizayd, who wants to be a reformer, is impressed with and interested in human sciences. Note that he is the most pious Muslim character and has traits that make him loosely resemble the fourth rightly-guided caliph of Islam who was known for his wisdom, fairness, and a double-pointed sabre “Zulfiqar” (which is also Alizayd’s sword, both in name and shape). His enlightenment would still signify the reconcilability of Islam and modernity, regardless of economic policy which is centrally addressed in *Throne of the Crescent Moon* and *Alif the Unseen*. For Ahmed and Wilson, clearly this modernization should not be seen as an embracement of Western neoliberal and capitalist model as it may be contradicting their emphasis on social equality for the reasons to follow.

In “The Limits of Tolerance – Islam as Counter-Hegemony,” Tony Evans argues that the single global market as seen by the [capitalist] West demands neo-liberal philosophy for its proper functioning. By neo-liberalism he means a philosophy that is primarily based upon

an economic logic that valorizes competition within a single market economy. The establishment of this global market requires the establishment of what Gill calls “market discipline” (one could think of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses) which stresses economic growth and development, free market, the privatization of public services and so on. Those who do not accept these views are labeled “uncivilized,” treated as ignorant and backward. From this perspective, Islam is then positioned as a counter-hegemonic threat to the global capitalist project (1751; 1755-56). As demonstrated, with their implied anti-bourgeois sentiment, Ahmed and Wilson shun the pseudo-capitalist system through the implications that it would lead to the creation of a class-based society. In this instance, their stance is similar to Marxist thought, with some being flexible enough to see Islam and Marxism as reconcilable in terms of their stress on equality, justice, and so on (Nourzhanov, Bleuer 234). But it is partially reconcilable, not fully, since Islam does not endorse Marxist materialist logic, nor economic thought of shared ownership. However, it does instigate a more equitable distribution of wealth. The late Muhammad Baqir al Sadr gives an idea how contemporary Islamic economics would integrate some premises from both capitalism’s the right to private ownership and communism’s stance that the ownership of natural resources belongs to the state (“An Islamic Perspective of Political Economy”).

In terms of political statement, there is a noticeable shift of fantasy to the left. In the particular case of the Middle East-inspired, rightist politics are seen as having had negative consequences in terms of class inequality instigated by dictatorial rule. Strong centralized state apparatus is in all the novels presented as a major problem: Jones portrays the caliph as carrying, but still controversial; Ahmed leaves the readers in suspense after the final act of the Falcon Prince; Chakraborty signals the impossibility of politics, Wilson ends with a revolution the aftermath of which is unclear. These are all seen as obstacles for achieving a more egalitarian society. The suggestion for change is in no way the need for external

intervention, but needs to occur internally, which is why three novels have the characters of an enlightened renegade prince. Perhaps this is what Chakraborty meant in her Acknowledgement at the very end of the book by offering “a sincere thank-you to my ummah [worldwide community of Muslims]: to the past that inspired me, the present that embraced me, and the future we’ll build together” (532).

## Chapter 2: A Cultural and Religious (Re)presentation

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fantasy has mostly been Eurocentric, drawing inspiration from Norse and/or Celtic mythologies and only portraying white (in most cases) male protagonists. The problem with this whitewashed narrative is the essential absence, or, if diminishingly present, marginalization of other races, nations and ethnicities. This could only be interpreted as an intentional otherization of the rest of the world. Said points out that cultural implications are always present, if not dominating the novel, as culture is meant to elevate one’s own society’s reservoir of what are thought its best traits. It acts as a sort of stage where political and ideological causes engage one another, each nation dedicated to promoting its dominance that is positioned as the mainstream that very often excludes the others. This idea of culture that entails one’s own culture presents itself as detached, thus transcending the everyday world (*Culture* xiii). Cultural and civilizational dominance, when presented in the case of multicultural America, poses a problem as it does not give voice to other groups that are as a result marginalized.

One such group that is politically, but more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, culturally marginalized is the Muslim community in the United States, particularly left in need for this representation after the 9/11 bombings. Filling this void was taken upon not only by Muslim writers such as Ahmed, Chakraborty, and Wilson, but also non-Muslim Americans, in this case Jones. Apart from making a political statement, which was extensively covered in the first chapter, culture is no less important, and it is through this one

that readers are invited to experience the full vibrancy of it carried through fantasy. Thus, the Middle East–inspired narrative taps into a wide range of rich and diverse cultural heritage that is familiar to many, like the heavily Orientalized Disney’s *Aladdin*. These are familiar because “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure” (Said, *Culture* xxv). This is how the *1001 Nights* became popular and influenced the Western public and has remained an inspiration for the contemporary fantasy that is inspired by the Middle East. Thus, the argument for an isolated culture can no longer be sustained. These novels would then sound familiar to the American public, but strange at the same time since they give a fresh perspective of the region, what is more, by Muslim Americans in three out of four of our cases. In the era of mass migration and globalization, Islam and Arab and Persian cultures are no longer confined to the Middle East and North Africa, but have become present and increasingly prominent in the US, therefore slightly beginning to enter the American cultural milieu, along its attempts to integrate itself into the modern society. The novels at hand would thus constitute a cultural statement, a (re)presentation of various aspects of Middle Eastern culture that are, besides entertainment, aimed at countering the general stereotypical perception of the region as exclusivist, androcentric, and barbaric. In lieu of that, three cultural categories are to be presented that are deemed particularly important for sending this message: to entertain and inform about the Arab and Persian folklore, to counter the particular stereotyping of Oriental women as passive and promiscuous, and ultimately send a message of multicultural understanding and appreciation.

#### *The Implications behind the Exploration of the Arab Folklore*

The Western relationship with the Orient has always been uneasy. In his prominent and perhaps most known work, *Orientalism*, Said argues that this stems from the need of one side to engage in imperialist and colonialist acquisition. It was necessary to establish the

backing of the public for such a “civilizing” mission, which was systematically and gradually obtained through the negative portrayal (and demonization) of the Orientals’ religion and culture. Thus, the Orient in the view of the West acquired this simplistic and largely homogeneous perspective of the large geographical region that is furthermore doomed to remain in the past without any hope of making its own progress without Western civilizations’ “help.” The case being largely such, it should come as no surprise that these novelists indeed do set their narratives in the distant past, partly playing along this construction to invite the readers into the exotic past, since for the West the Orient predicated an unchanging environment, it had to be absolutely different (Said, *Orientalism* 96), ie. remain in the past. Because of this exoticization, the authors would expect their potential readership that is interested in their work to look for this image of the exotic Orient. They do provide such an image. However, they conjure up the unexpected in that they now present the Middle East in a different light, drawing attention to the cultural vibrancy and complexity. Folklore plays the essential part here, and one of the most “catchy” tropes of the Middle Eastern folklore are the (d)jinn and the belief in magic, which could also be considered valid factors for the perception of the place as spiritual, timeless, and exotic.

“No one at all familiar with Islamic societies will doubt that magic and sorcery were, and are, a vital element of everyday life and practice” claims Remke Kruk (48). The trope of the (d)jinn thus accordingly belonging to this magical, or more properly, metaphysical realm plays a significant double role, first to evoke familiarity, that it is what the American readership is vaguely familiar with it as mentioned through the stories of the *1001 Nights*, but undoubtedly massively popularized by Disney’s blue Genie from the franchise *Aladdin*. While it is familiar, it is at the same time mystical and “present” in one part of the world for the reasons stated above, which, when viewed from that perspective, become a closer, everyday presence. Their role in this kind of fantasy cannot be fully appreciated for both their

religio-cultural and literary significance unless their place is understood within the particular social framework in the Middle East. From her fieldwork, Kruk understands the role of magic, in that she juxtaposes it to the scholarly definition that traditionally distinguishes natural, or sympathetic from the demonic. The former makes use of the hidden properties of natural substances, while the later involves the help of usually malevolent spirits (in our case the djinn). Sorcery is thus most often used for practices that involve these spirits (52).

The novels listed then make use of this belief and accordingly link it to the Middle East in similar, albeit highly fantacized fashion. The djinn and magic are central foci for all the novelists referred. Jones' characters can conjure magic without the aid of the djinn by chanting incantations and reciting mystical chants. It is through adhering to the mystically prescribed proportions and formula that Firouz manages to open a portal to the fallen djinni city of Irem (also included in Wilson) which exists in a separate realm of this reality, presented as if occupying another frequency of the same world, intangible to most humans except the ones who are versed in mystical knowledge. But he also ascribes the djinn characteristics that are not essentially Middle Eastern, such as voodoo magic. In his case, a separate realm is presented more in a metaphysical manner than magical.

Ahmed's opening chapter starts with the exercise of necromancy, which is indeed seen as practiced in many parts of the world. However, the agency practicing it is not human, but demonic, which may come across as unconventional as it is meant for the living to summon the dead. This demon endeavors to evoke the magic which an inanimate object of the throne allegedly possesses but is shown as ultimately devoid of such power in the end. There is the presence of ghouls and ghouls-hunters such as Adoula. With all these controversies present, magic countering necromancy, it then evokes the former statement of the twofold nature of magic that is believed by some, though putting in what is essentially not a part of Middle Eastern folklore, such as a girl's shapeshifting into a lioness.

S. A. Chakraborty takes the Middle Eastern folklore to a next level, obviously borrowing a lot from the *1001 Nights* but enriching it with her own imagination. She includes a wide range of races, classes and tribes, giving an elaborate history of the different djinn civilizations she invents, some of it based on history, Islamic theology (as there is even a chapter in the Qur'an named after them) and Arab folklore. She divides them into races, such as the *ifreet*, the *marid*, the *peris*, the *daevas*, and the djinn. The name of the prophet Suleiman (Solomon) grew almost inseparable from the mention of the djinn. In the narrative, in order to decrease their power and meddling in human affairs, he divided the djinn into six tribes each of which occupy a part of the real world: 1) the *Tukharistanis* in China, 2) the *Agnivanshi* in India, 3) the *Geziri* in Arabia, 4) The *Ayaanle* south of Egypt, 6) and the *Sahrayn* of the Maghreb (139). However, there is a more interesting thesis to consider. Although Chakraborty sets the time of the narrative during Napoleonic acquisition of Egypt, the society of the djinn is still living in the middle ages and is vaguely familiar with the (then) new technology, for example cannons. One can only speculate whether she sets the timing in the middle ages because she sees the pre-scientific era as fit them for a more exotic character of the narrative, or because the djinn belong to the past as one of the superstitions.

As for Wilson, this fantasy area is most systematically processed through the sage character that is Sheikh Bilal and through the supernatural Vikram the Vampire (actually a djinn). It seems that for her, some parts that are narrated are not meant solely to entertain and inform about the folklore, but about the Islamic metaphysics which indeed does include the djinn and magic in its theology. Through the exercise of the imagination, she brings theological and ontological questions forth, thus her rendering of the fantastic may have wider implications. The intention is not to make an argument that the novelists necessarily believe in this metaphysical rendering, though they may be reflecting some of it in their novels with conscious exaggeration to serve the purposes of the fantasy genre. At the same

time, the trope of the djinn may be found believable by many Muslims (which is certainly the case with many Muslim societies in the world not only narrowed to the MENA) which would then conclude that this kind of fantasy harnesses that theology (or folklore or superstition).

As for the what the American readership may find in this kind of fantasy, there may be a reason so “elevating” in the Orient to be interested in it. Once again, Said gives a hint to this possible fascination. Nineteenth century French pilgrim did not seek a scientific so much as exotic yet especially attractive reality (*Orientalism* 170). This argument can also be applied to the “seeking” of a modern American reader, who, devoid of age-long tradition ventures to seek it out, partly to satisfy his/her curiosity, partly in search of a deeper spiritual meaning. As Lawrence Buell makes an implication in his book *The Environmental Imagination*, Americans had no Old World monuments of high culture to draw the image of a distant past, but they did have an abounding wilderness to evoke a pastoral imagery which served as a counterpart (56). This could further be projected on the desert locale, which served as a timeless setting, where past and present could be rendered indistinguishable, where statements of the past could be made in the same way as the present (Said, *Orientalism* 235), thus suited for the imagination to inhabit and be vivified. One could also further recall the ideas that shaped the American tradition that begins with Whitman and Emerson, who divide the world into two binary opposing factions, Western representing technological, and Eastern a spiritual maturity, especially implied in one of Whitman’s most famous poems “A Passage to India.” Indeed, it was the ideas of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and the likes that initiated the transcendentalist movement drawing inspiration from the Orient to establish a deeper bond with their newly independent land. The Middle East has therefore served as a land for escapism – escapism from raw and unsatisfying materiality, from urbanism and technology, in search of deeper roots and transcendental bond. This argument could be still valid, not only for the American society, but for wider West which is entering a relatively



new cultural crisis cause in part by the diminishment of Western suzerainty over the rest of the world (*Orientalism* 257).

*Reshaping the Image of an Oriental Woman*

The portrayal of the Oriental woman is perhaps one of the most important issues addressed in the novels. It stands opposite for what the West has thought of her: as submissive, passionate, promiscuous and so on. In *Orientalism*, Said pays special attention to her false perception, arguing that she is more a projection of European desire for her exoticism than what she actually is like: “the oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man” muses Louise Colet (187). For the Europeans at the time, Orientals were unhappy subjects of their passion, while they can discursively control them (*Orientalism* 162), in that way necessarily depicting women such as to fit this libidinal framework. After the beginning of the modern era, a representation of Muslim women not linked to the harem is almost unimaginable. The central tropes of the Orientalist fantasy harem were sex and idleness. Even the paintings were meant to evoke every possible venue of erotic fantasy. Yet, it was a space where the cross-generational or extended family, women and children included, lived and where the indoor work of the family took place (El Cheikh 3, 5).

The libidinal image of the Oriental femme fatale came to be associated with consumerist leisure in Europe, particularly exemplified in the singling out of belly-dancing as a quasi-ethnographic display of sexuality (Said, *Culture* 111). All major female characters in the novel totally resist this kind of objectification, there are absolutely no depictions of the harem as it was/is generally perceived. Instead, a strong and motivated young female protagonist is put in her rightful place as an active part of the society, or attempting to be one in Jones’ case. She is young, but in spite of her promiscuous potential resists such carnal connotation, and again young, so to have the energy to establish her position in that part of

the world. But also, it could be a symbol of reawakening of the Middle Eastern woman in opposition to the strong patriarchal society. The historical dimension here is less relevant as is the symbolic. The actions of these female characters are sending a message to both sides of the camp: to the West that they are not to be associated with sexuality, to the East that they are not to be subjected.

In each of the novels, there are at least one or two female characters whose depiction and actions are meant to break the stereotype on one hand, and argue for the capability and need of recognition for wider liberties for women particularly in the Middle East. For Jones, the character who embodies these traits is Sabirah, a young, intelligent and well-learned student of Dabir the scholar. In her case particularly, it was seen fit that she acquires a good education because “Sabirah’s father, Musa, had declared that as God had seen fit to bless his daughter with so excellent a mind, God must have meant for it to be used” (Ch. 1). Her qualities are further praised on multiple occasions: she memorized the entire Qur’an by the age of seven and now in her eighteenth year teaches it to her female servant, had learned ancient languages (among them Greek), and remembers pretty much everything she reads. Since Jones’ novel is inspired by the history of the Abbasid civilization, there is a valid historical ground to align the case of Sabirah with the learned women scholars and their contributions of the time which Salim Al-Hassani briefly summarizes in his article “Women's Contribution to Classical Islamic Civilisation: Science, Medicine and Politics” (Muslim Heritage). They could be scholars in their own right, and James E. Lindsay mentions the case of one scholar of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to have studied under 80 female teachers (196). The argument could be further expanded to include Afsaneh Najmabandi’s remark who has demonstrated that many Iranian women (Iran was for a large period of time under both Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates) especially from the upper class were learned and cultured well into the modern period and that the image of premodern Iranian woman as illiterate and

silent (because veiled) is a modernist distortion of traditional women's real lives (Majid 335). Sabirah, then, fits well within these arguments in that she is both learned and veiled. But what would be more important to stress out in this case is the attitude of her very learned and pious teacher Dabir who argues for her case in a dispute. The dispute involves less-educated Asim's equating her to all the women, not recognizing her talents as such, while Dabir defends her right to pursue further knowledge and thus be an active participant in the society, and not "probably end up bored and lonely in some rich man's harem" (Ch. 9). The dispute then evokes a patriarchal attitude towards the marginalization of women, not necessarily a religious one, being that a scholar comes to defend her rights.

Ahmed introduces three prominent female characters in *Throne of the Crescent Moon*. All three of these are presented as capable women who are not restricted by the patriarchal order. The earliest to appear is an elderly procuress, Miri Almuoussa, whose character is a controversial one and it presumably stands at odds with the argument made on the countering a promiscuous image of an Oriental woman. One way to explain this is that Ahmed takes into account all the possibilities which a woman may have encountered, one of them being the recognition of the patriarchal system and making financial benefit from it. If not for the widely contrasting characters in the novel, one could stand in accusation that he is enforcing this sexual image of a woman. However, on the other hand there are other two prominent characters that counter this image: the former alchemist Litaz who is shown as a wise and knowledgeable woman who lives on equal footing with her husband and colleague, and is actively involved in the attempt to decode a mysterious scroll. Yet again there appears a highly-educated woman with a more prominent and valued status in the society, more fortunate than her counterpart Sabirah. But the most important female character in this particular novel is a young girl Zamia Banu Laith Badawi. She is the daughter of a Bedouin chieftain who, quite unexpectedly, appoints his teenage daughter as the Protector of the band.

The solidified patriarchy is perhaps most clear in the case that this move of his is criticized and ultimately not accepted by the other bands in the tribe, nonetheless it represents a spark of hope for arguing a more prominent position for women in the society not only confined to the role of motherhood. In fact, none of Ahmed's three prominent female characters are mothers, and he may be giving a hint to the reason through the words of Miri Almoussa: "And what is a woman's greatest chance at showing her virtue? In marriage." (227). Yet he is not so senseless as to eliminate the possibility of teenage love. Zamia, a warrior herself, falls in love with another, the dervish Raseed, though this reciprocated feeling is not developed in the novel, but is expected to in its sequel. Again, she is no damsel in distress, as Ahmed portrays her combating capabilities equal to the most capable of warriors, thus should be seen and treated as equal.

As for Chakraborty, there is only one prominent female character which would embody the image of an able woman, and she also serves as a contrast to the other women in the society that is highly androcentric. The protagonist Nahri is a young girl, veiled but not superstitious, well aware that her poor conditions force her to pretend she is a fortune teller and an exorcist, all this to earn a living in an environment that restricts her any other means to take care of herself, and while "stealing" as she calls her activity, she avoids excess in the occupation (7). Through her deprived circumstances early in the novel and later on as it develops, it could be said that the author voices criticism of the patriarchal system straight to the point in certain parts of the narrative. In the human world she aspires to go to Istanbul and study medicine but does not have enough means to do so, nor could she as a sole woman without a guardian. This wish of hers is partially realized after she reaches a prominent role in the djinni Daevabad society. Even there she is mostly confined in the palace. Although she is presented as extraordinarily able, she is also a sole exemplum of female determination which is at the end of the novel condemned to realize the inescapability from the fact: "In

what world do men and women pay the same price for passion. You'll be the one blamed. Indeed, people will assume you particularly...talented to have seduced such a religious man" (517), the King tells her after the failed attempt to escape Daevabad in which the pious prince was forcibly dragged. This excerpt would then present two crucial remarks on the conditions of women. This first is the obvious inequality of the sexes, as passion could be freely sought in brothels (that exploit *shafit* women as sex slaves) with no socially-imposed stigma to bear. The other remark is contained in the adjective "talented," that is in this case stressed out by its coming after an ellipsis. That signifies the undesirability of the so-called talented (read: educated and capable) women who do not fit the rigid patriarchal order, therefore regarded as a threat to be suppressed or eliminated. Chakraborty's literary endeavor in this case presents two images of Oriental women. One image represents a woman who aspires for something greater than average housekeeping, the other image is her struggle against a heavily patriarchal society that makes this path of hers difficult, but perhaps still achievable, in the sequel.

Wilson's depiction of the Middle East is in these cases the most precisely reflective of the socio-political situation and status of Middle Eastern Muslim women, given that her novel is for the most part overtly intended to both inform the non-Muslim readership, and also to direct her opinions (and criticism) to the Muslim readers on socio-political and religious matters. A particularly important and (for the West) controversial matter in this novel concerns the veil and its function and symbolism. To tackle this issue of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Middle Eastern women, Wilson creates the character of Dina. She is an extraordinary character, who in spite of her veil and perceived detachment from masculine society, manages to convince others of her socializing capabilities and dazzle even her friend and neighbor Alif with her intelligence. Her manner of successful negotiating with various characters (including underground mafia) puts her in the leading role for a part, the aim being

to deconstruct the perception of Middle Eastern women as passive, obedient, and most of all incapable of dealing with the “rough” outside world. Wilson gives voice to her heroine of the novel, thus giving her the opportunity to express herself and do away with prejudices.

As for the more social implication of the matter, she also voices her keen perception of the dress code, a maneuver used to point out perhaps not necessarily the religious viewpoint of the fashion, rather the cultural. She demonstrates this through three of her female characters, each belonging to a different category. The cases of Dina and Intisar stand opposite to each other. The former’s veiling was an act of piety, and perhaps surprising to Western readers was met with discontent from her family. Wilson immediately follows up with an explanation to this discontent by contrasting the case of veiling of the aristocratic women (represented by Intisar), whose fashionable and expensive gown carries the implications of higher status. For the aristocracy, it is a mark of rank and not of piety, as Wilson argues. It may be that bourgeois society’s association with niqab has played the role in Dina’s choice. Ultimately the niqab should be considered as a signifier of piety, and the aristocratic society uses the fashion to establish an image of (outward) piety. In the case of Dina, it is more “profitable” for her face to be visible as a mark of beauty, and more importantly of availability, a trait which would attract suiters; while on the other side, Intisar’s wealth and status are more likely to be taken into the suiters’ consideration for marriage (29-30). But also there is the interesting case of the Convert who is also wearing the hijab. As previously cited in the first chapter, she converted in search of social justice. It is perhaps this religio-cultural aspect that would be found surprising by the Western readers who are accustomed to associate the veiling as a degradation of women. Such perception was/is not always the general rule, especially for those who had direct contact with the veiled women. One can here briefly refer to the impressions of lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. She, for one, perceived

the fashion as liberating in a sense of privatizing one's identity and secluding it from unwanted curiosity (Montagu 71). After all, the author herself is a veiled convert who writes of the experiences of veiled women.

From all the examples above, the message stands clear: Middle Eastern women do have struggles with the centuries-old patriarchy, a social organization that Anouar Majid positions as theologically illegitimate, as he argues that Islam evolved from an initial phase of tolerance to the gradual marginalization of women (323). As these novels are arranged according to the chronology of their settings, each of the writers provides examples of different stations that women occupy in society respective of the era. All of these distinctive characters seek greater recognition from both their societies and the Western distorted perception. They do not, however, necessarily acquiesce to the model of Eurocentric vision of a modern woman. What they may be proposing is what Majid envisions: a progressive Islam empowered by the equal status and dynamic contributions of women (and full extension of rights to minority groups). The societal structure does not have to be Eurocentric, but the change would be a redynamization of progressive non-Western traditions in a genuinely multiculturalist world (325). Wilson's implication seems to be mostly aligned and relevant to this argument, as her female protagonist is perfectly capable of retaining her Islamic values as she, at the same time, struggles with the patriarchy, thus suggesting that the tradition was the one that restricts, not religion. The same could be applied for Jones' Sabirah, whose brilliance is recognized by her open-minded teacher Dabir. It is perhaps this aspect of the novels that may exert the greatest impression on the readers of whatever nationality.

#### *Resolving Muslim Cultural and Religious Identity*

"Our age is postmodernist, concerned only with local issues, not with history but with problems to be solved, not with grand reality but with games," claims Lyotard (Said, *Culture* 26). Indeed, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, multiculturalism has become not only a global fact, but a

local one as most of the first-world countries no longer have religious and ethnic consistency. Migrants are received with open skepticism and in some cases with hostility, which undoubtedly stems from the lack of understanding of the other's culture and religion, many times purposefully demonized for justifying certain countries' imperialist goals. The Arab community, Said testifies, has been on the receiving end of skepticism, but paradoxically their culture has also served as a source of fascination at the same time (*Culture* 294). Although Said claims this in 1993, the situation has been further complicated since 9/11. The Arabs (especially Muslim Arabs) therefore are perceived as a "problem to be solved," without taking into account, or more precisely being unaware of the reality which Said sees in culture's essential fluidity and exchange with other cultures. He stipulates that no culture is independent:

But the history of all cultures in the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable; just as Western science borrowed from Arabs, they had borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm. (*Culture* 217)

It can therefore be said that the Arab culture's share in the American narrative is supposed to be no different. In the American case, it served as a general representative of the Orient, and for the projection of Western fantasies on it. Ahmed, as an Arab-American, for once confessed that his representation of a marginalized group is an essential component of his work. He intentionally incorporates Islamic, Arab, and quasi-Islamic themes not only for the purposes of representation, but also to establish a counter-balance to the Eurocentricity of the fantasy genre "not only in a reactive way, but in a more positive and proactive way" (Youtube: Writing Muslim American Fantasy). In these novels, however, the writers endeavor to represent Middle Eastern culture by adhering to the familiarity that serves as an invitation, and then leave the readers to explore multiple unknown aspects of it. If novels



were important for the formation of imperialist attitude (Said, *Culture* xii), then they may also be a resistance to it.

One of the problems of particularly American Muslims is one of identity: what does it mean to be a Muslim and an American at the same time, and are those identities reconcilable. The religious part is especially arousing skepticism and is the main factor of positioning the group out of the mainstream, and although present, it nonetheless takes a marginal cultural position. The exposition of identity has at least a twofold application in these cases: one is vested in the persons of Muslim novelists. Although these writers were born in the US, two of them are converts to Islam, and having thus added one more identity to themselves, they may have the incentive to present aspects of it to the public for reasons mentioned. Additionally, since Ahmed, Chakraborty, and Wilson are religiously speaking in the minority, they are an unofficial defensive voice of the Muslim community in the United States, whose many members migrated to this country because of political and economic conditions in their own countries. These conditions are reminiscent of the ones in Ahmed's, Chakraborty's, and Wilson's novels which have been given insight into in the first chapter.

The representation is most vividly displayed through the personalities and actions of the most captivating characters in the novels. For most of them, their piety is not at odds with political and/or scientific forward thinking. For example, Dabir is the most educated and scientifically progressive character in all the works presented, yet he is also the most pious. The fact that this literary character (whose fate is followed in other Jones' novels) was created by a non-Muslim is to be understood as paying homage and recognition to the once prosperous and the most progressive civilization of its time (which does not mean that it did not have its faults, which are also depicted) directly countering the general Western perspective that has rendered the Muslim civilization as barbaric and regressive. Ahmed,

Chakraborty, and Wilson interestingly all have renegade princes who strive to bring about political change and economically fairer society.

But why this insistence on the negotiability, or better put the necessary reconciliation between religion and progress? Why cannot the Middle East be (re)presented in a secular manner, or at least detached from Islam, like *A Song of Ice and Fire* is detached from Christianity, for example? There are multiple reasons that are both theological as well as political to the point that it can hardly be said which is more dominant in the daily lives of the peoples of the MENA. Writers like Ahmed and Wilson whose works in particular carry greater political implications give no signs of endorsement of the Western neo-liberal capitalist model. For all the writers, culture and religion are central informants of their created societies that are consciously mimicking the actual Middle East and North African societies. As such, they probably recognize that:

[Secularization] cannot be superimposed on a culture in which human agency is constantly negotiating its boundaries with those of the Revelation, in which accommodation to divine intent is a fundamental principle. But this is precisely the agenda of secular elites in remolding Islamic societies, and, because of it, a new form of orientalism has emerged to equate the re-Islamization of secularized discourses with a new barbarism that aims at throwing these countries back into a medieval obscurantism. (Majid 340)

The writers, it can be said with a risk, are still writing in reaction to external events, each in their own respective ways. As for the novels set in earlier times, the reiteration of references to Deity, along that the forward thinking of the protagonists (Dabir, Adoula, Alizayd), serves to acknowledge this principle, but more importantly, it does not come as an obstacle to the selfsame progressive thought, rather, it in a way incites it. Wilson is most vocal in this case when those principles of Revelation are to be looked at and perhaps accommodated in contemporary times. Sheikh Bilal embodies this re-appropriation of religious thought for modern times, as does Dabir in Jones' case.

Another, and perhaps a more important reason of the Middle East's apparent inseparability from Islam stems from the development of deeper socio-political and historical circumstances. Secularism as a philosophical concept was developed by Europeans, as such it is meant to fit the European political setting. This was far easily applicable to a Christian society because the Church has held for centuries in its fundament the division between the spiritual and the worldly, although more so in the Protestant than in the Catholic domain. Nonetheless there was this distinction in Christendom. Therefore, the division between church and state could more easily be enacted, as it was. Having detached itself from the Church dogma, the secular establishment then took a new political direction, which, according to Marx's dialectical observation of historical progress, lead to the taking of power by the bourgeoisie and the development of capitalism. Nineteenth century capitalism benefited the minority bourgeoisie to the detriment of the majority proletariat. Lucács further extrapolates that the bourgeois exploitation has enabled reification, or a process in which all aspects of human life are converted into "things." This further brought about the fragmentation of human life, in that individuals lose sense of the different aspect of life and are left unable to gather them into a coherent whole (Booker 72, 74). Thus fragmented, the extrapolation is that it loses meaning. Günther Anders in his *The Obsolescence of Man* (vol. 2) argues that meaning is fundamentally at odds with freedom; in other words, standing for something necessarily brings certain restrictions. The more important the meaning, the greater the restrictions, and vice versa, the lesser the meaning, the greater the freedom (Imamović). The argument has now come back full circle as to why the Middle Eastern community in particular, and the Muslim in general, cannot afford that level of negotiating principles which do come at odds with the fundamental principles of the Revelation. As such, Islam is fundamentally incompatible with both late capitalism and neo-liberal thought. As Majid points out:

If the crisis of Muslim is one of identity, the solution does not lie in accepting a bourgeois definition of the human, but in examining the historical and cultural background of the prevailing (Western) capitalist equation of the individual with an “autonomous, contract-making self,” where the “self” is conceived of as property. (346)

That being the case, it becomes clearer now as to why the Middle East-inspired fantasy cannot completely cease to be informed or inspired by Islam, because the Middle East itself cannot be completely detached from it, neither theologically nor culturally. That is the reason as to why the bulk of the protagonists stick to their religious side and draw their counter-hegemonic resistance from it.

The novelists themselves are therefore resisting the simplification of a deeply complex social, political, religious matter that has firstly been and is misunderstood, stereotyped, then looked at with skepticism, positioned as the ultimate Other, and has been the target of imperialist goals. Their resistance is projected in an entertaining way through prosaic narratives that draw from the actual human conditions (along with their complexity). Ahmed and Wilson attempt to recast in the eyes of a common American citizen the universal theme of human struggle against dictatorships, along with their inclusion of multiple resistant characters. Ahmed’s presumed anti-bourgeois stance in particular, as was elaborated earlier, does not necessarily have to be confined to the Middle East. As for Jones, he rewinds history to focus on different aspects of it and present an unfamiliar narrative to readers who are most probably unaccustomed to view the Middle East as once advanced and not always in degradation. As Said highlights, one way of resisting is not a mere reaction to imperialism, but lies in an alternative way of conceiving human history that could possibly help in breaking down the barriers between cultures (Culture 216), or at least get a clearer understanding of the differences to respect them.

## Conclusion

By following the narratives through the chronology of their settings, I have provided an overview of the political conditions and their development, the implications of which were/are informed by, or reflected by the actual conditions in the Middle East. It was seen how the quality of socio-economic conditions were of a higher but no less controversial quality, then they deteriorated. It was argued that this deterioration has its vestiges in the present time. As such are being criticized by the authors. The obviousness of the political aspects of these fantasy novels suggest that contemporary Middle East-inspired fantasy has an expressed political dimension. The “political activity” of all these authors has a twofold intent: one is, as mentioned, to allegorically represent the conditions in the region, but more importantly the internal struggle that works to overrule them. This latter intent is then principally inviting the American readership to recast their views of the Middle East as politically homogeneous and backward thinking. This implication may well be intended to change the political view that would deter the justification of the constituency of military actions in the Middle East.

By utilizing Marxist aspects, this internal political strife between the classes was demonstrated, namely, how the upper class managed to gain the overall control of public and private affairs, which naturally came to the detriment of the majority. It was further analyzed by which methods was this achieved and could be achievable. The main means was through religion which was (mis)used to justify the religiously unjustifiable, a point that lead to dictatorship, totalitarianism, and even terrorism. However, it was demonstrated that there is no criticism of the religion of Islam per se, rather, the spirit of revolution is positioned not counter to it, but as stemming from it. As such, it was suggested that the revolution is not

completely understood in Western neoliberal terms but would have to find a new way that is certainly more liberal, yet remain compatible with (at least) the spiritual dimension of Islam.

On another note, the novelists have also attempted to represent the cultural and religious aspects of the Middle East, however imbued with hyperbolized elements of fantasy that are inspired by the *1001 Nights* to fit the genre. The representation of culture and religion was primarily intended to inform and to counter the typical Western stereotyping that has historically led to imperialism and presently ignites xenophobia. This is done through the invitation to step into the narrative by providing familiar Oriental exotic themes, but through them they give different unfamiliar aspects of the Middle East's folklore, culture, and religion. Arab folklore and Islamic theology are the key informants for the purposes of resisting stereotyping. Almost all novels have also been the positioning, or better put, the explanation of Muslim identity, as three of the four authors openly declare themselves as Muslim and American, with one identity not necessarily being at odds with another. They position this through universal themes of struggle for equal and fair treatment and multicultural understanding, which is not seen as only possible, but inescapable, as Said argues that no culture is totally independent and homogenous that was not influenced by another.

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