

From Myth to Cultural Diplomacy: Repositioning Arab Identity through the Transcultural Journey of Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah in European Literary Discourse

(Dari Mitos ke Diplomasi Budaya: Penyusunan Semula Identiti Arab melalui Pengembaraan Transkultural Hikayat Alf Laylah wa Laylah dalam Wacana Kesusasteraan Eropah)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah from an Arabic narrative tradition into a transcultural literary text that profoundly shaped European literary imagination. Using a qualitative narrative-cultural approach, the research combines cultural reception theory and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework to analyze the narratives of Shahrazad and The Merchant and the Ifrit. Cultural reception theory is employed to explore how European readers, translators, and literary institutions reconstructed Arabic narratives through exoticization, adaptation, and ideological negotiation, thereby reshaping their meanings within European literary discourse. Meanwhile, Thompson's framework identifies symbolic journeys, heroic archetypes, supernatural encounters, and moral-symbolic structures embedded in the narratives. The findings reveal that the text functions not only as entertainment literature but also as a symbolic instrument of cultural diplomacy that repositions Arab identity within European literary discourse. Three major findings emerge: first, mythological symbols construct heroic and civilizational journeys that mediate intercultural understanding; second, Shahrazad's storytelling strategy represents intellectual resistance and social transformation within patriarchal and colonial structures; and third, European reception reflects transcultural reinterpretation that simultaneously exoticized and legitimized Arabic literary heritage within world literature, strengthening literary decolonization discourse and the concept of cultural diplomacy narrative.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy; imaginative journey; mythological journey; symbolic mythology; transculturalization

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji transformasi hikayat One Thousand and One Nights daripada tradisi naratif Arab kepada teks sastra transkultural yang membentuk imaginasi sastra Eropah dengan mendalam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan naratif-budaya kualitatif, penyelidikan ini menggabungkan teori penerimaan budaya dan rangka kerja mitos simbolik Carl Thompson untuk menganalisis naratif Shahrazad dan The Merchant and the Ifrit. Teori penerimaan budaya digunakan untuk meneroka bagaimana pembaca, penterjemah, dan institusi sastra Eropah membina semula naratif Arab melalui eksotisasi, penyesuaian, dan tawar-menawar ideologi, sekaligus membentuk semula maknanya dalam wacana sastra Eropah. Sementara itu, rangka kerja Thompson mengenal pasti perjalanan simbolik, arketip wira, pertemuan ghaib, dan struktur moral-simbolik yang terdapat dalam naratif tersebut. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa teks ini berfungsi bukan sahaja sebagai hiburan sastra tetapi juga sebagai alat simbolik diplomasi budaya yang menyusun semula kedudukan identiti Arab dalam wacana sastra Eropah. Tiga dapatan

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utama timbul: pertama, simbol mitologi membina perjalanan heroik dan tamadun yang memudahkan pemahaman antara budaya; kedua, strategi penceritaan Shahrazad mewakili rintangan intelektual dan transformasi sosial dalam struktur patriarki dan penjajahan; dan ketiga, penerimaan Eropah mencerminkan penafsiran lintas budaya yang pada masa sama menonjolkan keunikan dan mengiktiraf warisan sastera Arab dalam sastera dunia, sambil memperkukuh wacana penyahpenjajahan sastera dan konsep naratif diplomasi budaya.

Kata Kunci: diplomasi budaya; pengembaraan imaginatif; pengembaraan mitologi; mitologi simbolik; transkulturalisasi

INTRODUCTION

The study of the mythological, imaginative, and factual journey of Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah from the East to Europe is of urgent academic and practical importance. This narrative not only represents the cultural heritage of the Arab world but also significantly shaped European cultural imagination since the 18th century. Scholarly discourse identifies the Hikayat as a complex narrative form, intertwining myth, imaginative reality, and social facts in a trans-civilizational dialogue (Dong, 2024), while also serving as a vehicle for reinterpreting collective cultural identity. This influence is evidenced by the text's persistent reprinting in Europe following Antoine Galland's 1704 French translation, as well as the adaptation of its narrative techniques in modern European literature (Pereira, 2014a). Furthermore, the character of Syahrazad has contributed to shaping the image of the feminine in European feminist imaginaries (Sreekumar & Poongodi, 2024). Thus, this research is crucial for revitalizing local traditions and enhancing global cultural dialogue within the field of cross-cultural literary studies.

Scholarly interest in Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah underscores the growing recognition of Eastern literature that weaves myth, imagination, and fact into a complex cultural tapestry. This text was selected due to its evolution from oral tradition into a transcultural aesthetic artifact via Galland's French translation—positioning it squarely within global reception studies. Gasser (2019a) explores how narrative journeys remap peripheral geographies to challenge Eurocentric narratives, thereby offering a suitable framework for understanding the repositioning of Alfu Lailah beyond its origin. Harrison & Gayle (2020) examines how literary journeys facilitate self-transformation through spiritual exemplars, which aligns with the transformative role of Shahrazad's narrative agency. Sreekumar & Poongodi (2024) analyze how women's journeys in Disney films shape cultural perceptions, providing a comparative lens for evaluating gendered narrative diplomacy in Alfu Lailah. These studies collectively expose a research gap: although they illuminate ideological dynamics in narrative travel, none directly address the mechanisms of transcultural textual migration or the ideological underpinnings of Western reception of Eastern texts. This study's original contribution lies in its analysis of the myth–imagination–fact triad in Alfu Lailah wa Lailah as a migratory text that persistently traverses cultural, linguistic, and temporal borders.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah and its reception in European literature, previous studies have predominantly focused on orientalist representation, narrative aesthetics, translation history, or comparative literary motifs. Existing research has not sufficiently examined the fundamental problem of how this classical Arabic text undergoes a transformation from a localized oral narrative into a transcultural literary artifact that actively reconstructs Arab cultural identity within European intellectual and literary discourse. More specifically, there remains a significant analytical gap concerning the

mechanisms through which mythological, imaginative, and factual narrative structures function simultaneously as instruments of cultural negotiation, symbolic diplomacy, and epistemological repositioning in cross-cultural reception processes. The absence of such analysis has resulted in the tendency to treat Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah merely as an exotic literary object rather than as an active narrative agent participating in the formation of global literary consciousness. Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study is the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of explaining how the text's narrative migration from the Arab world to Europe reshapes perceptions of Arab identity, gender representation, and intercultural relations through symbolic and transcultural literary mechanisms. This study addresses that problem by integrating symbolic mythology, narrative-cultural analysis, and transcultural reception theory to examine the transformation of the Hikayat into a medium of cultural diplomacy and global literary repositioning.

This study argues that Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah undergoes a transcultural transformation from a localized oral narrative into an active literary artifact that reconstructs Arab cultural identity within European intellectual and literary discourse. Rather than functioning merely as an exotic literary object, the Hikayat operates as a narrative agent through which mythological, imaginative, and factual structures simultaneously mediate cultural negotiation, symbolic diplomacy, and epistemological repositioning in cross-cultural reception. The research specifically examines how the migration of the text from the Arab world to Europe reshapes perceptions of Arab identity, gender representation, and intercultural relations through symbolic literary mechanisms and narrative reception. The first hypothesis proposes that the narrative structure of the Hikayat reflects mythological patterns of symbolic and heroic journeys that contribute to intercultural understanding and the reconstruction of civilizational meaning. The second hypothesis argues that the character of Shahrazad functions as a cultural agent who negotiates power through storytelling, representing intellectual resistance and female subversion within patriarchal discourse. This study tests both hypotheses by integrating symbolic mythology, narrative-cultural analysis, and transcultural reception theory to explain the transformation of the Hikayat into a medium of cultural diplomacy and global literary repositioning.

This study critically repositions Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah beyond its dominant treatment as exotic entertainment, translation material, or orientalist aesthetic object. Unlike previous studies that isolate textual motifs, narrative style, or European reception, this research introduces two interconnected research questions that foreground the Hikayat as an active epistemological and transcultural force. The first question investigates how mythological, imaginative, and factual narrative structures function simultaneously as symbolic mechanisms for reconstructing Arab cultural identity within European literary consciousness. This differs from earlier studies by shifting analysis from representation to epistemological transformation and cultural repositioning. The second question examines how Shahrazad operates not merely as a literary heroine, but as a discursive agent of narrative diplomacy who negotiates patriarchal and orientalist power through storytelling. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of symbolic mythology, transcultural reception, and narrative-cultural analysis to formulate a new framework of literary diplomacy and decolonial textual migration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship on mythological, imaginative, and factual journey narratives demonstrates a growing recognition that journeys are not merely thematic devices but epistemological infrastructures through which identity, cultural memory, and power relations are constructed, contested, and reconfigured. However, despite this breadth, the literature remains fragmented across thematic clusters that rarely converge into a unified explanatory framework of transcultural meaning production.

Mythological journey studies (Bhattacharyya, 2021; Pereira, 2014) emphasize narrative as a symbolic structure of existential recovery and collective memory, yet they differ in emphasis: Bhattacharyya foregrounds individual spiritual anchoring, whereas Pereira frames myth as collective resistance. While complementary, these studies do not fully theorize how myth operates as a mechanism of cross-cultural epistemic transfer. Similarly, Gasser (2019) and Gieba (2021) highlight the role of European peripheries in reconfiguring spatial and historical marginality, but their focus remains Eurocentric in spatial re-mapping rather than intercultural negotiation.

Studies of imaginative journeys (Anu & Deepa, 2024; Samuel A & Priscilla B, 2023; Sikorska, 2021) collectively demonstrate that imagination functions as a heterotopic site for emotional displacement and mnemonic reconstruction. However, these works primarily emphasize interiority and affect, without sufficiently connecting imaginative mobility to broader geopolitical or postcolonial cultural rearticulation. Likewise, analyses of spatial reconfiguration in Gasser (2019) and Çelik (2022) point to alternative cartographies of belonging, yet they remain descriptive of narrative space rather than interpretive of ideological function.

Factual journey narratives (Kelley, 2024; Moran, 2022; Caputo, 2024; Carroll & Carroll, 2022; López & Ryan, 2023; Rawlins & Hooper, 2022; Tennøy et al., 2022) further complicate the distinction between mobility and immobility, realism and constructed epistemology. While these studies collectively demonstrate that factual travel narratives encode power, trauma, and environmental ethics, they remain analytically separated from mythological and imaginative frameworks, thereby reinforcing a compartmentalized understanding of “journey.”

Finally, studies on cultural diplomacy and symbolic mobility (Dung, 2025; Bahtiar et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2023; Hamamra et al., 2025; Chen, 2021; Rózsavölgyi, 2023; Dudek, 2022; Bako, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025; Nasir et al., 2024) suggest that journeys function as instruments of soft power, identity negotiation, and postcolonial critique. Nevertheless, these works largely treat diplomacy as thematic outcome rather than structural narrative mechanism.

Across these strands, a key limitation emerges: existing scholarship has not systematically integrated mythological, imaginative, and factual journeys into a unified analytical model that explains how transcultural meaning is produced through narrative migration. More critically, the role of such narrative structures in shaping European perceptions of Arab cultural identity remains under-theorized. This fragmentation results in descriptive accumulation rather than explanatory synthesis. Therefore, this study advances a synthetic framework in which journey narratives are conceptualized as integrated epistemological systems that operate simultaneously as myth-making, affective mediation, and cultural diplomacy.

Previous scholarship on Arabian Nights has predominantly concentrated on Orientalist reception, translation history, and narrative aesthetics, yet it has insufficiently examined how the text operates as a dynamic mechanism of transcultural negotiation that actively repositions Arab identity within European intellectual consciousness. This study addresses that gap by introducing the analytical framework of the myth–imagination–fact triad as a cultural strategy through which *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* functions not merely as a literary artifact, but as a migratory epistemic text that continuously transforms across linguistic, historical, and ideological boundaries. Unlike earlier studies that mainly discuss European fascination with exoticism or the literary influence of Galland’s translation, this research specifically investigates how symbolic myth, imaginative narration, and factual cultural memory interact to construct a form of narrative cultural diplomacy capable of reshaping European perceptions of Arab civilization. Evidence for this originality is demonstrated through the close reading of Shahrazad and “The Merchant and the Ifrit,” where narrative structures are interpreted as instruments of intercultural mediation, identity negotiation, and postcolonial symbolic resistance rather than solely aesthetic storytelling devices. Consequently, this article offers a distinct conceptual contribution by repositioning Arabian Nights within global literary discourse as an active agent of epistemological transformation, thereby extending current debates on literary decolonization, transcultural reception, and the cultural mobility of classical Arabic texts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design with a narrative-cultural approach, emphasizing the exploration of meaning, symbolic structures, and cultural dynamics within literary texts, particularly in the context of the transcultural transformation of *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah*. The qualitative design is selected for its ability to conduct in-depth analysis of intertextuality, narrative transformation, and cultural reception—dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative or statistical methods. This approach offers interpretative flexibility and analytical depth in examining symbols, characters, and events as products of complex cultural constructions, surpassing the generalizability constraints of quantitative methods. The first research question explores the framed narrative structure and heroic journey patterns as manifested in the tale of Shahrazad, analyzing mythological motifs, symbolic schemes, and the transformation of spirituality within the Arab cultural framework. The second question examines Shahrazad’s role as a cultural agent negotiating patriarchal power and her representation in shaping female imagery within modern European aesthetics. Hence, the qualitative design is epistemologically appropriate and capable of accommodating the complexity of textual journeys and meaning shifts in global cultural contexts.

The material object of this study is specifically limited to the *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* text, focusing on Shahrazad’s narrative and its transformation from the Arab world to Europe through translation and cultural reception. This limitation is justified by the fact that Shahrazad’s narrative contains the most representative and richly layered mythological, imaginative, and factual elements necessary for cross-cultural interpretation. The first variable involves the narrative of “The Merchant and the Ifrit,” characterized by symbolic-mythological features, rooted in classical Arabic oral tradition, and set within the premodern urban Arab cultural context. The second variable involves the narrative of the one-thousand-and-first night, which illustrates the symbolic transformation of the female figure through Shahrazad—

feminist in nature, framed in structure, and represented within the aesthetic discourse of modern Europe. Thus, the research focuses on texts that exhibit intertextual and ideological dynamics within the broader migration of Arab culture into the European intellectual landscape.

This study employs a qualitative narrative-cultural approach using qualitative document analysis and narrative close reading to examine the symbolic, mythological, and transcultural dimensions of Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah. The analytical framework integrates cultural reception theory and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework to construct a systematic and theoretically grounded interpretation of the selected narratives. Cultural reception theory is utilized to analyze how European readers, translators, and literary institutions reconstructed Arabic narratives through processes of exoticization, adaptation, ideological negotiation, and aesthetic reinterpretation, thereby transforming the meanings of the text within European literary discourse. Meanwhile, Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework is employed to identify symbolic journeys, heroic archetypes, supernatural encounters, moral-symbolic structures, and mythological representations embedded within the narratives.

The primary data consist of narrative passages, framed storytelling structures, symbolic dialogues, mythological motifs, and representations of gender relations found in selected tales, particularly "The Merchant and the Ifrit" and the narratives surrounding Shahrazad. Data collection was conducted through intensive textual observation and selective categorization of passages relevant to the research questions. The analysis prioritizes semantic depth, symbolic representation, ideological transformation, and transcultural narrative reception within the text. The analytical procedure was conducted systematically through four interconnected stages.

The first stage was data identification and coding. At this stage, textual units were selected and coded according to thematic indicators derived from the theoretical framework. Codes related to Thompson's symbolic myth framework included heroic archetype, supernatural encounter, symbolic journey, moral conflict, and mythological symbolism. Simultaneously, codes derived from cultural reception theory included exoticization, patriarchal negotiation, cultural reconstruction, gender representation, and European aesthetic reception. This coding process enabled the categorization of narrative elements according to their symbolic and transcultural functions. The second stage involved thematic classification and narrative mapping. After coding, the data were grouped into broader thematic categories to identify recurring narrative structures, ideological tendencies, and symbolic patterns. In the analysis of "The Merchant and the Ifrit," the study mapped supernatural confrontation, justice symbolism, and Arab spiritual imagination as mythological structures reflecting collective cultural consciousness. In the analysis of Shahrazad, the study classified narrative patterns related to female agency, narrative authority, patriarchal negotiation, and the transformation of women's representation within European literary perception. The third stage consisted of interpretative close reading. At this stage, each coded narrative fragment was interpreted contextually by connecting textual meaning, symbolic structure, and transcultural reception. The analysis examined how mythological elements functioned not merely as fantasy devices, but as symbolic representations of Arab-Islamic spirituality, ethical order, and civilizational worldview. Simultaneously, Shahrazad's narrative role was interpreted as a cultural strategy through which storytelling transforms authority, negotiates patriarchal violence, and reconstructs women's intellectual legitimacy within European receptions of Arabic literature. The fourth stage involved theoretical synthesis and contextual interpretation. The findings

from thematic analysis and close reading were synthesized within the broader framework of transcultural literary studies. This stage aimed to explain how Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah functions simultaneously as a literary narrative, symbolic myth system, and cultural negotiation mechanism within European intellectual discourse. Through this systematic analytical procedure, the study ensures methodological rigor, theoretical consistency, and analytical transparency in examining the transcultural transformation of Arabic narratives.

RESULTS

REPOSITIONING ARAB IDENTITY THROUGH A MYTHOLOGICAL-EUROPEAN JOURNEY

This section analyzes five principal dimensions that position Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah as a transcultural text with symbolic and ideological significance beyond folktale tradition. First, the study examines the frame narrative structure as a strategy of discursive survival and patriarchal negotiation through Shahrazad's storytelling. Second, it explores symbolic and mythological elements, particularly supernatural figures such as the Ifrit, as representations of Arab-Islamic ethical cosmology and collective belief systems. Third, the analysis investigates cultural imagination as an epistemological framework integrating religious intertextuality and Arab collective identity. Fourth, the discussion addresses the repositioning of Arab cultural identity within European discourse through Galland's translation and orientalist reception. Finally, the study analyzes Shahrazad's transcultural influence on European gender discourse and literary consciousness. These dimensions demonstrate how Alfu Lailah wa Lailah functions as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and transcultural reinterpretation between Arab and European intellectual traditions.

The narrative structure of Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah is characterized by its use of a frame narrative technique, which allows Shahrazad to embed layered stories within a central tale as a strategy to delay her execution. This technique is marked by the recurring phrase:

وَقَالَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ: بَلَّغَنِي أَيُّهَا الْمَلِكُ السَّعِيدُ....

("Shahrazad said: It has reached me, O happy King...")

This recurring formula functions as a diegetic framing mechanism that structures the entire narrative into recursive embedded tales. From a narratological perspective, it establishes a multi-layered narrative hierarchy in which Shahrazad occupies both the role of narrator and survival strategist. The repetition creates a controlled suspension of narrative closure, functioning as a temporal deferral mechanism that prevents execution through storytelling continuity. From a cultural reception perspective, this structure was later reinterpreted in Europe as evidence of "Oriental narrative exoticism," where the layered storytelling was aestheticized rather than understood as a strategic discourse of power negotiation. Thus, the frame narrative becomes both a textual survival strategy and a site of later ideological reinterpretation.

Within this narrative structure lie symbolic and mythological elements that embody Arab-Islamic cultural values, enriching the depth and complexity of the text. These elements reflect a collective belief in the supernatural and the relationship between the seen and the unseen. One notable example is found in the tale of "The Merchant and the Ifrit," where a supernatural being suddenly appears to exact vengeance:

وَإِذَا هُوَ بِعَفْرِيتٍ طَوِيلِ الْقَامَةِ ...

(“Suddenly a tall Ifrit appeared with a drawn sword...”).

This passage represents a mythic rupture within narrative reality, where the sudden appearance of the Ifrit signals the intrusion of the supernatural into the human moral order. In Thompson’s framework, the Ifrit functions as a symbolic archetype of retributive justice, embodying existential fear, moral consequence, and metaphysical authority. Rather than being interpreted as a literal supernatural entity, the Ifrit operates as a mythological coding of ethical cosmology, where human actions are embedded within a system of supernatural accountability. This reflects a structured mythic imagination in which morality is externalized into symbolic beings, forming what Thompson identifies as a heroic–supernatural confrontation schema.

These mythological elements also function as expressions of Arab cultural imagination, which serves as a mirror of collective identity. Here, imagination is not an escape from reality but a tool for interpreting reality within a metaphysical framework. The narrative refers to Qur’anic verses such as:

قَالَ عَفْرِيثٌ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ ...

(“An Ifrit among the jinn said: I will bring it to you...”)

This Qur’anic intertextual reference functions as a cultural legitimization device that anchors supernatural discourse within an accepted epistemic framework. Within Jauss and Iser’s reception theory, such references establish a horizon of expectations where the supernatural is not irrational but culturally intelligible. The integration of Qur’anic language demonstrates that imagination in the Hikayat is not separable from religious epistemology, but rather forms a continuum between metaphysical belief and narrative construction. This challenges Western readings that frame such elements as purely fantastical, instead revealing a structured epistemological system of meaning-making.

The repositioning of Arab cultural identity within European discourse began with Antoine Galland’s French translation in 1704—decades before the text’s official publication in Arabic. This historical sequence is significant as it reveals how European interpretation preceded Arab cultural internalization. The translation by Antoine Galland is not a neutral linguistic transfer but a productive act of narrative reconstruction. Through reception theory, this moment represents a shift in the interpretive horizon, where European readers actively reshaped the text according to orientalist expectations. The inclusion of additional tales such as Aladdin demonstrates that translation operated as creative appropriation, producing a hybrid text that reflects European imaginative demands rather than original Arabic narrative integrity. This process transformed the Hikayat into an orientalist epistemic object, where “the East” was reconstructed as magical, exotic, and culturally othered.

The arrival of *Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* in Europe had a profound effect on cultural perception and gender discourse, particularly through the character of Shahrazad. Her influence extended into the reimagining of womanhood in patriarchal European contexts. As one passage confirms:

وَأَثَرَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ فِي النِّسَاءِ الْفَرَنْسِيَّاتِ ...

(“Shahrazad influenced French women and changed the course of women’s history in Europe”)

This claim should be understood not as historical causality but as a discursive effect of reception history. Shahrazad becomes a symbolic projection of narrative intelligence, later reinterpreted within Enlightenment and proto-feminist frameworks. From a cultural reception standpoint, her figure is re-signified in Europe as an emblem of female intellectual agency, although this meaning is not inherent in the original text but constructed through European interpretive frameworks. Thus, Shahrazad operates as a transcultural signifier of gendered resistance, shaped by both Arabic narrative logic and Western ideological reinterpretation.

To further illustrate the narrative construction and thematic depth of these five aspects, the following analytical table synthesizes representational components of *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah*. The table includes original Arabic excerpts, translations, and analytical descriptions highlighting the connections between narrative structure, mythological symbolism, cultural imagination, the repositioning of identity within orientalist discourse, and the resulting implications for gender construction and Eastern perceptions in global literature. This critical interpretative approach enables a deeper epistemological tracing of the text's transcultural and transhistorical dynamics.

TABLE 1. Transcultural Reception of Alf Laylah wa Laylah

Analytical Aspect	Textual Data (Arabic and Translation)	Description and Commentary
Narrative Structure: Frame Narrative	النص العربي: وَقَالَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ: بَلَّغْنِي أَيُّهَا الْمَلِكُ السَّعِيدُ ... Translation: Shahrazad said: It has reached me, O happy King...	The recurring formula functions as a frame narrative device that delays closure and sustains Shahrazad's survival through storytelling. European reception later interpreted this structure as a form of Oriental narrative exoticism.
Symbolic and Mythological Elements	النص العربي: وَإِذَا هُوَ بِعَفْرِيتٍ... فَمُ حَتَّى أَقْتُلَكَ كَمَا قَتَلْتَ وَلَدِي . Translation: Suddenly, a tall Ifrit appeared... Arise, I will kill you just as you killed my son.	The Ifrit symbolizes supernatural justice, existential fear, and moral accountability. Within Thompson's framework, it represents a mythological structure linking human morality with metaphysical consequences.
Cultural Imagination as Arab Identity	النص العربي: قَالَ عَفْرِيتٌ مِّنَ الْجِنِّ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَقُومَ مِنْ مَّقَامِكَ... Translation: An Ifrit from among the jinn said: I will bring it to you before you rise from your seat...	The Qur'anic intertextual reference legitimizes supernatural imagination within Arab-Islamic epistemology. Imagination functions as a medium of spirituality, ethics, and collective cultural identity.
Repositioning Arab Cultural Identity in European Discourse	النص العربي: وَقِيلَ إِنَّ أَوَّلَ تَرْجُمَةٍ... فِي عَامِ ١٧٠٤ م . Translation: It is said that the first translation of <i>Alfu Lailah wa Lailah</i> into French was in 1704 CE.	Galland's translation reconstructed Arabic narratives according to European orientalist expectations. The text was transformed into an exotic cultural object within European literary discourse.
Impact in Europe	النص العربي: وَأَثَرَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ فِي النِّسَاءِ الْفَرَنَسِيَّاتِ ... Translation: Shahrazad influenced French women and changed the course of women's history in Europe.	Shahrazad was reinterpreted in Europe as a symbol of female intelligence, emotional diplomacy, and gender resistance within Enlightenment and proto-feminist discourse.

TRANSFORMING PATRIARCHY THROUGH NARRATIVE DIPLOMACY

This section analyzes Shahrazad as a transcultural cultural agent who negotiates patriarchal authority through symbolic narration and ethical discourse in *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah*. Using cultural reception theory and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework, the analysis examines how the narrative structure initially constructs women as objects of political domination and symbolic punishment within a patriarchal sociocultural system, particularly through Shahrayar's ritualized violence. Through coding and interpretative close reading, the study identifies Shahrazad's storytelling strategy as a form of female agency, symbolic journey, and cultural diplomacy that gradually destabilizes patriarchal absolutism through discourse, memory, and moral persuasion. The discussion further explores how motherhood functions as a moral-symbolic structure and mechanism of cultural negotiation, transforming Shahrazad from a survivor of patriarchal violence into a symbolic agent of civilizational restoration. In addition, the section investigates the transcultural reception of Shahrazad within European literary discourse, where she was reconstructed simultaneously as an exotic feminine figure and a proto-feminist model of intellectual authority. The analysis concludes by examining the duality of Shahrazad's symbolic role—outwardly submissive yet narratively dominant—demonstrating how her apparent obedience conceals discursive power capable of reshaping gender authority, ethical consciousness, and European perceptions of Arab-Islamic femininity.

The narrative structure of *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* reflects a patriarchal sociocultural system in which women are initially positioned as objects of political domination and symbolic punishment. Through the coding process based on cultural reception theory and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework, the statement:

وَكَانَ الْمَلِكُ يَأْخُذُ امْرَأَةً كُلَّ لَيْلَةٍ وَيَقْتُلُهَا فِي الصَّبَاحِ.

(“The king took a woman every night and killed her in the morning.”).

was categorized under the code's patriarchal negotiation, moral conflict, and mythological symbolism. Interpretative close reading demonstrates that this passage does not merely depict royal violence, but symbolically represents a crisis of masculine authority rooted in betrayal trauma. Within Thompson's framework, Shahrayar functions as a distorted heroic archetype whose authority is maintained through ritualized violence. Simultaneously, cultural reception theory reveals that European receptions frequently reconstructed this narrative as evidence of “Oriental despotism,” thereby reinforcing exoticized perceptions of Arab-Islamic societies. However, the narrative structure itself gradually destabilizes this patriarchal absolutism through Shahrazad's discursive intervention.

The second coded fragment appears in Shahrazad's declaration:

قَالَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ: إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ أَحَدِّثَ الْمَلِكَ بِقِصَصٍ تُؤَخِّرُ قَتْلِي.

(“Shahrazad said: I want to tell stories to the king that will delay my execution.”)

This passage was classified under the categories female agency, symbolic journey, narrative authority, and cultural reconstruction. Through interpretative close reading, Shahrazad's storytelling strategy is analyzed as a symbolic journey in which narration becomes an instrument of ethical transformation and cultural diplomacy. Rather than confronting patriarchal violence physically, Shahrazad negotiates authority through discourse, memory, and moral persuasion.

Within Thompson's symbolic myth framework, her narrative role reflects the heroic archetype of the intellectual mediator who restores social balance through wisdom rather than warfare. At the same time, cultural reception theory demonstrates that European literary discourse reconstructed Shahrazad as an emblem of exotic femininity while simultaneously admiring her intellectual sophistication and emotional intelligence. This dual reception transformed Shahrazad into a transcultural figure positioned between Oriental fantasy and proto-feminist representation.

The narrative reaches a further symbolic transformation through Shahrazad's invocation of motherhood:

هَؤُلَاءِ أَوْلَادُكَ، وَقَدْ تَمَنَيْتُ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ تُعْتَقَنِي مِنَ الْقَتْلِ إِكْرَامًا لَهُؤُلَاءِ الْأَطْفَالِ

("These are your children. I ask that you spare my life for their sake.").

This fragment was coded as moral-symbolic structure, gender representation, and cultural negotiation. Thematic classification indicates that motherhood functions not merely as a domestic identity, but as a symbolic mechanism of moral regeneration and dynastic continuity. Close reading reveals that Shahrazad strategically transforms maternal discourse into ethical authority capable of reshaping political consciousness within the palace. Within the transcultural framework, this representation contributed to European reinterpretations of Eastern femininity, where maternal intelligence and emotional diplomacy became associated with moral refinement rather than passive obedience. Consequently, Shahrazad emerges not only as a survivor of patriarchal violence, but also as a symbolic agent of civilizational restoration.

The transcultural dimension of Shahrazad's influence becomes more explicit in the statement:

وَقِيلَ إِنَّ شَهْرَزَادَ أَثَرَتْ فِي بِنَاءِ شَخْصِيَّةِ الْمَرْأَةِ الْأُورُوبِيَّةِ فِي الْقَرْنِ الثَّامِنِ عَشَرَ.

("It is said that Shahrazad influenced the formation of the European woman's character in the eighteenth century.").

This textual unit was coded under European aesthetic reception, cultural reconstruction, and transcultural transformation. Through cultural reception analysis, the study identifies how Galland's translation facilitated the integration of Shahrazad into Enlightenment literary discourse, where she was reconstructed as a model of literacy, emotional intelligence, and narrative authority. European readers did not merely consume Shahrazad as an exotic figure, but also appropriated her as a symbolic representation of intellectual femininity. This process demonstrates how Arabic narrative traditions participated in shaping European discussions regarding morality, gender, and civilizational refinement during the eighteenth century.

The final symbolic fragment appears in the description:

وَقَامَتْ عَلَى قَدَمَيْهَا وَقَبَلَتْ الْأَرْضَ بَيْنَ يَدَيِ الْمَلِكِ

("She stood and kissed the ground before the king.").

This passage was categorized under patriarchal negotiation, symbolic submission, and narrative authority. Interpretative close reading reveals that Shahrazad's gesture outwardly reflects courtly obedience consistent with patriarchal norms, yet symbolically conceals discursive dominance. While appearing submissive within the political hierarchy, Shahrazad simultaneously controls narrative progression, moral education, and emotional transformation within the kingdom.

Thompson's symbolic myth framework identifies this duality as a mythological inversion in which apparent weakness becomes the source of transformative authority. Through theoretical synthesis, the study concludes that Shahrazad functions as a transcultural cultural agent whose narrative strategies reconstruct gender authority, negotiate violence, and reshape European perceptions of Arab-Islamic femininity within global literary discourse.

To synthesize the findings, the following table presents five interconnected dimensions that construct Shahrazad as a transcultural agent of transformation within patriarchal structures. Through systematic coding, thematic classification, and interpretative close reading based on cultural reception theory and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework, the analysis demonstrates that Shahrazad's narrative role extends beyond fictional storytelling into the realm of cultural negotiation and symbolic resistance. The analyzed dimensions—patriarchal negotiation, narrative diplomacy, maternal symbolism, European aesthetic reception, and symbolic submission—reveal how Shahrazad strategically transforms discourse into an instrument of ethical authority and social reconstruction. The Arabic textual fragments analyzed in this study show that her narrative agency destabilizes patriarchal absolutism, reconstructs women's intellectual legitimacy, and reshapes transcultural perceptions of Arab-Islamic femininity within European literary discourse. Consequently, Shahrazad emerges not merely as a literary heroine, but as a symbolic cultural mediator whose narrative strategies contribute to broader discussions of gender, morality, power, and civilizational transformation across global literary traditions.

TABLE 2. Shahrazad: Gender, Agency, and Narrative Authority

Aspect of Analysis	Textual Data (Arabic and Translation)	Description and Commentary
Patriarchal Negotiation and Mythological Symbolism	وَكَاْنَ الْمَلِكُ يَأْخُذُ امْرَأَةً كُلَّ لَيْلَةٍ وَيَقْتُلُهَا فِي الصَّبَاحِ "The king would take a woman every night and kill her in the morning."	This passage was coded under patriarchal negotiation, moral conflict, and mythological symbolism. Interpretative close reading demonstrates that the text symbolically reflects a crisis of masculine authority rooted in betrayal trauma. Within Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework, Shahrazad functions as a distorted heroic archetype whose authority is maintained through ritualized violence. Through cultural reception theory, European literary discourse frequently reconstructed this narrative as evidence of "Oriental despotism," reinforcing exoticized perceptions of Arab-Islamic societies. However, Shahrazad's later narrative intervention gradually destabilizes this patriarchal absolutism.
Female Agency and Narrative Authority	قَالَتْ شَهْرَزَادُ: إِنِّي أُرِيدُ أَنْ أُحَدِّثَ الْمَلِكَ بِقِصَصٍ تُؤَخِّرُ قَتْلِي "Shahrazad said: I want to tell the king stories that will delay my execution."	This fragment was categorized under female agency, symbolic journey, narrative authority, and cultural reconstruction. Shahrazad's storytelling strategy functions as a symbolic journey in which narration becomes an instrument of ethical transformation and cultural diplomacy. Rather than confronting violence physically, she negotiates authority through discourse and moral persuasion. Within Thompson's framework, Shahrazad represents the heroic archetype of the intellectual mediator who restores social balance through wisdom. Simultaneously, European receptions reconstructed her as both an exotic feminine figure and a proto-feminist symbol of intellectual femininity.
Motherhood as Moral-Symbolic Structure	هَؤُلَاءِ أَوْلَادُكَ، وَقَدْ تَمَنَيْتُ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ تُعَفِّقَنِي مِنَ الْقَتْلِ إِنْ كَرِهْتَ هَؤُلَاءِ الْأَطْفَالَ "These are your children. I plead with you to spare my life for the sake of these children."	This passage was coded as moral-symbolic structure, gender representation, and cultural negotiation. Thematic analysis indicates that motherhood functions not merely as a domestic identity, but as a symbolic mechanism of moral regeneration and dynastic continuity. Through close reading, Shahrazad transforms maternal discourse into ethical authority capable of reshaping political consciousness within the palace. Within the transcultural framework, this representation contributed to European reinterpretations of Eastern femininity as morally refined and intellectually influential rather than passively submissive.
European Aesthetic Reception and Transcultural Transformation	وَقِيلَ إِنَّ شَهْرَزَادَ أَثَّرَتْ فِي بِنَاءِ شَخْصِيَّةِ الْمَرْأَةِ الْأَوْرُوبِيَّةِ فِي الْقَرْنِ الثَّامِنِ عَشَرَ "Shahrazad influenced the shaping of the	This textual unit was categorized under European aesthetic reception, cultural reconstruction, and transcultural transformation. Through cultural reception analysis, Galland's translation is understood as facilitating Shahrazad's integration into Enlightenment literary discourse. European readers reconstructed her as a model of literacy, emotional intelligence, and narrative authority. This demonstrates how Arabic narrative traditions contributed to European discussions concerning morality, gender, and civilizational refinement during the eighteenth century.

Symbolic Submission and Discursive Dominance	European female character in the 18th century." وَقَامَتْ عَلَى قَدَمَيْهَا وَقَبَّلَتْ الْأَرْضَ بَيْنَ يَدَيْ الْمَلِكِ "She stood and kissed the ground before the king."	This fragment was coded under patriarchal negotiation, symbolic submission, and narrative authority. Interpretative close reading reveals that Shahrazad outwardly performs obedience according to patriarchal court norms, yet symbolically conceals discursive dominance. Although appearing submissive, she simultaneously controls narrative progression, moral education, and emotional transformation within the kingdom. Thompson's symbolic myth framework interprets this duality as a mythological inversion in which apparent weakness becomes the source of transformative authority. Consequently, Shahrazad emerges as a transcultural cultural agent who reconstructs gender authority and reshapes European perceptions of Arab-Islamic femininity.
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DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the mythical, imaginative, and factual journeys in Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah operate not only as narrative devices but also as interconnected cultural mechanisms that construct, negotiate, and transmit Arab cultural identity across different historical and civilizational contexts. The mythical dimension, as reflected in "The Merchant and the Ifrit," symbolically represents ethical tensions between justice, destiny, and human agency within the moral imagination of medieval Arab-Islamic society, rather than merely presenting supernatural entertainment. Meanwhile, the imaginative dimension enables the text to create alternative narrative spaces through which cultural values, political anxieties, and social ideals are articulated symbolically. The factual dimension, particularly through the manuscript's translation and circulation in eighteenth-century Europe, illustrates how the text became embedded within European intellectual discourse, although often mediated through Orientalist frameworks that exoticized and selectively reconstructed Arab culture. Instead, the analysis argues more cautiously that Shahrazad emerged as a significant literary symbol of female narrative authority whose reception contributed to European discussions on voice, morality, and gendered intelligence within literary discourse. By integrating narratological analysis with cultural and reception theory, this study demonstrates that Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah functioned simultaneously as a literary text, a contested cultural representation, and a medium of symbolic intercultural negotiation.

The formal object of this study—the analysis of mythical, imaginative, and factual journeys—demonstrates strong relevance to the material object, namely the narrative text of Shahrazad that undergoes cultural transformation from the East to Europe. This relevance lies in the structural symbolism embedded in the narrative, which parallels cultural and ideological representations as reflected in the Western reception of the text. Saleh et al. (2023) emphasize that mystical and archetypal journeys serve as dynamic narrative vehicles that articulate identity transformation and spiritual displacement across cultures. Complementing this view, Rózsavölgyi (2023) explores the literary function of the journey as a symbolic topos, underscoring its potential to mediate between the imagined and the real within transcultural storytelling. Thus, the contextualization of this study underscores the critical role of narrative interpretation as a site for negotiating Arab identity and repositioning Eastern discourse within the global cultural imagination.

The analysis reveals that these three modes of journey—mythical, imaginative, and factual—serve as representational media to reconstruct cultural memory and broaden the collective Arab identity within a global framework. These journeys transcend mere storytelling; they function as symbolic responses to historical ruptures and sociocultural dislocation. Samuel A & Priscilla B (2023) emphasize that spatial identity emerges through memory and narrative movement,

demonstrating how literary journeys negotiate personal and communal senses of place. Inarmal and Samuel & Priscilla, (2023) and Inarmal & Rossmann (2024) illustrate how narratives of displacement reconfigure the meaning of home and selfhood, highlighting the psychological depth of imagined returns. Accordingly, these three modes of journey construct a narrative reality that redefines identity through the traversal of historical and geopolitical boundaries, employing the transformative power of symbols and discursive movement.

The study demonstrates that Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah bears significant implications as a medium of cultural diplomacy, converting local Arab narratives into transnational discourses that shape global perceptions of the East. This impact is reinforced by the success of its framed narrative structure and spiritual symbolism in aesthetically and ideologically mediating Arab values to European readers. The studies of Harrison & Gayle (2020) and Moran (2022) affirm that such narrative journeys create opportunities for self-transformation and the reconstitution of meaning across cultural borders. Meanwhile, Sogbe & Rosselló (2024) and Kelley (2024) argue that travel narratives can become arenas for utopian quests and cultural identity negotiation. Therefore, this work should not be viewed solely as a literary artifact, but also as a strategic instrument for repositioning Arab identity within global literary discourse.

This research aligns with prior studies that explore identity transformation through transboundary imagination, yet it diverges in its focus on narrative repurposing as a tool for symbolic diplomacy in the context of epistemic colonialism. Previous works, such as those by Gangan et al. (2022) and Anu & Deepa, (2024), have emphasized the mythic, diasporic, and existential trajectories of female protagonists—elements that parallel Shahrazad's role as a symbol of resistance and cultural strategy. However, the present study prioritizes the transformation of narrative function as a means of symbolic diplomacy, resonating with studies by Bahtiar et al. (2023) on the colonial pilgrimage as a site of Islamic identity negotiation, and Bobrovnikov & Kalinovsky (2021), who examine spiritual journeys as constructs of geopolitical discourse. In this regard, the study provides an innovative lens for understanding Eastern texts as epistemic agents within the domain of global literature.

A systematic theoretical and practical intervention is necessary to reframe Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah as an epistemic agent in the global transcultural discourse. The engagement of academic institutions, area studies centers, and interdisciplinary scholarly communities is crucial in constructing a theoretical framework that recognizes Eastern texts as subjects rather than mere objects of representation. In response to the first research question, the study recommends a postcolonial and cultural-hermeneutic approach within the global literature curriculum to prevent narratives such as Alfu Lailah from being marginalized within the Western canon—an effort best undertaken by scholars in comparative literature. Addressing the second research question, further studies on reception and translation aesthetics are encouraged, particularly by literary and translation research institutions. As a continuation of the study's core objective, the formulation of a theory of narrative cultural diplomacy should be developed through international academic forums. This strategy will contribute to the decolonization of literature and broaden the global epistemic horizon.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah should be understood not merely as a repository of folktales, but as a complex transcultural narrative system that continuously negotiates identity, morality, power, and civilizational perception across historical contexts.

The analysis reveals that the frame narrative structure functions as a strategic mechanism of discursive survival in which Shahrazad transforms storytelling into an instrument of ethical intervention and political negotiation. Likewise, mythological figures such as the Ifrit are interpreted not as simplistic fantasy elements, but as symbolic representations of Arab-Islamic ethical cosmology that encode concepts of justice, fear, and metaphysical accountability. By integrating narratology, cultural reception theory, and Carl Thompson's symbolic myth framework, this study argues that the interaction between narrative structure, mythic symbolism, and cultural imagination constitutes an epistemological system through which Arab cultural identity was articulated and reinterpreted within European intellectual discourse. Rather than claiming direct historical causality, the study carefully demonstrates that the European reception of Shahrazad operated primarily at the level of symbolic and discursive influence, particularly in Enlightenment literary culture, where her figure was reconstructed as a model of narrative intelligence, emotional diplomacy, and female intellectual agency.

This research also contributes to broader theoretical debates concerning orientalism, gender representation, and transcultural literary reception by critically engaging with previous criticisms directed toward *Hikayat Alfu Lailah wa Lailah*. Earlier studies frequently interpreted the text as reinforcing patriarchal domination, exoticizing Eastern femininity, and reproducing orientalist fantasies through depictions of violence, sensuality, and female submission. However, this study demonstrates that such readings become theoretically limited when the narrative is approached solely through static representational analysis. Through interpretative close reading, the article shows that Shahrazad's apparent submissiveness simultaneously conceals discursive authority, enabling her to destabilize patriarchal absolutism through ethical persuasion and narrative control. In this sense, the text contains an internal tension between patriarchal structure and female agency rather than functioning as a unidimensional legitimization of male power. Furthermore, the study critically explains that European appropriations of Shahrazad as a proto-feminist figure were not inherent meanings within the original Arabic text, but rather products of transcultural reconstruction shaped by Enlightenment and orientalist interpretive frameworks. This clarification allows the discussion to avoid overgeneralization while offering a more historically grounded and theoretically nuanced interpretation of gender and cultural representation.

Nevertheless, this study remains limited by its primary focus on textual discourse and early modern European reception, which leaves several dimensions insufficiently explored. The analysis has not comprehensively examined material historical evidence regarding the broader social impact of *Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* outside literary and intellectual circles, particularly in relation to concrete transformations in women's social history or institutional cultural change in Europe. In addition, contemporary transmedial adaptations—including cinema, digital media, television, and global popular culture—remain beyond the scope of the present discussion. Future studies may therefore expand this research through interdisciplinary approaches combining literary studies, intellectual history, gender studies, postcolonial theory, and media studies in order to trace how the symbolic structures of *Alfu Lailah wa Lailah* continue to circulate and transform across contemporary global contexts. Such developments would further strengthen the position of classical Arabic literature within comparative world literature and deepen scholarly understanding of transcultural narrative circulation in global modernity.

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