

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.3. 2018 (July-Sept)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE FRAME STORY OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

A frame story is a story told within a frame, or a story, constituting a frame for another story, or a series of other stories. The frame story is very succinctly narrated in the "Prologue" through a third-person omniscient narrator. He tells the reader of the time and place as well as the main characters of the *Arabian Nights*. The ancient, oriental story collection called the *Arabian Nights*, which we are all familiar with, is a classic representative of the use of framing technique. The conventions of the frames give the stories considerable independence. In the *1001 Nights*, the stories merely have to be good enough for the King to want them to be continued. The use of tales-within-tales is the hallmark of this wondrous narrative of fantastical imaginings.

Key Words: Frame story; Cliffhanger; fantastical

Introduction

A Frame story is a story told within a frame, or a story, constituting a frame for another story, or a series of other stories. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a "frame story" is "a story which serves as a framework within which a number of other stories are told." Katherine G. Gitts defines the frame narrative as "A framework or framing story is to be understood as a narrative which, however interesting in itself, was composed for the primary purpose of introducing and connecting a series of tales, which are the *raison d'être* of the whole work." (Paninnah Schram, available on the Internet). It is one of the oldest devices for groupings of tales.

The structural device of the 'Frame Story' is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the tales known as the *Arabian Nights*. In the *Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad uses this device to telling effect. With the use of this device the stories become the "pictures" of the "frame" tale, Shahrazad creates multiple levels of frames and stories by not only creating stories within the frame, created by an outside narrator, but also using stories within the frame as frames for other stories. In creating these levels, Shahrazad emphasizes the importance of her own frame tale, using it to her advantage, and creating a masterpiece of literary structure.

Discussion

The frame story is very succinctly narrated in the "Prologue" through a third-person omniscient narrator. He tells the reader of the time and place as well as the main characters of the *Arabian Nights*.

There are two main male characters, two real brothers, named Shahrayar and Shahzaman. They rule in separate regions of the Sasanid Empire. Shahrayar is the ruler of India, while the younger brother rules over Samarkand. They have not met for ten years. Then Shahrayar wishes to see his younger brother, Shahzaman. To summon his brother, Shahrayar sends his vizier, Jafar, who, as the narrator notes, has two vivacious

daughters, the older, Shahrazad, and, the younger, Duniyazad. After receiving the invitation from Shahrayar, brother Shahzaman makes preparations for his journey, but, just before leaving, he discovers his wife sleeping with a slave. Shahrayar kills her as well as her paramour in his anger. But he feels very unhappy. In such a woeful state he travels to see his brother. Shahzaman's depression confuses Shahrayar, who goes out hunting for 10 days, leaving Shahzaman in the palace. Shahzaman discovers Sharayar's wife and 20 of her slaves, having an unrestrained illicit relationship in the courtyard. Consequently, Shahzaman comes to feel that he is not alone in his troubles, and, hence, becomes much more cheerful than before. Shahrayar wishes to know the reason behind the change in his brother's attitude and presses him until he tells him all about what had been happening in the palace in his absence. Shahrayar, too, witnesses the actions of his wife and her slaves and becomes so upset that, to lift their spirits, he proposes that he and his brother travel until they find someone who is even more unfortunate than themselves.

During their journey, both the kings, once, come across a demon, who rises out of the sea, releases a woman from a glass box, and falls asleep with his head in her lap. All this while the kings keep watching them. The woman threatens them to make an illegal relationship with her, while the demon has been sleeping. Afterwards, she tells the brothers that she has had such relationships with a hundred men, showing them her purse full of their rings to prove it. The kings decide that no husband in the world could possibly be more ill-fated than that demon and so decide to return to their own kingdoms.

The frame story, then, focuses on Shahrayar. As soon as Shaharyar observes the disloyalty of his wife, he gets her beheaded by his official executioner. He, then, makes up his mind to put this penalty, even on all of his successive wives. Shahryar, marries a virgin each day, and has her beheaded the next morning, such that the new bride would not get a chance to betray him even once. This practice of his takes the lives of hundreds of young and innocent women, and this is carried out until there are no more young women in the kingdom. Then Shahrazad, who is the main female character of the tales, and is the daughter of the vizier, is presented as a savior from such femicide ordered by the cruel king. She becomes a succor to all the other females of the empire. On learning of these tragic developments and the grief of the brides' families, Shahrazad, the vizier's learned elder daughter, requests her father to marry her off to Shahryar, so that she can save the women-kind of the kingdom. This shocks the vizier; who could never imagine such a foolish plan from his wise daughter. He immediately refuses her for taking up a step that would leave her dead in no time. He attempts to dissuade his daughter with cautionary tales, but she remains determined in her decision. The unwilling father, at last gives permission to her, though reluctantly, and with a very heavy heart. Thus, she is prepared to marry the king, despite her father's best attempts to dissuade her from such a foolhardy attempt. The vizier offers his daughter, Shahrazad, to the king for their marriage, who, at once, gives his consent for the same. Meanwhile, Shahrazad and her younger sister, Duniyazad, devise a crafty plan, through which Duniyazad would be summoned to the palace, on the night of the marriage, and would ask her sister, Sheherzad, to tell a story before daybreak. Their plan miraculously succeeds, as the king permits them for the same. This he does for his love for wonderful stories.

The plan she conceives, is also able to distract, engage, and educate the king by artfully telling stories so he will let her live. This is what, in the end, happens. Whatever the case, Sheherazad has a knack for telling stories that has the ability to touch a human heart. No matter what sort of story it is, she makes it especially charming and entertaining. Her voice, her timing, her way of presenting the story, are all flawless. She has the gift of capturing her listener's attention, tantalizing him, driving him to think and speculate, and then, in the end, gives him precisely what he has been so keenly seeking. In this manner, she manages to save the remainder of the girls in the kingdom. All this shows how resourceful Sheherazad had been in harnessing her talent to tell a story.

The name Shahrazad or Scheherazade is derived from the Persian word, "*Čehrāzād*", meaning "of noble origin". She is one of the main characters of the *Arabian Nights*, as well as the teller of fantastic tales. In Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazad:

"had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of bygone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and

knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred. (Burton, On the Internet)

After the ceremony of their marriage, she comes to the king's chambers and requests her husband to allow her a last farewell to her sister. As soon as this request of hers has been granted by Sheheryar, Shahrazad begins to tell a story, interrupting herself and digressing into a story-into- a-story until the dawn of the day, where she has her story ended on a cliffhanger. We are told:

"But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence, leaving King Shahrayar burning with curiosity to hear the rest of the story. Then Dinarzad said to her sister Shahrazad, "What a strange and lovely story!" Shahrazad replied, "What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live? It will be even better and more entertaining."

Although Shaharyar is not pleased at this sudden interruption, he, yet, agrees to let her stay alive for one more day, so that he could hear the end of the suspense of the story of the previous night. As the night approaches, Shahrazad begins to continue her tale telling, but interweaves a story after a story. This goes on for a thousand nights. During these one thousand days, Sharazad's aim has been to remain alive, by keeping the king entertained and curious. As long as her stories leave him wanting more, she would not face death and would be alive to see the next morning. She begins their first night with "The Story of the Merchant and the Jinni". As with the other tales, gradually the frame story disappears and we are absorbed into the framed story. We are only reminded of Shahrazad's plight when she sees "the approach of morning" and falls suddenly "discreetly silent"

Shahrazad continues telling these stories for one thousand and one nights, weaving a vivid and rich collection of tales within her own. The interplays between the frame and en-framed stories are extremely important, since these bear great consequences, as, if Shahrayar had stopped Shahrazad in the middle of a story, it would only mean her death. Thus, she creates a web to entrap the king. In the end one thousand days have passed. On the one thousand and first day, Shahzaman, the younger brother of Shaharyar marries Duniyazad, the younger sister of Shahrazad.

On the other hand, till then Shaharyar has started to actually love her from his heart, and thus, the trust for the females makes its place in his heart, once again, and this is all because of Sheherzad. She understands human psychology, and, hence, creates such stories, on purpose, through which she could divert the king's cruel heart towards the blessed feeling of love. She knows that only this psychological treatment could cure her husband of the unnatural disorder, the hatred for the opposite sex. She makes up stories that guide him to learn sympathy, tolerance, trust and respect for all human beings, whether male or female, or rich or poor. Shahrayar, in this manner, spares her life, in the end, at her request and retains her as his queen and consort. At this stage Richard Burton writes:

"By Allah, O Shahrazad, I pardoned thee before the coming of these children, for that I found thee chaste, pure, ingenuous, and pious! Allah bless thee and thy father and thy mother and thy root and thy branch! I take the Almighty to witness against me that I exempt thee from aught that can harm thee."

The frame-tale technique lets the storyteller tell a story, in the manner that he can weave one story into another, endlessly. In this technique, a story frames another story, which, in turn, would frame another story, signifying the opportunity of an noticeably long-drawn-out descent, all the way through tales within tales. Characteristically, a framed account keeps putting off its entrance at any terminal. It is when the reader finds himself, all at once, trapped in the labyrinth of the stories within stories, that he realizes that he does not wish to come out of it.

Conclusion

The pleasure of a framed narrative lies not in containing the narrative, rather, in the contained narratives. Indeed, the main narrative may even be irretrievable in the maze of stories that are added to it. As the text gets deeper, we might lose sight of the first story as also the first storyteller, since the characters within stories begin to tell other stories and so on, even though everything is still contained within the first story.

The ancient, oriental story-collection called as the *Arabian Nights*, which we are all familiar with, is a classic representative of the use of framing technique. This collection of stories is based purely on the technique of using the framework of the main story, which goes on weaving one tale into another, until the reader gradually forgets the first story and finds himself in the amazing world of little, fascinating, and innumerable stories after stories. The use of tales-within-tales is the hallmark of this wondrous narrative of fantastical imaginings. This technique, today, is being used all over the world. In English, the outstanding example of the very successful use of this technique is to be found in many works: in *Kathasaritasagar*; in Boccaccio's *Decameron*; Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; Christopher Nolan's *Inception*; and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to name a few.

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