

Fawzia Zouari

A Reflection

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Time's Running out for Scheherazade

For centuries, it was you who told stories in my stead. Your voice drowned out my own. You aroused admiration and astonishment. You fixed for all time the shape of the woman I must be – cunning yet frail, at once victim and tormentor.

As for me, I no longer feel that you and I share one fate, Scheherazade.

I cannot accept the legitimacy of a ploy which claims to save me from the vagaries of men merely by cunning, which can keep me alive only by staving off attention from what I am.

Yes, I am taking a stand against the woman who saved her life by constantly seeking to have herself forgotten. The one who traded the murmurs of shared love for a string of passions at one remove. The one for whom a woman's words were to serve simply to distract the male sex.

Since it seemed self-evident that my fate lay in a man's hands, and, ultimately, upon the altar of his pride, it was to Scheherazade that I owed my escape from a worse fate. I was to atone with my silence for her suffering. Each time I was tempted to speak, Scheherazade came up with a new story which bade me keep silent, for her stories never end, and there's the problem! But why should Scheherazade's sacrifice be my Calvary, the reminder that her life will have amounted to nothing more than amends for my initial faithfulness?!

It is when Scheherazade falls silent that I begin to speak.

My breaking into speech comes at the price of her conclusive silence.

There are nights when I intentionally lose the use of words. Dawn may come without my lips parting to issue promises. When I am enjoined to silence, I seek no escape. I agree to die.

I myself cannot be ordered to speak under duress, under the tyranny of outward necessity and dates in the calendar.

Because, from now on, all that counts are my own needs, and the

[150] validity of words which will ring out beyond time. For me, story-telling is no longer bound up with the extreme urgency of any one moment, rather it concerns the meaning given to every moment of my existence. It no longer has to do with living at any cost, but with living fully. It is no longer the key to safeguarding the present moment, but to building for tomorrow.

My desire is no longer to live through the other but to settle myself anew in the depths of my being, quietly to survey the enigma which dwells within my body. I do not tell stories to outlive others. I do so the better to live with myself.

My problem is no longer what might happen to me tomorrow; it is how I might still exist, when I no longer have a tomorrow.

In the end, Scheherazade died, having never ceased fighting for life. In the end, I live because I have run the risk of dying. Dying, that is, being born for myself, existing through myself, beyond all coercion and open to all challenge. My freedom lies in battling for every moment. For me, there can be no daily break. I have chosen risk, real and potential, future and imminent. I have given myself over to my solitude and to my own judgement. I have cast off all reference points. It is in my gift whether I speak or remain silent, whether I beguile the world or turn it against me with my guilelessness. I have chosen no witness, no prompter. I agree to stay awake by day and to sleep at night, to remain silent for hours or years. I am giving myself over to the cause of writing, that hazardous and lonely enterprise. From now on, I am the author of a story which is its own wellspring, not a bid for reprieve.

I tell the world of what I am. I demand one-to-one confrontation. With words, with suffering, with men, with the world.

I want to counter Scheherazade's survival tactics with the vulnerability and lightness which are heedless of death, but which, in their own way, build up a sense of our own enduring essence within the heart of illusion itself.

If I had to tell another woman's story, I would tell the one Scheherazade never told: her own. The love or hatred that were in her heart. The desire which words – promised and endlessly delivered – caused to be confined deep within her body. The desire which defies words.



Because, when Scheherazade tells her stories, she does not act. When she saves her life, she loses claim to it. With her, words are a substitute for love. Her words blossom out of a death threat and know nothing of the lover's confessional register. Her words unwind the thread of remote fictions with the sole aim of concealing the tale of an incipient love.

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Scheherazade's nightly vigils bespeak the absence of love. Her days belong to the night of the unsaid. A thousand and one nights without a real night of love. Only the allusion to a joyless union, childbirth without love.

What would I do with so many stories, I whose only interest is in a woman's heart, in Scheherazade's desire?

Am I not right to hate Shehrrayar, unworthy listener and mediocre lover? But is Shehrrayar any better than the one I have deep inside myself, that intimate and invisible witness, that need, now so much part of me, to speak only under the spur of beauty and a life with dignity.

That truly modern listener, without whom the risk of a single death hangs over me: that of telling stories in order to live, like Scheherazade.

I am the future.

How would you deny me the right to say I? I who am speaking for the first time. Who no longer speaks by proxy. I who am discovering the freedom of words, the magic of their power, with wonder and surprise.

I have spent centuries in silence, barred from the circle of those who speak, stifled by the din of men's desires, of their commands. I have been able to express myself only through whispers, have drawn advantage only from collusion, and even that was mute.

I have walked from age to age, from one society, one generation to another, taking care never to raise my voice, to put my feet where they could raise no echoes, leave no trace. To buy my silence, men made me silken wings so that I would meet their resistance soundlessly. Then I was weighted down with gold, so that I should have no appetite for flight or would fall. I was pinned to the wall of their passing fancies, exposed to their looks of mingled scorn and adoration.

I was tempted to escape, I called for help. They heard me reluctantly and double-locked the door.

[152] For me, the useful gesture took the place of words. I organised, tended to, attended on, but I neither appeared nor spoke. I watched and listened, but had no right to interpose my point of view. I walked with lowered eyes, since I was not allowed to look the world in the eye. I heaped up everything in the depths of my memory, since it was not for me to judge things by my wits.

I had to slip through space and time, leaving no traces, no rough edges, without inconveniencing the well-ordered world of men with my desires or wants. I had to look on and die without one single opportunity to bear public witness.

Because, since time immemorial, public space has been empty of me. Streets have seen me pass by only in haste, a veiled and fleeting shadow, coming out of one door only to go in by the next.

I was deprived of nature from an early age. I knew nothing of the passing of the seasons, vast blue skies, soft winds. If my window looked out on one side only, I was doomed to either a life without sunsets, or without sunrises.

Now that I have emerged, I shall not be going back. Now that I have spoken, I shall not relapse into silence.

I have sworn to get my own back on silence. I have torn up the angel's wings and cast the precious weights which caged me with their brightness into the depths of the sea. I have turned my back upon centuries of oppression. Upon times which belonged to men alone.

I shall talk at length. To slake my thirst for words, to move down to the furthest of my depths, return from them and lay down all that rightfully belongs to me – all that they thought that they could take from me forever – in the full light of day, before them all.

And yet I have learned to love my fellows. So do not hasten to cry shame, and do not put on a show of indignation. You need to have lived like me, in silence, to understand the value of words. You need long experience as an observer before you can go on to judge. You need to have endured in order to be able to bear forceful witness.

Like me, you need to have had intimate contact with the apparently all-powerful man not to feel even the slightest temptation to betray him, to feel revulsion at the idea of denying him. For, unbeknown to them, you have observed those sly wolves desperately fighting their



corner. For you have seen those titans of willpower faltering; those men of anger, weeping; those hearts – touched, mortally but secretly, by tenderness – shedding blood.

Thus I have remained faithful in faithlessness, united in rupture, critical but not disparaging. In my arms I bear past and future. I have retained the key which opens other worlds. I have made presence my imperative. [153]

Contrary to what we might believe, flying in the face of all images, all caricature, no Arab woman could hope to live through more fateful times. Today it is her turn to say: I am the future.

Translated from the French by Judith Landry