Arabian Mythology in *The City of Brass* by S. A. Chakraborty (2017)

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Abstract:
Due to the remarkable constant release of fantasy books, it is not out of the ordinary to proclaim that it is now one of the most popular genres found in contemporary literature. Fantasy opens the door to a plethora of possibilities by intermingling the magical and the real. However, for the longest time, the vast majority of fantasy writers limited their scope of inspiration by writing solely about European folklore and mythology. Arabian mythology, which had a prime inspirational spot for writers due to the Arabian Nights, has lost traction within the genre. Presently, Western writers have renewed their awe with Arabian mythology and a shift has been observed during the past decades. Nevertheless, many of those titles are written with an Orientalist lens and do not show accurate representations of the cultures and myths they seek to represent. Opposite to this, are works that do utilize Arabian mythology in the way it is supposed to. Without stereotyping and alienating the Other, with respect for the sources, and backed by accurate information. Among the titles that show Arabian myths in a positive light is *The City of Brass* by S. A. Chakraborty, a highly acclaimed work centered around a universe weaved with Arabian mythical elements intertwined with the author's imaginative abilities. It is heavily inspired by Arabic mythology and folklore while also moving beyond the stereotypes orientalists have marred works like *the Arabian Nights* with. This paper will then explore a positive use of Arabian Mythology through S.A Chakraborty's work *The City of Brass.*
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1. INTRODUCTION

Libraries are filled with books about fictional and fantastic creatures, beasts, and magicians frolicking in a supernatural universe. Works preoccupied with the supernatural and the magical are commonly assembled within the genre of fantasy. Fantastical elements, albeit having always been present even in the earliest literature such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*, were not amalgamated into a separate genre. Centuries later fantasy has finally been accepted as a genre and has now risen to take a prime spot in contemporary bookshelves, its literary influence has also bled into works on the big screen with seminal works like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Ring (1954)* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter (1997)* positioning this genre as highly commodified and optimal for commercial use. Due to this recent insurgence fantasy can finally be treated as a genre with literary merit and worthy of academic attention —especially after the release of Tolkien's masterpieces which are widely studied. However, within the multitudes upon multitudes of fantastical works, a particular facet has been forgotten and that is Arabian mythology.

This paper aims to explore Arabian mythology within the fantasy genre, its uses in literature, and how it is portrayed. Therefore, it first discusses the fantasy genre and its relation to Arabian mythology. Then it will proceed to discuss the orientalist lens it has been put through, and how it can be dismantled by works such as *the City of Brass* and its positive and accurate use of Arabian myths and folklore to reinvigorate the Arabian fantasy subgenre and expose it to wider audiences in a manner devoid of harmful stereotypes.

2. Fantasy as a Genre
2.1 Definition(s) of Fantasy

Fantasy is a multitude of themes, motifs, mimicries, and worlds making it a genre so broad and encompassing that a definite definition is near impossible. Edward James, in the Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature, likened it to "a row of terraced houses" rather than a "mansion"

(2014, p.I). After the critical and commercial success of *Lord of the Rings* in the mid-1900s, theoreticians have bustled towards clear-cut definitions by contesting and refining previous ones. Indeed, that was needed in order to set boundaries and limitations for the genre (Stableford, 2009, p.xlviii). However, fantasy does not adhere to a precise definition since it is "free from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts" (Jackson, 2015, p.1). Indeed, these works resist fitting into the mold of unified chronology, characterization, and rigid distinctions; therefore, a single definition would not be appropriate. The task then proved to be implausible since that long row of terraced houses has connecting attics with doors that lead to a secondary world, they have shared walls and basic constructive similarities but the internal décor changes from one house to another refusing to fit into a specific style. Then, "fantasy is about the construction of the impossible" (James et al., I), and to seamlessly define the impossible is, well, impossible.

However, a widely accepted description among theoreticians is Brian Attebery's succinct denomination of fantasy as a "fuzzy set", it is a set free of limitation or delineation but also a set that can nevertheless be understood through different examples and signs. This fuzzy set also allows for degrees of membership meaning that a story can be mostly fantasy, marginally fantasy, or like fantasy and does not have to adhere to all criteria concerning the genre (2014, p.65). The term "fantasy" has thus been applied indiscriminately to any literature which possesses magical or supernatural representation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, and all realms presenting an out-of-the-ordinary tale. Based on Attebery's descriptive phrase, Clute and Grant developed a rough definition of the genre, according to them, fantasy is "a self-coherent narrative which, when set in our REALITY, tells a story which is impossible in the world to perceive" (1999, p.viii). It is, therefore, a highly imaginative narrative regarded as unreal and impossible to be realized within the real world by the audience. They continue and state that "at the core of fantasy is STORY." So, at the

heart of each fantasy narrative is an imaginative story which makes all fantasists storytellers.

Stableford in *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* states that: "Fantasy is the faculty by which simulacra of sensible objects can be reproduced in the mind [through] the process of imagination" (2009, p.xxxv). Meaning that fantasy modifies representations of reality into ideas that can only be perceived within one's imagination. Additionally, Martin Hall describes fantasy as "something to do with that which is impossible, while retaining self-coherence" (2007, p.345). The word impossible is then a keyword to describe fantasy since its essence is to turn sensible objects or representations into what is unfeasible in reality while still maintaining coherence. These definitions reinforce the ones provided by Attebery, Clute, and Grant. However, Tzvetan Todorov, an influential critic of narrative theory and the concept of the fantastic, insists that there has to be systematic writing of hesitation for a work to be truly fantastic:

> The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is entrusted to a character...the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (2007, p.33)

According to Todorov, a notion of skepticism is necessary. The reader has to hesitate between the reality and surreality of the world presented to him. A paradigm to this is Jacques Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux*, a short story whose protagonist, Alvaro, goes mad while hesitating about the true identity of the recipient of his infatuation —a woman named Biondetta. Said woman is a devil who blurs the line between human and superhuman. The uncertainty about his lover's identity turns into uncertainty about his own identity and even reality. So, this "hesitation between psychological and supernatural interpretations of exotic phenomena, and a character's subsequent indecision as to whether he or the

world has suffered a breakdown." Is "the essence of fantastique" (Stableford, 2009, p.145). Todorov then distinguishes between the uncanny, where supernatural elements are eventually explained within the story with a rational solution, and the fantastic proper, where the supernatural remains unresolved, creating a sense of ambiguity and hesitation for both the characters and the readers. However, his persistence in setting a distinction in fantasy is paradoxical to the concept of fantasy as seen in the previous definitions provided. Since fantasy is meant to blur the line between reality and the impossible, seeking a rational solution is counterintuitive to the genre (Jackson, 2015, p.17). Attebery adds that "fantasy is not so much the opposite of realism as a complementary mode. Most individual fantasy texts overlay the marvelous and the real, including real-world power dynamics" (2014, p.174). Thus, fantasy does not seek to reject or obstruct reality. Its relation with reality is not one of enmity but one of collaboration.

Despite the multitudes of definitions and the varying details concerning the relationship between fantasy and reality, one thing remains clear; fantasy deals with the improbable, since it has "the desire to change givens and alter reality - out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images" (Hume, 2014, p.20). It is then of essential priority that it contains some form of supernatural, mythical, or magical elements in the setting. Fantastic setting is oftentimes shown in two different ways; first one is centered around a secondary world that comes in the form of an alternative dimension parallel to the real world, second one presents those fantastic elements in what is seemingly the real world within its own narrative. Then the characters can either be humans like magicians and witches, creatures like faeries and ghouls, or fictional races like orcs and elves. Magic, along with mythical creatures and mystical elements in fantasy novels, collectively constitute an extremely important aspect of the genre: the occurrence of the impossible.

2.2 Fantasy and Mythology

Before delving into the main subject matter, it is important to mention

that two strategies have been adopted for the historical approach of fantasy. The first one has Attebery and Clute as its proponents. It principally contrasts fantasy with the fantastic and therefore denies categorizing early works —including mythological texts— within the realm of fantasy literature despite them possessing fantastical elements. The second one, developed by Lin Carter and Neil Barron, does not attempt to form such a distinction and so any work with the ability to fit into the fantasy criteria can be categorized as fantasy literature. Stableford in his discussion of both strategies leans towards the second since he deems a historical divide between modern fantasy literature and the materials that it recycles and transfigures "a brutal artifice" (2009, p.xli). Additionally, he argues that implying a non-existence of fantasy literature before the 18th century could signify that writers before that time were unaware of distinctions between naturalistic and supernatural elements of their stories. The general consensus leans towards the first strategy, therefore most fantasists regard pioneering mythological texts as a separate genre. This paper also stands in favor of the first strategy and will therefore treat the first mythological texts as fantastic sources of inspiration for modern fantasy and will treat them as different bodies of literature connected and in symbiosis with each other.

As stated in "What is Fantasy?" Fantasy and mythology have this complex relationship wherein fantasy literature pulls inspiration from myths and myths are renewed and preserved by the fantasy genre (Laetz and Johnson, 2008, p.165). Since myths are widely accepted as products of the ancients' imaginative and creative attempts to make sense of the universe, they are by consequence fantastic. In addition, most fantasy works are influenced by European mythologies mainly the Classical, Norse, and Celtic mythologies, and these are undeniably fantastic and unbelievable, but what about Arabian mythology? It has aspects taken from religion and thus is still widely believed and true. While dealing with Arabian mythology, the writer has to tread the fine line between folklore and religion which can be difficult for writers who are not part of the culture.

Brian Attebery proclaims that: "fantasy is one of the main techniques for reimagining our relationships with traditional myth" (2014, p.17). This means that fantasy constitutes an aid in keeping tales present for centuries new and invigorating. This can be witnessed in the constant rewritings, transformations, and imitations of the previously stated Western Mythologies. Tales about deities and supernatural entities from those myths have inhabited the fantasy genre since its genesis. Arabian mythology is not as widely discussed and written about as Western European mythologies but has still garnered enough awe and admirers to deserve its own subgenre.

2.3 Arabian Fantasy

Works pervaded with Arabian myths are referred to as Arabian fantasy a subgenre of the much wider and encompassing fantasy genre. one preoccupied with all fantasy literature that is pertinent to Araby. It holds at its core *The Arabian Nights*, also known as, *One Thousand and One Night*, this oeuvre was first translated by Antoine Galland during 1704-16 and that translation serves as the foundation of the subgenre. Most Arabian Fantasy works take place in Cairo or Baghdad, but Clute still bemoans a lack of geographical precision since the Arabia most authors wrote about is the imaginary one of the Arabian Nights. "This situation is of greater import to scholars than to modern fantasy writers, who know they are fabricating an "Araby" and a Nights that never existed, except in the West after 1700" (Clute and Grant, 1999, p.52). Therefore, Arabian fantasy suffers from an over-obsession with the Arabian Nights since other texts discussing Arabian myths and legends went mostly ignored.

Some consider Arabian fantasy as a subcategory of Oriental fantasy. The motifs most widely deployed in Arabian fantasy are djinns, magic carpets, witchcraft, deserts, and harems. The Cyclical storyline of Arabian Nights is also imitated in many subsequent works inspired by it. The "fashionability" of the mystical and fantastical world of Arabian fantasy waned in the 19th century, then saw an uprise again through the works of Salman Rushdie such as *The Midnight Children* (1981), A. S. Byatt's *The*

Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye (1994), and Anna Kashina's *The Princess of Dhagabad* (2000) which assisted in its reintroduction into the field of literary fiction (Stableford, 2009, p.20-21). Despite that uprise Arabian Mythology still has not relived the glory days it once had. However, with the resurgence of the fantasy genre in contemporary literature and the growing need for diverse representation within Western literature, Arabian mythology has become increasingly prominent, offering a rich tapestry of cultural elements, mythical beings, and storytelling traditions that add depth and diversity to fictional worlds.

In the 20th century, the influence of *the Arabian Nights* extended from Modernist literature such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* —which with layers of reference to Sinbad the Sailor made constant allusions to the seminal work— then, Postmodernist works such as John Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991) are explicit fantasias from the characters and structure of the cycle. His metafictional work depicts the tale of Somebody the Sailor an aged and disillusioned man who embarks on a surreal journey and encounters mythological figures. Framed within the narrative structure of *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade tells stories to Somebody the Sailor. As the tales unfold, the novel blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, challenging conventional narrative forms. Another example is Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* which is a dark and twisted hallucination between dream and reality set in Cairo. Its protagonist, Dunia, cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality as he navigates the intricate web of dreams and nightmares that shape his journey. Myths can then be a tool to expand and blur the lines of fantasy especially when set alongside reality manifesting the hesitation Todorov insists for a work to be considered fantasy.

In their quest to break away from conventional literary forms and engage with a wide range of cultural influences, Modernists and Postmodernists sought myths to achieve that goal. Michael Bell states that they used mythology because "it had a liberal and progressive implication

which was intrinsic since its underlying significance was a sense of philosophical responsibility in living in a post-religious, and even in a post-metaphysical, world" (1998, p.1). By embracing mythology, writers sought to convey a sense of philosophical responsibility and engage with the evolving socio-cultural landscape. By doing so, they crafted narratives that reflected the fragmented nature of contemporary existence, blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and inviting readers to question and reinterpret established truths. Therefore, the incorporation of myth not only allowed for a more expansive and inclusive exploration of human experience but also served as a means to grapple with the uncertainties and complexities of the modern and postmodern eras. Although the direct incorporation of Arabian mythology may not be as pronounced as in other literary traditions, Modernist works exhibit a general openness to diverse mythologies and cultural sources.

Despite the use of myths to express the complexities of society and a shift from tradition, the use of Arabian mythology —especially by Western writers— scarcely came without a major drawback. That drawback is the orientalist lens. In the introduction of his seminal work, Orientalism, the late Edward Said writes of "the Orient" as "almost a European invention… a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1978, p.1). *The Arabian Nights,* in particular, is a work deeply loved by Western audiences, not simply because of its fantastic tales, but for the "confirmation" of Arabs and people from the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region as exotic beings shrouded in magic mystery and a particular "otherness". Even the myths themselves are subject to reductionist generalizations committed by the orientalists. *The Arabian Nights* have been subject to numerous orientalist reinterpretations, among them, the play *Kismet* (1911) —which then got film and musical renditions— portrayed Arabs in the simplistic exotified version that Westerners perceive them with. The play relays tales of thievery, magic, seductive women, and harems —everything an orientalist deems necessary to describe Arabs. As Cameroon Woodhead (2011) states after watching its

musical adaptation, "the play shows no actual knowledge of Arab culture or history at all". It portrays Baghdad in a mired and inaccurate manner replete with bogus Western inventions and sensationalizing. He also states that "The treatment of Islam is particularly dodgy". In the play, beggars whine about the "noise" of the muezzins, a false Haj jokingly inappropriately asks for the direction of Mecca, and so on.

As Edward Said proclaims Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978, p.3). Regrettably, numerous literary works that draw inspiration from the Arabian Nights often perpetuate negative stereotypes and exoticize Arabs and Muslims, therefore, keeping Western hegemonic practices in place. Nevertheless, some contemporary works in literature actively combat this Orientalist perspective by portraying a nuanced, accurate, and truthful representation of Arabian myths. Contemporary writings mainly use Arabian myths for diverse cultural representation, expanding beyond Western tropes, and novel world-building options. The Arabian Fantasy subgenre has grown exponentially in the past years under the umbrella of contemporary literature, and while works are still heavily inspired by *the Arabian Nights*, they have been challenging stereotypes and expanding world-building with works such as Helen Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni*, Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, P. Djèlí Clark's *A Master of Djinn*, and the book explored in this paper; S. A. Chakraborty's *The City of Brass*.

3. Arabian Fantasy in The City of Brass.

The City of Brass is the preliminary book of the *Daevabad Trilogy*, S. A. Chakraborty's debut novel, and her first venture into fantasy and speculative fiction. Her trilogy has been translated into several languages and nominated for the Hugo, Locus, World Fantasy, Crawford, and Astounding awards (Chakraborty, n.b, "ABOUT"). This novel switches back and forth between two points of view of vastly different characters.

First, the protagonist Nahri, a citizen and con woman —or as she likes to call it "a merchant of delicate tasks" (Chakraborty, 2017, 44)— in 18th century Cairo. She uses her wit to trick people out of their money, by giving fake palm readings to Ottoman officials as well as performing fake exorcisms for the inhabitants of Cairo. Nahri —akin to many protagonists of fantasy— possesses some mysterious magical abilities, she has the ability to heal people. A rare ability due to the extinction of the djinn tribe who specialized in that magic. During one of her routine fake exorcisms, she catches the attention of an ifrit, a fiery and evil djinn, who wishes to capture her as the last survivor of a prestigious tribe with strong healing powers. While scurrying to escape the creature she accidentally summons another type of djinn: A daeva. The meeting prompts her to embark on a journey towards Daevabad —the secondary universe which is an alternative universe where the djinns reside.

Then, the story also follows Alizayd al Qahtani, nicknamed "Ali"; a devout Muslim and second son of the djinn king whose family currently rules Daevabad. As political conflicts were arising, Alizayd found himself torn between his duty as the future Qaid —the military leader that will serve his brother Emir Muntadhir— and his strong morals since he also secretly supports the Tanzeem, a group of half-human djinn —known as shafit— that fight against the oppression and cruelty perpetrated violence against their kind by the Qahtani rulers and other pureblooded djinns.
When the two characters meet each other, Nahri is immediately seen as a threat by the ruler of Daevabad; king Ghassan. Nahri as the only survivor of the Nahid tribe, the old rulers of Daevabad, could cause the Daevas to revolt against the Qahtanis. With that in mind, Ghassan orders Alizayd to befriend her to set the groundwork for a political marriage between her and his brother; Prince Muntadhir.

One work of fantasy can fit into a variety of genres. For example, *the City of Brass* is easily recognizable as Arabian fantasy from the book cover and summary alone, then after getting acquainted with the story it is easy to

ascertain it as a historical fantasy, there is also its protagonist Nahri who is revealed as a thief and fraud early on thus also making this novel a picaresque fantasy which follows "the exploits of" a rogue and thief "with mock-ironic sympathy" (Stableford, 2009, p.317). This novel's title is taken from a chapter in *the Arabian Nights* also titled the City of Brass. This tale follows the Caliph of Damascus as he tasks his trusted Emir in the Maghreb, Musa, with the challenging mission of delivering a djinn that has been ensnared in a bottle. The Caliph is familiar with the lore surrounding these trapped djinns, who were sealed by Suleiman himself and readily begged for his forgiveness upon being released. Musa and his companions must brave perilous territories and navigate the lost City of Brass to successfully find those fabled ensnared djinns and deliver them to the caliph.

The protagonist in Chakraborty's novel must also go on a perilous journey to reach the city of brass, not for a task but to escape the clutch of ifrits, dangerous demonic djinns, who strive to capture her for her powers. She also narrowly escapes death at the hands, or more accurately, claws of a rukh a large fearsome creature "with a wingspan that would have covered the length of her street in Cairo […] It had ebony eyes the size of platters and glittering feathers the color of wet blood" (Chakraborty, 2017, p.132). She also survived the vicious attack of a Marid which is a fearsome water elemental disguised in the form of a river, "The river. Or what had been the river. It had drawn back and thickened […] defying gravity to rise. It wriggled and undulated in the air, slowly towering over them […] It was a serpent. A serpent the size of a small mountain" (Chakraborty, 2017, p.166). While Musa's journey in the original City of Brass tale was an arduous task, it did not involve these fearsome creatures and Chakraborty did not merely use the Arabian Nights just to add a touch of romantic mysticism as orientalists are wrought to do, but duly used other aspects of Arabian myths to expand her tale.

As previously stated, this tale first takes place in 18th-century Cairo which serves as the realistic world parallel to the supernatural secondary

world where the djinns reside. A common feature of the fantasy genre is the map. Writers use one or several maps to introduce the secondary world and facilitate the process of imagination. *The City of Brass* also utilizes this feature and provides two maps. First, this map of the greater Middle East shows the location of the djinn nations:

Maps for fantasy literature are usually about lands that do not exist
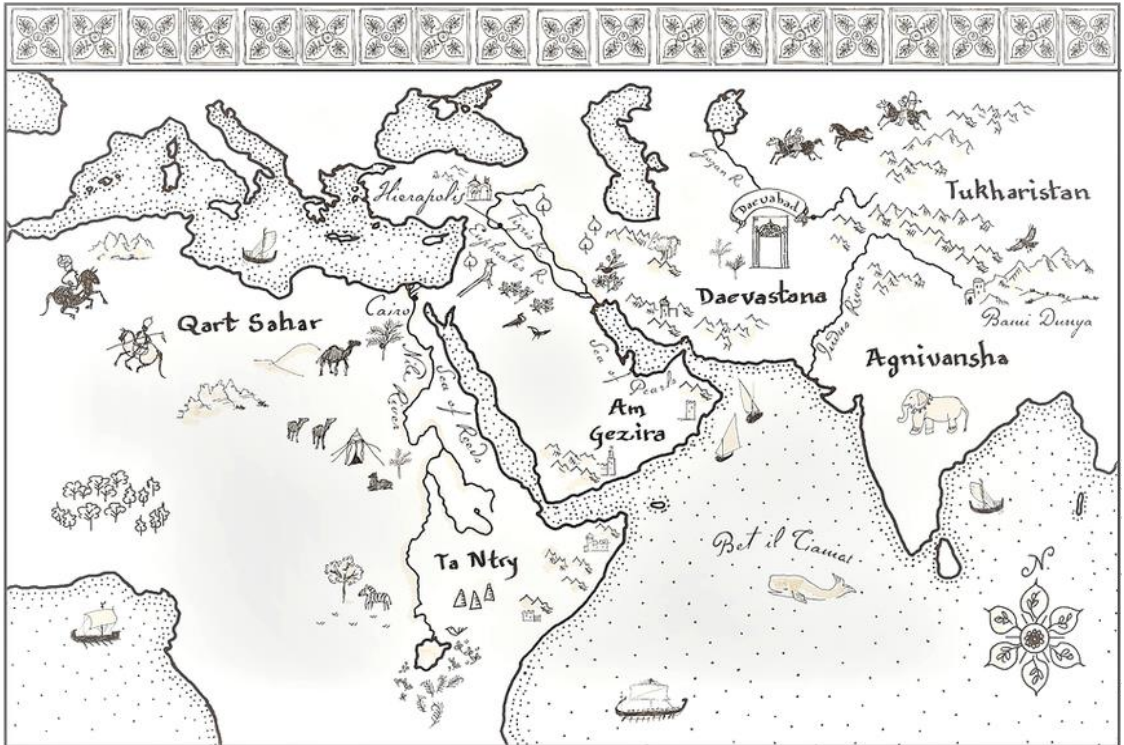

Figure 1 : The World of *The Daevabad Trilogy* (Chakraborty, "THE WORLD OF DAEVABAD")

set with new borders, mountains, seas, and oceans. However, in this map, we can clearly see the outlines found in our real-world map albeit with different appellations. This is the first clue to this book's genre. After taking a look at the map, Clute's comment on geographical ambiguity regarding Arabian fantasy comes to mind. This world stretches from North Africa to as far as the Western part of China, therefore despite its classification as Arabian fantasy it still is not primarily concerned with Arabia.

Each djinn nation is inspired by the real nations they parallel on the map and thus have their own culture, traditions, and denizens. These nations are divided into six unique lands. Starting from the West is Qart Sahar. It is a land of legends and adventure. It is inhabited by the Sahrayn, ambitious people who strive for freedom and who know their country's mysteries better than anyone. The Sahrayn are skilled sailors who travel over sand and water on ships made of conjured smoke

Then, Ta Ntry is the mythical homeland of the great Ayaanle clan, nestled between the flowing headwaters of the Nile River and the saline shore of Bet il Tiamat. The Ayaanle are a people to envy, rich in gold and salt, and far enough away from Daevabad that its lethal politics are more entertainment than peril. It parallels the Eastern-most side of Africa.

After that is Am Gezira. The djinns inhabiting it awakened from Suleiman's curse, a curse which stripped them of their immortality due to their persecution of humans, to a world vastly different from that of their fire-blooded brethren, surrounded by water and stuck behind the thick band of humans in the Fertile Crescent. The Geziri gradually learned to share the miseries of the land with their human neighbors, becoming ardent guardians of the shafit. Zaydi al Qahtani, the rebel-turned-king would then take Daevabad and Suleiman's seal from the Nahid in a battle that altered the magical world. They are known as Zulfiqar-wielding warriors.

Daevastana, the historic seat of the Nahid Council—the famous dynasty of healers who once dominated the magical world—is a desirable place, its culture influenced by the ancient cities of Ur and Susa. The Daevas, a prideful people, took the original name of the djinn race as their own; a slight that the other tribes still resent them for.

Tukharistan is located east of Daevabad. Tukharistanis live among the ruins of bygone Silk Road dynasties, and trade is their livelihood. They

travel in caravans of smoke and silk down halls made by humans millennia ago, bearing mythical items such as golden apples that cure any ailment, jade keys that enter unknown worlds, and fragrances that smell heavenly.

Lastly, Agnivansha is a serene nation famous for its artists and jewels. But also, its cunning ability to stay out of Daevabad's stormy politics. It is blessed with every resource imaginable and isolated from its considerably more volatile neighbors.

In her literary works, Chakraborty skillfully portrays diverse regions of the SWANA area in a parallel universe, each with its unique cultural and political characteristics. This stands in stark contrast to Orientalist beliefs which assume that the entire region shares a single culture. The movie Aladdin (1992) exemplifies this notion, as the city of Agrabah blends Middle Eastern and Indian influences, the cultural dress a mixture of different places such as Aladdin sporting a Turkish fez, Jasmine donning Indian shoes, and belly dancers adorned with Hindi bindis. Unfortunately, Westerners often fail to recognize the distinctions between different parts of the East, instead viewing it all as a representation of the Orient. This orientalist point of view remains true today as it can be seen in the 2019 live-action remake of Aladdin. The film's production designer, Gemma Jackson, confirmed her orientalist lens by stating that she picked things from different SWANA cultures and used them as she pleased in the production design,"you have to steal a b it of this, a bit of that and a bit of the other, and mix it up and make it your o wn" (Sinha-Roy, 2019). As if, in this movie's case, Middle Eastern culture can be represented simply by cherry-picking aspects of various places and mixing them all in an orientalism manufactured blender to get the authentic Middle Eastern cultural experience.

Chakraborty drew inspiration from various sources for her work, but she was careful not to blend them all into one indistinct mix, as some Orientalists have done. Instead, she respectfully acknowledges the differences between cultures and does not appropriate from them indiscriminately. For instance, the Sahrayin people wear galabiyyas, while the Agnivanshi wear dhotis and are armed with Hindustani talwar, and the Geziri wear dishdasha and fight with a Zulfiqar. This fictional yet accurate multiculturalism can be seen in the city of Daevabad which has also been
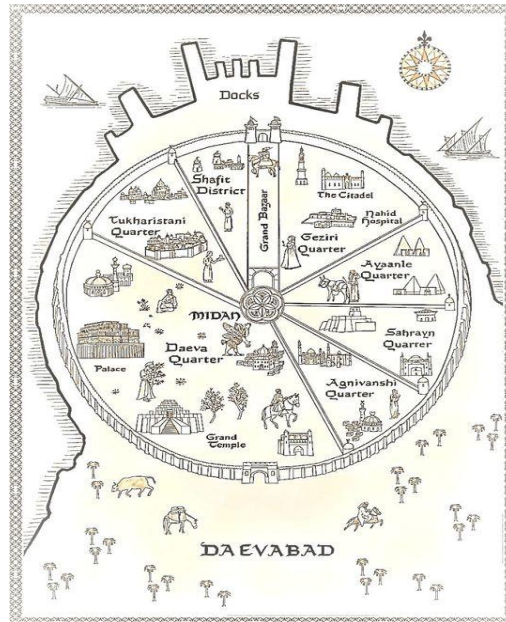

Figure 2 : Daevabad (Chakraborty, "THE WORLD OF DAEVABAD")

mapped:

Located beyond the Gozan river —which was a Marid in disguise— in the vast dunes, there is a threshold that magically hides Daevabad. Only the djinn or daeva who share the blood of those who have been cursed or blessed by the Prophet Suleiman can enter its walls (Chakraborty, 2017, p.55). It is the capital city of the Djinn world, ruled by the Al Qahtani royals —among them Alizayd. The city is divided into quarters wherein each djinn

tribe has its own allocated space. Each quarter with its distinct representative gate, the Sahrayn's is a gate with "black-and-white-tiled pillars wrapped in grapevines heavy with purple fruit". The Ayaanle's has "two narrow, studded pyramids crowned with a scroll and a salt tablet." The Geziri gate is a simple sharply cut stone gate since its people prefer function over form. Opposite to it in form is the Agnivashni's gate with its gorgeous sculpted figures dancing on an ornate gate of rose-colored sandstone. Tukharastani's is "a screen of polished jade reflecting the night sky, carved in an impossibly intricate pattern." Lastly, directly across the Grand Bazaar stands the most impressive gate of Daevabad; The Daeva gate leads to the Daeva quarter where the royal palace is located. The gate is painted a pale blue akin to the fresh-washed sky and embellished with white and gold disks while its doors are held open by two brass sentries; the mythical Shedu or winged lions (Chakraborty, 2017, p.69-70). The shafits, however, have been segregated into a small poor district in the Geziri quarter due to their mixed blood —half humans and half djinns. Albeit residing in one city, each tribe still possesses its own identity, ambitions, and struggles which is a change from the amalgamation of fanciful stereotypes that orientalists use.

Chakraborty, despite being of white descent, possesses extensive knowledge of different SWANA cultures. This may be due to her conversion to Islam and her close ties to Egyptian culture from her husband's side. Chakraborty's characters frequently use Muslim greetings and prayers realistically and naturally. While orientalists avoid any mention of Islam unless it is to stereotype or mock it, Chakraborty, as a Muslim herself, relays tales from the Quran while mentioning that it is holy scripture to not confuse the audience. Other aspects of the religion are peppered throughout the book through descriptions of mosques, characters praying, and characters' speech. Muslim phrases are often used in characters' speech and dialogues. Exemplified here are some Muslim phrases used during their daily tasks "There is no god but God!" the captain cried and slammed the rod" (Chakraborty, 2017, p. 183). In times of fear,

"God preserve me." The whispered prayer came unbidden to her lips at the sight of the rukh" (Chakraborty, 2017, p.132). Even in metaphors, "God be praised," Nahri whispered. There was enough food in front of her to break the fasts of an entire Cairo neighborhood" (Chakraborty, 2017, p.226). Through these passages, we can see how natural and seamless characterization is when written with knowledge instead of simplistic and orientalist admiration.

Chakraborty's work also delves into the damaging effects of stereotypes and orientalist stereotypes. For instance, one of her protagonists uses biting sarcasm to underscore the absurdity of such notions: "God forbid. It's not as though the Egyptians were the inheritors of a great civilization whose mighty monuments still littered the land. Oh, no. They were peasants, superstitious fools who ate too many beans" (Chakraborty, 2017, p.5). This literary device exposes and challenges misrepresentations that SWANA countries are afflicted with. By exposing the ridiculousness of condescending attitudes, Chakraborty aims to dismantle stereotypical depictions that undermine the sophistication and accomplishments of these countries.

Chakraborty's expertise in Arabian mythology and culture is evident in her skillful portrayal of djinns as complex beings with distinct cultures, politics, languages, and habitats, rather than one-dimensional wish-granters. As Mara Albadawi asserts, "the solution to the problem of Orientalism […] is to tell more diverse stories" (2019). Works like *the City of Brass* are crucial in expanding the literary scope to include accurate, stereotype-free representations of Arabian mythology and fantastical fables. This book offers fantasy enthusiasts an opportunity to explore a richly imagined world inspired by Arabian mythology without encountering harmful inaccuracies or negative stereotypes.

5. CONCLUSION

Fantasy is a genre that primarily focuses on the imaginary, the

impossible, and the mythical. Indeed, Mythology and fantasy have always been deeply connected even before the emergence of literature itself. This relationship is paradigmatic for the creation of improbable stories full of magical twists and turns, supernatural creatures, and legendary realms. Arabian mythology contributed toward this literary bond through seminal works such as The Arabian Nights and its mystical tales such as Alibaba᾽s and Sinbad᾽s. Chakraborty᾽s book —in itself titled after one of the pertinent tales in the influential work; The City of Brass— is a revitalized product of Arabian fantasy. The tropes Chakraborty utilized are aligned with the ones present in most contemporary fantasy works while still maintaining an accurate representation of the cultures and myths she draws inspiration from, and so she regales us with her vast knowledge through her intricate constructions of a whole new world where djinns live alongside each other in a vividly described world with political intrigue. Through this work, Arabian fantasy is portrayed graciously and accurately very much unlike the Orientalist ones that used the genre for fetishization, exotification, and alienation of people from SWANA and the Middle East especially.

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