

Rafik Schami's Fantasy and Fairy Tales

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The Syrian author Rafik Schami, born in Damascus in 1946, has lived since 1971 in Germany, where he earned a doctorate in chemistry. Since 1978 he has published nine books (two novels, and collections of fairy tales and fantastic narratives) in German, and has received several literary awards in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

In this paper I intend to analyze some of Schami's themes and motifs in order to illustrate how he utilizes the genre of the fairy tale and elements of fantasy literature as a vehicle to address contemporary issues, issues that revolve in particular around the phenomena of racial discrimination, political oppression, and economic exploitation.

In the tales, the author criticizes the phenomena symbolized by what Vladimir Propp terms the "villain."¹ Schami endows villainy with new meanings which correspond to the current issues he is concerned with. In Schami's tales acts of villainy are performed exclusively by males, be they human beings or personified animals, while females and children are always among the victims who are exploited and oppressed. On the other hand, in many tales the courageous heroes who engender resistance and ensure salvation are female characters or children. Thus the narratives stress the necessity of women's emancipation, and call for a rejuvenation of ideals to change a world dominated by oppressive male-oriented ideologies.

Several animal and plant parables reflect the acute problems of racial discrimination. Intolerance and hostility towards the "other" are demonstrated in a number of parables through the use of color. In each story a dominant color sets the standard to judge those who are different as outsiders and as inferiors.

Schami also utilizes science fiction to address the psychological challenges facing immigrants, the problems of alienation and integration that can be witnessed in the current controversy in Germany. A Spanish *Gastarbeiter* invents a machine that transforms wishes into realities. Whenever he looks through it, he is in Andalusia. Juan, the alien, is caught up in images of his homesickness. His invention is his only means of overcoming his isolation abroad. Eventually this escapism leads to a tragic end.² Another tale offers the other extreme, which is total assimilation. A trickster fools the rejected foreigners by the illusion of converting them into Germans. Out of the dark-skinned Hassan

¹ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

² Rafik Schami, "Andalusien liegt vor der Tür," in his *Die Sehnsucht führt schwarz: Geschichten aus der Fremde* (München: dtv, 1988) 56-75.

emerges a blond Siegfried.³ However, attempts to cope with the imposed marginalized existence abroad by denying one's own ethnic and cultural identity offer no solution. In the story they also have catastrophic consequences. According to Schami's narratives, neither extreme addresses the harsh circumstances with effective alternatives. Both are exposed as impotent responses to racial discrimination. Schami's tales, however, do not depict prejudices only from an ethnic point of view, but also from a socioeconomic perspective. This stance broadens the scope of the analysis of discrimination to encompass the socioeconomic prejudices that produce—in addition to the ethnic minorities—other marginalized groups within a society. For example, a little orphaned raven is cut off from social contact with his peers because of his poverty.⁴ In another tale an old chicken is even denied the right to live because it can no longer produce eggs.⁵ In this tale Schami touches upon a problem that he considers typical of Western industrial nations where people may lose recognition because of their unproductiveness in the dynamic process of economic growth.

A number of other narratives focus primarily on economic exploitation. In an apparently realistic setting, surprisingly, Dracula's grandson shows up. He has a special liking for the workers in a German company. He sucks the blood of his victims regardless of whether they are Germans or foreigners, Christians or Muslims. Neither Günter's cross nor Ali's crescent deters the new Dracula.⁶ In a world determined by materialism, there is no refuge in spiritual conceptions. At the same time, the story indicates that today's vampire, economic exploitation, serving its own ends, does not differentiate between the victims.

In other accounts, the implicit target of criticism is political oppression. A good example is a tale explaining how the salt came into the sea. The repressed salt population on earth escapes the tyranny of the salt king by hiding themselves in the sea. A cruel general follows the small salt creatures in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent their escape. The amazed first-person narrator who observes this scene hears the salt creatures cursing the general in most of the languages of the world.⁷ Thus political repression is presented as a worldwide phenomenon.

Motifs from the *Arabian Nights* are used widely by Schami. Yet they undergo drastic changes. The title of his tale *Die Wunderlampe*⁸ is an apparent allusion to Aladdin's wonderful lamp. However, the reader very soon realizes that he is not introduced to a remote world of diversions. Instead, he finds himself confronted with the challenges of immediate reality. The Jinni of the *Arabian Nights* is now a giant representing problems of ecology and the ambivalent nature of modern technology. Unlike his predecessor, this giant, while obeying the commands of the owner of the lamp, brings about unforeseen dam-

³ Rafik Schami, "Als der Meister auftrat," in his *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte: Märchen, Fabeln & phantastische Geschichten* (1987; München: dtv, 1988) 80-101.

⁴ Rafik Schami, "Der Schnabelstecher," in his *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte* 41-50.

⁵ Rafik Schami, "Das Schwein, das unter die Hühner ging," in his *Der erste Ritt durchs Nadelöhr: Noch mehr Märchen, Fabeln und phantastische Geschichten* (Kiel: Neuer Malik Verlag, 1985) 14-20.

⁶ Rafik Schami, "Vampire lieben Knoblauch," in his *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte* 51-75.

⁷ Rafik Schami, "Wie das Salz ins Meer kam," in his *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte* 76-79.

⁸ Rafik Schami, "Die Wunderlampe," in his *Der erste Ritt durchs Nadelöhr* 79-102.

ages, destroying nature and the environment. In addition, the modern giant can multiply himself. His new selves gradually appear everywhere, symbolizing the spread of the nuclear threat. The Jinni-figure turns out to be a destructive force. In despair, king Talal raises the question of whether the magic lamp is a blessing or a curse.⁹ This question, illustrating the ambivalence of today's magic lamp, has no precedent in the Arabian tale.

Furthermore, Schami's narrative reveals the dilemma of modern scientists in an unequal alliance with state politics. In Schami's tale, the scientist of the palace delivers the magic lamp with its secret code to the ruler. This link between science and politics also has no precedent in the Arabian tale. Through the transformation of the Arabian motif, Schami contributes to the chain of literary works that call into question the modern achievements of technology. In the genre of the fairy tale he confirms doubts that were earlier addressed in other genres (such as Friedrich Dürrenmatt's dark comedy *Die Physiker* or Heinar Kipphard's documentary drama *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer*) concerning atomic power. The name of the scientist in Schami's *Wunderlampe*, "Fysikos," alludes to the science of physics. It is also an allusion to the title and the theme of Dürrenmatt's dark comedy. Similarly, other motifs from the Arabian literary tradition are transformed in the tales to apply to the immediate reality of today.

Symbols in Schami's stories occasionally reveal the author's tendency to universalize his criticism. The intrusive narrator gives the reader clues that subtly draw his attention to analogous situations in different parts of the world. For example, the brutal general with sunglasses who persecutes the salt creatures reminds the narrator of Pinochet. Here, the narrator transforms a real-life person into an archetype and uses it as an attribute for a fictitious character. The Pinochet-metaphor immediately brings the conflicts of Latin America into the picture. Thus the reader is prompted to establish links between fiction and reality in global terms.

The implicit theme in Schami's tales is, in sum, that people should develop an understanding for each other and a unity among themselves, notwithstanding ethnic, social, religious, cultural, and gender differences. This concept of solidarity finds a strong advocate in an immigrant rat in the tale *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte*,¹⁰ and it is the keynote of the rat's farewell address.

From this central theme—which is manifested in Schami's tales through the use of Oriental and Occidental motifs—we can draw the conclusion that the fairy tale as a literary device serves Schami in a significant way to unmask allegorically the deficiencies of today's living conditions and, at the same time, to express a utopian concept of a better world. For the fairy tale, as Ernst Bloch suggests, implies a utopian outlook.¹¹

⁹ Rafik Schami, "Die Wunderlampe," in his *Der erste Ritt durchs Nadelöhr* 98.

¹⁰ Rafik Schami, "Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte," in his *Das letzte Wort der Wanderratte*, 35-40.

¹¹ Ernst Bloch, "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time," in *The Utopia Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) 163.