

Ayşe Naz Bulamur

Representations of Istanbul in A. S. Byatt's "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"*

This paper explores how Istanbul fantasies in A. S. Byatt's "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1994) function as a critique of British patriarchal constructions of femininity. In *Orientalism Postmodernism and Globalism*, Bryan Turner argues that "the Orient in Western imagination is often perceived as the fantastic, it is associated with sexual fantasies" (98). Due to the European invention of Istanbul as "Oriental," Byatt's fifty-year-old female protagonist, Gillian Perholt, creates her own fairy tale by miraculously releasing a djinn from a Turkish glass vase in late twentieth-century Istanbul. The British narratologist imagines Istanbul through its nineteenth-century representations that picture the city as a fairytale-like place with Oriental daemons and magical vases. Istanbul's association with sensuality, however, is problematized as Gillian realizes that her wish for eternal love will not come true with the djinn. In fact, Istanbul, the city that had been the metaphor for gender inequality due to women's segregated lives in the Ottoman harems, becomes a setting, in Byatt's novella, where British male standards of beauty and the ideals of happy-ever-after love in fairytales are critiqued.

In a novella that brings together realism and fairy tale, A. S. Byatt chooses Turkey, a neighbor of Iraq, as a setting where the romanticization of marriage as the symbol of eternal love is critiqued during the Gulf War in 1991. Byatt's first-person narrator tells the story of a fifty-year-old divorcée, Dr. Gillian Perholt, who, unlike the princesses in fairy tales, did not live happily ever after with her unfaithful husband. While she suggests a distant imaginary world with the fairy tale opening "once upon a time," the narrator also hints that Gillian's story takes place at the time when the United Nations, primarily the United States, were bombing Iraq for invading Kuwait:

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At the time when my story begins the green sea was black, sleek as the skins of killer whales, and the sluggish waves were on fire, with dancing flames and a great curtain of stinking smoke. The empty deserts were seeded with skulls, and with iron canisters, containing death. . . . In those days men and women, including narratologists, were afraid to fly East, and their gatherings were diminished. Nevertheless our narratologist, whose name was Gillian Perholt, found herself in the air, between London and Ankara. (97)¹

The narrator's comparison of the Persian Gulf to a black sea with dancing flames, and of Iraq's geography to empty deserts with skulls, smoke, and iron canisters evokes the gruesome results of the war that caused the death of at least a hundred thousand Iraqis. Europeans' fear of flying to the East, including Turkey, indicates their tendency to homogenously categorize countries beyond Greece as being dangerous and uncivilized. Ignoring the fact that Turkey's capital city Ankara lies at a distance of more than a thousand kilometers from Iraq, the British narratologist Gillian Perholt feels "an appropriate measure of fear" flying to a country that did not even partake in the Gulf War (97). Despite her fear, Gillian, who spends her days "interpreting, decoding the fairy tales of childhood," flies to Ankara for the "Stories of Women's Lives" conference, and, then, visits Istanbul to give a talk at the British Council (96).

Ironically, the country that Gillian hesitates to travel to enables a critique of female roles, as her wish to be attractive and loved indicates how successful women are affected by the romantic narratives in fairy tales. In "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale," Jack Zipes writes that fairy tales have "spells, enchantments, disenchantments, resurrections, recreations" "more than any other literary genre," and they "enunciate the speaker/writer's position in the world, including his or her dreams, needs, wishes, and experience."² The fairy tale world Gillian invents in Istanbul also reflects her desire for love, beauty, and youth at the age of fifty. Having listened to her Turkish friend Prof. Orhan Rifat's lecture on the djinns in *The Arabian Nights* at the Ankara conference, Gillian creates her own fairy tale in which she gets to be the heroine, releasing an Oriental daemon from the old Turkish glass vase she buys in Istanbul. Described as an invisible being created by Allah from the flame of fire in the Koran, the djinn that comes to life in Gillian's Istanbul hotel room makes her dreams come true by restoring her youth and by making love to her. The themes of magic and wish fulfillment serve as a critique of stories that impose beau-

1. All parenthesized references are to this edition: A. S. Byatt, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 94–272.

2. Jack Zipes, "The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 12 (1988) 7–31, p. 12.

tiful and happily married princesses as role models to female readers like Gillian. The Oriental daemon of the Arabian Nights teaches Gillian that a woman's wisdom is more valuable than her beauty by praising the intelligent and powerful non-Western women – the Turkish prodigy Zefir, the Queen of Sheba, and the Ottoman Sultana Roxelana – that he has met in his previous lifetimes. In offering Gillian romance for the first time since her divorce, the conversations and lovemaking of the British and the Oriental characters are the antithesis to the images of war and death that describe the time of the protagonist's travels. With the Islamic djinn, who uses a feminist rhetoric to show how beauty is culturally constructed, the East that evokes fear in Gillian also encourages her to be self-confident as a single middle-aged woman.

Gillian's Flight from England to Ankara and Her Shattered Ideals of Marriage

Framed in "once upon a time," Byatt's novella subverts the conventions of fairy-tales by beginning with Gillian's reflections on her marital frustrations during her flight to Ankara. Her husband's vacation in Majorca with his twenty-six-year-old mistress and his fax-message informing Gillian that he is never coming home expose the artificiality of stories that represent the wedding as a happy ending for women. The stories with wedding cakes, white gowns and flowers do not engage with the complexities of marriages that end in divorce. In *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye*, Madonna Kolbenschlag argues that women are profoundly disillusioned when their marriages "fail to live up to the fantasy" and "end as life itself does, in some kind of separation and loss, in a mini-death."³ Byatt also rejects the representation of wedding as the ultimate source of happiness in women's lives by comparing her female protagonist to a newly born woman after her divorce. On receiving her husband's fax, Gillian feels "like a prisoner bursting chains and coming blinking out of a dungeon" and "like a bird confined in a box, like a gas confined in a bottle, that found an opening, and rushed out" (103). Instead of "grieving over betrayal" and "loss of companionship," Gillian is content to be emancipated from her "grumbling and jousting" husband who has always been late for dinners and indifferent to her feelings (104). The divorce that evokes feelings of "lightness, happiness, and purpose" in Gillian, interrupts the myth of marriage as the ultimate source of bliss for women (103).

The happy-ever-after stories that narratologists tell in the "Stories of Women's Lives" conference in Ankara, nonetheless, prompt Gillian to reflect on her successful but lonesome life as a divorcée whose sons rarely keep in touch with her. As a story-

3. Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 151.

teller herself, Gillian is ironically taken in by the romantic paradigms in fairy tales and feels “redundant as a woman, being neither wife, mother nor mistress” (103). Paradoxically, the narratologist longs for the lives of the beautiful married princesses in stories which she criticizes for associating femininity with passivity and submissiveness. She ends her talk on Chaucer’s tale of “Patient Griselda,” for example, by commenting that “the stories of women’s lives in fiction are the stories of stopped energies” (120). Despite her critical stance on the masculinist structures of fairy tales, Gillian acknowledges how they have shaped her concept of womanhood as she listens to her Turkish colleague, Orhan, telling a story from *The Arabian Nights*:

I had this idea of a woman I was going to be, and I think it was before I knew what sex was (she had been thinking with her body about the swooning delight of Camaralzaman and Princess Budoor) but I imagined I would be married, a married woman, I would have a veil and a wedding and a house and Someone – someone devoted, like the thief of Baghdad, and a dog. I wanted – but not by any stretch of the imagination to be a narratologist in Ankara. . . (135)

In the story of Prince Camaralzaman and Princess Budoor, Orhan emphasizes the role of the two genies, who “fetch the sleeping princess from China and lay her beside” the young prince in order to debate which is the most beautiful. When the genies wake the “perfect beauties” in bed, they madly fall in love with one another and get married after overcoming many obstacles and hazards. Reading the stories of sleeping beauties meeting handsome princes, Gillian assumed that it was her destiny to find true love and live happily ever after. In “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” Karen Rowe writes how female readers “transfer from fairy tales into real life those fantasies which exalt acquiescence to male power and make marriage not simply one ideal, but the only estate toward which women should aspire.”⁴ Since heroines in traditional fairy tales do not participate in the social sphere, Gillian had never thought in her childhood that she would be a narratologist attending conferences but a protagonist like Budoor with a devoted husband. Her longing for “the swooning delight” of Prince Camaralzaman and Princess Budoor exposes how love narratives in which the heroine’s conflicts are resolved with marriage, give women hope that someday their prince will come and make their lives meaningful.

The themes of supernatural beings bringing love and happiness to the lives of beautiful princesses, in the stories Gillian listens to in Ankara, shape the way she later

4. Karen Rowe, “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” in *Don’t Bet On The Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Methuen, 1986), 209–223, p. 211.

imagines the djinn emerging from a Turkish glass vase in her Istanbul hotel room. It is significant that Gillian indulges in djinn fantasies in Istanbul and not in Ankara, where she is originally exposed to Orhan's speech foregrounding the role of genies "in bringing about a satisfactory adjustment to the normal human destiny" in *The Nights* (128). The narratologist's perception of Ankara in light of her childhood days in Yorkshire, where the air pollution gave her asthma, has an impact on her choice of Istanbul as a setting for her djinn story. The narrator remarks how Gillian associates Ankara with her hometown while listening to Orhan's discussion of genies in fiction:

She [Gillian] was tired; she had a slight temperature; the air of Ankara was full of fumes from brown coal, calling up her childhood days in a Yorkshire industrial city, where sulphur took her breath from her and kept her in bed with asthma, day after long day, reading fairy-tales and seeing the stories pass before her eyes. (134)

Gillian's perception of Ankara as a modern industrial city that shares the urban problems of England's metropolises, where air pollution threatens the health of the population, prevents her from constructing a narrative of wish fulfillment. Turkey's capital city, where the air is full of "fumes from brown coal," does not resemble the "unchanging landscapes" of fairy tales "where it is always spring and no winds blow" (261). Gillian's conflation of Ankara with Yorkshire suggests that the former is not unfamiliar, different, Oriental enough to produce sexual fantasies with supernatural daemons. Ankara, the city that reminds Gillian of her childhood days when she tried to forget her asthma and the air-raids during World War II, is not the setting she chooses to invent a fairy-tale that vicariously satisfies her desire for love and happiness.

Gillian's depiction of Ankara in terms of its environmental problems in the 1990s, however, is worth comparing to the way she imagines Istanbul before flying there to give a talk at the British Council. The narrator foregrounds Gillian's excitement in visiting Istanbul for three days before going back to England: "She could not resist the idea of the journey above the clouds, above the minarets of Istanbul, and the lure of seeing the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus and the shores of Europe and Asia face to face" (97). It is not the minarets of Ankara but those of Istanbul, which have been the source of many fables and Greek myths, that attract the narratologist. It is no coincidence that Gillian refers to two attractions in Istanbul – the Bosphorus, and the Golden Horn, "a scimitar-shaped gulf," that divides the city's European side into historical and modern quarters – whose names originate in classical mythology. According to a Greek legend, as Jak Deleon explains in *The Bosphorus: A Historical Guide*, Zeus temporarily transformed his lover Io into a heifer to protect her from the spite and jealousy of his wife Hera. Io crossed the Bosphorus, giving the strait its name ("boos-foros," a Greek name for "cow-ford"),

and later gives birth on the shores of the Golden Horn to a girl, Keroessa, whose future son names the gulf, Khrysokeras, after his mother.⁵ Gillian's "lure" of flying to Istanbul indicates her excitement about seeing a city that has actually been the setting of many stories, which she perhaps imagined seeing "pass before her eyes" in her childhood days in Yorkshire (97). It is in Istanbul, not in Ankara, after all, that nineteenth-century European travelers such as Edmondo De Amicis saw the phantoms of the Arabian Nights' characters pass before their eyes,⁶ and Emilia Hornby compared the Ottoman kiosks to Aladdin's palace and gardens.⁷

Istanbul: The City of Nymphs and Djinns

On arriving to Istanbul, the narrator remarks that "Gillian Perholt settled in for a few days in the Peri Palas Hotel, which was not the famous Pera Palas, in the old European city across the Golden Horn, but a new hotel, of the kind Gillian liked best" decorated with Turkish tiles and carpets (166). Byatt's narrator clearly differentiates the fictional Peri Palas from the Pera, where Agatha Christie stayed during her visit to Istanbul in 1928.⁸ The name of Peri Palas Hotel, meaning the palace of a fairy envisioned as a beautiful maiden, suits Gillian's perception of Istanbul in terms of Greek goddesses and foreshadows her fantasy of being the young heroine of a fairy tale. Abandoned by her husband for a woman half her age, Gillian sadly reflects how far she is from being a peri with her "dying skin," too old to meet the beauty standards of her British culture (164). Believing that "flying distorts the human body," she does not even dare to look at the mirror in her hotel room "for what stared out at her was a fleshy monster" (167). While taking a shower in her hotel room, on her first day in Istanbul, Gillian is frustrated to see that her "sad" middle-aged body cannot resist aging and decay:

[She] looked ruefully down at what it was better not to look at, the rolls of her midriff, the sagging muscles of her stomach. She remembered, as she reached for her towel, how perhaps ten years ago she had looked complacently at her skin on her throat, at her solid enough breasts, and had thought herself well-preserved, unexceptionable. . . . And now it was all going, the eyelids had soft little folds, the edges of the lips were fuzzed, if she put on lipstick it ran in little threads into the surrounding skin. (186)

5. Jak Deleon, *The Bosphorus: A Historical Guide* (Istanbul: Intermedia Yayınları, 1999).

6. Edmondo De Amicis, *Constantinople*, trans. Stephen Parkin (London: Hesperus Classics, 2005).

7. Emilia Hornby, *In and Around Stamboul* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, n. d.).

8. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1977).

In *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir writes that women are "haunted by the horror of growing old" and long to preserve their "dying youth" in order to be desirable in the male gaze.⁹ Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* also argues that even "successful working women," like Gillian, equate beauty and youth, and, therefore, are infused with "a dark vein of self hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control."¹⁰ Nostalgically remembering the well-preserved body she had in her forties, the narratologist perceives the wrinkles on her face not as signs of maturity but of degeneration, and drops her head sadly as she sees "her death advancing towards her" in the mirror covered with steam (186). Gillian's choice of the Peri Palas – a fairy palace – itself shows how much she is affected by the images of physical perfection in fairy tales and is taken in by nineteenth-century narratives that depict a fantastical Istanbul with magical beings such as djinns and houris.

Objectified by the British patriarchy as a redundant woman not beautiful enough to keep a husband, Gillian partakes in the Orientalist gaze by comparing the stores of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar to "Aladdin's caves full of lamps and magical carpets, of silver and brass and gold and pottery and tiles" (176). Amazed to be surrounded with the oriental props depicted in storybooks, Gillian compares the five-century-old covered market to the cave where Aladdin finds a magical lamp in the *Nights*. The narrator reflects on Gillian's excitement when shopping with Orhan in a store owned by one of his former graduate students: "And suddenly Gillian felt well again, full of life and singing with joy . . . hidden away in an Aladdin's cave made of magical carpets with small delightful human artifacts" (177–8). Imagining herself in a supernatural cave in Istanbul, Gillian does not listen to the shop owner's complaint that it is hard to make a profit by importing carpets since it is difficult to please western tourists whose tastes in color and material change every year. She also dismisses Orhan's remark that the carpet-seller has a Ph.D. in English literature, which indicates that teaching does not provide an adequate income to live on in Istanbul. Instead of reflecting on the high cost of living in the city in the 1990s, the narratologist imagines the Grand Bazaar as a fantastical place where she can find a dusty bottle with a djinn to make her wishes come true. In a shop owned by another of Orhan's ex-students, Gillian inquires about a transparent glass vessel with a "spiral pattern of opaque blue and white stripes," which the seller believes to be either çeşm-i bülbül (nightingale's eye) or recent Venetian glass (180). For Gillian, the glass will be valuable only if it is Turkish. "It probably isn't," says the shop

9. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 575–6.

10. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p. 10.

owner: “I will sell it to you as if it were Venetian, because you like it, and you may imagine it is çeşm-i bülbül and perhaps it will be, is, that is” (181). Gillian’s inclination to see the recent Venetian glass as an old and magical nightingale’s-eye bottle indicates her desire to construct her own Aladdin story of Istanbul. Her shopping experience also indicates how Turkish merchants profit from the European fascination with the Orient by selling “chased daggers,” “magical carpets,” “dangling lamps and water-shakers from the baths” at the Grand Bazaar where western tourists, like Gillian and Archie, hope to have an Arabian Nights experience in Istanbul (176).

Gillian and the Djinn Share Stories of Beauty, Love, and Marriage in Istanbul

While Gillian imagines the Venetian glass vessel to be a nightingale’s-eye bottle, Orhan reflects back on a pre-industrial Istanbul whose inhabitants could hear the sound of the nightingales instead of the heavy traffic and sirens of the ships passing through the Bosphorus. As the merchant explains to Gillian that the glass is transparent and opaque like the nightingales’ eyes, Orhan comments on how the city’s environmental problems and technology have changed Istanbulites’ lives: “‘Before pollution,’ said Orhan, ‘before television, everyone came out and walked along the Bosphorus and in all the gardens, to hear the nightingales of the year. . . . A whole people, walking quietly in the spring weather, listening’ ” (180). Orhan’s critique of Istanbulites watching television at home rather than enjoying the Bosphorus, and his nostalgic look at the past when the city was free of air and noise pollution, however, are the themes that are glossed over in the Grand Bazaar scene. Not responding or even paying attention to her friend’s social critique, Gillian says: “I must have this. But if it is çeşm-i bülbül it will be valuable” (181). Gillian’s indifference to the fact that Istanbul has changed with industrial developments and that people are not in tune with nature hints at her preference to see the city in terms of its Orientalist stereotypes rather than its social climate in the 1990s. We should note, however, that Orhan’s account of Istanbulites walking quietly and listening to the nightingales on the shores of the Bosphorus is another fantastical narration that idealizes Istanbul’s past. Orhan’s imagination of Istanbul in the spring with nightingales is constructed by the early twentieth-century Turkish poetry from which the shopkeeper anonymously quotes: “In the woods full of evening the nightingales are silent / The river absorbs the sky and its fountains / Birds return to the indigo shores from the shadows” (181). In highlighting the discursivity of Orhan’s nostalgia for Istanbul’s past by providing a quotation from a Turkish poem, the novella represents another textual construction of Istanbul, similar to the way Gillian imagines the city through the Aladdin story in the *Nights*.

When she is back in her hotel room, Gillian decides to "bring the glass" she bought from the Grand Bazaar "to life" by holding the bottle under running water and turning the stopper "round and round" (187). While she is rubbing the "dust-spots with thumbs and fingers," the glass turns blue, the stopper miraculously flies out of the bottle and falls into the basin, and a djinn covered with a dark cloud takes up most of her hotel room. Byatt's narrator describes the djinn, released from the nightingale's-eye bottle, in terms both of Gillian's contemporary history and of the stories Orhan tells in the Ankara conference:

And out of the bottle in her hands came a swarming, an exhalation, a fast-moving dark stain which made a high-pitched buzzing sound and smelled of woodsmoke, of cinnamon, of sulphur, of something that might have been incense, of something that was not leather, but was? The dark cloud gathered and turned and flew in a great paisley or comma out of the bathroom. I am seeing things, thought Dr. Perholt. . . (188)

In the absence of Gillian's direct speech in this scene, the reader has access to the protagonist's ways of seeing the djinn only through the narrator's point of view, which ironically associates the supernatural being with commercial and chemical substances like leather and sulphur. The djinn is further removed from his religious context in the Koran as he watches the tennis match between Boris Becker and Henri Leconte, grabs the former from the TV screen, and brings him to Gillian's bedroom. The djinn's interruption of the tennis match serves as a proof of his existence as the commentator on TV announces that Becker has had a seizure and cannot go on with the game. The similarities between Orhan's references to djinns in his lecture and Gillian's perception of the flying daemon also highlight the discursivity of the narratologist's fantasy, which is based on her friend's retelling of Scheherazade's stories. The depictions of "the transparent and solid" daemon as a dark cloud emerging in Gillian's bathroom derive from Orhan's description of djinns as "a swaying black pillar that touched the clouds" and as being "sometimes visible, sometimes invisible; they haunt bathrooms and lavatories, and they fly through the heavens" (126–130). The narratologist creates her own fairy tale, which is based on Orhan's narration of djinns in the Camaralzaman and Budoor story, by perceiving the European glass as *çeşm-i bülbül* and bringing the dusty bottle to life in late-twentieth-century Istanbul.

The djinn, the one that Gillian releases from a Turkish glass vase, also enables a critique of patriarchal constructions of beauty. The text evokes the djinns with supernatural powers in storybooks to underline how the ideal female body image is destructive for women who resort to drastic measures like plastic surgery in order to look beautiful. In her conversations with the djinn, Gillian confesses that an attrac-

tive body is what she has “desired hopelessly in the last ten years”: “‘I wish,’ said Gillian, ‘for my body to be as it was when I last really *liked* it, if you can do that’ ” (197–198). Gillian’s first wish indicates how much she has internalized the beauty myth, which, for Wolf, is perpetuated by magazines that represent attractiveness as a woman’s most valuable asset, and profit from selling the secrets of having “a gorgeous figure” and a younger-looking skin. The djinn cannot understand Gillian’s wish for temporal and transitory qualities which will not delay her destined return to dust. Nevertheless, he grants her wish by magically transforming her into a thirty-five-year-old woman with full breasts, taut stomach, smooth thighs, round nipples, and a neck without wrinkles. Most importantly, the djinn does not grant her physical perfection but gives her self-confidence to overcome her insecurities as a middle-aged woman. Gillian learns to appreciate her body despite its flaws such as “her appendix scar” and the “mark on her knee where she had fallen on a broken bottle” (199). She is “happy to see and feel” her face which is “not beautiful” but “healthy and lively” and breaks away from the ideals of beauty by embracing her body with its imperfections: “I shall *feel* better, I shall like myself more. That was an *intelligent* wish, I shall not regret it” (199). Gillian’s wish-making problematizes the association of the East with sensuality and the West with rationality as the Oriental daemon teaches his British companion not to be physically oriented, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

In restoring Gillian’s self-confidence to enjoy her own body, the djinn underlines the artificiality of standards of beauty that are, in any case, socially and historically constructed. He observes that ample women were desirable in the past and now people prefer “ladies without breasts, like boys” (200). He questions the prevalent constructs of a thin female body by finding Gillian’s figure “a little meagre” and by wishing her to be “ripe” and “rounder” (198). The old tourist guide Gillian meets at the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations regrettably agrees with the djinn that skinny androgynous female bodies with small breasts seem more fashionable than plump women. He tells her how ancient people worshipped fat goddesses because they associated “rolls of fat” with “strength,” “good prospects of children,” and “living through the winter,” and thinness with rough labor, sickness, or starvation (137). The guide says: “We don’t like our girls fat now . . . we like them to look like young boys, the boys out of the Greek gymnasium round the corner” (139). Both the Oriental daemon and the Turkish tour guide claim that women’s efforts to be fit, athletic, and skinny distort the feminine features of their bodies – curves, bellies, and breasts – and make them look masculine. Ironically, the Istanbul hotel, named as the palace of a beautiful maiden, becomes a setting where the artificiality of Gillian’s beauty fantasies is exposed, and where late twentieth-century women’s extreme efforts to be slim, and, therefore, desirable for the masculine gaze are critiqued.

While questioning Gillian's standards of beauty, the djinn deconstructs the bliss of marriage by telling the stories of his conversations with the Queen of Sheba and Zefir, who did not want to be imprisoned in the domestic sphere. The djinn's stories that narrate matrimony from women's points of view subvert the images of happily married wives in both history and fiction. In telling the story of the Prophet Solomon – David's son in the Koran – from the perspective of his bride-to-be, the djinn gives voice to the Queen of Sheba's critique of marriage as an institution that obliges women to be subservient to their husbands. The djinn states: "She would say to me as, as her spies brought her news of his triumphal progress across the desert, the great Suleiman, blessed be his memory, she would say 'How can I, a great Queen, submit to the prison house of marriage, to the invisible chains which bind me to the bed of a man?'" (205). Although attracted to Solomon, the Queen did not want to jeopardize her freedom by surrendering to her husband's commands and fulfilling his sexual desires. The djinn advised her that marriage was not the only option for women and she should not get married simply to fulfill her society's expectations. Most importantly, the silenced subservient Queen in the Koran becomes a spokesperson for gender equality in the djinn's story. The Koran states that the Queen of Sheba from Yemen and "her people were worshipping the sun instead of Allah," and, on meeting with the Prophet Solomon, the Queen admitted that she had "wronged" herself by not believing in Allah and willingly changed her faith.¹¹ The djinn problematizes the depictions of the obedient Queen in the Koran by praising her richness of mind and her refusal to be in a subservient position in marriage.

The djinn verifies the Queen's comparison of marriage to a "prison house" by telling the story of Zefir, who was married at fourteen to the merchant of Smyrna, "kind enough to her, kind enough, if you call treating someone like a toy dog or a spoiled baby or a fluffy fat bird in a cage being kind" (218). Zefir was dehumanized in a marriage in which she was treated as a living toy of a husband who was much older than she was. She repressed her anger at the merchant, who ignored her artistic skill in "sewing huge pictures" of stories in silk, and pretended to be a content wife with a fake smile (219). Imprisoned in her "cage," she mournfully reflected that she did not have any opportunity to improve her skills because it was not socially acceptable for women to be wise and learned:

She was a great artist, Zefir, but no one saw her art. . . . She told me she was eaten up with unused power and thought she might be a witch – except, she said, if she were a man, these things she thought about would be ordinarily acceptable. If she had been a man, and a westerner, she would

11. *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentaries*, trans. Nurettin Uzunoğlu (Istanbul: Acar Matbaacılık, 1998), 27:24.

have rivaled the great Leonardo, whose flying machines were the talk of
the court of Suleiman one summer – (219–220)

With Zefir's story, the djinn hints that the reason for male dominance in arts and sciences is not because women lacked creative genius but because their lives were limited to the domestic sphere. Women in the fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries were treated as idle playthings of men and were not allowed to become famous painters like Leonardo da Vinci or poets like William Shakespeare. In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf argues that even if Shakespeare had had a gifted sister, her parents would have encouraged her to stay at home, "mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books or papers."¹² According to Woolf, a woman who tried to use her artistic talents would have been an outcast, regarded as "half witch, half wizard" in the Elizabethan age when it was unthinkable for women to have Shakespeare's genius.¹³ Considering intelligence and creativity as masculine traits, Zefir also "thought she might be a witch" and "was eaten up with unused power," which could have produced many drawings and paintings (220). In highlighting Zefir's oppression in marriage, the djinn foregrounds how the absence of women in the arts intersects with patriarchal and ethnic ideologies that privilege the works of white western men.

The djinn not only disrupts the myth of happily-ever-after marriages, but also the nineteenth-century constructions of subservient female slaves in the Ottoman harem by telling the stories of strong women who determined the fate of the Empire. The djinn's narration of Süleyman the Magnificent's Christian concubine, Roxelana, known in Turkish as Hürrem, foregrounds the hybridity of the harem and the role of the foreign Sultanas in the Empire's power network. The djinn shows how non-Muslim slave-girls, portrayed by nineteenth-century European travelers (e.g. Edmondo De Amicis and William Thackeray¹⁴) as idle sexual objects of men, could marry the Sultan and rule the Ottoman palaces with their treacherous intrigues. The djinn tells Gillian how Roxelana entered the harem as a Ukrainian slave-girl, "defeated the Sultan's early love Gülbahar," "bore him a son," and became the legal wife of Süleyman, "which no concubine, no Christian, had ever achieved" (209). In order to secure the throne for her eldest son, Selim, Roxelana persuaded the Sultan that his son with Gülbahar was deceitful, and had Mustafa and his pregnant Circassian lover strangled with silk cords. The djinn's story underlines how cunning and shrewd women like Roxelana were able to influence the Sultan's com-

12. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), p. 51.

13. Woolf, p. 53.

14. William Makepeace Thackeray, "A Journey from Cornhill to Cairo," in *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray* (n.p.: Smith, 1884), XII, 585–733.

mands and determine the successors to the throne. Foregrounding Roxelana's role as "political confidante to the sultan,"¹⁵ Leslie Peirce also remarks in *The Imperial Harem* that "concubine mothers, women from Christian territories enslaved and converted to Islam – were also able to claim a share in the exercise of sovereign authority through their roles *within* the family."¹⁶ The djinn shows how De Amicis's representations of the harem inmates as "pleasing and decorative feminine creatures" "fond of childish games"¹⁷ gloss over the fact that some foreign slaves like Roxelana had power to control the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

In telling the stories of the Queen of Sheba, Zefir, and Roxelana, the djinn challenges the objectification of the harem inmates in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel literature by focusing not on women's physical appearance but on their social skills. As Mary Roberts writes in "Contested Terrains," many European travelers – Lady Montagu,¹⁸ Hornby, Thackeray, and De Amicis – were involved in "Orientalist eroticism" by focusing on the slave-girls' beauty, make up, skin complexion, and elegant dresses. Indira Ghose¹⁹ and Reina Lewis²⁰ also argue that while elevating the harem inmates' art-like physiques, women writers like Hornby adopted an imperialist gaze by attributing intelligence to the British and traditional female roles of passivity and beauty to the Ottoman ladies. The djinn, on the other hand, does not foreground the Queen's, Zefir's, and Roxelana's physical appearance but their wisdom in questioning patriarchy, their talent for drawing pictures, and their power to rule their countries. The djinn's story of the "long-dead Turkish prodigy" and "a great artist" Zefir, for example, goes against the "bird-of-paradise-like uselessness of the Turkish belle," as presented in Emilia Hornby's *In and Around Stamboul*,²¹ by showing that achieving physical perfection was not the only employment of Ottoman women. In his conversations with Gillian, the djinn also emphasizes how he values women's personalities and intelligence more than their looks, which are transitory: The Queen of Sheba's "body was rich and lovely but her mind was richer and lovelier and more durable" (205). The djinn's stories teach

15. Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 63.

16. Peirce, p.17.

17. De Amicis, pp. 165–6.

18. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Malcolm Jack (London: Virago Press, 1993).

19. Indira Ghose, *Women Travelers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

20. Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996).

21. Hornby, p. 68.

Gillian to move away from bodily concerns by representing women not as sexual objects but as individuals with artistic skills. The supernatural daemon that comes to life in Istanbul challenges the classification of sexes into social and domestic spheres by showing how women, as early as the ancient times, questioned their gender roles, had artistic talents, and were political actors in the Ottoman Empire.

“Tell me your story . . . tell me anything,” says the djinn to Gillian, and his narrations of powerful queens and sultanas cause her to reflect on the fact that although she and her college friends “were all clever like Zefir” and “had greed for knowledge,” they naïvely perceived marriage as the highest achievement for women: “We were a generation when there was something shameful about being an unmarried woman, a spinster – though we were all clever” (233). Gillian tells the djinn that achieving academic success did not bring much happiness and self-confidence to her circle of female friends, who felt insecure for not being attractive enough to find the Prince Charming of their dreams. They knew that “stories happen to ‘beautiful women,’ whether they are interesting or not,”²² as Wolf writes, and “the heroines are chosen for their beauty, not for anything they do,”²³ as Marcia Lieberman states. Gillian’s preoccupation with her looks shows how the images of pretty and well-dressed princesses cause physical dissatisfaction in girls who perceive beauty as the prerequisite for love. She foregrounds her obsession with beauty by telling the djinn how she compared her body with that of her bride-to-be friend while they were looking at the mirror in the latter’s bedroom the night before the wedding: “First in the mirror, and then I looked down at myself. And then I looked across at her – she was pearly-white and I was more golden. And she was soft and sweet” (236). While Gillian was examining her friend’s fair skin, associated with beauty in fairy tales such as “Snow White,” the bride assured her that she would find a man “to go mad with desire for” her flat belly and “beautifully rising breasts” (236). If not in life, Gillian wanted to vicariously satisfy her desire for beauty and passion by playing the role of Ophelia in a student production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but was frustrated to be given the part of Hamlet’s mother Gertrude instead. Gillian’s fascination with her friend’s white wedding and her desire to be the beautiful lover on stage indicate how much she internalized the myths of true love in fairy tales.

Not having been a flirt in college and living as a lonely divorcée in her fifties, Gillian fulfills her desire for passion and intimacy by making her second wish that the djinn would love her. In *Orientalism postmodernism and globalism*, Bryan

22. Wolf, p. 61.

23. Marcia Lieberman, “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” in *Don’t Bet On The Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Methuen, 1986), 187–200, p. 189.

Turner argues that "the Orient in Western imagination is often perceived as the fantastic, it is associated with sexual fantasies" (98). Emblemized as Oriental, Istanbul, the city with djinns, harem, and the polygamous Ottoman Sultans, is a perfect setting for Gillian to make love to the djinn she releases from a Turkish glass vase in the late twentieth century. While Gillian stares at "his sex coiled like a folded snake and stirring," the djinn says: "maybe you have wasted your wish, for it may well be that love would have happened anyway, since we are together, and sharing our life stories, as lovers do" (244). Byatt's narrator tells how Gillian makes love to the daemon, who finds her "eminently lovable," in her hotel room in Istanbul:

And without moving a muscle Dr. Perholt found herself naked on the bed, in the arms of the djinn.

Of their love-making she retained a memory at once precise, mapped on to every nerve-ending, and indescribable. . . . He could become a concentrated point of delight at the pleasure-points of her arched and delighted body; he could travel her like some wonderful butterfly, brushing her here and there with a hot, dry, almost burning kiss, and then become again a folding landscape in which she rested and was lost, lost herself for him to find her again, holding her in the palm of his great hand, contracting himself with a sigh and holding her breast to breast, belly to belly, male to female. (246-247)

It is significant to note that Byatt's narrator sustains the images of meek princesses in fairy tales by ascribing passivity to Gillian and authority to the djinn in the depictions of their lovemaking. The protagonist is the one being kissed, like Snow White, or being made love to. She is not depicted as a powerful and self-confident woman, who can have control over and lead the djinn in bed. It is the male figure that "travels" the female body like a "wonderful butterfly" while Gillian simply "rests" or loses "herself for him to find her again." The narrator further ascribes sexual passivity to Gillian by comparing her body to "arching tunnels under mountains through which he pierced and rushed" (246). The narrative, which represents the two characters' intercourse as the djinn's act of piercing, traveling, and rushing through Gillian's body, operates within the masculinist discourse that attributes authority and activity to men.

By having her protagonist wish first for beauty and then for love, Byatt's story seems to be affirmative of the patriarchal message in fairy tales that a woman's happiness depends on her ability to find a man who would love and take care of her for a lifetime. In exposing how the images of happily married beautiful princesses are detrimental to women by foregrounding Gillian's fear of being a spinster in college and her insecurity over her ageing body, the story also deploys the conventions of fairy tales by granting romance to the narratologist who looks thirty-five in her fifties. Like

the princes in “Snow White” and “Cinderella,” who help damsels in distress by giving life to the former with a kiss and saving the latter from her cruel stepsisters, the djinn eases Gillian’s feelings of solitude and self-hatred by making love to her. As Lisa Fiander writes in *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and A. S. Byatt*, “the themes of the fairy tale being referenced are simultaneously interrogated and reinforced”²⁴ in “The Djinn,” in which the protagonist finds love through the emergence of a strong, powerful male figure from a magical glass vase. Nevertheless, making the heroine’s wishes come true, Byatt’s novella also subverts the cliché endings of fairy tales as Gillian gives her third wish to the djinn, who leaves the narratologist promising that he will visit her from time to time. “If you remember to return in my life-time,” responds Gillian, and “If I do” says the djinn (265). The text ends with the djinn briefly encountering Gillian in a glass shop and leaving with the same promise that he might come back again. The open ending of the story deviates from the myths of romance in fairy tales, as a happy-ever-after love is unobtainable for Gillian and she turns back to her lonesome life after the djinn’s departure.

Istanbul: The City That Lies outside Gillian’s Hotel Bedroom with the Djinn

Istanbul’s social and environmental issues that do not fit into “a condition of beautiful stasis, more like a work of art” in fairy tales, however, are glossed over in the narrator’s story that grants Gillian’s wishes for beauty and love (261). The narrative that represents Gillian’s stay in Istanbul through her conversations with the djinn does not adequately represent the city outside her room in the Peri Palas Hotel in 1991. Gillian’s fantasies of buying a glass vase with a genie and her wish-making process cloud Turkey’s political complexities, which Professor Orhan hints at while the two share their life stories in Istanbul. Accompanying the narratologist during her stay in Turkey, Orhan comments how dress and hair are markers of one’s religious and political identity, and how a beard is associated with Islam or Marxism, which are both considered detrimental to the unity of the secular Republic. The narrator informs the reader of Orhan’s conflict with the government that did not allow him to teach at Istanbul University without shaving his beard:

Orhan told of his tragic-comic battle with the official powers over his beard, which he had been required to shave before he was allowed to teach. A beard in modern Turkey is symbolic of religion or Marxism, neither acceptable. He had shaved his beard temporarily but now it flourished anew,

²⁴ Lisa M. Fiander, *Fairy Tales and the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and A. S. Byatt* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 8.

like mown grass, Orhan said, even thicker and more luxuriant. The conversation moved to poets and politics: the exile of Halicarnassus, the imprisonment of the great Nazım Hikmet. (150)

Orhan's battle with "the official powers" foregrounds the state's insistence on preserving Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's ideals of secularism by not allowing men to wear a beard, with religious or Marxist implications, in government facilities including schools, courts, and civil service offices. Orhan challenges the government's power to interfere with a professor's physical appearance in the classroom by growing his beard after shaving temporarily. Since the narrator does not provide Orhan's direct speech but gives a brief summary of his conflict with the university officials, the reader has a limited view on how students' and professors' appearance was affected by the state politics in the 1990s. The passage that goes beyond Gillian's encounter with the djinn is also cut off abruptly by the narrator who does not give an account of the rest of Orhan and Gillian's conversations, which move "to poets and politics." The narrator briefly mentions that the two characters discuss the imprisonment of the Turkish poet, Nazım Hikmet, for promoting Marxism and the novelist, Cevat Şâkir Kabaağaçlı (known as the Fisherman of Halicarnassus), for attacking the capital punishment of men who did not fulfill their obligatory military duty in the early years of the Republic. By not providing any background information on why Kabaağaçlı and Hikmet were punished, the narrator chooses not to explore how Orhan is not the only poet in battle with "the official powers" and how writers since the 1920s have been imprisoned or exiled for going against Turkish nationalist ideologies. The narrator's decision to cut the characters' conversation on politics short and move on to their discussion on genies indicates how Istanbul is represented through the fantastical themes in the *Nights* instead of the city's historical context in 1991. The abrupt shift from the imprisonment of Turkish poets to supernatural daemons in Byatt's text self-reflexively hints at the workings of Orientalist discourses, which make Istanbul Oriental by excluding the city's social and political complexities.

In recounting Gillian's adventures in Istanbul, the narrator also hints at the fictionality of the djinn by commenting: "She was later to wonder how she could be so matter-of-fact about the presence of the gracefully lounging Oriental daemon in a hotel room" (202). With Gillian's reference to the self-reflexivity of Turkish tales, introduced with "perhaps it happened, perhaps it didn't," the narrator highlights how story-telling and truth-telling are interweaved in the protagonist's encounter with the djinn, which, like glass, is paradoxically both "transparent and solid," and both "there and not there" (254, 266). Byatt's narrator hints at the inventedness of the djinn story by referring to Gillian's lectures that compare life to a narrative consisting of both unreal and factual happenings:

She was accustomed also to say, in lectures, that it was possible that the human need to tell tales about things that were unreal originated in dreams, and that memory had certain things also in common with dreams; it rearranged, it made clear, simple narratives, certainly it invented as well as recalling. Hobbes, she told her students, had described imagination as decayed memory. She had at no point the idea that she might 'wake up' from the presence of the djinn and find him gone as he had never been. . . (203)

In her lecture, the narratologist acknowledges the human need to tell stories that would allow one to feel "the possible leap of freedom – I can have what I want" just like the characters whose wishes are granted in fairy tales (254). Feeling old, redundant, and unattractive after her husband's affair with a younger woman, Gillian does not question the presence of the djinn whom she needs to forget her solitude in her hotel room. "Real-unreal [is] not the point," as Gillian says, and what is important is that fantasy provides a remedy for the narratologist to overcome her insecurities as she becomes the heroine of a story that brings her love, sex, and youth (164). Whether "invented" or "recalled," the djinn gives Gillian the chance to be a beautiful magical figure, a peri, by pronouncing her name as "Djil-yan Perihan" (209).

Overall, Byatt's novella depicts Istanbul in light of the Arabian Nights stories with the themes of magic and wish fulfillment by privileging Gillian's djinn fantasies in the Pera Palas over the city's complexities, such as pollution and income inequalities, which lie outside of her hotel room in 1991. In associating Istanbul with a supernatural being depicted in the Koran and in Persian-Arabian stories, Gillian renders the city that brings Asia and Europe together as being completely distant from Western cultures and civilizations. The djinn, the one that grants Gillian's wishes for youth and love, however, enables a critique of fairy tales through which female readers internalize the myth that they will find romance only if they are desirable in the male gaze. The text evokes fairy tale conventions to show how beauty standards in "once upon a time" stories do not simply exist in a distant imaginary world but negatively affect late twentieth-century British women like Gillian, who are self-conscious over their physical appearances. Unlike the djinns in the Camaralzaman and Budoor story that miraculously bring the two beauties together in bed, the Oriental daemon that comes to life in Istanbul does not grant a happy-ever-after love to Gillian but helps her overcome her insecurities as an aging woman by granting her spiritual youth and self-confidence to feel beautiful. In compensating for her insecurities, Gillian's fantasies of conversing with the djinn serve as a critique of British society where women are judged on the basis of their youth and attractiveness and not of their intelligence and academic success.