JoLaCE

Journal of Language and Cultural Education, 2015, 3(3)
ISSN 1339-4584
SlovakEdu

DE GRUYTER OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/jolace-2015-0025

The thousand and one tries: Storytelling as an art of failure in Rabih Alameddine's Fiction

Zuzana Tabačková
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia
ztabackova@ukf.sk

Abstract

The paper discusses experimental fiction of Rabih Alameddine, an American writer of Lebanese origin, whose literary pursuits subvert Orientalist discourse based on the East/West dichotomy by focusing on the commonalities of the two. The recurring motif of searching for one's identity (while being trapped in-between two mutually distant and at the same time similar worlds) is reflected in the subversion of the traditional understanding of the narrative which is destined to a constant failure. Alameddine's storytelling is, in reality, a "story-trying." By employing multiple narrators, intertwining plots, genres and languages, the author is striving hard to tell "his-story" about American homophobia, Lebanese sectarianism as well as the physical and psychological outcomes of war – a story which turns up to be a narration of the thousand and one failed beginnings.

Keywords

Rabih Alameddine, American literature, identity, Orientalism, storytelling

'Sister, I pray you finish your tale.' To this Shahrazad
answered: 'Gladly and with all my heart!' Then she continued:
(*The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*)

Introduction

Kan ya ma kan, once upon a time, there was a story. But the story could not exist without its "teller" as the events that made up the story could only be communicated through telling. And that is how a storyteller was born. But the storyteller did not possess the story. He was not its sole owner, proprietor, and guardian. As Alameddine (2008, p. 137) suggests, once the story was told, it was "anyone's," it became "common currency," it got "twisted and distorted," for "no story is told the same way twice or in quite the same words." The art of storytelling has had a long tradition in the Arab world. For centuries, the "once-upon-a-time" has been performed by the so-called *hakawatis* or storytellers. The *hakawati* did not necessarily rely on the written word; his (or her) expertise was the realm of the spoken as is also suggested by the etymological root of the word, whose origin can be traced back to the Arabic verb *haka* (= to tell, to relate). In the Lebanese dialect, the word *haki* also stands for *speech*; speaking, as Hassan (2011, p. 212) argues, is therefore "synonymous with telling a story"; and the story becomes the "condition of language and of all human knowledge." In his 2008 interview with Jacki Lyden, Alameddine, whose two works of fiction are discussed in the present paper, recalls this peculiar storytelling profession distinct for the Middle East:

> At some point, you know, hakawatis were the primary form of entertainment. They could tell a story and expand it for about, you know, six months to a year. They could go on and on and on. Basically they were paid on whether the audience wanted them back or not. If they weren't able to hook an audience, they went hungry. And if, you know, God forbid at one point if they couldn't tell a good story they were beheaded.

The idea recalls Shahrazad whose life also depended on the thousand and one stories she was telling to her despotic husband. Under the threat of losing her head, she was narrating a thread of stories, one interwoven into another. Like Shahrazad, the *hakawati* would often take a break at the point of great tension, then "take a sip of tea, only beginning again after enough coins were tossed his way" (Zughaib, 2007, p. 132). For the storyteller, storytelling was a means of survival. El Hakouni (as cited in Hamilton, 2011, p. 5) suggests that the motif of survival should guide any reading of *The Thousand and One Nights*:

> If Scheherezade could save her neck for one thousand and one nights, that would be long enough for the king to forget his vengeance. But the key was not a physical weapon. Scheherezade had nothing; only good stories to tell and the ability to tell them well. The lesson is that, if you want to survive, you better have a good story to tell.

The art of *hakawatis* is the leitmotif present in all literary pursuits of an American writer of Lebanese origin, Rabih Alameddine. The author's preoccupation with the narrative (or narratives) as the primary focus of his aesthetics is transferred into his postmodern pastiche composed of a mosaic of vignettes, mythical stories, traditional tales of the beautiful Shahrazad, stories from the Bible or the Koran, historical heroic tales as well as family histories of the "unheroic heroes and heroines" whose identities are broken between their civil war driven Lebanese homeland and the USA; whose gender or sexual identities are ruptured as well as the narratives that they are trying to create. Alameddine's failing narrators are, thus, the postmodern versions of the beautiful Shahrazad, whose modern tales always begin and never end, desperately searching for a "Sharayar" to listen. All their ontological anxieties are transferred to their stories; stories that "speak to the tenuousness of storytelling as a foolproof mode of communication by highlighting the inevitable multiplicity that exists in the act of remembering something and then speaking about it" (Salaita, 2011, p. 47 – 48). While traditional *hakawatis* were sort of entertainers speaking in local cafés and capable of keeping the attention of their audience for weeks, Alameddine's storytellers tell stories which are a reflection of their broken selves in the postmodern milieu; whose "once-upon-a-time" is more a "once-upon-a-timelessness" and whose "and-they-lived-happily-ever-after" turns into a desperate appeal to listen.

The article discusses different aspects of creating and telling Alameddine's stories, as represented by his two novels, *I, the Divine (2001),* and his first post September 11 novel (which is often referred to as his *opus magnum), The Hakawati (2008).* In both novels, the motif of break, split or cleavage has been transferred into the narrative techniques which subvert the traditional understanding of storytelling and storytellers. Literary criticism tends to look at American ethnic writers (be they of Arab, Jewish, Hispanic, etc. origin) through the perspective of culture and identity as well as the tendencies to either identify or non-identify with the culture of their adoptive country. Alameddine's stories suggest a different kind of reading and by doing so, they subvert the Orientalist discourse to nothing else but a work of fiction for if a story belongs to anyone, and if anyone can twist or distort it, then, as Hassan (2011, p. 215) suggests, "it would be folly to claim that any one culture is autonomous, self-identical, uncontaminated by outside influences, or has a monopoly on language or truth." Said's East versus West dichotomy thus turns in Alameddine's narrative into a fictional story itself. Alameddine is a postmodern *hakawati* who strives hard to "cook" in his literary cuisine a story of mixed storylines, mixed characters residing in mixed geographies and the motifs mixed of violence and storytelling; the overall effect being the themes flavored with postmodern spices suggesting different tastes and meanings in those who try to eat them.

Mixed up storylines

At the beginning of a story, there should be some "once upon a time," some launching or starting moment from which the narrator introduces the story to the one who listens; a moment which lays the foundations of the *fabula-sujet* relationship. In Alameddine's fictional projects, this point, which is

supposed to incite the reader's interest, is somehow blurred turning the "once upon a time" into a "once upon a timelessness." The time in its chronological understanding becomes a work of fiction itself evoking Alameddine's very first novel *Koolaids* (1998, p. 4) in which one of its multiple narrators proclaims that "the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time." In the same way, the shattered time in the two discussed novels results in a shattered narrative (or narratives).

In his 2001 novel *I, the Divine* whose subtitle bears the name of *A Novel in First Chapters*, the first person narrator, a woman of Lebanese origin, Sarah the "Divine," strives hard to tell her story but is never quite satisfied. As a result, after every first chapter, she starts another first chapter hoping that her next attempt will be more successful. In the end, her narration turns out to be a novel of more than fifty first chapters (including some introductions) written in English, French and dispersed with Lebanese dialect. The foregrounded technique is complicated through the employment of various genres which challenge the process of narration as well as the process of reading. Sarah is sometimes writing a novel, sometimes a memoir. Her account of her introverted sister Lamia has the form of letters which Lamia writes (but never sends) in weak English to their American mother who was sent from Lebanon back to the United States for not giving a son to her husband. In addition to this epistolary form, Sarah also makes an attempt to tell her story through newspaper articles related to the Lebanese Civil War that deeply affected the stories of all the characters in the book. Paradoxically, none of these narrative experiments satisfies the narrator who upon finishing the previous chapter always begins the next chapter one. Intermixing English, French, and Arabic suggests that no language can in a satisfying way express Sarah's experience, her individuality, which is in fact nothing else but her story. The idea of these continual attempts to start with repeated revelations of failure are in-between-the-lines suggested in different parts of the book, such as "the false starts of the Volvo" (2011, p. 236), "The engine caught. I stepped on the gas. The car lurched forward, toward the approaching boy, and died. I tried again. Another false start. The engine caught again and died before I could step on the gas." Sarah's attempts to start the engine are interrupted by a boy with a machine gun who offers her help. Their conversation in the course of fighting gives the reader a clue to the false beginnings in the novel which may be understood through the perspective of the civil war:

> "Why are they fighting?"
> "Who can remember anymore? Habit, I guess. Nobody knows anything else. They start shooting, forgetting why. They stop. They start in a different way. They stop again. Try a different attack. They can't seem to be able to finish a battle. It's endless."
> "Can't someone get them to stop?"
> He shrugged. I guess the question was too silly. (2011, p. 237)

This writing technique enables the author to play with time so as to reveal Sarah's story gradually, in small steps, through which the readers can in "small bites" taste and digest Sarah's experience in a way that they would not if her story were told chronologically.

The Hakawati (2008), on the other hand, mixes up different storylines. The novel opens with three quotes that foreground Alameddine's motifs and techniques employed in the process of creating his *opus magnum*. The first quote is taken from al-Tifashi's *Delights of Hearts*, "Praise be to God, who has so disposed matters that pleasant literary anecdotes may serve as an instrument for the polishing of wits and the cleansing of rust from our hearts" (as cited in Alameddine, 2008, p. 3). In Alameddine's novel those "pleasant literary anecdotes" stand for the stories (or "the conditions of language and of all human knowledge") through which the author by means of Osama, one of the narrators of the story, reveals the rust that has gradually covered the wits of his fictional characters and non-fictional readers.

The second quote comes from Javier Marías' *A Heart so White* (1992, p. 136), "Everything can be told. It's just a matter of starting, one word follows another." The quoted statement is reflected in Alameddine's focus on the story which lies at the focal point of his novel. Every experience can be

contained within a narrative; the question is the starting point. This statement is subverted in the novel since by getting to the end, we find out that the novel is in fact a cycle. Its first opening words do not tell who the narrator is, "Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imagining. Let me tell you a story" (p. 5). On the first page of the novel, we do not have any hint of who that unnamed godlike narrator is. The narrator then continues with a story inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights* about an emir and his wife who had twelve girls but no son. The narrative then shifts to 2003 – the year which Osama, the first person narrator, chooses as his starting point. He comes back to Lebanon from the United States (which he chose as his new homeland upon finishing his studies) so as to visit his father, dying in the local hospital. The hospital also becomes the final scene of the novel which brings the reader back to the beginning. In this final setting, whose distance from the first scene stretches over more than five hundred pages, we find Osama in the hospital, standing next to his father's deathbed telling him a story (or stories) that have accompanied the reader throughout the whole reading quest and that have been told to Osama by his grandfather (who was a true *hakawati)*, by his uncle Jihad and all other people that he ever encountered. The last words of the novel, in a Finnegans-like-way bring the reader back to the beginning of the story:

> "Your father told me that story – one of his best, if you ask me. He also told me how you were born. Do you want me to tell you? He told me all kinds of incredible things about you. He told me how you used to steal meat as it was being fried, how you used to sneak by your mother, grab the lamb from the frying pan and run." I checked his face for a reaction. "Can you hear me?" I closed my eyes briefly. "I know your stories."
> His chest kept rising and falling mechanically, systematically.
> "And I can tell you my stories. If you want."
> I paused, waited.
> "Listen." (p. 513)

The irony of these last lines is that Osama's dying father cannot probably perceive his son's narration; there are, however, other people – his friend Fatima, sister Lina and niece Salwa (as well as the reader) – who can. The irony also stems from the father-son relationship that they had as Osama felt much closer to his mother and Uncle Jihad than to his father. Jihad happened to be Osama's most influential storyteller:

> Uncle Jihad used to say that what happens is of little significance compared with the stories we tell ourselves about what happens. Events matter little, only stories of those events affect us. My father and I may have shared numerous experiences, but, as I was constantly finding out, we rarely shared their stories, we didn't know how to listen to one another. (p. 450)

Again, the story, the *fabula*, plays the crucial role and the common experience does not guarantee that one's story will be truly shared by all the recipients involved. This idea proves to be at the core of Alameddine's narrative. If Osama's father was not able to listen to his story during his lifetime, there is a small possibility that he will be able to "digest" his son's stories on his deathbed. The listener of Sharazad's stories was her despotic husband Sharayar whose violence was in small "fabula-inspired" steps softened and weakened. Osama is also searching for a listener who would be able to share his experience and digest his story as well as the story of his varied and large Lebanese family striving to survive in the skirmishes of the Lebanese Civil War. Osama's story is composed from a mosaic of other stories from the Bible, The Thousand and One Nights, mythologies, historical and heroic tales, etc. which Osama strives hard to retell by repeatedly admitting that "[n]o one listens anymore" (p. 9). Da Costa (2008) sees this sequence of storylines as "a disorganized yet lavishly blurbed mass stitched together with deadly platitudes about the magic and mystery of storytelling." This statement, however, fails to see the motifs lying behind Alameddine's narrative techniques. The book may at first sight seem to be

lacking any authorial command; however, it is because the novel, despite the fact that it is written in English, is mostly set in the civil-war-driven Lebanon. As argued by Salaita (2007, p. 77), "the political upheaval entailed in the civil war eliminated both temporal and ontological certainties" which affected the seemingly disorganized form of the two novels. Simultaneously, storytelling suggests telling existent stories to the audience while the audience is involved and whenever the audience is involved, there are multiple interpretations involved as well. Talking about "deadly platitudes" is thus quite unfair.

The third quote that opens up the novel is taken from *The Book of Disquiet* written by Fernando Pessoa, "What Hells and Purgatories and Heavens I have inside of me! But who sees me do anything that disagrees with life – me, so calm and peaceful (as cited in Alameddine, 2008, p. 3)?" The "co-existence" of Hells, Purgatories and Heavens is reflected in the characters of the novel who are somehow broken and split by competing ideologies (be they political, religious or philosophical) and who are despite their inner cleavage living their own stories which are sometimes broken, sometimes torn apart but which are not in disagreement with life.

To conclude, what these two novels share are the narrative techniques drawing on the subjective perception of time and the dissonance between individual remembering and retelling. The family histories in both novels prove to be nothing else but the subjective stories of the individuals within those families, composed not just of the microcosm of the inside-the-family storylines but also of the macrocosm of the Lebanese and American settings, religious, historical and mythological tales that have been tormenting and twisting the inner world of the *hakawatis.* While *I, the Divine* could be called "the thousand and one tries to find the right *sujet*" for Sarah's *fabula*; *The Hakawati* resembles "the thousand and one *fabulae"* moving in the cycle of one s*ujet* which is, however, never the same once the reading cycle is completed. Since the relationship between the story and the way in which it is told is mediated through the storyteller who constitutes the tension between the two by selecting a specific narrative mode, to understand the complexity of Alameddine's aesthetics, we now need to focus our attention on the mediators, the storytellers, who are trying to tell their stories to the reader.

Mixed characters residing in mixed geographies

The difference between the narrator and the non-narrator (who is often referred to as a reflector) could be, according to Procházka (2015) expressed through the opposition between telling and showing, "The story is either told by the narrator (Fielding's *Tom Jones*), or the narrator may be partially or totally absent. In the former case, it is telling that prevails, in the latter case showing is the main way" (p. 170). In both discussed novels, the narrator may sometimes seem absent but his (or her) presence is nevertheless always suggested in-between the lines. The narrators of both novels discussed in the present paper are broken in a similar way as the narratives that they are trying to reconstruct from a myriad of stories and memories. What is broken is their understanding of their own roots; their identities split between different ethnicities, religious conceptions, and between the East and the West. All of these "cleavages" complicate their storytelling.

The first thing that Sarah and Osama share is their fake name as well as the fake stories about their roots told to them by their paternal grandfathers. *I, the Divine* is told from the perspective of a woman, Sarah Nour el-Din (which translates as the *light of religion*), named by her grandfather after a famous French stage icon, Sarah Bernhardt, well-known by her nickname "The Divine Sarah." The origin of Sarah's name is discussed in the "first first" chapter of the book, which is quite brief:

> My grandfather named me for the great Sarah Bernhardt. He considered having met her in person the most important event of his life. He talked about her endlessly. By the age of five, I was able to repeat each of his stories verbatim. And I did.
> My grandfather was a simple man. (Alameddine, 2001, p. 3)

It is only much later in her life that Sarah learns that her name is in reality nothing else but a lie repeatedly told to her by her patriarchal grandfather. She becomes his favorite granddaughter because

as the third girl in line, she proves to be the medium through which he is able to send her American mother back to the United States and find a proper wife for his son. Sarah's name and her grandfather's tales (which she listens to throughout her childhood) are fake; as is her idea of who she is and where she should go. Consequently, she does not turn out to be a "divine," omniscient narrator, but a subjective, first person one. Despite the fact that she sometimes tries to switch to the third person, especially when she is trying to reconstruct a difficult story which she would rather forget, she still remains the narrator trying to show what she cannot tell.

The irony of the narrator of *The Hakawati,* who is asking the readers to "be [their] god" (Alameddine, 2008, p. 5), is that he is also subverting the idea of an omniscient, all-knowing and godlike third person narrator who, in this case, turns out to be a mere reflection of his first person, subjective perspective – the perspective which is again nothing else but a mixture of the stories of all the characters involved in his story. Similarly, the name of Osama's grandfather suggests the idea of something fake and unreal. As in Sarah's case, Osama's grandfather, who is a professional *hakawati*, exerts significant influence on his grandson. His personal narrative shapes the narratives of all his descendants. Osama's grandfather is called Ismail which his grandson considers predetermined as "[w]hat would you call a son of your maid if you lived in Urfa" (p. 36)? Since Urfa, situated in southern Turkey, close to the Syrian border, is often referred to as the birthplace of Abraham, Osama's statement creates an analogy between his grandfather's story and the story of Abraham's illegitimate son Ismail. Osama's grandfather was the son of an English alcoholic doctor Simon Twinning and his Armenian maidservant. Simon Twinning's legitimate wife would not allow her husband to give his name to the son he had with a servant so the child was called after his mother. When Ismail becomes a professional *hakawati*, a *bey* hires him and names him "Al-Kharrat" which translates as fibster because

> When he [the bey] inquired after my grandfather's background, the young Ismail provided three different improbable tales in a row. On the spot, the bey hired my grandfather to be his fool, and from that point on referred to him as "al-kharrat," the fibster, or "hal-kharrat," that fibster…Since my grandfather had no papers, no documented father, the bey called in favors, paid bribes, and offered his boy a new birth certificate, baptizing him with a fresh name, Ismail al-Kharrat. (p. 36 – 37)

The name pointed to the grandfather's job of the *hakawati* whose origin brings forward the idea of a lie as suggested by Osama himself:

> What is a hakawati, you ask? Ah, listen.
> A hakawati is a teller of tales, myths and fables (hekayât). A storyteller, an entertainer. A troubadour of sorts, someone who earns his keep by beguiling an audience with yarns. Like the word "hekayeh" (story, fable, news), "hakawati" is derived from the Lebanese word "haki," which means "talk" or "conversation." This suggests that in Lebanese the mere act of talking is storytelling. (p. 36)

The idea of beguiling the audience is foregrounded by the family name invented for their paternal grandfather. It also points to Osama himself for he, too, plays the role of the *hakawati* of the story relying on his blurred memories of the tales he has heard throughout his lifetime and striving hard to reconstruct the fragmented recollections of the past.

What Sarah and Osama share besides their fake names and influential paternal grandfathers is their mixed identity foregrounded by their Lebanese origin. Both of them come from fairly well-to-do Lebanese families of mixed ethnic and religious background. Their financial background enables them to sojourn between the East and the West – the fact which complicates their "who-am-I-dilemma."

Sarah is a daughter of a Lebanese Druze father and an American mother. As she recounts in one of her first chapters, when her father and mother fell in love with each other, her father's Druze family did

everything possible to break up the relationship. Despite the fact that her mother became a true Druze woman, adjusting to the traditions of the family, "[o]ne could not convert to the religion, but had to be born into it" (Alameddine, 2001, p. 48). As it was not possible to have civil marriages in Lebanon, Sarah's parents got married in Cyprus and this makes Sarah say that "technically, that meant that all their children [including herself] were bastards." Osama's background is even more complicated, having English, Armenian as well as Lebanese roots. From a religious perspective, he is Druze (like Alameddine's parents) but his sister is a Maronite. His closest friend Fatima is a daughter of an Iraqi Christian father and an Italian Jewish mother. This multiethnic origin stresses the Lebanese setting incorporating a myriad of cultures, ethnic groups and religious confessions.

Furthermore, both Sarah and Osama move between Lebanon and the United States, their adoptive country, a fact which complicates their narratives even more. As an adult, Sarah constantly shuttles between the USA and Lebanon and, as Fadda-Conrey (2009, p. 164) argues, this commuting to her homeland and back to the USA enables her to enact "physical and ideological negotiations of both cultures that are deeply informed by an anti-nostalgic critical standpoint." As an adult, Sarah takes a quizzical standpoint to both Lebanon and the USA, complicating the idea of belonging or identifying within specific spatial or cultural boundaries. Sarah is split between those two cultures in the same way as her narrative which makes her confess:

> I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to belong to my clan, being terrified by loneliness and terrorized of losing myself in relationships. I was the black sheep of my family, yet an essential part of it. (Alameddine, 2001, p. 229)

Sarah's narration is split between the ideas of American individualism and Arab collectivism, the first represented by her American mother, the second by her Arab father. Her quest for independence is, however complicated by her desire to belong somewhere so as not to be labeled as "the other." This makes her proclaim that her "American patina covers an Arab soul" (p. 229).

Osama, too, selects America for his new homeland. Upon finishing his studies in California, he takes up a job in an American company. His split self is reflected in his preference for a specific musical instrument. As a child, he is fascinated by the oud, a traditional Middle Eastern pear-shaped instrument. His talent is further developed by Istez Camil, who used to accompany the greatest Arab musical icon, Umm Khoultum. Osama is, however, very often reprimanded that he plays well but cannot feel the music. Once, his teacher tells him, "You're hitting the right notes, but there's more to this than that….You have to be more honest with yourself. You have to" (Alameddine, 2008, p. 209); Osama reacts by saying, "I'm playing well,….., This is who I am." When a Kuwaiti later tells him that his oud "is for old-fashioned Arabs" (p. 211); Osama decides to change the oud for its descendant, the guitar, and begins to play American music. His decision to identify with a new instrument foreshadows his future decision to live in the United States.

Furthermore, there is another break within the personality of the two narrators. Both Sarah and Osama are somehow lost in their relationships. Sarah, who has been divorced twice, is unable to maintain her relationship with David, her American lover. Her mother commits suicide and her sister Lamia is put under the forced medical supervision after having killed seven patients in hospital. Osama, on the other hand, does not have any wife. Like his favorite uncle Jihad, he is a homosexual but his sexual orientation is just suggested in-between the lines and never treated directly. Osama's mother suggests Jihad's sexual orientation to her son only indirectly:

> Do you think for a moment that Jihad fell in love with me or I fell in love with him? Please. No matter what Farid [Osama's father] and Jihad might have ardently wished to believe, no one was ever fooled. I recognized – oh, what shall we call it? – his special ability to be best friends with

women, the instant I saw his impish grin from across the room. My God, how could I not, given the way he crossed his legs or what he did with his hands? No one would talk about it, but that didn't mean anyone was fooled." (p. 418)

Like his uncle, Osama leads a celibate life in the United States which is not discussed in the novel at all. This multilayered ethnic, religious, cultural, and sexual break in the identities of the two narrators is intensified by the motifs mixed of violence and storytelling, which are present in both novels.

Motifs mixed of violence and storytelling

Both books share a number of common motifs recurrent in the narratives and affecting the two narrators. One of the most prominent ones is the motif of violence which goes hand-in-hand with the Lebanese Civil War – a long-term conflict affecting both Nour al-Din and al-Kharrat family. The civil war, stretching over two decades of Lebanese history, deeply affected the narrators themselves. Salaita (2007) argues that this long chain of skirmishes in the multiethnic society of Lebanon should guide the reading of Alameddine's fiction. Lebanese society has always been referred to as sectarian, multireligious, multiethnic and multicultural and, as Salaita (p. 72) suggests, "[t]he polyphonic nature of the Lebanese Civil War undoubtedly has led to the polyphonic fictive depictions of it (intratextually as well as intertextually)." The violence accompanying the civil war shattered the lives of the narrators in the same way as it shattered their narratives. Besides other things, the civil war also brought about the ignorance of law. It is at this time that Sarah takes a taxi which changes her life and becomes the starting point of the rupture that splits up her whole narrative. On that day, Sarah is kidnapped and gang-raped; an experience which she repeatedly tries to tell but in the end manages only to show – in the second half of the novel and in the third person. Once, she tries to tell this story in French but fails. Another time, she decides to use a sort of a prose poem filled with metaphorical language but fails again. Her short sentences which are often cut and lack predicates, foreshadow the rape scene:

I wore a black linen dress.
The linen was perfect for the weather, but the color was not.
The dress was covered with tiny colorful flowers, a happy motif.
The black was a stark contrast to my skin.
The dress exposed my shoulders, which the sun attacked mercilessly.
Merciless. That evening was merciless.
I watched the cars drive by. No taxis in sight. (Alameddine, 2001, p. 113)

It is precisely on this evening that Sarah, aged sixteen, is kidnapped and raped. The short sentences create a regular rhythm as if Sarah, the first person narrator, wanted to bring order to this part of her story which is, paradoxically, the source of the greatest rupture. The hot, merciless sun foreshadows Sarah's merciless experience which later affects all her future relationships. But at this point, she fails in her storytelling attempt; the last sentences of the chapter just discuss her dress and the sea, "The dress was French, bought from a catalogue. I loved it. I looked at the sea behind me, oblivious to the play of colors" (p. 114). Sarah finally succeeds in communicating her harsh experience in the second half of the book, in the chapter called *Spilt Wine*, and this third person account suddenly reveals the main motif that lies behind the novel in first chapters. The name of the chapter evokes a conversation that Sarah has with her father who once compared a boy's sexuality to a plastic tablecloth:

If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, you can easily wipe it off. A girl's sexuality, on the other hand, is like fine linen, much more valuable. If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, it will never come off. You can wash it and wash it, but it will never be the same." (p. 127)

The motifs lying behind Sarah's continuous attempts to start her narrative are at this point of the novel put under more light. Her false starts are, in reality, her attempts to wash the red spots from her linen.

The al-Kharrat family is also affected by the civil war which at one point of the story forces them to leave to the mountains and abandon their apartments. Mrs al-Farouk, the closest friend of Osama's mother, is forced to return back to Italy with her younger daughter Fatima who happens to be Osama's closest friend. Her elder daughter and husband stay in Lebanon and die. Osama's sister Lina gets pregnant with their neighbor Elie, who is the leader of the militia, but never sees him again after their wedding. After the war, the family loses their flat; the neighborhood where they live is completely annihilated. The twenty-five year old violent experience which starts and ends and starts and ends again is thus transferred to the disrupted narratives.

Another motif that is recurring in both books is the narrator's obsession with stories which prove to be a mirror reflection of the language itself. The story and its retelling forms the core of Alameddine's aesthetics evoking Cohan's and Shires' (1988, p. 1) argument that "stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives." Throughout both books, there are multiple metafictional digressions pointing to different aspects of storytelling. In *I, the Divine*, Sarah, a successful visual artist, decides to write a novel but continuously fails. Very often, she directly addresses her readers stating that she wants to tell them her story. Sometimes, she considers her love story unbelievable, "If I were to write our love story, no one would believe it. My real-life story is unbelievable" (Alameddine, 2001, p. 111). Other times, she explains she just wants somebody to note what happened, "I want to tell you my story, not to show how I was hurt, though I was. I simply want someone to note what happened" (p. 115). Sarah feels tense whenever she opens her manuscript:

> I drag my forefinger across the computer touchpad to eliminate the carnivorous fish. Out pops my manuscript. My manuscript. Mine. I tense, feel a knot building in my right shoulder. I feel about to faint.
> I stand up and put on my coat. I will walk across the street for a coffee, something to ease the tension. I stretch my back. (p. 240)

As a visual artist, Sarah is obsessed with perfectly regular shapes. Her painting with Cadmiun red bars on titanium white background irritates her only because "[t]he second lowest bar on the right is not a perfect rectangle, which tilts the whole painting. Few people realize that. The eye always fills in the imperfections. Eleven perfect rectangles; the twelfth must be as well" (p. 239). Her obsession with regularity disables her to express her experience in language, which is unpredictable. Her continual attempts to tell her story prove to be a chain of constant failures. Since her identity is broken in multiple ways, her narrative is also ruptured, chaotic, irregular and, therefore, it could be equaled with an irritable "quest for a fictional form to reflect trauma and self-invention" (Jaggi, 2002).

Compared to *I, the Divine*, *The Hakawati* could be considered a sort of a "fictional metafiction" for what combines all the storylines – the story of the al-Kharrat family, the story about emir and his wife, Fatima, Baybars, etc. – is the narrative and the process of its remembering, retelling as well as its narrator (or *hakawati*). The story thus becomes the most significant leitmotif as every character is nothing but the story itself; every event, skirmish, conflict is nothing but its own reflection in the story because a *hekayat* (tale) matters more than the event itself. When Osama listens to one of Jihad's stories about Genghis Khan, he has hard time believing him and after he asks him if he should trust him, his uncle answers, "Never trust the teller…trust the tale" (Alameddine, 2008, p. 206). The tale, the story, thus becomes the most important drive of the novel. The narrative moves from one tale to another as if it was a sort of a postmodern version of *The Thousand and One Nights.* It is a story within a story. Not only the members of the Al-Kharrat family but also the characters in their narratives are obsessed with stories. When emir's wife is giving birth to her son, her husband is telling her a story about Baybars, an Arab hero. Later, we learn that it is, in fact, Uncle Jihad, who is telling Baybar's tale to his nephew

Osama. At the same time, Baybars himself is telling his story to his audience, "And Prince Baybars told the stories of his grandfather and his father, and those of his mother, and those of his uncles.'This is who I am,' he finally said" (p. 242). The man is seen as a fabric woven from a myriad of stories from his past and present. The story is what he is. However, the man does not possess the story which can, consequently, take many different forms as it is subject to multiple interpretations. The character of Baybars gives the reader a significant hint to understanding Alameddine's masterpiece. When Uncle Jihad gives his own account of Baybars, he subverts him, eventually turning him into a mere fictional masquerade created by "an army of hakawatis" (p. 441):

You see, the story of the story of Baybars is in some ways more interesting. Listen. Contrary to what my father and most people believe, the only true event in that whole story, in all its versions, is that the man existed. Everything else has been distorted beyond recognition. Al-Malik al-Zahir Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Bunduq-dari al-Salihi owes his fame to his talent for public relations, without which his reign might have been reduced to a historical footnote. (p. 440)

Another function of the tale is that is remodels reality creating a new, alternative one, eventually planting roots for a certain philosophy or ideology. In an ironic way, Jihad draws a parallel between Baybars and the existent Arab political milieu, satirizing Arab politicians who are creating similar stories as Baybars and his *hakawatis* did: "He [Baybars] was definitely a marketing hero. Baybars consolidated his power and created a cult of personality by paying, bribing, and forcing an army of hakawatis to promulgate tales of his valor and piety… He was the precursor to all Arab presidents we have today" (p. 441).

Like many other Arab American writers, Alameddine, too, includes politics in his writing. According to Layton (2010, p.10), "Whether explicitly or implicitly, the political environment of a post-September 11 world has influenced writers living in the United States, Arab Americans to a greater extent than others." For Alameddine, the problem of the Arab world (as well as the problem of the Western world) resides in the stories, that we may call ideologies, which are often mutually contradictory but which do not reflect the reality as every story is a mere creation of the *hakawati*, who likes to beguile his audience.

Consequently, the motif of storytelling shows different aspects of stories. A story never exists on its own, it is always created from the stories that the *hakawati* has heard (or invented) before. There is a striking similarity between Alameddine's understanding of a storyteller and Barthes' conception of the author. In *Notes and Acknowledgements* to *The Hakawati*, Alameddine argues that "a storyteller is a plagiarist" (p. 515) and in the following lines, he gives the reader a list of sources that were included in his books: *A Thousand and One Nights,* the Old Testament, the Koran, *The Ring of the Dove, Iliad* – to mention just a few. Similarly, Roland Barthes in his famous work *The Death of the Author* (1967, p. 4) claims that a text "is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture." In the same way as the author is dead so that the reader should live; for Alameddine, not the teller but the tale should be trusted. Despite the fact that it was woven from the thousand and one other stories of culture that were remembered, retold, and reshaped, it is the story that matters for "Reality never meets our wants, and adjusting both is why we tell stories" (Alameddine, 2008, p. 434); and if you pretend to be another hero, in one instant, you acquire "a new story, a new family, a new identity, and gifts, many gifts (p. 436)"; and still, if you suffer, the *hakawati* can "ease your suffering" (p. 321). The last component necessary for the storytelling to be successfully communicated is the recipient, the listener or the reader; the call for whom both opens and closes *The Hakawati* or, rather, it connects its beginning with its end creating a cycle of reading interpretations which are never the same once the cycle is completed.

Conclusion: Themes flavored with postmodern, antiorientalist spices

Coming back to literary cooking, Alameddine himself, in *Notes and Acknowledgements* to *The Hakawati*, gives his own recipe of how to prepare a book by drawing a parallel with coffee:

Everything one comes across – each incident, book, novel, life episode, story, person, news clip – is a coffee bean that will be crushed, ground up, mixed with a pinch of salt, boiled thrice with sugar, and served as a piping-hot tale. A brief list of sources that provided the most beans: *A Thousand and One Nights* (uncensored), Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Old Testament, the Koran, W. A. Clouston's *Flowers from a Persian Garden,* Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*, Kalila wa Dimma (uncensored), Ahmad al-Tifashi's *The Delight of Hearts*, Ibn Hazm's *The Ring of the Dove*, Mahmoud Khalil Saab's *Stories and Scenes from Mount Lebanon*, Homer's *Iliad*, Jim Crace's *The Devil's Larder*, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Ida Alamuddin's *Maktoob*, Shakespeare's plays, numerous Internet folktale sites, and quite a few books of Syrian and Lebanese folktales bought for pennies from street vendors. (p. 515)

The beans in Alameddine's literary coffee cup come from both Western and Eastern literary traditions; they are Islamic to the same extent as they are Christian or Druze. Some beans are American, some are Lebanese – but, what is America and what is Lebanon? The plantations where they were grown were located in England, Turkey, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Belgium, etc. for these are the original roots of the people and stories that were forming the storytelling of the narrators of the two novels. This makes Curiel (2008) proclaim that *The Hakawati* "is a kind of East-meets-West comedic clash of cultures." The literary coffee prepared from these beans creates the themes soaked in postmodern spices. Osama grows up hearing tales from all the above mentioned sources; the Biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac as well as the Koranic story of Abraham and his son Ismail; Fatima's encounter with *Efreet Jehannan* as well as the story of how his grandfather became a *hakawati*; the story of his neighbors killed in the skirmishes of the Lebanese Civil War as well as the love story of how his father met his mother. Moreover, as Crossen (2008) suggests, some of the stories that Osama listens to "come directly from Mr. Alameddine's Technicolor imagination." All of these sources create his own story. The story thus equals identity. Since each person has his or her own, individual story, which is the result of multiple interpretations of the people one encounters, the tales one reads, the events one has to face…, the question of objective truth, ideology or religion is subverted to a mere fiction itself.

I, the Divine is also soaked in "postmodern sauces" because Alameddine in a similar way "addresses personal dislocation by constructing a text that defies fixedness and postulates the implausibility of cleaving to a centre" (Garrigós, 2009, p. 189). This turns the center-periphery opposition of the East versus West dichotomy into "a mission impossible." In her final *Introduction*, Sarah is watching a PBS nature documentary about lions while contemplating on the reasons why she is having trouble with her memoir, "I was having trouble with my memoir, not being able to figure out how to attack it" (Alameddine, 2001, p. 306). The word "memoir" evokes memories while the word "attack" implies violence suggesting that Sarah's recollections of the past resist her constant attempts to control them and put them in order. The PBS documentary suddenly provides her with an epiphany. It shows "a story" of a lion pride in which a new male assumes dominance, forcing his predecessor to leave and subsequently killing his offspring. Sarah's initial shock upon seeing her favorite lion cub Ginny killed suddenly turns into a revelation, "If I wanted to know about *lion*, I had to look at the entire pride" (p. 308). In other words, her constant attempts to tell her individual story could not be successful because her individual story is not her own story, but the story of her family, friends and relationships. Consequently, what was wrong from the beginning was the title of the memoir that Sarah was trying to write. *I, the Divine*, the glorifying deification of the individual, is subverted and mocked. However, as Hassan (2011, p. 211) suggests, "the implicit acceptance of patriarchal violence as a fact of nature deepens instead of resolves the problem. Consequently, this resolution remains yet another draft that may well be discarded like those that preceded it…"

Most Arab American authors tackle the problem of Orientalism by either identifying with the West, with the East or staying somewhere in-between. Alameddine's coffee cup rejects the mere idea of the Orientalist dichotomy. In the same way as a story may bring about multiple meanings, interpretations or reactions because it is just a chain of quotations from other sources; the ideology or philosophy that someone is something with defined Eastern or Western borders is a mere fiction. The idea is stressed by Sarah's and Osama's multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural background. It is also suggested by Osama's grandfather who criticizes his father's didactic tales: "Stories with obvious moral lessons are like eels in a wooden crate. They slither over and under each other, but never leave the tub. In my day, I told some of the same stories, but mine soared. His problem was that he believed. Belief is the enemy of a storyteller" (p. 61).

Consequently, those stories that people call ideologies or philosophies are nothing more than the eels that never leave the tub. The tub which stands for nothing else than the mind of the recipient (the reader or the listener). Alameddine's "and-they-lived-happily-ever-after" is thus turned into a desperate appeal to listen. This open ending (which is at the same time the beginning of the novel) deconstructs all seemingly well-defined messages as it is through listening to (or reading) other people's stories that the recipient becomes aware of the multitude of meanings and interpretations that a single storytelling attempt (which in Lebanese equals an act of communication) can offer. Storytelling implies the receptive skill of listening combined with a productive skill of speaking. Telling a story cannot exist without remembering and memory never has well-defined borderlines. Using "listen" as the inciting as well as the enclosing word of the book opens up multiple interpretative possibilities for the recipients, evoking "our post-Postmodern situation" which "has served to remind us that there are never final answers (Ruland, Bradbury, 1991, p. xx). The "ah moment," the great ending, is thus unexpectedly hidden in the mere act of listening. Alameddine's play with the reader (who has gone through more than five hundred pages just to be asked to "listen") evokes Uncle Jihad's words that he addresses to Osama somewhere in the middle of the book, "So you ask, why am I telling you a story without a great ending? Because, as in all great stories, the end is never where you expect it to be" (Alameddine, 2008, p. 344). The act of storytelling implies a tension that exists between one's experience and one's memory of that experience. In her essay, The *Relentlessness of Memory*, another Arab American writer, Elmaz Abinader (2004, p. 110), argues,

> The moment of experience transforms immediately from event to memory. The evolution of that instant never ends. Each time a story is told, something changes. The difference may be as subtle as an intonation or as pronounced as time or place. Memory is not to be trusted for it is unstable and is affected by perspective, character and consequence.

The irony of the "listen" appeal is that Osama addresses it to the reader, not the listener of the traditional storytelling evenings at Arab cafés. He is asking the reader to listen to his story as if the written word depended on auditory senses; as if he was trying give a solid and well-defined visual form to his dispersed memories – an attempt which is destined to a constant failure as "Truth nor story can be written in stone; each dies when petrified" (Spaulding, 2011).

Acknowledgment & permissions
This work was supported in part by a grant from KEGA 036UKF-4/2013: Creating Textbooks and Multimedia Courses for a New Study Programme as a Means of Internationalisation of Foreign Language Teacher Training.

References

Abinader, E. (2004). The Relentlessness of Memory. In S. M. Darraj (Ed.), *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (pp. 109 – 119). Westport: Praeger.

Alameddine, R. (1998). *Koolaids.* London: Abacus.
Alameddine, R. (2001). *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Alameddine, R. (2008). *The Hakawati.* New York: Anchor Books.
BARTHES, R. (1967). *The Death of the Author.* Retrieved from http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf
Cohan, S., & Shires, L. M. (1988). *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction.* London: Routledge.
Crossen, C. (2008, April 26). A New "Arabian Nights": A novel of Life in the Middle East Relies on the Art of Storytelling. *The Wall Street Journal.* Retrieved from http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120916642423246209
Curiel, J. (2008, April 29). Alameddine. *San Francisco Chronicle.* Retrieved from http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Alameddine-3217366.php
Da Costa, D. (2008, April 22). Let Me tell You a Story... [Review of the book *The Hakawati*]. Observer. Retrieved from http://observer.com/2008/04/let-me-tell-you-a-story/
Fadda-Conrey, C. (2009). Transnational Diaspora and the Search for Home in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*. In L. Al Maleh (Ed.), *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (pp. 163 – 185). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Garrigós, C. (2009). The Dynamics of Intercultural Dislocation Hybridity in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*. In L. Al Maleh (Ed.), *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (pp. 187 – 201). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Hamilton, R. (2011). *The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Hassan, W. S. (2011). *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Jaggi, M. (2002, September 21). I, the Divine [Review of the book *I, the Divine*]. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview13
Layton, R. (2010). *Arab American and Muslim Writers.* New York: Chelsea House.
Lyden, J. (2008, May 18). The Pull of the "Hakawati". All Things Considered. *Podcast.* Podcast retrieved from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90576250&ft=1&f=1008
Marías, Javier. (1992). *A heart so white.* New York: New Directions Books.
Procházka, M. (2015). *Literary Theory: An Historical Introduction.* Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum.
Ruland, R., & Bradbury, M. (1991). *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature.* New York: Penguin Books.
Salaita, S. (2007). *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Salaita, S. (2011). *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide.* New York: Syracuse University Press.
Spaulding, A. E. (2011). *The Art of Storytelling: Telling Truths through Telling Stories.* Lanham: The Scarecrow Press.
The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night (vol. 1). (1964). London: Routledge.
Zughaib, H. (2009). Stories My Father Told Me: The Personal Narrative in Visual Arts. In H. Arida, & A. Ameri (Eds.), *Etching Our Own Image: Voices from Within the Arab American Art Movement* (pp. 132 – 156). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Contact

PhDr. Zuzana Tabačková, PhD.
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Faculty of Education
Dražovská 4
949 74 Nitra
Slovakia
ztabackova@ukf.sk