

So you think you know Scheherazad...

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Scholars may argue over the exact provenance of the *Arabian Nights* (Kitàb alf laylah wa-laylah) and its original content, but children the world over have been captivated by the tales of Sinbad, Aladdin and Ali Baba, for many the first glimpse of the mysterious, magical Orient and the ultimate exotic Other. Inspiration for great literature and music through the centuries, and providing much of the story grammar for European fairytales, Scheherazad's stories saved her life and those of women who would otherwise have been sacrificed to her husband's bloodlust. In addition to the iconic characters immortalised in cartoons and on the silver screen, Scheherazad conjures up a host of strong female characters; beautiful and erudite queens, clever and quick witted slave girls, and resourceful if impoverished widows. But where are those heroines now? In much the same way as the cuckolded King Shahryah saw only treachery and infidelity in his brides, so the Western media perpetuates stereotypes of veiled women as 'domesticated, subjugated and unenlightened' (Abdelrazek 2007) portraying them not only as oppressed, but also as colluding in that oppression. In this paper I will contrast contemporary media portraits of Arabic women with the stories such women tell of themselves, drawing on the work of Arab American poet Mohja Kahf, and her *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) to illustrate how women struggle against the patriarchal nature of Arab society and the dis-empowering and dis-abling attitudes of the West.

Abdelrazek, A. (2007). *Contemporary Arab American women writers*. Youngstown NY: Cambria Press.

Kahf, M. (2003). *Emails from Scheherazad*. Gainesville, FL.: University of Florida Press.