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# Proto-Feminism in Ancient Global Texts

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# Proto-Feminism in Ancient Global Texts

Jody Ann Dammann-Matthews  
Major: Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences  
May, 2014

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Jane Compson

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
University of Washington, Tacoma

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The goal of this paper is to explore the patriarchal interpretations of two ancient global texts; the biblical story of Deborah and Jael, and also the secular story of Shaharazad. This paper will provide an overview of these stories and the patriarchal interpretations of them. I will then analyze and critique those interpretations through the lens of a feminist theory. I will provide evidence of how the feminist theory is valid and supported by the textual content, and through this process show that the protagonists of these texts had proto-feminist qualities. I will challenge the male centric interpretations of these texts and give evidence to support my contention that these interpretations are erroneous.

To begin with, I will explain why this topic is important to me. When I was younger I was raised in a fundamentalist church that taught directly from the Bible. I remember one specific instance when the preacher was relating the story of Deborah and jokingly told the congregation that God truly performed miracles because he used a weak woman to save Israel. What was truly grating was the way he said “women” so derisively and made light of the story. I felt very uncomfortable listening to the way it was related. It made me feel diminished as a person and devalued as a female. Also, I was confused. My understanding of the story I read did not at all resemble what was told from the pulpit. I asked myself the question, what was wrong with me that I cannot seem to understand what the preacher is telling me? He says Deborah was weak and I read that she is strong, competent, a faithful follower of God, and brave. I felt I was spiritually lacking. As I grew older I became exposed to the idea that texts are interpreted through different conceptual frameworks. There is more than one way to interpret any text. Often how one interprets the world around them is influenced by the culture in which they live and their individual world view. Our culture is considered a patriarchy meaning there is a

male centric hierarchal structure. I began to see that some of my discomfort may have arisen from a patriarchal interpretation of the Biblical passages.

I found that this text was often preached as an example of God's miraculous power because he used a "*mere woman*" to bring Israel back to Him. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries some commentaries were inclined to recognize Deborah's public role, more did not. They repeated many of the old themes found in earlier writings by biblical scholars. In *Deborah's Daughters* by Joy Schroeder (2014) there is a passage that illustrates this point: "... Joseph Hall (1574-1656), bishop of Norwich and a popular preacher with a Puritan upbringing emphasized that the choice of a weak woman demonstrated the power of God." To quote Bishop Hall, "He, that had choice of all the millions of Israel, calls out to weak woman to deliver his people: Deborah shall judge, Jael shall execute." (Schroeder, 2014 p.127) Bishop Hall nowhere mentions how brave and intelligent these women were, or how Deborah held a high office equal to some of the most powerful men at the time, and enjoyed what would be recognized currently as gender equality. Hall goes on to say "... Deborah's rule was deficient on account of her gender. Lacking a masculine presence, she sends for Barak to complement her leadership." Hall believes that because Deborah is a woman, she is deficient.

This kind of patriarchal interpretation of the bible made me feel alienated from my faith community and confused me. I no longer felt that I could connect emotionally with spiritual teaching and felt adrift, like I was not valued or important because I was a woman.

As I grew older, and having lived through the late 60's and 70's, I was exposed to the feminist movement. I began to understand that there was an implicit hierarchical structure that valued men over women, and I came to the conclusion that this hierarchy was informing much of the world around me including patriarchal accounts of the bible. I developed an understanding

that the conceptual frameworks through which we view the world around us can be steeped in values that privilege one group over another. Feminist critiques highlight how women can be oppressed by these frameworks. This helped me to understand my alienation and that it was the interpretation of the texts not the texts themselves that devalued the women's roles in the stories. Before proceeding with an analysis of these texts, I will look in more detail at the feminist idea of Oppressive Conceptual Frameworks. These frameworks relate directly to my thesis that strong female role models were stigmatized and subverted by patriarchal interpreters of ancient global texts. For the purposes of this paper I am focusing on this framework.

In her essay *The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism*, Karen Warren (1996) outlines what she defines as some of the essential qualities of Oppressive Conceptual Frameworks. Warren identifies five factors common to these frameworks: value-hierarchical thinking, value dualisms, power over another concepts, and the logic of domination theory. I will now explain these factors with reference to my experience.

When listening to the pastor I felt that I had less value because I was a woman. Warren describes this as value-hierarchical thinking:

“Value-hierarchical (Up-Down) thinking, which places higher value, prestige, or status on what is “Up” (men) than on what is “Down” (women).” (Warren, 1996, 126-27)

In reading and then listening to the male interpretation of these stories I soon came to understand that in relating them the pastor was mirroring cultural ideology that men are superior and women are inferior.

Another way I found that women were being devalued and subverted in these texts is that there was a feeling of exclusivity in the retelling of the stories. There is a value dualism, an either

or concept that occurs when reading them. The male is highlighted as dominant and the achievements of the female are suppressed.

“Value dualisms (“either-or” thinking) which organize reality into oppositional (rather than complementary) and exclusive (rather than inclusive) pairs, and which place higher value, or status on one member of the pair (e.g. dualisms which give higher status to mind, reason, and male, in alleged contrast and opposition to that which is body, emotion, and female respectively).” (Warren, 1996, p.127)

Supremacy by males in the teachings were maintained at the cost of the true story to foster a dominate vs. submissive relationship within the group being exposed to the teaching or retelling of the story. My example of a church congregation being indoctrinated into this framework of the stronger dominating and the weaker submitting is an illustration of “up vs. down” thinking. Warren calls this:

“Power-over conceptions of power which function to maintain relations of dominance and subordination.” (Warren, 1996, p.127)

By teaching that one entity is dominant and another is subordinate the dominant one becomes privileged, either by being viewed as stronger, or as more intelligent or knowledgeable and therefore is viewed as an authority. However, with dominance comes privilege, which carries with it status that needs to be maintained. By creating a subordinate class or classes, dominance and privilege can be maintained. Warren identifies this as: “conceptions of privilege which systematically advantage Ups in Up-Down relationships”, or in terms of this paper the male has the advantage while the female is subordinate. (Warren, 1996, p.127) In the example of my experience as the member of a congregation, the pastor was viewed as a bible scholar and therefore an authority. To maintain that authority he fostered a hierarchal class system within the

church by creating the structure in the faith community of men being the privileged Up and the women taking on the role of the second class or the subordinate Down role. He reinforced this by using biblical examples that he interpreted as proof that women had less value.

The idea of an oppressive conceptual framework helped me to understand my feeling that I had little value as a female came from the male dominated culture of the church community. Once I understood that the idea of women as being subordinate was the product of an oppressive central framework, and not “truth” about reality, the concept of male and female being equal became easier to accept. This helped to dispel the feeling that I was subordinate to males. I began to see the fallacy of the ‘logic of domination’ that men were superior just because they were men and women were inferior just because they were women. Warren (1996) explains the logic of domination in more detail as:

“...a structure of argumentation which justifies relations of dominance and subordination on the grounds that superiority (or being “Up”) justifies subordination (or being “Down”). Within a patriarchal conceptual framework, difference breeds domination. It is the last characteristic of patriarchal conceptual frameworks, a logic of domination, which “justifies” power-over power relations within patriarchy. A logic of domination legitimates the unequal distribution of power in ways which serve to reinforce and maintain systems of oppression: who or what is “Up” is who or what has power over others. The justification of the Ups' power over the Downs' typically is given on grounds of some alleged characteristic (e.g. reason or rationality) which the Up or dominant group (e.g. men) have which the Down or subordinate group (e.g. women) lacks. So it is easy to find out who deserves to be

up: it is whomever is up! A logic of domination is necessary to maintain and justify patriarchy...” (Warren, 1996, p.127)

I will argue that these texts seem to portray women as having power and strength. By applying these frameworks and studying them in a more non-gender bias light we will find that the evidence does not support the more culturally accepted logic of domination framed interpretation of these texts. In fact they do just the opposite and support proto-feminist ideologies. It is important to define proto-feminism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Feminism: “As an adjective; of, relating to, or advocating the rights and equality of women, or as a noun, Feminist; an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women.”(OED, 2014) Proto means before, so proto-feminism would be used when defining women who had these qualities before the feminist movement. I will argue that the women highlighted in these texts will be identified as having proto-feminist traits.

In order to explore proto-feminism when we are defining it in relation to ancient texts, we must understand the roles of men and women in the cultures we are discussing. The concept of gender equality is a very important part of the culture of the times of the texts that will be explored in this paper. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are exactly the same, but that their interests will be accorded equal consideration. Also, it is important to understand the concept that women had responsibilities that were as important as those attributed to men in these ancient cultures. I will argue that the concept of equal and complementary was a common ideology in the cultures highlighted and is key to the concept of gender equality discussed in this paper. The idea of men and women having equal status indicates the presence of gender equality and proto-feminist ideology in the times that these texts were written.

By putting these definitions together in the context of ancient texts, proto-feminism will be defined as: behaviors, activities or attitudes in women which influenced, expressed and accomplished change that promoted gender equality. This also includes the representation of women as having equal value and being accorded equal treatment. These stories have been interpreted within a value hierarchical cultural norm that has subverted the strength, power and capability of the protagonists—thus diluting the message or story that they were meant to convey. I will argue that the women in these texts will clearly illustrate these characteristics and will dispel the myth that because they were of the female gender they were somehow lacking, or of lesser value to men. It would be erroneous to define these as feminist before feminism existed. However, we can identify certain proto-feminist characteristics that help us to understand women as having more power and equality than is usually thought of women of ancient cultures.

Now that we understand how the term proto-feminist will be used in the context of this paper, I will summarize the story of Deborah and Jael. Then I will provide an analysis of how the patriarchal interpretation can be refuted, and then show how proto-feminist qualities can be attributed to the women in this story

### **The story of Deborah a prophetess and judge of Israel**

The story of Deborah is one that deserves scrutiny and has a lot to offer in the realm of lessons about the women of the times of ancient Israel and for women today.

Deborah was a prophetess, judge, wife and mother. She was the only female judge among twelve judges at the time. She held court under the palm tree of Deborah in the hill country of Ephraim, deciding the people's disputes. According to the story, the Israelites had been disobeying God ...so God allowed Jabin, a king of Canaan, to oppress them. Jabin's general was named Sisera, and he intimidated the Hebrews with war machines, huge and made out of iron, to terrorize the population (Judges 4:5, New International Version).

Deborah, directed by God, sent for the warrior Barak. She told him the Lord had commanded him to gather 10,000 men from the tribes of Zebulan and Naphtali and lead them to Mount Tabor. Deborah promised to lure Sisera and his chariots to the Kishon Valley, where Barak would defeat them (Judges 4:6). This would have given much glory to Barak if he would have followed directions.

However, Barak was frightened and distrusted the direction given by God and so refused to go unless Deborah accompanied him to inspire the troops. He said, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go” (Judges 4:8). She, after trying to convince him to follow God’s direction, finally acquiesced to this request to go with him, but she prophesied that the credit for the victory would not go to Barak but to a woman (Judges 4:9).

The armies engaged in a horrific battle. In the midst of the battle, God sent heavy rainfall that flooded the River Kishon (Judges 5:4), and this swept away most of Sisera’s men and his war machines became bogged down and ineffective. The Canaanite army retreated with Barak in hot pursuit, but were soon captured and defeated (Judges 4:16).

The Canaanite general, Sisera, having escaped in the chaos of battle, found what he thought was refuge in the camp of Heber the Kenite, a tent maker and acquaintance of King Jaban. Sisera staggered into the tent of Jael, Heber’s wife, and asked for sanctuary and water. Instead she gave him curdled milk, a sleeping aid of the times, which made him drowsy. Interestingly, he asked Jael to stand guard at the tent opening and asked her to protect him from any pursuers or enemies (Judges 4:20).

However, the tables were turned when Jael sneaked in, carrying a long, sharp tent peg and a hammer. She drove the tent peg into the sleeping general’s temple, killing him (Judges 4:21). Barak soon arrived in pursuit of any Canaanite refugees and Jael took him to the tent to show

him the general's dead body (Judges 4:22). Thus a woman was responsible for the complete victory over the Canaanites as was prophesied by Deborah.

### **Analysis of the story of Deborah and Jael**

Interpretations such as Bishop Hall's (2014) that apply oppressive conceptual frameworks subvert and devalue the role of women. I argue that this story offers a good example of how such an understanding of women as weak and inferior is a misrepresentation of the actual role of these women. Nowhere in this text is there an indication that Deborah or Jael were weak or subordinate. Deborah was a Judge in Israel. She was also a prophetess, with a spiritual calling. Being a Judge was a high office and she was the only female judge among the twelve judges of Israel. Deborah is called "Mother of Israel" which is recognition of the highest status. The phrase Mother of Israel is used often in regards to Deborah. Biblical Scholar and Feminist, Phyllis Bird (1974) writes: "... the expression "a mother in Israel" could be used metaphorically to describe a woman or a city (grammatically feminine) of special veneration (Judges 5:7; II Sam. 20:19)—or perhaps, one who protects, saves or succors. Cf. Isa. 22:21 and Job 29:16... But motherhood brought more than honor, more than security and approval of husband and society. It brought authority" (Bird, 1974, p.62). Deborah was a wife and a mother, but being called Mother of Israel meant she was worthy of special respect because of her role as a judge, a prophetess and her part in the victory against the enemy. Deborah's role was respected contrary to the patriarchal interpretation that views and portrays her as weak and lacking because of her gender.

Just as the phrase "Mother of Israel" describes Deborah's social status, her roles as judge and prophetess are equally significant. What did it mean to be a Judge in Israel? While the term "judge" is the most literal definition of the Hebrew word used in the Masoretic text, *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (1876) defines the term Judge as: "The judges were temporary and special

deliverers, sent by God to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors; not supreme magistrates, succeeding to the authority of Moses and Joshua. Their power only extended over portions of the country, and some of them were contemporaneous. Their first work was that of deliverers and leaders in war; they then administered justice to the people, and their authority supplied the want of a regular government.” (Smith, 1876, p. 340).

Deborah was the only woman judge among the twelve judges of Israel at that time. This fact is clearly emphasized in the biblical text. Deborah led the Israelite army to victory, and Jael took it upon herself to kill the supreme leader of the enemy. Because of this, these women were recognized as warriors. In Judges 5, the song of Deborah, both of these women were praised as leaders and saviors of their people. The text shows that there was gender equality when it came to the ability to fight and protect their people, in the sense that they were not seen as less capable than men in these respects.

What did it mean to be a prophet/prophetess? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a prophet as: “A divinely inspired person, and related senses. A divinely inspired interpreter, revealer, or teacher of the will or thought of God or of a god; a person who speaks, or is regarded as speaking, for or in the name of God or a god.” In Deborah’s case she was a person chosen to speak for God and to guide the people of Israel. Prophetess is defined as: “A woman who prophesies, a female prophet; a woman who foretells the future, or claims to do so; a sibyl”, (OED, 2014).

The roles of judge and prophetess overlapped somewhat. Judges were understood to be divinely chosen by God and it was believed that God worked through them for a specific purpose. Prophets were also thought to be chosen by God and used to guide the people of Israel in the way that God wanted them to go. Deborah had all the qualities that were necessary to be a leader in Israel including being viewed as an equal to the other judges who were men. If God did

not delineate between genders when he chose who would be his special messenger then, in this case, it follows that he did not value Deborah any less for being a woman. The people of Israel recognized her abilities and honored her without judging her of less value because of her gender. Quite the contrary, she was revered in Israel as a leader.

Taking the story in its historical context we conclude that Deborah was one of the most powerful leaders in the country at the time, equal in rank to her male counterparts. If value-hierarchical thinking regarding gender was present during her time, one would expect that Deborah would never have been in the position of judge. It would follow that if there had been higher value placed on men than women then she could never have gained the respect and honor to be considered to be one of the most powerful people in the land. The actual story does not indicate that she was subordinate, thus suggesting the previously mentioned interpretations which impose a value hierarchal framework on the story are erroneous. This does not seem to support the interpretation that God chose a “weak woman” who was unable to function so that, as Joseph Hall suggested “...he could prove his miraculous power”; instead it seems more plausible that he picked an intelligent woman who was equal to men, chosen for the very traits that made her an exceptional leader. Remember, Deborah was chosen by God to be a leader, judge and prophetess long *before* the Israelites went to war with Canaan. This is made clear in the book of Judges chapter four, when Barak implores her to come with him to inspire the troops. Would a weak woman inspire troops on the brink of battle? It seems implausible to suggest so. Deborah urged Barak to take on the responsibility, he refused, and that is the reason that Jael ended the war with Canaan and was given credit for it. She took it upon herself to take advantage of the opportunity to end the oppression over Israel by killing the leader of the enemy. Clearly this shows strength not weakness. Those that analyze this passage differently are incorrect in their interpretation.

Jael as well displayed proto-feminist traits by taking the initiative to join in the cause to save Israel and, when given the opportunity, end the war with Canaan by killing the general of the Canaanite army, Sisera, and thus eliminating the threat and initiating peace. She can therefore be understood as being responsible for ending the oppression of Israel. If Jael was not viewed as equally competent to male warriors, why would Sisera have asked her to guard his tent against those trying to kill him? If she had been viewed as weak and subordinate it is unlikely that Sisera would have given her that commission and trusted that she could protect him. It seems inconsistent with the actual story to believe that Jael was viewed as unequal in regards to her value and her ability. Jael also showed strength and character when she took the opportunity to end the war with Canaan by killing the leader of the enemy. This does not show weakness but strength. Both women did what had to be done to defend their people and fight the enemy. Neither Deborah nor Jael regarded their gender as being a hindrance, they were confident in their abilities and did not question their value as women.

Contrary to the kind of patriarchal argument discussed earlier, it could be argued that by highlighting two strong women, God was sending a message; women are strong, capable, brave, influential and able to effect change. Both Deborah and Jael took on what are now considered traditionally male roles to overcome the challenges that faced them, through strength and warlike behaviors. In these respects, they are examples of women having equal competence and being accorded equal status to men. As we have discussed earlier in this paper proto-feminist behaviors include influential behaviors that accomplish change and promote gender equality. Deborah and Jael clearly had proto-feminist traits. This interpretation is in contrast with the logic of domination concept that women are weak and have less value. Although the logic of domination may infuse patriarchal interpretations of this story, it is not supported in the actual text.

Challenges to the patriarchal interpretations of biblical text are not just contemporary phenomena. For example, Grace Aguilar was a proto-feminist biblical scholar in the nineteenth century (1816-1846). She argues that stories in the Pentateuch, (the first five books of the Old Testament) often seem to make the case for gender equity. Contemporary scholar Christiana De Groot (2009) summarizes Aguilar's contribution: "Through careful reading from the vantage point of Jewish women, Aguilar has interpreted the laws to provide for the welfare of both women and men, and to assume the equality between women and men in the sight of God. Aguilar, addressing the beleaguered Jewish community also asserts that it needs to defend itself against laws that oppress women. She has addressed both of these claims and demonstrated to her own faith community that the law upholds the dignity of all classes of people, as well as the dignity of women and men. Her writing equips a marginal group with the exegesis it needs to defend itself against claims made by the dominant Christian culture" (De Groot, 2009, p.108). This demonstrates that Aguilar has interpreted the Pentateuch quite differently than the accepted patriarchal interpretations and finds it to support gender equality. She challenges the traditional Judeo-Christian interpretation and provides evidence that proto-feminist traits were not as unusual as the value hierarchical interpretations would lead us to believe. These critiques can also be applied to other texts. In Acts 10:34, in the New King James Version, Peter said: "In truth I perceive that God show no partiality among people." Also in Romans 2:11 in the New King James Version, God, through Paul the author, says that he shows no partiality. In both the Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of the bible that hold the Old Testament Law, and the New Testament which clarifies biblical law, it is clearly stated that God sees everyone as equal.

There are other passages in the Bible that support this idea. "And the Lord God said, *'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him'*" (Genesis 2:18, King James

Version). This passage is often used to diminish women's roles in the bible and minimize them into one of a "servant" or "helper". When considered in the context of the original language of the text and the times in which it was written, this emphasis is not actually correct. Phyllis Bird (1974) explains that "Helper carries no status connotation while the Hebrew expression translated "fit for" means basically "opposite" or "corresponding to" (Bird, 1974, p.73). She goes on to express that this statement actually "...expresses the man's recognition that he needs the woman and that she is in essence like him. She completes him, but she is not inferior to him." (Bird, 1974, p.73) This example highlights how those who have espoused an interpretation infused with logic of domination ideologies have created an erroneous impression that women featured in the Biblical texts described were considered subordinate.

So far I have shown how these kinds of oppressive conceptual frameworks have informed the perception of women as holding less value than men in the Biblical story of Deborah. This phenomenon happens in interpretations of non-religious ancient texts as well. It is relevant to the topic to understand that not only biblical texts, but all ancient texts were subject to patriarchal interpretation. I will now turn to *1001 Arabian Nights* and discuss the teller of these stories, Shaharazad. I will argue that, like Deborah, Jael, and Shaharazad the author and teller of the *1001 Arabian Nights* tales are examples of women who had definite proto-feminist traits. First, I will summarize the story of Shaharazad, the author and teller of the stories we know as the *1001 Arabian Nights*. I will then analyze this text with a view to highlighting her proto-feminist traits.

### **The story of Shaharazad**

There were two brothers, both were kings. Shahryar was the elder who ruled India and Indochina, Shahzaman was the younger who ruled Samarkand. It had been a very long time since the brothers had seen each other and Shahryar sent his Vizier, his closest most trusted servant, to Shahzman to invite him to come to him for a prolonged visit. As Shahzman and his

massive entourage were about to leave, in his excitement he flew to his wife's side to bid her farewell and found her in the arms of a kitchen boy. Stunned by her perfidy and unfaithfulness he drew his sword and killed his wife and the boy, and dragged them by the heels and threw their bodies from the top of the palace into the trench below. He then left his kingdom with his brother's Vizier and entourage, his heart bleeding with sorrow and grief (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.3). Shaken by the incident, Shahzaman pined and wasted away at his elder brother's home. Not knowing what was upsetting his brother so, Shahryar told him that he had planned a ten-day hunt especially for his amusement. Still distraught, but reluctant to tell his brother what was ailing him, he declined by telling Shahryar that he was too depressed and preoccupied to accompany him: "I have a wound in my soul" (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.4). Although his elder brother persisted, Shahzaman insisted upon staying behind. Deciding it was better to not pressure him; Shahryar embraced his brother and took his royal entourage out for the hunt (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.3).

Shahzaman, restless and depressed, could not keep still: he moved about the room like a restless tiger in a cage. Hearing bird song and seeking to soothe himself he opened the shutters of the window and looking into the blue clear sky he wished God would lift him away into the heavens and take away the heavy burden he was bearing. Suddenly he heard a commotion below his window. His brother's Queen with a bevy of servants came through the gate below him. As he observed unseen he watched in dismay as the entire group started disporting themselves in a raucous sexual orgy (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.3). He rushed away but could not keep from turning back to the window in disbelief and horror. Shahzaman felt great empathy and pity for his older brother. "Oh brother of mine, you are the ruler of the entire world, length and width, the towering knight, the implacable, the pious; yet your wife seems to find delight only with a...slave...And to add insult to injury, they were [disloyal to you] in your own home. If only it

was just your wife, but all your concubines and slaves too...as if to them your status is little more than an onion skin. What a treacherous world is this, which fails to distinguish between a sovereign king and a nobody” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.4). He of course was sympathetic towards his brother, but somehow this seemed to bring renewed life back to Shahzaman.

When Shahrayar came back from his hunt he noticed the change in his brother. Shahzaman had regained color and the life was back in his eyes, he had an appetite and this filled his elder brother with relief (Al-Shaykh, 2013). Happy that his brother was so much improved he asked why he had been so unhappy when he had arrived and what had wrought the change in him that now he was so energetic and cheerful. Shahzaman told him the story of his own wife’s betrayal and how in anger he had avenged himself by slaying both of them and heaving their lifeless bodies from the uppermost roof of the palace into the trench below like two dead cockroaches (Al-Shaykh, 2013). At this Shahrayar exclaimed “Shame, shame, I am filled with horror at this revelation of the deceit and wickedness of women. But how fortunate you were, my beloved brother, in killing your wife for betraying you; she who was the cause of your misery and malaise. She was a snake hiding in the grass, waiting to strike the hand which fed her. And how fortunate, too, that you killed this kitchen boy who dared to disrespect a king. Never have I heard such a thing! Had I been in your place I should have lost my mind, gone insane and slaughter with my own sword hundreds of thousands of women. Let us celebrate and praise God for saving you from this turmoil. But now you must explain to me how you managed to rise above your calamity and sorrow” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.5).

Shahzaman begged his brother to let his question go unanswered. Shahrayar pressed him and pleaded with him to hear an explanation. Finally Shahzaman was compelled to answer the question and he did so by saying: “My King, I fear that if I tell you, you will suffer greater

devastation and desolation than my own...I witnessed your misfortune with my own eyes” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.5) ...and he told him of his wife’s and his servant’s exploits on the grounds of the palace directly under his window. Shahrayer declared that he could not and would not believe a word of what his brother told him unless he saw it with his own eyes. Shahzaman challenged Shahrayer to see for himself. So they made a plan...they decided to arrange another hunting trip for the morrow, when the entourage had cleared the gates they would disguise themselves and sneak back into the palace under cover of darkness to Shahzaman’s quarters to spy from the window the next morning (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.6).

Lo and behold the party of Queen and servants came through the gate and once again disported themselves with sexual abandon. Enraged, Shahrayer took up his sword and ran to the garden to revenge himself on the reprobates. He beheaded every one of them. Leaving the area of slaughter he took off his blood-stained robe, and with dragging steps heaved himself onto a rock, and cradled his head in his hands (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.7).

The next day he decreed a law. “I, Shahrayer, shall each night marry a virgin, kissed only by her mother. I shall kill her the following morning and thereby protect myself from the cunning and deceit of women, for there is not a single chaste woman on the face of this earth!” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p. 8). His trusted Vizier (the father of Shaharazad and Dunyazad) was tasked to find a girl each day for the King to deflower and it was also his task to take the girl the next morning and have her beheaded. He killed many, many women and revolt was brewing throughout the land.

Shaharazad the eldest daughter of the king’s trusted Vizier, a young woman of intelligence, beauty, and exceptional refinement, went to her father and said in the presence of

her sister Dunyazad: “Father, I want you to marry me to King Shahrayar, so that I may either succeed in saving the girls of the kingdom, or perish and die like them” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.8).

The Vizier was stunned by this request. His daughter who was so wise, so intelligent, so learned, versed in the great texts of philosophy, medicine, literature, poetry and history, and so beautiful and graceful of manners, was his beloved child. His reply was one of a loving father: “You are being foolish! You know that if I give you to the King he will sleep with you for one night only and then give you to *me* to put to death in the morning! You must be aware that I must carry out his wishes, since I am unable to disobey him” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.8).

Shaharazad insisted by pleading: “Father, you must offer me to him, even if it will result in my death” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.8). Seeking to understand her motivation her father asked her; why would she wish to endanger her life in this way? The only reply she gave was that he must do it. After his pleading, cajoling and citing stories about what happens to foolish, stubborn people, Shaharazad still stood her ground and was stalwart in her decision. “Yes father, my decision is final” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.9). Little did he know that she and her sister had come up with a plan...

The despondent and angst-ridden Vizier forced himself to go before the King and gave him his beloved daughter. The King, astounded by this offer, was confused because the Vizier was fully aware that his daughter would be killed and he would be responsible to kill her on pain of his own death (Al-Shaykh, 2013).

With a heavy heart the Vizier returned to Shaharazad and told her to ready herself for she would be married to the King that night. Leaving her he said, “May God not deprive me of you” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p. 10). Shaharazad was taken to Shahrayar’s quarters, and when the King was unfastening her garment, which had many tiny buttons, she started to weep. The King asked

why she was crying. Her answer was, “I weep for my younger sister Dunyazad and so I should like to say farewell to her before dawn” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.10). So the King sent for Shaharazad’s sister. Dunyazad hurried into the chamber and the two girls embraced. Dunyazad climbed under the bed while the King had his way with Shaharazad. As the night wore on Dunyazad cleared her throat and spoke into the silence.

“Sister, tell us one of your lovely stories before I must bid you goodbye for I do not know what will happen to you tomorrow.”

“If the King gives his permission,” Shaharazad replied.

The restless King, who was waiting for dawn to break, thought the idea a good one and said, “Yes, go ahead” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.11).

Shaharazad, overjoyed told him a story about a poor fisherman who vows to God to cast his net only three times a day, and ends up pulling up a terrible jinni. Just as the story reaches its peak dawn is breaking. Dunyazad, from under the bed said, “Oh King, what a beautiful and amazing story!”

“If the King spares me and lets me live, then I shall tell you tomorrow night what became of the fisherman and the jinni,” said Shaharazad.

The King thought to himself, “I’ll let her live so I can hear the rest of the story tomorrow night and then I shall kill her.” (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p. 17)

Shaharazad waited anxiously, holding her breath, her heart pounding in her chest...the moment seemed to stretch out for an eternity, but finally Shahrayar left his room without calling for the Vizier to put Shaharazad to death. The two sisters clung to each other, embracing and weeping, hardly able to believe that their plan had worked, even for one night. When the Vizier

realized that his daughter would not be put to death he kissed the ground in praise of God (Al-Shaykh, 2013, p.17).

The plan was repeated for 1001 nights. At the end of 1,001 nights and 1,000 stories she told the king that she had no more stories to tell. During the 1,001 nights the King had fallen in love with her and became a wiser and kinder man by her tales. He spared her life and made her his queen. She had daughters and sons and the people rejoiced in their Queen for she saved their daughters from certain death.

### **Analysis of Shaharazad**

Shaharazad exhibits proto-feminist qualities by demonstrating quiet power and emotional fortitude. She did not take on warrior-like qualities as in the case of Deborah and Jael, but used her wisdom and her ability to influence the emotions of her audience to effect change. However, she did challenge the patriarchal cultural norm by defying her father's wishes, which clearly shows that she had confidence in her value as an equal. Shaharazad challenged the norm by going against her father and insisting to be married to the King. This is important to note as it demonstrates a definite proto-feminist quality. Shaharazad was willing to attempt her plan to turn the heart of the king and live under the specter of death every day of the 1000 days until she finally won his trust. It is hard to imagine living under the threat of death for nearly three years, and yet she was strong and brave as well as wise. Her wisdom empowered her to persevere in order to save the young women of the kingdom and be an example of a person who risks all to effect change.

In order to help us understand Shaharazad, and what it took for her to put her life in danger for 1001 nights, we must understand what it was like to be a woman in Persia where Shaharazad lived.

Persia was a patriarchal culture, and the people of this region were largely Islamic; this culture brought the world astounding science and literature. Women were likely to be educated in this culture at this time. In the case of Shaharazad, she was known to be intelligent and learned; the conclusion from the text is that she was educated and versed in story telling as part of her educational upbringing. Oral tradition (story-telling) was part of this culture. Shaharazad's tales are used as evidence in this in scholarly works (Arberry, 1955).

Women were given more opportunity for gender equality with the arrival of the teachings of the Koran. The Koran is understood by Muslims to be the direct word of God, delivered to the prophet Mohammad (570 CE-632 CE). The teachings of the Koran, and the leadership it inspired in the Prophet Mohammed brought many social changes, including elevation of the status of women. Shaharazad lived in a time when these social changes were in effect. In his book *The World's Religion*, Huston Smith(1991) explains the rights of women of Islam in early Islam...“the Koran leaves open the possibility of woman's full equality with man...” (Smith, 1991, p. 251). Before the Koran and the social changes it inspired, “infanticide of girl babies was common and women were viewed little more than chattel” (Smith, 1991, p. 251). With the advent of the teachings of Mohammad, it was encouraged to give women a portion of family inheritances and it was allowed that women could divorce their husbands without reprisal. These were rights that were not afforded to women before the teachings of the Koran. Women were no longer viewed as chattel but were afforded much more equality than had been previously known (Smith, 1991). Despite this elevation of the status of women through the introduction of the teachings of the Koran, the cultures where Islam has taken root have tended to be patriarchal, and the meanings of the texts are interpreted by men. Muslim feminist and scholar Sakkana Shaker (2012) argues that when one understands that Mohammad's teachings are of love, justice and the value of human life, it suggests an inconsistency between these ideals and the patriarchy of many

Muslim societies: Shaker asks a very important question...“what went wrong in some Muslim societies? Is it because of the patriarchal attitudes, or the lack of education or misinterpreting and decontextualizing some of the Qur’anic texts and the lack of proper understanding of many verses, and sometimes manipulating religious authority? If one of God’s names in the *Qur’an* is “justice,” how can women be ill-treated under the name of Islam. It seems that women’s issues are [were] caught up in the political-cultural battleground and male-dominated **interpretation** (emphasis mine) of the *Qur’an*” (Shaker, 2012, p. 296). Just as with Judeo-Christian traditions, the interpretation of the Koran was subject to the cultural norms of society. There is no reason to think that this would be any different in reference to the interpretation of the story of Shaharazad. “There is no question that the *Qur’an*, like all holy scriptures, was deeply affected by the cultural norms of the society in which it was revealed...” (Aslan, 2005, p.71). Patriarchal societies influenced literature through value hieratical thinking.

Shaharazad’s stories have been told and retold (*Alibaba and the 40 Thieves, Aladan’s lamp...*), but little is known about the remarkable woman who told these amazing stories. In a NPR radio interview, Hanan Al-Shaykh the author of *One Thousand and One Nights: A Retelling by Hanan Al-Shaykh* (2013) tells of her discoveries about Shaharazad the woman and the story teller. In the interview, Al-Shaykh related that having grown up with the *1001 Nights* tales, she was unimpressed by Shaharazad, and after being compared to her in regard to her ability to tell stories she thought ... “Why would they do that? I don't like Shaharazad.” Al-Shaykh’s exposure to Shaharazad’s stories and her life was limited to the little she heard through a male dominated society and was not at all positive, so the comparison to Shaharazad irritated her.

Al-Shaykh came to feel differently about Shaharazad after being asked to adapt her stories for the theater. During this process, she remembers: "I fell in love with her because I thought she

was the first feminist. Second, because she was a philosopher, an artist, a writer, and she was trying through literature to humanize the king and men around her" (Al-Shaykh, 2013).

Shaharazad stood up for herself, and used her wisdom and intelligence to become empowered and turned the course of a country away from the wholesale murder of innocent women. She defied her father, which was not typical of young women of that patriarchal culture, and exhibited proto-feminist traits in doing so. By using the powerful art of storytelling, she gently manipulated the King in subtle ways which had the effect of turning his heart away from his misogynistic tendencies and saved the young women of the land. This helped to bring a greater understanding of the value of women in her society by effecting the change through altering the attitude of the highest authority in the country, the King himself. Shaharazad facilitated this change through her actions, all under the specter of death on a daily basis. This is a testament to her courage and determination.

### Conclusion

Ancient global texts are stories that can be related around the globe. These narratives are more than just stories; they bring to the audience such things as wisdom, ideas, and cultural traditions that are necessary in binding society together either in a large global sense or on a local level. These stories have been told and retold, adapted to teach as well as entertain. Stories that started as oral tradition have become part of cultures all over the world. The texts themselves are vulnerable to being interpreted through the lens of the prevailing cultural norms. However, closer reading of these texts, particularly in their historical contexts, can challenge the oppressive conceptual frameworks that color the interpretations of these texts. Stories like these have been told and retold for centuries. Each culture adapts stories and adds cultural themes or motifs to teach lessons, record history, or amuse. However, the effect these adaptations or interpretations

have can be lasting. Careful reading of these texts can challenge the use of value hierarchical thinking implicit in some prevailing interpretations, and allow different meanings to emerge.

I have focused on two examples of stories found in ancient global texts, and have shown that in both cases, some interpretations of these stories portray women as weak and subordinate. I have argued that when read in the light of their historical context, there is no evidence in the stories that these women were weak or lacking in ability. On the contrary, just the opposite is true. I have argued that the interpretations that give the women in these stories subordinate status are tainted by the logic of domination, which leads to a misrepresentation of the role of women. I submit that these women demonstrated proto-feminist behaviors that were subverted by patriarchal interpretations that served the interests of the dominant power structures. These amazing women had qualities that empowered them. They are examples that we can all aspire to, and they had qualities that should be celebrated; qualities that present women in a positive, rather than a negative light.

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