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Abstract

Cultural authenticity in children's literature has long been the subject of heated literary, educational and sociopolitical debate. Reviewing opposing perspectives in multicultural children's literature and examining Susan Fletcher's *Shadow Spinner*, this paper argues the possibility of acquiring the genuine perspective of the other culture and therefore authentically representing it for people who do not belong to that culture.

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American author Susan Fletcher's *Shadow Spinner* (1998) is a fresh look at *The 1,001 Nights*, emphasizing the power of story and storytelling rather than retelling the old tales. The frame story of *The 1,001 Nights* is about the ruler Shahryar, who is enraged by his first wife's infidelity. Believing that "women are not to be trusted" (Haddawy 4), he decides to marry a new girl every night and behead her the next morning. Shahrazad volunteers to marry the vicious Shahryar and, through telling stories over 1,001 nights, saves her own life and those of other women as well. Inspired by the ancient story of Shahrazad and Shahryar, Susan Fletcher introduces a new character, Marjan; she is a young Muslim girl, a poor orphan with a crippled foot, who attracts the attention of Shahrazad.

From the very beginning of the story, we see that "this cripple of Shahrazad's . . . is cleverer than she looks" (38), since she knows the art of storytelling. When Marjan arrives at the palace, the higher-class children see her as "some outlandish creature" (6) with a filthy appearance, but they are soon captivated by her magic power of storytelling:

"Have you heard," I asked the children, "the tale of the fisherman and the jinn?" . . . I held my breath then, waiting. It is not good, when telling tales, to tell too much too soon. You must cast your net, like the fisherman in the story, then wait to see what swims in. . . . The children watched me, eyes wide . . . [and] the gazelle girl said, "What did the fish . . . say?" And then I knew I had them. (7, 8)

Fletcher's female protagonist is not a stereotypical Eastern girl with dark hair, charming eyes, and connected eyebrows. Instead, she is an orphan deprived of parental affection and a normal life. She is not a beautiful girl, but a "crippled little monkey" (56). She achieves her power from her passion for stories and storytelling. In Fletcher's novel, Shahrazad is running out of stories and is desperate for untold tales. She learns of Marjan's talent for storytelling and orders the girl be brought to her chamber. Through adventures both inside and outside the harem, Marjan helps Shahrazad to find more stories, saving Shahrazad's life.



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