

SYLLABUS

AMES 3833 | Fall 2021 - Jinn, Ghosts, and Demons in Arabic Literature

3 Credits

Instructor: Dr. Shir Alon

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Class Time: T, TH 2:00pm - 3:15pm

Office Hours: T, TH 10:00-11:00am, Folwell 230-C

Jinn, also known as genies, are supernatural beings intrinsic to Islamic cosmology and culture: neither human nor divine, of our world but (usually) invisible to us. This course traces the trope of the jinni in Arabic literature: from the place of jinn in the Quran and Islamic tradition, through their role in the composition of the greatest poetry, to their reincarnation in modern works of literature. Following a survey of classic texts and contexts, we will ask why modern authors summon demons and resurrect ghosts, and what political and cultural work these unruly beings are called to perform. More specifically, we will explore the manner in which jinn are latched onto modern debates on personal and collective trauma, memory, madness, relations between East and West (or North and South), political and state violence, gender relations and hierarchies, and virtual realities.

Student Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the semester, you will be familiar with an extensive historical and geographical trajectory concerning Jinn beliefs and literary references, extending across North Africa, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and India, and including Islamic cosmology, vernacular practices, poetic traditions, and modern literature and mass media. You will also be able to recognize and discuss canonical literary genres of Islamic cultures including the Quran, hadith (sayings and practices of the prophet), classical poetry, and Sufi allegory, as well as modern genres such as Arabic novels, memoirs, and popular media.

While the first weeks of the course are dedicated to pre-modern Arab and Islamic cultures, in the following weeks you will examine how modern Arab writers and artists evoke and utilize pre-modern literary figures in order to address contemporary issues. Throughout the semester, we will explore the role of creativity and innovation as well as re-writing and translation as means of political and personal expression in a variety of contexts.

Class assignments are designed to cultivate and assess a range of skills: analyzing literary technique and style (translation analysis), familiarity with specific texts (comparative analysis), and ability to position materials within their social, cultural, or political contexts (longer research project). You will also participate regularly in class discussion and deliver in-class presentations of individual or group work.

Liberal Education: Literature and Global Perspectives

Gaining critical literacy in diverse cultural traditions is one of the foundational principles of liberal education: it denaturalizes one's given context and offers a basis for thinking

comparatively of the variety of systems for “making meaning” that humans have come up with. This course examines how the figure of the jinn – pre-Islamic fantastical beings – appears in Arabic and Islamic literary traditions over a period of almost than 1,500 years. The focus on one trope and the way it transforms across histories, geographies, and genres will allow our class discussions to center on the manner in which literary form shapes meaning and affect. Over the course of the semester we will discuss how different genres allow writers to achieve different goals in a variety of political contexts.

The course has no prerequisites and assumes no prior knowledge of Islamic/Arabic culture or experience with literary analysis. The order of the assignments is designed so that each one cultivates new skills and build upon prior ones: the translation comparison analysis fosters an attention to the nuances of language and their effect. The comparative essay develops awareness of formal as well as narrative differences and their meaning. The final research project relies on both these skills, adding the demand to formulate a contextualized argument.

In this Global Perspectives theme course, you will cultivate the following habits of mind:

(1) Thinking ethically about important challenges facing our society and world:

Every culture has its own tradition of the fantastic or supernatural, a realm out of the reach of human control or understanding that is often a reflection of, and a means of reflecting on, social relations and structures. This class introduces students to the supernatural tradition of the Jinn in Arab and Islamic cultures extending from Morocco to India, in conjunction with readings and discussions on madness, memory, personal and collective trauma, colonialism, global inequalities, political and state violence, gender relations, and virtual realities. The students are encouraged to consider the texts as ethical interventions within specific political and historical contexts. Throughout the course we will discuss how literary devices such as metaphor, allegory, allusion, and fictionality allow writers to reflect on complex global challenges in sophisticated and ethically conscious ways.

(2) Reflecting on the shared sense of responsibility required to build and maintain community;

Class discussions on the fantastic and the non-human necessarily generate conversations on what it means to be human and to live in a human society. Ghosts, demons, and specters allow us to reflect on the manner histories and injustices are narrated, processed, and continue to live in the present. The figure of the Jinn as evoked by writers such as Ibrahim al-Koni, who writes of nomadic people in Libya, or Radwa Ashour, who considers political censorship of archives in Egypt, allows us to think of marginalized communities and of forms of communality that have been repressed and forgotten in modern state-sanctioned narratives. Throughout the term, you are encouraged to think comparatively of other marginalized histories (for example the manner in which Tony Morrison utilizes traditions of the supernatural to write about the legacies of slavery in the US). Such comparisons divulge how every society uses fiction and invention to comprehend injustice and to imagine more just future. Eventually we will consider how the notion of living with the jinn can become a metaphor for new modes of collectivity grounded in difference rather than sameness.

(3) Connecting knowledge and practice:

Whether in discussion, group work, or writing assignments, you are invited to engage directly with the texts and to put them in conversation with social and historical concerns that might be of immediate concern to you: issues such as migration, cultural imperialism, personal and collective trauma, or the shifting lines differentiating madness from normalcy. In your final project, you are expected to present your findings in a format that you deem most fitting: a podcast, a website, a video, or a more traditional paper. In choosing a format you are encouraged to think about audience, about modes of presenting knowledge, and about the ramifications of your work beyond the classroom context.

(4) Fostering a stronger sense of our roles as historical agents.

The course materials regularly highlight the role of creativity and invention in coding, comprehending, and intervening in history. While the geopolitical context of the texts might not be familiar to some of you, understanding how fantastic worlds are often a means to ethically reflect on issues such as racism, sexism, ableism, or economic inequalities can raise awareness of your own historical position and agency. Throughout the semester we will pay close attention to issues translation, transmission, and entanglements of global histories in a manner that will illuminate our own position, agency, and mode of access.

Required Texts

Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Scarecrow*
Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*
G Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen*
Course packet

Grading

20%	Participation and Group Work
15%	First short essay (3-5pp.)
20%	Second short essay (3-5pp.)
5%	Final presentation
40%	Final project (8-10 pp. Can be a development of a shorter essay)

Participation

Come to class on time and ready to work. This means doing the required reading and actively participating during in-class discussions and group work. Discussion offers you a chance to better formulate and deliver your own ideas, while improving your ability to respond to and integrate different positions. We will be dealing with some controversial or explicit material over the course of the quarter. Remember to keep an open mind, not only as you read the text, but also during your engagement with others in class. While I encourage you all to be honest and open in your considerations of the course materials, mutual respect is a crucial and necessary part of this class.

Attendance is mandatory, and more than two unexcused absences will lower your grade.

This applies to more than just your physical presence: **Please put away your phones, tablets, and laptops during class, take handwritten notes, and bring hardcopies of the texts.**

Research shows that students who take notes by hand perform better than those who take notes on their laptops. On the other hand, research also shows that electronic devices can enhance the quality of group work. On days when group work is scheduled, I will inform you in advance. Unauthorized technology use, including of cell phones, will be counted as an absence. If this policy poses any problem, please discuss it with me.

Assignments

“One Thousand and One Nights”: (700-1000 words, due Feb 27). For this short paper, you will compare two translations of one of the stories we have read from *“One Thousand and One Nights”* (links to alternative translations will be provided). The goal of the exercise is to examine how choices of language and style affect the reading experience, and to articulate an argument on the differences between the two texts.

“Midterm Paper:” (700-1000 words, due Mar 26). The prompt for this comparative paper will be distributed a week before the due date. Your paper should include an original argument or observation – the key to that is focusing on a concrete, specific question, rather than attempting to attack big abstract ideas, or trying to summarize an entire novel.

Final Paper

2000-2500 words. Your final paper should pursue a question or a theme that you found personally intriguing over the course. You can, but don’t have to, write a literary analysis paper, focusing on one or two of the texts in the syllabus or another of your choosing. You can, but don’t have to, write a research paper addressing a historical/sociological question. We will discuss both these options in class. In any case, your paper will cite at least two external sources, and you will discuss your topic with me in advance (preferably before writing your abstract).

“Abstract and Final Paper Questionnaire:” You will need to turn in an abstract of your final project (up to 300 words) and answer a questionnaire about your writing plan.

Final Presentations: During the last week, we will hold two conference-style sessions, presenting your work-in-progress to the class to get additional feedback and ideas.

Communication

Throughout the semester, I will post reminders and announcements using email and Canvas. You should check both on a daily basis. The best way to communicate with me is in person, either in the classroom, during office hours, or by appointment. Make use of office hours. I am always delighted to meet and discuss your work or the course materials. If you make an appointment but cannot show up, it is basic courtesy to email and cancel in advance.

Please see Canvas for additional policies and let me know if you have any questions.

<u>Week 1</u>	<u>I Dream of Jeannie: Orientalist Legacies</u>
21-Jan	• Introduction to course
23-Jan	• Short introductory texts: Edward Lane (1836), Muhammad Asad (1980). [CP, 4pp] • <i>In class</i>: Visual Representations, from Al-Isfahani, through Disney, to Christina Aguilera.
<u>Week 2</u>	<u>Jinn in the Quran and in Practice</u>
28-Jan	• Read: Sūrat al-Raḥman; Sūrat al-Jinn. [CP] • Listen: Quran recitation (<i>Canvas</i>).
30-Jan	• “Jinn Behavior” from Robert Lebling, <i>Legends of the Fire Spirits</i>. [CP 16pp] • Watch: <i>Bad-e Jinn</i>, directed by Naser Taqvai (20 mins, <i>Canvas</i>)
<u>Week 3</u>	<u>Poets and their Jinn</u>
4-Feb	• From Abu Amir ibn Shuhaid, <i>The Treatise of Familiar Spirits and Demons</i> (al-Andalus, 1025). [CP pp. 59-96, “Introductory Essay” is optional]. • Amira El-Zein, “Djinns Inspiring Poets,” from Islam, <i>Arabs and the Intelligent world of the Jinn</i> (2009). [<i>Canvas</i>, 8pp]
6-Feb	• <i>In Class</i>: Ta’abaṭa Sharran, “How I Met the Ghoul” (6th c. poem).
<u>Week 4</u>	<u>Majnun and Love’s Demons</u>
11-Feb	• Poetry excerpts from Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah [<i>Canvas</i>, two poems] • Nizami, <i>The Story of Layla and Majnun</i> (Persian, 1188). [CP, 30pp]
13-Feb	• <i>Group work</i>: Cinematic adaptations of Majnun Layla, from Cairo to Bollywood.
<u>Week 5</u>	<u>Jinn and Humans: Arabian Nights</u>
18-Feb	• Tale of Merchant and the Jinni; Tales of the Three Sheikhs. [CP 12pp]
20-Feb	• “City of Brass”. [CP 15pp] • Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919). [<i>Canvas</i>, 135-151]

Week 6 **Demonic Power**

- 25-Feb • Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Scarecrow* (Libya, 1998, 128pp.)
- 27-Feb • al-Koni cont.
• SHORT PAPER 1 DUE

Week 7 **Gothic Palestine**

- 3-Mar • Emile Habibi, from *Saraya The Ogre's Daughter* (Palestine, 1991).
[CP pp. 7-56]
- 5-Mar • Poems from Mahmud Darwish and Ghassan Zaqtan [Canvas]
• Excerpt from Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*. [CP 4pp]
• Watch short videos: Sharif Wakad, "To Be Continued..."; Bashir Makhoul, "Enter Ghost Exit Ghost;" Ronen Eidelman, "The Ghost of Manshia". [Canvas]
• OPTIONAL: Celia Rothenberg, "My Wife is from the Jinn" from *Islamic Masculinities* (2006). [Canvas]

10, 12 Mar **SPRING BREAK**

Week 8 **Ghosts and History**

- 17-Mar • Excerpt from Radwa Ashour, *Specters* (Egypt, 1992). [CP 38pp]
- 19-Mar • Colin Davis, "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms." [Canvas 7pp]
• SHORT PAPER 2 DUE

Week 9 **Migratory Jinn**

- 24-Mar • Hanna Azualai Hasfari, *Sh'hur* (Film, Israel 1995). [Canvas]
- 26-Mar • Anand Vivek Taneja, "Jinnealogy: Everyday life and Islamic theology in post-Partition Delhi" [CP 23pp]

Week 10 **Hauntings - Horror and Rewritings**

- 31-Mar • Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Iraq, 2013).

2-Apr • Saadawi cont.

Week 11 **Jinn and Genre**

7-Apr • Babak Anvari, *Under the Shadows* (Film, Tehran 2016).
 • FINAL ABSTRACT DUE

9 Apr NO CLASS

Week 12 **Cyber Jinn**

14-Apr • G Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen* (Fantasy/Cyber punk, US/Cairo, 2012).

16-Apr • Wilson cont.

Week 13 **Jinnbusters**

21-Apr • *Jinn*, Netflix Original Series
23-Apr

Week 14 **Final Presentations**