

Faith, Freedom, and Favors

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As Western speculative fiction increasingly explores diverse cultural traditions, Shannon Chakraborty's *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* stands out as a masterwork of Islamic maritime literature that seamlessly combines science fiction, fantasy, and horror elements. While similar works of science fiction and fantasy in the US like *Dune*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek* have "borrowed heavily from Middle Eastern culture and religions,"¹ Chakraborty's novel, similar to Saladin Ahmed's 2012 *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, represents something more profound: a genuine synthesis of Islamic tradition, magical realism, and contemporary speculative fiction.

Between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, the Indian Ocean served as the hub of a vast Islamic maritime network that profoundly shaped global trade and cultural exchange. Muslim merchants, scholars, and travelers created the "Indian Ocean world"—a network connecting ports from East Africa to Southeast Asia through trade routes that predated European maritime expansion by centuries. As historian Michael Pearson notes, these networks facilitated not only the exchange of goods, such as spices, textiles, and precious metals, but also the exchange of ideas, religious practices, and technologies.² The development of sophisticated nautical instruments, such as the astrolabe and quadrant, alongside detailed nautical maps and charts, enabled Muslim sailors to master monsoon patterns and establish regular trading circuits. This rich backdrop provides essential context for understanding why the Indian Ocean world serves as the perfect setting for a story that explores questions of identity, faith, and cultural exchange through the lens of science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

This historical foundation provides the setting for Chakraborty's complex characterization, particularly in her nuanced portrayal of Amina. The novel's medieval

1. Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad and Rebecca Hankins, "Towards a Global History of Islamicate Science Fiction," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Muslims and Popular Culture*, ed. Hussein Rashid and Kristian Petersen, 215–24 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 215.

2. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 89–92.

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Indian Ocean setting reflects what Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener describe as “a world of complex trade networks and cultural exchange that existed long before European dominance.”³ Chakraborty pays careful attention to historical details—from navigation techniques to market customs—creating a rich backdrop that supports rather than overwhelms the narrative. The novel’s geography becomes a character itself, particularly in the author’s depiction of the island of Socotra. The island’s treacherous rocks and ancient history provide more than just a setting for the final confrontation; they embody what Arab-futurist writers have identified as “the intersection of history, mythology, and contemporary concerns.”⁴ The story’s heroine, Amina al-Sirafi, and her extensive maritime knowledge accurately reflect this historical reality, in which coastal communities from Mogadishu to Malacca were bound together by shared commercial interests and Islamic cultural practices that transcended ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

Chakraborty’s portrayal of Amina is nuanced and multi-layered, challenging readers to expand their understanding of Muslim women. She is a mother who maintains her daily prayers while cursing like a sailor; she is a leader who commands through both wisdom and force, a woman whose past holds as many shadows as triumphs. She is the former pirate captain of her ship, the *Marawati*, who has carefully constructed a serene and uncomplicated retirement. However, when the wealthy Salima al-Hilli offers her an astronomical sum of money to find her missing granddaughter, Amina disrupts her retirement, hoping to acquire financial freedom for her family. What begins as a seemingly straightforward rescue mission unfolds into an intricate tale involving shape-shifting djinn, magical artifacts, and questions of faith and freedom that resonate with both historical and contemporary concerns.

The supporting cast is equally well-realized. There is Dalila, the Christian apothecary whose knowledge of explosives saves Amina countless times. Dalila also serves as Amina’s confidant and often her voice of conscience, warning her about the men in her life. In chapter 4, she scolds Amina, saying, “Men are your weakness,” which proves not only true but also has life-altering consequences for many of her companions.⁵ We meet Tinbu, whose loyalty to Amina runs deeper than mere crew membership. He is also a character who embodies the complex bonds that form in maritime communities. Amina rescues him at the expense of putting herself in danger. Both Tinbu and Dalila know Amina’s secret: her husband Raksh is a shape-shifting demon. Their interactions showcase the varied relationships that occurred throughout these networked worlds of trade, commerce, and adventure.

The most transformational supporting character is Dunya, the sixteen-year-old granddaughter of Salima al-Hilli and daughter of Asif al-Hilli, who was Amina’s first mate and for whose death she has long felt responsible. Dunya’s character arc represents one

3. Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener, “The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2007): 243–79.

4. Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 126.

5. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 64.

of the novel's most complex achievements. Initially presented as a kidnapping victim, she emerges as a scholar whose profound understanding of ancient texts and magical lore stems from a family legacy of scientific and mystical interpretation. Falco, the Frankish sorcerer and leader of Christian smugglers, is believed to have kidnapped Dunya to help him locate the Moon of Saba, a source of immeasurable power. The truth is more complex: Dunya agreed to help Falco, thinking he was a benevolent person who would respect her gifts and help the world. However, she learns that he only wants her abilities to help him find the Moon of Saba to conquer and dominate the world. When she witnesses his depravity in action, she tries to escape, but he forces her to continue helping him.

We also learn that Dunya's yearning to be free from her grandmother's imposition of a forced marriage may have been the favor she saw Falco as providing. More importantly, we ultimately learn of Dunya's desire to live as a man, and this unforeseen plot twist changes the trajectory of the story and quickens the reader's anticipation of something much more memorable. How does this revelation transform the narrative's lens and voice? This story of adventurous and heroic women becomes subversively also a (trans) man's story, particularly when we discover that Dunya is revealed to be Jamal the Scribe, who has been narrating the story throughout the novel. This transformation raises important questions: does this alter our understanding or subvert our expectations of this feminist tale of Amina al-Sirafi finally finding comfort and redemption in her own identity as a Muslim woman? Does the voice of the story, which shifts back and forth from female to male, impact the narrative lens? Each reader must decide how this transformation affects them, but these alterations enrich our understanding of these complicated characters and the themes of faith, favor, and freedom that permeate the novel.

The action sequences throughout the novel demonstrate Chakraborty's ability to weave thematic depth into narratives that are both terrifying and emotionally charged. When Amina faces off against Falco's supernatural forces in the waters around Socotra, the battle becomes more than just a clash of powers. The final confrontation in the caves, where multiple plot threads converge beneath a lunar eclipse, exemplifies how the novel integrates magical and historical elements into a coherent whole. After Amina rescues Dunya, the two work together to defeat Falco and the spell that controls his crew. Dunya uses her knowledge to reverse the spell, turning Falco into al-Dabaran rather than the reverse—revealing that the actual Moon of Saba is the wash basin that Queen Bilqis created to trap an unwanted pursuer.

The novel's supernatural elements are particularly noteworthy for their integration of Islamic mythology with fantasy worldbuilding. The peri court, with bird-like features and a dismissive attitude toward human concerns, builds on elements of Islamic cosmology while creating something new. Their world represents one of the seven heavens mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. For the peris, Amina represents a transgression; she has found their island and now must be killed because she knows of their existence. The scene with the peri court is reminiscent of contemporary films such as *Black Panther*, where the Wakandans, and later in the sequel, the kingdom of Talocan, sought to hide from worldly intrusions, willing to kill to ensure their purity. The peris see their world as requiring balance between the human realm and the magical realm, but it is dependent on them remaining separate. They feel

that the human realm is violent, similar to the way the Wakandans and Talocans viewed the outside world.

It must be noted that the peri perspective contradicts Islamic tradition, which recognizes that knowledge should be shared. Spreading knowledge is a sacred obligation for all Muslims, and the Qur'an explicitly addresses this: "God will elevate those who have faith and knowledge" (58:11). The peri who helps Amina, Khayzur, represents the lone voice that wants to share the world and spread the gifts of the peri. Khayzur, Amina's unlikely ally, embodies the novel's central themes of freedom and obligation to provide a reciprocal favor. It is Khayzur who speaks about how liberty and favor are essential for Amina. It is his words that she remembers when she cuts the cords binding the sea creature, the marid, controlled by Falco, freeing it and allowing it to return the favor by helping to destroy Falco.

On the other hand, Raksh, Amina's shape-shifting former husband, embodies the novel's sophisticated approach to faith and moral ambiguity. Their complex relationship reflects what scholars identify as a key feature of modern Islamic fiction: "the ability to present complex characters whose actions cannot be reduced to simple categories of good and evil."⁶ Late in the book, Raksh reveals to Amina that he has not severed their association because it would leave him weak, something he cannot afford in the world as it is. She then learns of his contract with Asif, which cost Asif his life, and realizes their relationship is too complicated for someone like Raksh ever to be an honest ally. These revelations prompt Amina to send him into exile, recognizing that he would never be of value or loyal to her.⁷ The secret of their daughter Marjana's parentage, which Amina refuses to divulge to Raksh, adds another layer of complexity to their interactions, demonstrating how personal choices ripple outward to affect entire communities.

The novel's treatment of faith is diffused throughout, encompassing more than just Islam. Amina's relationship with Islam is neither the simple devotion of a saint nor the cynical distance of a sinner, but rather the complex navigation performed by someone trying to reconcile religious beliefs with a complicated life. This approach aligns with what contemporary Arab writers have achieved in fantasy novels like Ibraheem Abbas and Yasser Bahjatt's *HWJN*, published in Saudi Arabia in 2013, "where supernatural elements serve to explore rather than avoid questions of faith and morality."⁸ We also learn about Falco's connection to his Christian faith and his use of magic, spells, and cords, which is reminiscent of Octavia Butler's *Patternist* series, where the female leader uses a spiritual cord to protect and ultimately control her offspring. Ultimately, however, Falco's telepathic abilities and pursuit of world domination are not put to religious ends. Falco wants Amina to join him and overthrow both Christians and Muslims.

The novel's climactic sequences bring its themes full circle. Amina's decision to free rather than control the marid allows it to return the favor and demonstrates what contemporary scholars have identified as a key theme in Islamic speculative fiction: "the triumph of moral

6. Ahmad and Hankins, "Towards a Global History," 223.

7. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 487.

8. Ahmad and Hankins, "Towards a Global History," 218.

choice over mere power.”⁹ Likewise, when Amina ultimately chooses not to return Dunya to her grandmother, Salima, prioritizing true freedom over financial riches, the novel makes a powerful statement about the nature of justice and responsibility. These are the tests of faith that Amina grapples with throughout the novel and that give legitimacy to the scholar Edward Said’s words about Islam: “For anyone with any clarity of thought and common-sense ideas about the complexity and variety of concrete human experience, it is much more sensible to try to talk about different kinds of Islam, at different moments, for different people, in different fields...”¹⁰ The beauty of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* is that Amina embodies the complexity and simplicity of Islam and forcefully demonstrates that Islam is monotheistic, not monolithic.

Chakraborty’s achievement extends beyond mere storytelling. As Muslim scholars have noted, Islamic speculative fiction often serves as “a means of exploring alternative futures and recovering hidden histories.”¹¹ By creating a world where faith, magic, and pragmatism coexist—often uneasily—Chakraborty demonstrates how this genre can address serious themes while remaining thoroughly entertaining. This work provides a model for others to tell Islamic stories from a perspective that forces us to confront our assumptions and stereotypes, to spark further conversations, and ultimately to inspire other works of creativity.

The novel’s conclusion suggests possibilities for future adventures while satisfying its immediate narrative arc. As Dr. Jayna Brown observes in her analysis of contemporary speculative fiction, narrative framing devices can “transform personal stories into historical documents.”¹² Jamal, through his narration of Amina’s adventures, has written her story, his story, and the stories of all the supporting characters into this personal story for our history books. These stories will live on through the documentation and retelling of these exploits, serving as living memory. *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* contributes significantly to both fantasy literature and Islamic speculative fiction. It demonstrates how traditional elements can be reimagined for contemporary audiences while maintaining their essential meaning and power. Through Amina’s story, Chakraborty shows how the past and future, the magical and the mundane, the sacred and the profane, can coexist in ways that enrich rather than diminish each other.

9. Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life*, 128.

10. Edward W. Said, “Impossible Histories: Why the Many Islams Cannot Be Simplified,” *Harper’s Magazine* (July 2002), 69–74, at 70.

11. Emad El-Din Aysha and Rebecca Hankins, “Surveying Arab and African American Muslim Science Fiction: A Conversation,” in *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely and Emad El-Din Aysha, 35–52 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022), 48.

12. Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 178.