

Gender Representation in Moroccan Orature: Moroccan Folktales as a Case Study

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Abstract

Scholars worldwide are fascinated by oral traditions, and Moroccan folktales are particularly striking within a mosaic of spoken narratives and cultural past. Storytellers bring these stories, rich in traditional wisdom, to life in both public and private spaces. To showcase their storytelling abilities, women are assuming roles that have historically been held by men, such as "storyteller" and "orator." Researchers are now examining the forms in which women are portrayed in these tales, as well as how female narrators engage with and contest these representations within the oral tradition. This paper looks at the stories that women tell and how often they connect female characters to negative stereotypes like evil intent, jealousy, and deceit through an exemplifying analytical approach. While these tales demonstrate women's storytelling abilities, they also reveal women's self-doubt and uncover women's underestimation of themselves and their intellectual abilities, hence showing the contradictions residing in female-narrated stories. Thus, one should advocate for a revised view of the female voice in storytelling.

1. INTRODUCTION

Orature has sparked the interest of several experts throughout the world. This exploding trend among scholars to explore the nature and characteristics of orature is because they are means of portraying the cultural and social patterns of life in a particular geographical region. Considering this, Moroccan folktales are regarded as excellent examples of oral literature and cultural legacy. Female orators tell folktales orally in both the public and private spheres. Therefore, one is accustomed when hearing the term orator/storyteller to associate it with men, but women demonstrate that they, too, are professional storytellers; women's absence from the public sphere and stereotypes about them play a significant role in some Moroccans overlooking their contribution to preserving folktales as cultural heritage. In addition, women's illiteracy and ignorance foster an environment in which they are readily misinterpreted and stigmatised. In this paper, my argument is that Moroccan women tend to

misrepresent themselves through their own narrativity. Hence, relying on a collection of female-narrated folktales edited, translated and collected by Jilali Elkoudia, one could find that women portray themselves as evil and overly jealous. In stories such as *Jealous Mother and the tale of three women*, women are defined as the source of evil-like behaviour and moral degeneration and endowed with other many stereotypical misrepresentations. Using folktales as a case study, I aim to emphasise gender portrayals in Moroccan literature; its primary purpose is to investigate the nature of folktales as a literary genre, highlighting the fundamental basic elements for a text to be termed a folktale. In addition, I highlight Moroccan storytellers and women's participation in the storytelling process. In addition, this paper attempts to reveal the stereotypes associated with women's behaviour, such as excessive jealousy and evil. These stereotypes are presented in numerous tales, such as *The Sultan's Daughter, Father and Daughters, a Tale of two women, three women, the jealous mother, three sisters*, etc., as well as tales demonstrating women's knowledge and intelligence, such as *the modest girl, the girl and Fakih, Amar and his sister, and seven brothers and sisters*. In folktales and oral culture, such as songs, sayings, and proverbs, women are portrayed as malicious and wrongdoers.

2. Folktales as a literary form

Folklorists believe that folktales are tales passed down orally in different regions. Folktales are oral traditions that contain mythology and ghost stories as well as tales of saints, demons, and spirits. Thus, a folktale is an oral story that is passed from one generation to the next. Moreover, it provides pleasure and enjoyment to individuals who want entertainment. In some squares in Morocco, for instance, people congregate to be entertained by storytellers; at the end of each narrative, they pay a particular amount of money to orators. Therefore, in the Moroccan setting, folktales are considered a kind of entertainment. For this respect, we have Ogunjimi and Abdul Rasheed Na'allah who says

folktales introduce children to the cultural practices of their society, including customs, institutions, mores and beliefs of the people (Ogunjimi, Bayo and Abdul-Rasheed Na'allah, 2005,p.1)

Therefore, folktales may be viewed as a form of instruction for children; when grandmothers tell the stories to their grandchildren, they strive to exaggerate the consequences of wrongdoing and depict the unfavourable fate of those who do wrongdoing. In this manner, storytellers encourage youngsters not to be as disruptive and to avoid evil works. Therefore, folktales serve as an excellent model for teaching and educating children. Not every literary text is a folktale, but a text that claims to be a folktale is supposed to have the features of folktales according to Jack Hanery

to be a folktale, a text must have been transmitted orally. Second, it must be regarded as belonging to a particular tradition (...) All [these criteria and] requirements must be satisfied for a text to be considered a folktale (Hanery,1999 p. 4).

Thus, the focus that Hanery concentrates on is the oral transmission of the text and the sense of belonging to the traditions of certain culture. Also, we can confirm this by Hanery's

words that “an important feature of the folktales is that it is an orally derived, traditional verbal art form” (1999 p. 4). Hence, folktale is an art of oral narration of stories of multiple meanings and interpretations that differ from one culture to another.

Readers of folktales notice that folktales are like other literary stories in terms of text structure and substance, including characters, narrative, and themes; nevertheless, they are passed down orally and do not belong to anybody. They are another reading of life depicting the experiences of common layman and fantastical monsters as Hassan El Shamy has said:

As an aspect of folkloric behaviour, a true folktale, told orally from memory, is one of the most delicately balanced manifestations of human life. It is a description of life of living in a real or fictitious community as perceived by narrators and visualised by listeners each in his unique way. (El-Shamy,2004, p. 9)

The substance of folktales is another representation of human life. They symbolise people's daily activities and preoccupations. Thus, folktales serve as colourful depictions of the life of common people. Folktales serve as a depiction of the culture in which they originate; they are an additional part of cultural identification and belonging. For instance, tales that are told in Moroccan context manifests aspects of Moroccan traditions and cultural heritage such as the term ‘*halqa*’, the latter refers to special place in each city where people gather to hear tales from ‘*hakawati*’; that is the storyteller who takes storytelling as his profession to earn his living. We can take for this purpose Jilali Elkoudia who says,

Folktales constitute an essential aspect of the culture of any country (...) this cultural heritage expressed the daily preoccupations of ordinary people from all kinds of social classes. (Elkoudia,2003, p. 8).

Thus, folktales express the cultural heritage of each place they belong to. Therefore, folktales are not just stories told orally in certain squares as well as in Moroccan houses, but they are another representation of Moroccan cultures; they are mostly considered by scholars of folktales as belonging to the culture of orality in Morocco.

3. Moroccan women as storytellers

One may note that when hearing the term "storyteller," one naturally equates the term with men, even though "storyteller" can also refer to a woman. Although we often heard stories from our grandmothers as children, they rarely acknowledged their role in maintaining folktales. In addition, our grandmothers have assumed the responsibility of transmitting these tales from their parents to our age, as the stories we hear today would not exist if it were not for them. Therefore, both men and women play a vital role in preserving this cultural legacy of which Moroccans are so proud.

One is accustomed to see ‘*halqa*’ which is a circle that is formed by people listening to the storyteller inside it when one visits some well-known squares in Moroccan cities like ‘*jamae lfana*’. We sometimes find more than one storyteller are taking part in the process of telling the tales to the listeners or we find one is telling the stories and the other is accompanying him by magnifying the events using non-verbal communication as Fatima Sadiqi says,

Storytellers also include great amount of non-verbal behaviour. They use paralinguistic features like emphasized articulation, increase in voice volume, laughter, variations in intonations, (...) encouraging minimal responses, as well as frequent touching, hand holding, hand gestures, facial expressions, tilted heads, sustained gaze, locked-eye gaze, and nodding(...)body language and non- verbal behaviours have the function of supporting storytelling and highlighting its centrality for the audience. (Sadiqi,2003, p.247).

The storyteller's body language is a vital element that helps the listener follow his tale step by step. In addition, storytellers may wear distinctive attire to attract the greatest number of diverse listeners.

The 'halqa' is mostly male dominance as soon as the storyteller is man, the teller of the folktales takes his listeners in journey with *Alae ddine* or places them in what is going on in the sultan house of *the sultan's daughter*. The storyteller may surprise his audience by an abrupt stop, to repeat the event or by directing the questions to the audience to guess what will happen after, he may challenge the audience by raising the bet if someone knows the following event. The teller of folktale would transfer his listeners to an imaginary world where animals do speak, and the trees move as Paula and Rosman say,

Storytellers carry us from one realm to another from mundane and material to the imaginal and ethereal. Storytellers are translators by definition (...) Travelling from one imaginary world to another, their power lies in their ability to traverse these worlds. (Paula&Rosman,2003, p.135).

According to this quote, the storyteller is a tool of transference who takes the listeners to a virtual world where there are no social boundaries as Richard Hamilton's point of view says

the storytellers, who would enter people's minds, creating images, emotions, worlds and experiences, both real and imagined, tapping into our innate impulse to dream (Hamilton, 2011, p.2).

The teller does make people feel relieved and satisfied, the orator tries his best to entertain the listeners, and he makes them escape with him via his tales from the social restrictions to a boundless, imaginary world.

The storyteller uses folktales as his profession; storytelling for him is a means by whereby he can gratify the needs of his life. That is why, we find him at the end of each tale turning around the circle and collecting the money from his listeners. For this purpose, we have Leila Bendra who says,

Folktales are as well told in public places where orators compete, and storytelling becomes an art and a source of revenue, attracting crowds looking for entertainment. (Bendra,2010, p.15).

Although storytellers take folktales as their profession, they are good teachers inside ‘halqa’, they teach moral lessons to the seekers of entertainment through their tales; they try to make people aware of their bad behaviours by giving them examples that the bad is always the loser, they engage their listeners into self- analysis to reconsider their actions. In addition, they encourage the audience to take advantage of doing well because it is rewarded in the end; they urge them to host strangers, help the elders and be merciful to others as much as possible. In this respect, we have Njuko who has said

the storyteller carefully determines his choice of topics in the same manner as the schoolteacher plans classroom instruction (...)their stories also enlighten the listener on human wisdom, follies, and morality(Njuko,2006, p.42).

Thus, storytellers become instructors who carefully select their tales so as to impart as much moral instruction as possible to their audiences; they will pause at particular moments to emphasize the consequences of a wicked deed and the circumstances of its perpetrator.

As we have noted, the storyteller can also be a woman. We primarily associate storytelling with men due to their presence in public spaces, but if we examine private places like houses, we find our grandmothers as examples of women who tell folktales to their families, particularly children. If males dominate public spaces during the day, women are the professional storytellers of folktales that children flock to hear at night. Most of these stories have a happy conclusion, as is typical of women's tales. In this purpose, Sadiqi says,

When actually telling a story, women generally show an eagerness to provide the maximum background to their folktales. Furthermore, women sometimes intervene to give their own point of view before each major event of the tale. (Sadiqi,2003, p.7).

Therefore, male and female folktales differ in terms of choice and conclusion. For the goal of expressing their desires inside patriarchy, women tend to include their personal perspectives in stories. Women use folktales to express their attitudes towards a patriarchal society. They strive to make their voices heard using storytelling, presenting themselves as witty and intelligent in the tales is akin to proving that they are like men; they have the same abilities and skills that allow them to be outside as men. Women wish to assert that if given the opportunity to voice their opinions, they will demonstrate their ability to accomplish what males can do. For this purpose, we have Alison Baker who says,

Storytelling is an important part of Moroccan popular culture. Even today, in women’s circle, storytelling skills are highly valued (...) women and children of the household would gather to hear an older aunt or grandmother tell the tales of the Arabian nights, stories of Islamic religious figures and saints (...) they have become practised storytellers; and many of the Moroccan folktales in their repertoire feature a strong, smart heroine who outwits the men in authority to get what she wants’’. (Baker, 1998, p.5)

Women, in addition to males, play an important part in preserving Moroccan cultural history through passing down oral traditions such as folktales. Some people tend to always say that women in Morocco are more traditional and orthodox than males. Still, they should be recognized for the role they play in preserving the cultural wealth of Morocco. The contributions of Moroccan women to the country's diverse cultural traditions are rarely acknowledged, and women's voices are rarely heard. Therefore, it is our moral obligation to recognize the contributions women have made to preserving our cultural and linguistic traditions.

4. Analysis of some passages from the folktales

When one investigates orality like folktales, songs, and proverbs, one will find that women are being stereotyped a lot by their behaviours, they are referred to as evil, covetous and wrongdoers, they are associated with satanic works, and they are mostly connected with mystery, deceit, and faithlessness as Katrak says:

A fear of female fertility, its mystery and power, lies at the root of women-hating proverbs and disempowering folktales. Such cultural modes express a culture's ways of controlling female life-giving potential, most commonly not by denigrating it, but ironically by venerating, even glorifying female fertility. Such idealization is one way to contain its mystery within patriarchal boundaries that try to limit its possibilities and power. (Katrak, 2006, p.164)

So, these stereotypes that are conveyed via folktales and proverbs have a great impact on women's circle in society. For example, in Moroccan Folktales we have a lot of tales that present women as evil and jealous like the story of *the jealous mother, a tale of two women, three women, three sisters and the sultan's daughter*'. These stories mostly represent women in negative ways and introduce female characters as troublemakers, jealous and evil.

Evil

Women are viewed as omens of evil and troublemakers, and most Moroccan folktales depict ladies negatively, such as in the tale of two women, in which the one is referred to as good intention and the second as ill intention, and each has a large family. So, one day they decide to embark on a voyage in search of food to feed their children; they take the food with them, agree to split it, and depart. When the good intention is hungry, she informs her friend that we should eat our meal, but the evil till we complete ours. After many days, the good intention becomes hungry and asks the bad intention for her portion of food. The bad intention refuses and tells the good intention that if she wants my food, she must give her one of her eyes.

Three days later good intention again started to suffer from hunger, but she was embarrassed to ask for food. When her legs started giving away, she collapsed (...) Oh, my friend, I'm dying of hunger. Can we have something to eat (...) we finished mine. Let's have yours (...) I can't give you my food (...) so she told her point-blank, give me one of your eyes, and I'll give you food. (El Koudia, 2003, p.86)

Women are portrayed as naturally suspicious and deceitful, which feeds negative prejudices into folklore. The story depicts women doing evil things, including robbing a friend of their eye, which emphasizes the negative connotations associated with them. This portrayal is not only coincidental; rather, it is a mirror of how women have been stereotyped in conventional narratives, where their identities are frequently reduced to representations of dishonesty and moral decay. A limited and harmful picture of femininity is perpetuated by folklore by repeatedly associating women with such undesirable characteristics. It implies that women are ethically dubious and untrustworthy by nature, a view that has historically been used to justify women's marginalization in both cultural narratives and societal positions. The intricacy and diversity of women's experiences are overlooked in this reductionist representation, which also reinforces a cycle of bias and discrimination that continues to resonate in modern interpretations of these stories. In this sense, Rhouni says,

stereotypical representation of 'harem' women not only ignores social and cultural change...But also, and more important here, erases female agency (Rhouni, 2010, p.22).

So, women's misrepresentation in folktales stands as one of the most important ways that help the continuity of these stereotypes. These prejudices that tales contain are transmitted from one generation to the other orally and they are being inculcated into children's minds.

Other examples corroborate the common belief in stories about women being overly jealous, like the story of the three ladies. This is the tale of three sisters who went outside to get feed for their animals and were pulled to a field of beans. The sisters lived together. Thus, terrified of the landowner, they take a seat close together and start talking. The initial response was, "If he marries me, I will make him a giant loaf of bread from a single grain;" The second response was, "If he marries me, I will give birth to a son with a golden birthmark on his forehead." All three women are married to the owner, who happens to be nearby and overhears their chat. Two of them fail to fulfil their promise, but the third gives birth to a child with a golden birthmark on his forehead; as seen in this text, the other two women plotted against her out of jealousy.

When the child was born, they cut off his little finger and thrust it into the mother's while she was still exhausted after her labors. They gave the baby to a woman to bury alive. When the husband arrived, they told him she had eaten her baby. The mother, still recuperating, was shocked by the accusation and could not defend herself. When she said nothing, her husband punished her. (El Koudia , 2003,p.97).

Reader would notice in this passage that women are untrustworthy because we find that they plot against that woman. They are misrepresented and are associated with evil, wrongdoers and jealousy.

The tale of *'the sultan's daughter'* is a lively example of the women's misrepresentation as over-jealous. It is a story about a sultan who has three daughters, but he has no son. The youngest daughter is the most attractive and her father's favourite; all her wishes were fulfilled. Therefore, her sisters get envious of her, and they begin to plan against

her and make her life difficult. Therefore, she decides to ask her father to construct her own castle and supply her with attendants. Once her request was granted, she forbade anybody from entering her palace.

Later, the son of a great sultan hears her story and chooses to propose marriage; she agrees under certain circumstances. Therefore, they begin meeting in secret through a tunnel created by the sultan's son. After hearing about their sister's romance with the sultan's son and deciding to visit her, their sisters write her a note expressing how much they miss her. So, she trusts them and permits them to come, but as this text demonstrates, their jealousy will ruin their sister.

After agreeing on a plan, they went to see her. They suggested taking her to the hammam, the public bath, and she liked the idea. Once there, they pretended they had forgotten something. Leaving her with the servants. They hurried back to her room to get a glimpse of the young man (the sultan's son). They had made their precise calculations to coincide with his visit. Upon investigation they discovered that the tunnel was made of glass. When they heard him making his way through the tunnel, they started throwing stones. A sharp piece of broken glass went straight into his eye and did him a serious injury. (El Koudia, 2003, p.16)

The quote reinforces negative stereotypes that portray women as the source of evil and crime by portraying them as overly jealous and intrinsically untrustworthy. This unfavourable image of women is not a unique episode; rather, it is a part of a larger folkloric trend in which women are regularly linked to harmful behaviour. The narrative of a girl and her stepmother, for example, reflects these themes by portraying the stepmother as a cruel person who torments the stepdaughter following the girl's mother's death. The stepmother exemplifies the stereotype of women as sources of misfortune and evil by providing her own daughter a bucket to get water while giving the stepdaughter a sieve, and then punishing the latter with daily beatings for not returning with water. Like many other narratives, this one reduces women to one-dimensional antagonists whose only function is to upset the peace and create suffering. The concept that women are innately nasty and antagonistic, especially when they play maternal or step-maternal roles, is perpetuated by these depictions, which is quite problematic. In addition to distorting the richness of women's experiences, folklore also perpetuates a societal narrative that sees women as the embodiment of evil by persistently portraying women in these negative positions. The distorted portrayal of women has extensive ramifications as it moulds society's attitudes about them and provides an explanation for their marginalization. In the end, these stories reinforce a history of prejudice and discrimination in which women are wrongly held responsible for all the world's problems and treated with mistrust.

one day the stepdaughter kept trying to fill the sieve, but it slipped from her grasp and was carried away in the river. When she returned home without it, she was severely punished.'' (El Koudia, 2003, p.19)

In Moroccan folktales and oral culture, women are typically portrayed as troublemakers and omens of evil, generally associated with devious and devilish behaviour. This representation is the result of ingrained presumptions and prejudices that have moulded cultural narratives throughout time rather than just a reflection of specific stories. A limited, reductionist conception of femininity that ignores the depth and diversity of women's lives is reinforced by the stories' repeated linkage of women with evil intent and harm. These stories feed damaging preconceptions that have long been used to excuse the marginalization and suspicion of women in society by portraying them as sources of evil and difficulty. This portrayal in Moroccan oral culture is representative of larger patriarchal institutions that aim to subjugate and subdue women's autonomy by portraying them as essentially harmful or dishonest. These representations are not only symbolic; they also have practical ramifications since they help shape cultural perceptions of women as suspicious and frightening. These stories minimize the diverse and varied roles that women play in society and reduce them to simple caricatures of evil by basing their portrayals on false presumptions and biases. Long-lasting consequences of this distorted portrayal include the maintenance of gender inequality and the belief that women are inferior creatures whose presumed propensity for evil, rather than their inherent humanity, defines them.

5. Conclusion

It is very challenging to examine women's portrayal in folktales and oral culture; many scholars and researchers have explored and argued in this subject. However, most of them have not paid much attention to how women narrate themselves in popular culture. Through my reading of the folktales mentioned above, women associate themselves with evil, envy, dishonesty, and other stereotypical traits, as well as ignorance of their strengths and intellectual powers. Contradictorily, women have the opportunity to express themselves, they demonstrate their ability to compete with males in storytelling. However, they tend to belittle their gender, intellectual and social roles in a way that reflects how much they have internalized the idea of female weakness. This concludes my article, and because it was not thorough, I hope that other researchers would conduct more studies on this issue and do their best to expose the stereotyped women. Additionally, one might attempt to approach folktales and oral culture in general and demonstrate the significance of conserving this cultural legacy that has contributed to the human capacity for knowledge and learning.

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