

Mythical Ghouls as Supernatural Aids: An Analytical Discussion of the Ghoul in Libyan Folktales

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Abstract

The belief in supernatural creatures, such as the Ghoul, has existed in Arabic culture many centuries back and even survived Islam. The mythical ghoul is widely spread in Arabic folktales up to our modern time today. It is particularly depicted as a defected female monster that resides in the wilderness and lurks in the dark to prey on male travelers. In general, a ghoul in Arabic culture is an evil being, a vengeful force, a deceiving woman, and a demon used in oral tales to instill fear in children's hearts. This devilish image is, somewhat, contradicted in Libyan folktales; the ghoul takes the form of evil forces and supernatural aids as well. This paper is an analytical discussion of the mythical ghoul in Libyan oral tales. The discussion sheds light on the different, opposite roles the mythical creature plays in the tales. The paper analyzes the role of the ghoul as a supernatural aid and its function in a larger cultural scope. This paper argues that female narrators of Libyan folktales are contributing in the evolution of the ghoul. This is seen in the implementation of the ghoul as a female supernatural aid assisting the protagonist. Such reformation can be argued as a cultural revolution in Libyan society.

Keywords: Myth, Libyan Folktales, Ghoul, Supernatural Aid

1. Introduction

For many centuries, mythical creatures have preoccupied many ancient societies and continue to linger till today's modern cultures. The Ghoul in Arabic folktales is a mythical creature that originated in pre-Islamic Arabia among the Bedouins, a human flesh consuming monster, a popular legend that's name is frequently employed to frighten badly behaved and disobedient children. The ghoul is commonly known in Arabic folktales as a female monster that deceives and lures men, especially travelers, to their doom. This legend lasted throughout Islam and continues to live till our modern time. The ghoul in Libyan folktales is no different than its peers in the other Arabic regions, however, its monstrous and negative image is somewhat arguable. The ghoul is not merely an evil being that frightens humans and consumes them, but also plays a significant role as rescuer and protector, it symbolizes positive and god-like characteristics such as blessings and wisdom. The ghoul in Libyan folktales is, in other words, or as Joseph Campbell (2008) describes it, a supernatural aid.

This paper sheds light on the nature and role of myth in society in general, Libyan tradition in specific. It discusses the main role and depiction of the ghoul in Arabic folktales and how that of Libyan folktales deviates from that general and fixed negative image. According to Campbell, myths are metaphors for deep spiritual truths and social struggles, they are a reflection of our unconscious self. His research on global myths in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* underlines that myths from all over the world carry the same elementary ideas, images, and themes; such as the hero, the monster, the quest, the gods, and the supernatural powers, are all projected and reincarnated everywhere. This paper argues that the ghoul in Libyan folktales plays a larger role in the tales, it is more than just a hideous monster, it is a powerful and supernatural aid that assists the protagonist in his/her quest or endeavor.

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This paper also discusses how this positive power is implemented due to the authority of the female storyteller, such change and alteration in the ghoul's image is a social movement, a correction of how the audience view the female figure and identity in society, and that the ghoul in Libyan folktale, as DeWitt & Hanrahan (2018) in their study on the depiction of Te Fiti in the Disney movie Moana state, "though imperfect in its depiction, sends a clear message to viewers that they can and should imagine new possibilities for women who transgress." (p.12).

2. Myth and Society

The definition and understanding of myth has varied and its debate developed over time; Traditionally, myths are tales of a group of primitive people who share the same culture and beliefs, and these tales are interpretations of the universe around them. Many definitions of the word ranged from stories and tales of unknown origin (Greek mythology), speech acts (Homer in Iliad), framework of a story and the arrangement of its incidents (Aristotle), to a culture's attitude towards life (Campbell). Myths are very complex because they "...can be interpreted from multiple and complementary perspectives" (Morales, 34: 2013). These interpretations can stem from different approaches, such as, psychological or historical. What is unique about myths is that they represent all times and spaces and should be reinterpreted in accordance with the new variables (Morales, 2013). Myths implicitly showcase the psychology, historical experience, elite culture, and everyday life of a society. According to Liszka (1989) "[a] myth is a symbolic idealized representation of social reality to which is it organically related" (Berger, 2013:32). These symbols represent common universal concepts, such as, love, hate, pity, and envy. As the characters of the tales embody these representations, cultural notions and stereotypes are created and manifested into a society's sociological structure.

Greek, Hindu, and Chinese myths use creatures and monsters in their myths and legends prevalent in their culture to symbolize concepts, present ideas, and give life lessons. In Greek mythology, the gods and heroes symbolize righteous morals and justice, as well as specific aspects of life, such as beauty and wisdom, whereas monsters represent negative images; dragons, for example, were notorious for being associated with the devil, fire, hell, and violence. In Asian mythology, however, such as in China, Japan, and Korea, dragons are mystical creatures that protect Buddhism. Unlike Western myths, Chinese myth portrays dragons as powerful and spiritual creatures that are a source of goodness. These varieties in images have great influence in literature and pop culture throughout the globe. The role such mystical creatures play in culture is significant and influential in different ways whether positive or negative. And while Asian and European myths are notorious for the dragon, ghouls occupy Arabic myths as the mythical creature that symbolizes fear, punishment, and death.

3. The Ghoul in Arabic Culture

The belief in supernatural creatures, such as the Ghoul, has existed in Arabic culture many centuries back even before Islam. This mythical creature was first traced back in the Beduins' culture. They believed the ghouls to be devilish creatures residing in the deserts and the wilderness. According to pre-Islamic sources, Beduins believed that "[W]hen the devils wanted to eavesdrop on Heaven, God threw meteors at them, whereupon some were burn, fell into the sea and later turned into crocodiles, while others dropped onto the ground and changed into ghouls". (Al-Rawi, 46: 2009) The pre-islamic ghoul is particularly depicted as a defected female monster that resides in the wilderness and lurks in the dark to prey on male travelers. In some tales the ghoul disguises as a beautiful woman to seduce men for kill, they are known as deceitful creatures that change form to prey on travelers, especially men.

With the arrival of the Islamic religion in the seventh century, several cultural superstitions were changed. However, the belief in the mythical ghoul survived despite its contradiction to Islamic teachings. Arabs and Beduins continued to give life to ghouls through their tales and poetries. These tales then traveled from their original home, the desert, through the nomadic societies further to urban communities. The mythical ghoul became widely spread in Arabic folktales up to our modern time today. In general, a ghoul in Arabic culture is an evil being, a vengeful force, a deceiving woman, and a demon used in oral tales to instill fear in children's hearts (Al-Rawi, 2009). The following section introduces folktale in Libyan culture and its social value, along with a discussion of the ghoul and its social implications in the tales.

4. Libyan Folktale

Folktales are free and have no boundaries; they travel and change through borders and time. You may find the same story narrated differently in various cities or locations, all depending on the story teller's personality and intention. The nature of storytelling in Libya goes back to the lifestyle of the Beduins. The storyteller would set out word to neighboring households that a gathering will be held after dinner for a Khorafa (i.e mythical story).

Stories were usually told at night, whether the audience were adults around a bonfire or children before bedtime. Arabs and Beduins gather for story telling at night due to their hard work in herding, farming, traveling, etc during the day, “[I]t (khorafa) takes the night as its theater or platform...for daytime is for hardship...whereas nighttime is the only time to...embrace one’s imagination and travel to unconditional realms and experience exotic places, times, and creatures.” (Agila, 2008: 27)

The Khorafa was the most common form of entertainment at then. In modern times, this tradition, and despite religious and social change, has been passed down through generations and is still practiced till this day by women in the family. Elderly women, especially grandmothers, have become the prime storytellers in Libyan society. They narrate stories of princesses, sultans, magic, and ghouls to their grandchildren to either entertain them or to pass down life lessons. Besides the elements of sorcery and the supernatural, the ghoul is one of the most prominent story figures in Libyan folktales. Its social implication and role in modern Libyan society are deeply rooted in the culture, and hence, reflect social traditions and beliefs, such as gender roles in society.

4.1. The Ghoul in Libyan Folktale: Analytical Discussion

As in other Arabic cultures, the ghoul in Libyan folktales is strongly present; “The ghoul is an impersonation of evil... it appears in the form of a dog, a man, or as a woman, and sometimes has a name” (Agila, 2008:8). It mostly takes the form of a woman or an old lady that possesses magical powers to either trick the characters into their doom or assists them with wisdom and advice. Libyan folktales specify the gender of the ghoul in the tale as either a male ghoul /gu:l/ (غول) or a she- ghoul, ghoulah, /gu:la:/ (غولة). The she-ghoul has more domination over Libyan folktales than the male ghoul. The discussion below sheds light on both the male ghoul and she-ghoul and their representation in Libyan folktales.

4.2 The Male Ghoul: Antagonist or Villain

Similar to the nature of ghouls in almost all Arabic myths, and in accordance with Al-Rawi (2009), the ghoul in Libyan folktale is a hideous being/demon that lures people for feed, but despite this main similarity, the ghoul in Libyan folktale breaks out of the common generalization that Al-Rawi underlines. In pre-Islamic and post-Islamic myths, the ghoul is a female monster that dwells in the desert and kills travelers, however, in Libyan folktales, it is mostly the male ghoul that is embedded as the antagonist/evil being to kidnap and feed on people. Although, the male ghoul is less common in the folktales, it is always depicted in a demonized way. The male ghoul sometimes appears as an old man that kidnaps little girls or brides to either trap them in a palace or to feed on them in exchange for favors: “‘oh old man!’, she cried, ‘do you have a match?’ ‘I’ll have to bite your pinky finger first’ replied the ghoul... and so the little girl ran back home with the match and a bleeding hand.”² The male ghoul presents an obstacle and/or a conflict with the protagonist. This is in parallel with Al-Rawi’s argument on the general description of the ghoul in classic and modern Arabic myths. However, not every antagonist is a villain, some antagonists act as aids to the protagonist. In several Libyan folktales, the fixed image of the ghoul as being evil is tampered with in many cases with the she-ghoul. The she- ghoul takes a more positive and contributive role in the tales.

4.3 The She-Ghoul: A Supernatural Aid

According to Campbell “the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass.” (2008: 57), the supernatural aid can be a crone, an old man, a wizard, or a fairy godmother. These figures provide their protagonists with words of wisdom, tools, weapons with supernatural powers, or magic to fulfill their journeys and their destinies. The element of supernatural aid in Libyan folktale is strongly present, however, and unlike western myths, the supernatural character does not necessarily provide means to complete a quest, but rather to reward and assist with struggles facing the protagonist. It is a matter of balance on the scale of morality. The journey of the protagonist in Libyan folktale is more of a moral one, a test of kindness towards the abnormal. This moral test is parallel to the sacred texts, whether pre-islamic or islamic, and social traditions. It is a mirror image of our psychology and humanity. Some supernatural aids come in the form of heavenly gifts and miracles, such narratives may be pre-islamic and survived through modern times despite their contradictory nature with Islamic teachings³.

² From the folktale *The Child Eater*, gathered by author from storyteller.

³ Super natural powers in Islam are solely to the Supreme, Allah.

While supernatural aids may take the form of gods in Greek myths, fairy godmothers in the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, or a Jedi Master in George Lucas' Star Wars Epic, in Libyan folktale this aid comes from the least expected figures/characters in the tales, the antagonist, or in other words, the beastly creature: the she-ghoul (ghouleh). According to Al-Rawi (2009), some ghouls, especially ghoulehs, engage in friendly relationships with the protagonists, "a ghouleh helps... human beings by guiding them in order that they might reach their goals." (2009: 297), Al-Rawi's argument was made based on a small collection of Arabic folktales, such as, the Egyptian tale *The Nightingale that Shrieked*. The ghouleh in Libyan Folktale, however, stands in a more grey area, that is, its role in the stories is mostly dependent on the protagonist's character and actions, "protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just bend, the unfamiliar features of the world. One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear." (Campbell, 2008: 59). The nature of such supernatural aid ranges from miracle gifts and treasures, to health, peace and tranquility.

4.3.1 Miracle Gifts

Throughout history myths carry stories of miracle powers and answers to the prayers of the protagonists. These mythical miracles are a reflection of humans' belief in a supreme being or power. Mythical creatures and gods, whether in myths from Greece or the far east of Asia, possessed magical abilities to bring heavenly gifts to the protagonist. The she-ghoul in Libyan folktale practices such powers. In one tale, a woman is abused and beaten daily by her husband for not bearing children. One day, an old woman knocks on her door asking for water to quench her thirst. The wife offers the stranger water and hospitality, shares her suffering with the stranger, and was rewarded with a new born child for her kindness. In *The She-Ghoul and The Beauty*, the she-ghoul casts a curse on the protagonist, prohibiting her from marrying the Sultan's son. Later in the tale, the mythical creature shows empathy towards the female protagonist by giving her back her beauty and youth. Despite the fact that the she-ghoul was the evil force in the tale, her powers were finally implemented to serve the protagonist as a supernatural aid.

The fulfillment of the protagonist's wish for a child and the restoration of the young woman's beauty and youth are examples of godly-like powers that resemble those of the gods in Greek mythology. These gods connote not only supernatural characteristics, but also poses the power to change/alter fate positively in the tales. Thus, we see the she-ghoul in Libyan folktale playing the role of a supernatural aid to assist the protagonist, breaking by that the stereotype of being solely the anti-force that prohibits the protagonist from reaching his/her goal.

4.3.2 Rewards

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist in Libyan folktale is tested in his/her morality and kindness towards the unfamiliar and hideous creatures. When faced with a test of kindness, the she-ghoul rewards those who pass the test with their warm hearts and patience and punishes those who fail to accept the nature of the ghoul. In the Henna tale the she-ghoul tests two housewives' compassion and kindness towards her hideous looks and hairy hands when asked them to dye her hands with henna. The first housewife agreed showing no feelings of repulse or disgust and was rewarded the next day with golden coins. The other housewife, out of jealousy and greed, refused to fulfill the ghoul's request " 'How am I supposed to dye such hideous hands!!? Go away!'" the she-ghoul left her a sack full of snakes as a punishment for her cruelty. Punishment and reward empowers the she-ghoul to act as the social scale for humans, to reward their kindness and punish for their negative disposition.

4.3.3 Peace and Tranquility

Another form of aid or reward is giving peace in times of instability and fear. In one folktale a house is haunted by a ghoul, causing fear to the residents. The housewife, who is a widow living with her children, decides to face the she-ghoul and convince her to leave the residence. The she-ghoul confided in her and shared her sorrow " "he [the she-ghoul's husband] killed me despite the pain I endured and the tears I shed for him" ". The widow opened her heart to the she-ghoul and sympathized with her; the next morning the she-ghoul promised the widow to never disturb her peace and left the household "the widow woke up the next day finding the house spotless clean!". In another tale, the she-ghoul punishes a husband who physically abused his wife " "Where do I start? 'Start with my fingers that pinched my wife, then eat my leg that kicked her" ", this punishment, despite depicting the she-ghoul as an evil monster, shows, connotatively, how it aids into bringing justice and peace to the unequal dynamic between women and men in the society.

5. Social Context of the Ghoul in Libyan Society

Myths and folktales may be woven with strings of imagination and irrationality, but these stories stem from the realities of their cultures. As ghouls are mythical creatures, they represent social context and signify cultural norms in society. Ghouls in Libyan folktale implement fear and punishment, their supernatural powers to shape-shift and provide heavenly gifts, and even cure illness, connote the godly powers of reward and punishment, as in Greek mythology. They are a mirror reflection of humans' nature, whether it is greed, grudge, or love and compassion. Human nature is impelled by the philosophical notion that good intentions and actions are rewarded in life and the afterlife, whereas bad intention leads to negative or destructive consequences.

Myths have complex cultural contexts and thus cannot be interpreted from a 'univocal' way but rather "[It] comes to be present at all times and in all spaces, it must be reinterpreted in terms of new variables." (Morales, 2013: 34). Through myths and folktales we communicate struggles, teach lessons, and fight stereotypes and social oppression. Social injustice for women is among these struggles, our literature and popular culture feed in negative perceptions, "both artists and their audiences are fascinated by the monstrous female and the potential she possesses, even if ultimately, the patriarchal ideology demands her defeat, silence, and punishment." (DeWitt & Hanrahan, 2: 2018). Thus, with the depiction of the female figure in a negative image in most traditional Arabic folktales, the role of she-ghoul in Libyan folktale ought to be interpreted through a social lens to unfold and understand what is communicated to us as the audience, what lessons are to be learned, and what are the storytellers telling us.

5.1 Power of the Storyteller

As humans, our minds and imagination travel boundlessly, contradicting our physical capacities and what nature dictates. Myths, since ancient times, have created a space in man's mind to experience the unthinkable, to travel the unreachable, and to pass down messages and moral lessons from the strangers who have experienced life before us. The storytelling of myth is not merely a social act of entertainment among groups of society, but a heritage of humanity and a philosophical way of life. It is a sense through which we break governing traditions forced by our own society. The power of myth is undeniably captivating, and its value is due to its instructive nature and ability to resist social order informed by cultural traditions. Composed by the narrator, mythical tales are bound to the storyteller's authority and design. The moral message is communicated through the tale to the audience by his/her moral intentions.

Storytellings and folktales are more than just a tradition, they are a social movement, a reformation, and sometimes a rehabilitation, of unjust social practices such as gender discrimination. From what is gathered from the Libyan folktales, the storytellers are redirecting society's attitude towards the female figure in the tales. This story technique is similar to that of Shazad in the tales of 1001 Nights. Shahrazad designed her master plan to save her life by entertaining Sultan Shahrayar with a tale every night. Her wit and powerful art of storytelling spared her life and tamed Shahrayar's violent methods toward women. Agila compares the female storyteller in Libya as the 'master of storytelling', he argues that this mastery of art could be her way to "...compensate for her absent authority in a male society, as the works of Shahrazad." (Agila, 2008: 28).

6. Conclusion

In the light of Campbell's theory of heroes and supernatural aids in myths, the she-ghoul in Libyan folktales seems to take a rather more heroic role than an evil/antagonist one. Unlike its traditional and stereotypical image in Arabic myths, it is embedded with supernatural and extraordinary powers that enable her to alter fates and destinies for the protagonists. Although the story structure and plot are different than those of Western and far Eastern myths, for example the protagonist is not set on a journey, the she -ghoul stands in a grey area, where it is not just a demolish cannibal creature that poses fear in the dessert, but also an angel, a witch, a wise woman, a supernatural aid, and sometimes acts as a tool of God. This transformation, though not necessarily radical, but somewhat gradual and connotatively important.

Although it is almost difficult to pin point the time in which these tales were born, some folktales carry historical landmarks within them that help estimate the time frame of such tales and/or, theorize about the source of the evil female figure in Libyan folktales. One particular tale comes to mind, that is the tale of Lamia. This tale is known among the Berbers, the Amazigh, of Libya. The tale was inherited from the Greek myths. The story goes that Lamia was the daughter of Poseidon and queen of Libya. Lamia was a beautiful woman who then became a child-eating monster after her children were killed by Hera, Zeus' wife, after learning about her husband's love for Lamia.

From such inherited Greek myths, one can understand the root of the negative and monstrous image of the female figure in Libyan folktales, however, the characteristics of this monster, in our case the she-ghoul, are different and somewhat positive. The supernatural powers given to the she-ghoul to aid the protagonists by the female storyteller indicate a change and alteration of the stereotypical perception of the creature. As such tales are passed down by women in Libyan societies, we can conclude that this change in image is a social revolution against gender undermining. It is a call for social reformation through the platform of storytelling, a channel “binding the teller and the audience into a common understanding of community identity” (DeWitt & Hanrahan, 12: 2018).

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