

# Folk Literature and Culture: A Study of Arabian Culture through Selected Stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*

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## Abstract

The paper talks about Folk Literature and how it is influenced by the culture of a society. It states how culture is related to each aspect of a society. The paper's focus is on the culture of Arabia and how it influenced the narration of the folktales of Arabia. This paper is a thematic study of Arabian Culture and its influence on Arabian Folktales.

Key words: Culture, Folktales, Society, Superstition.

## Introduction

Literature used to be classified into 'refined literature' and 'popular literature.' Today this earlier classification of literature has evolved into that of 'elite literature,' 'popular literature' and 'folk literature.' (Huang 23). Folk Literature is the Literature which brings out the folktales narrated by the people who lived in the earlier time. Folktales are stories told in the oral tradition. McCabe's point is that all cultures tell stories, though the manner in which the stories are told can differ (McCabe, 1997). In Wu et al's words, according to folklorist William Bascom, folktales have four purposes: (1) to let people escape from society, (2) to validate and justify culture, (3) to reinforce morals and values, and (4) to apply social pressure. (Wu et al 5113). The online dictionary defines folk as "The common people of a society or

region considered as the representatives of a traditional way of life and especially as the originators or carriers of the customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture” and their culture may be referred to as folk culture (Jaimini and Raghav 2). They are narrated orally from generation to generation but now have been compiled in the Digital form. They reflect the culture, society, religious and superstitious beliefs of the narrators. They depict the Historical, Religious, and Cultural Background of the narrator. Folktales are characterized by strong national spirits and local colours, as they express the thoughts, emotions and aesthetic taste of general public, and hence they are a kind of anonymous and non-personalized product of literature. (Huang 24).

Folktales come from countries all around the world. The countries well known for their collections of folktales are Arabia, India, China, Germany, Britain, Africa etc. They are the tools through which a person can understand a particular country’s beliefs, culture, and practices. Folklore is an inseparable part of culture but the relationship between folklore and dominant culture is not very simple because folklore or folk traditions not only reflect the culture of their folk and are used as tools to emphasize and reinforce existing power equations but also question dominant social ideologies (Jaimini and Raghav 2). Through them, a person can understand about the religion, belief and cultural practices of a particular country.

### **Arabian Culture**

Tai notes that Edward B. Tylor (1877) states, culture is a unified totality, “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tai 2). Cultural identity is recognized and determined through the interplay of different identifying elements such as location, language, ethnicity, myths, religious culture, nations, history, art and traditions (such as songs, traditional costumes, dietary habits) that make up the national cultural heritage (P. Stavrou 527). Obeidat et al note Hofstede’s words are that National Culture is the collective mental programming of the people of any particular nationality (Obeidat et al. 513). Saudi Arabia, well known for its oil wealth, is abundant in history and culture. It includes seven Arab countries: Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Hofstede considered it one of the countries where power of the superiors and loyalty of the subordinate are present. (Obeidat et al.). This can be seen in *One Thousand and One Nights*, where King Sharyar’s requests are fulfilled by his people.

The people of Arabia are very religious, as they consider God to be the centre of their lives. Islamic value system requires a commitment to God and a belief that God is ubiquitous even in material work. Obeidat et al note Herbig and Dunphy, 1998's argument that "Muslims believe that time is, to a certain extent, controlled by God and nothing happens until God wills for it to happen" (Obeidat et al.515). They also had superstitious beliefs, which chiefly comprised their belief in Jinns. Belief in the existence of Jinns or Genii is general amongst Moslems, and it is orthodox that it should be so, for their Prophet Muhammad was a sincere believer in them. Chapter 72 of the Koran is called "Surah of the Jinns," and he tells of their creation from smokeless fire. (Codrington 123)

### **The Arabian Nights**

The Arabian Folktales are chiefly compiled in *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is an embedded narrative, or story within a story technique where the general story is narrated by an unknown narrator, and the stories are told by Scheherazade. The stories are introduced in a variety of ways, including as answers to questions raised in previous tales. It is a collection of Middle Eastern folktales compiled in the Arabic language during the Islamic Golden Age. It is often known in English as *The Arabian Nights*, from the first English-language edition (c. 1706–1721), which rendered the title as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. It has many translated formats in the English Language. The paper uses selected stories from the translated version of Hussain Haddawy as its primary text.

### **Hypothesis**

The paper postulates the hypothesis whether folktales are inspired by the culture and beliefs of a society. The chief focus of the paper is on Arabian culture and its influence on *The Arabian Nights*.

### **Society and Religious beliefs**

*Arabian Nights* reveals Arabian culture through its characters, the roles of animals, social hierarchies, religious beliefs, gender discrimination, and more. Here is a deep analysis of Arabian culture through the selected stories in *Arabian Nights*. It not only depicts Arabian culture but also reveals the influence of borrowed cultures, including that of India, as the tales are told by people from various countries. Thus, Muhannad Salhi says that the tales were written by different hands and seem to have accrued over the centuries, drawing from the cultural traditions of the Middle East, as well as

from those of the various regions with which the Middle East had been in contact through trade, travel, invasions, or war, over the centuries. The tales were then Arabized and adapted for a Middle Eastern and Islamic audience. (Salhi)

In "The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey," the ox listens to the advice given by the donkey. This exchange of advice between the donkey and the ox highlights the cultural value of wisdom and practice. As in many other cultures, one of the traditional values in Arabia is to respect and obey the advice of elders. To honour this wisdom, the ox listens to the donkey's counsel and follows it. The donkey advises the ox to pretend to be ill to escape the daily ploughing duties. The less experienced ox respects this advice, pretends to be ill, and avoids the work. The donkey advises as thus:

When the ploughman takes you back and ties you to the trough, you go on butting and beating with your horns, kicking with your hoofs, and bellowing for the beans, until they toss them to you; then you begin to eat. Next time, when they bring them to you, don't eat or even touch them, but smell them, then draw back and lie down on the hay and straw. If you do this, life will be better and kinder to you, and you will find relief. (Haddawy 43)

The hierarchical relationship between humans and animals reflects Arabian culture. The merchant and the ploughman treat the animals as their servants, using the ox and donkey for agricultural and transportation work. They force the animals to do their tasks, which leads the ox to try to escape from the ploughing work. For this reason, the ox seeks advice from the donkey.

The hierarchical power of the king vividly reflects the culture. Once the king gives an order, the people obey it without question. At the beginning of this folktale, the king is betrayed by his wife and, in a fit of rage, kills her immediately, disregarding the law, as no one dares to challenge the king. After this, King Shahrivar loses trust in women entirely. He commands his Vizier to arrange a new bride for him every day, only to have her executed at the end of the day. He swears that he would "marry for one night only and kill the woman the next morning, in order to save himself from the wickedness and cunning of women." (Haddawy 41). Although the Vizier realizes that this is a sinful act, he complies because it is the king's order. He even sends his own daughter to be the king's bride. He said to his daughter "If I give you to him, he will sleep with you for one night and will ask me to put you to death the next morning, and I shall have to do it, since I cannot disobey him." (Haddawy 42). In Arabian culture, when the king gives a command, the people are expected to obey without question.

The king's function was to initiate and sponsor major public works. (Beeston 263). The King had superior power in the Arabian Society, as every authority and power lay in his hands. This power

can be seen in King Shahzaman and King Shahryar's lives. They murder anyone whom they see as a threat to existence. They both kill black slaves who had illicit relationships with their respective wives. They do it on their own will and never consult anyone else. When King Sharyar puts forth the law that young virgins must be brought to him every night and must be murdered the next day, the Vizier complies to it. He is elder to the King in age but is never able to tell the king about his mistake and bows to his command. He yields his own daughter Shahrazd to the king as the King's command is greater than their lives.

"Muslims believe that time is, to a certain extent, controlled by God and nothing happens until God wills for it to happen" (Obeidat et al.515). The lives of the Arabs revolve around their God Allah. No matter what they do, they never forget to give him their reverence. The religious belief is strongly emphasized in *The Arabian Nights*. From the past to the present, it is evident that Muslims hold strong faith in their religious beliefs. The narrators of the folktales could have been very religious as they have mentioned King Solomon in "The Fisherman and the Demon." The story revolves around a poor fisherman and his unwavering faith in God. He begins his fishing with a prayer. On his first attempt, he catches a dead donkey, yet he does not lose faith in God and recites some verses:

O you who brave the danger in the dark,  
Reduce your toil, for gain is not in work.  
Look at the fisherman who labors at his trade,  
As the stars in the night their orbits make, (Haddawy 66).

On his second attempt, he retrieves mud and sand, but his belief remains steadfast. On the third try, he pulls up broken bones and bottles. Still, he raises his face to heaven in prayer. Finally, on the fourth attempt, he pulls up a jar from which a demon emerges. The demon threatens to kill him, but the fisherman replies that "Forgive me, and God will grant you forgiveness. Destroy me, and God will inflict on you one who will destroy you." (Haddawy 71). Even though God does not answer his prayers directly during his four attempts, the fisherman does not lose faith, believing that God will ultimately protect him and punish those who seek to harm him.

The importance of God can be seen in "The Story of the Merchant and the Demon." The narrator mentions that the merchant travelled under the care of God. This clearly indicates their complete belief in God and his care. The story shows that demons too revere God, as the demon says thus: "By God, I must kill you..." (Haddawy 51). Throughout their conversation the merchant and the

demon revere God through their vows and promises. This clearly indicates the reflection of Arabian Beliefs in Folktales.

### **Superstitious Beliefs**

The superstitions in “The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey” are deeply rooted in the idea that animals can harbour and bestow mystical knowledge of wisdom and merchants. These elements enrich the story with a mixture of humour and moral teachings while reflecting a cultural fascination with the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds. The story ultimately uses these superstitions to teach a lesson not just for entertainment but with these superstitious elements serving to reinforce social norms and moral values such as humility, the consequences of deceit and the natural order of life. This thematic exploration of superstition ultimately emphasizes the tension between rational thought and irrational belief, allowing readers to engage with deeper moral quandaries presented within the tales (Henderson L et al.).

In “The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey,” the ox and donkey's ability to communicate underscores a superstitious belief system where animals are seen to hold secret wisdom and personalities like those of humans. The ox's expression of sorrow over his struggles and the donkey's clever suggestions serve as a supernatural mechanism to reveal human-like feelings in animals. The ox says to the donkey, “Watchful one, I hope that you are enjoying the comfort and the service you are getting. ... I, on the contrary, am taken out to plow in the middle of the night. ... My sides are lacerated, and my neck is flayed.” (Haddaway 43). The merchant possesses the ability to comprehend the language of animals, which is a superstitious aspect rooted in folklore traditions. However, the condition that he must not disclose this secret to anyone, as doing so would result in his death highlights its supernatural nature as thus: “This merchant was taught the language of the beasts, on condition that if he revealed his secret to anyone, he would die.” (Haddaway 43). The story likely served as a moral allegory, using the animals' ability to speak as a device to convey lessons about hard work, deception, and the consequences of one's actions. As these stories convey the weight of superstition, they simultaneously critique and affirm the societal expectations imposed on individuals, ultimately highlighting the dual role of superstition as both guidance and constraint in human affairs (Damrosch D).

“The Tale of Merchant and his Wife” talks about miscalculation and a penitent woman. The narrative revolves around the idea that the merchant possesses the supernatural ability to comprehend the secret language of animals, an ability he must keep hidden, as revealing it would result in his death. Haddaway speaks about this through the following lines: “I cannot tell you. I am afraid to disclose the

secret conversation of the animals” (Haddawy 46). The merchant is so concerned that he will die soon that he almost gives in to his wife’s demands. The donkey, ox, rooster, and dog, however, end up saving him with their counsel. In this regard, the rooster admits, “He should take an oak branch, push her into a room, lock the door, and fall on her with the stick... until she cries out, ‘I no longer want you to tell me or explain anything.’” (Haddawy 47). The intertwined fates of these characters emphasize how deeply superstitions can influence human behaviour and societal dynamics (Jurafsky D).

Ultimately, the reliance on superstition in *The Arabian Nights* not only enriches the narrative but also offers profound insights into the cultural psyche of the era. It highlights how deeply rooted beliefs shape human experiences and interactions within society (Barnes-Brown A et al.). In “The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon,” a poor fisherman can throw his net into the sea only four times every day. One day, his first three cast brings him nothing but trash and fragments of pottery, a big pot of dirt, and a dead donkey. He makes a desperate attempt at the fourth and last time, pulling up a heavy, sealed brass jar with a lead stopper bearing King Solomon’s seal. The fisherman opens the jar in curiosity. A huge cloud of smoke emerges and transforms into a terrible demon. The transformation from smoke into a towering demon emphasizes its supernatural powers as thus: “The smoke kept rising...then it gathered and took shape, and suddenly it shook, and there stood a demon, with his feet on the ground and his head in the clouds.” (Haddawy 69).

The demon recounts its tale of imprisonment. After being imprisoned for generations, the demon is released and reveals his intention to murder the fisherman. He reveals that King Solomon had put him in the jar as a punishment for his misbehaviour a long time ago as thus: “I, together with the giant Sakhr, rebelled against the prophet Solomon... He invoked God to protect him from me and my looks... called for this brass jar, confined me inside, and sealed it with a lead seal on which he imprinted God’s Almighty name.” (Haddawy 70). The devil had promised to reward whoever liberated him during the first 100 years of his confinement and then harm those who freed him thereafter. “During the first hundred years of my imprisonment, I swore that I would reward whoever set me free with wealth. During the second hundred years, I swore to grant him three wishes. During the third, I swore to make him a king. But in the fourth hundred years, I swore to kill whoever set me free.” (Haddawy 70). The fisherman pleads for his life. However, the demon remains unmoved. Despite the demon’s extraordinary might, the fisherman deceives him. To demonstrate the power of human intelligence over supernatural forces, the fisherman deceives the demon into demonstrating his ability to fit back into the jar before sealing him inside once more. “The demon shook himself and turned into smoke...then gathered and began to enter the jar.” (Haddawy 72). The fisherman quickly seals the jar, trapping the

demon once more. The fisherman warns the demon saying “Spare me, and God will spare you. Destroy me, and God will destroy you.” (Haddawy 73). Witches are also mentioned in the narration of *The Arabian Nights*, chiefly in “The First Old Man’s Tale,” and “The Second Old Man’s Tale.” It is depicted that it is a learned skill, as the wives in both the stories have studied to become witches. They use their spell to transform humans into animals and save their beloveds from death. Thus, *The Arabian Nights* depicts the belief of the Arabic society in Demons, Jinns and Witches.

### Conclusion

As Jamini and Raghav state, “Both social space and folk literature affect and mould each other. What happens in social space gets reflected in folk literature and what folk literature depicts becomes part of social space.” (Jaimini and Raghav 188). The paper highlights how folktales are influenced by the culture and beliefs of a society. The cultural practices as well as the religious and superstitious aspects rise in folktales due to the culture of a society. The selected stories from *The Arabian Nights* depict the Society of Ancient Arabia, the people’s belief in God and in demons and witches. The paper depicts Arabian culture and its use in *The Arabian Nights* beautifully. Thus, the hypothesis is answered in the paper.

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