



## THE HUMANIZATION OF FISH IN ARABIC FAIRY TALES: A TOTEM SURVIVALS

---

**Mohamed JOULI\***

Ernest Jones in his *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis: Essays in Folklore, Anthropology and Religion* (1951) points out that the phenomena studied in folklore relate for the most part to simple or even lowly themes. The same is true a *fortiori* of the unconscious mind. In Folklore we have to do with the simple wishes and fears of the people and very little with elaborate philosophical, spiritual or artistic preoccupations. We find the people concerned with such matters as the preservation of health, the warding off of danger and death, the hopes of fortune and the desire for happy marriage and the blessing of children. The unconscious is similarly engrossed with such topics and in even more primitive terms... the first is that it is mainly concerned with the themes of *birth, love and death* (Jones, 1951: 13).

Indeed the human sea Folklore in general, the arabic see folklore in particular as I could say is engrossed as Jones pointed out with this three themes.

Regarding birth, conception from eating fish or the Motif of having a child by eating fish is mentioned by Stith Thompson in his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1935: 310). More than that not only a childless woman could gets pregnant by eating the fish of fertility as we observe in a such Arabic folk fairy tale but, the man himself who is in general the husband of a childless woman can be pregnant too in another humoristic special popular genre of tales in oral Arabic culture

Unlike a several Arabic versions of this tale where the husband of a childless woman become pregnant in place of his wife by eating an egg, or an apple in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, in a distinguished version of this tale from Oman the husband of childless wife got pregnant by eating a fish which is called “sadda” in this country ( the scientific name of this species of fish is *Euthynnus*) (Fatima bint Qalam ibn Khamis al-hannai, 2006).

---

\* Prof. Dr. - Manouba University, Faculty of Literature – TUNISIA



One again I would like to call attention to Stith Thompson, who emphasizes the presence of this tale in international folklore. He made a note: (H 791) about a Riddle in which the heroin said: “a fish was my mother, a man was my mother.” relate for the topic of the Man who eats magic fish and becomes pregnant, a girl is taken from his knee (Thompson, 1935: 316).

Nevertheless, I would like to focus in this paper on an Arabic tale for which we find in the Arabic World a multiple versions which have the same contents, and differ only in dialects and some parts such as the titles .In this tale, an orphan girl shares the heroicness with a fish that plays the role of the mother in her life in the absence of her real mother.

This tale is known in some countries by different titles: “*Bint Al-Hawwat*” (The fisherman’s daughter) in Tunisia, “*Fasijrah*” in Qatar, and “*Badiha*” which is the name of a fish in Emirates in its urban version [The scientific name of this this species of fish is Gerres] or “*Bint Al-Shabbik*” in the Eastern Region or “*Warda Bint Al-Sammak*” in Al Ain City (Maryam Juma’a Faraj, 2015: 34-35).

All these versions, in their Gulf and or in their North African (Magrib) dialects, are in consistent with the persecution of the fisherman’s wife for his orphan daughter. One day, the father comes home from fishing, carrying fish, so his wife orders his orphan daughter to go to the sea to clean and peel them or she uses to assign to her with the hardest and most arduous tasks. Here, the Gulf and North African versions give an example of these arduous actions, which is represented in the milling of barley, as in the Tunisian version or its purification, i.e. separating it from wheat or grain of wheat after mixing them deliberately, as in the Qatari narration “*Fasijrah*” (Mohamed Talib Douik, 1984: 133) and the Emirati narration “*Bint Al-Shabik*”.

However, some narrations do not identify the species of the fish, and other Emirati narrations identify the name and species of the fish «*Badiha*», some of these go so far as to name whole the tale by the name of this fish.

When the orphan daughter is about to use the knife to clean and peel the fish says in the Tunisian narration as “Please release me, and you will find me at the time of distress”, in the Emirati narration as “Please release me, and I will satisfy all your desires” or “Please do not cut me, and I will give you whatever you want”, and in the Qatari narration as “Please release me, and I will give you satisfy”. Then, she releases the fish.

When her stepmother, who counts the fish one by one, realizes that there was a missed fish, she gets angry and decides to punish her husband’s daughter for her deed. Whereas the Emirati and Qatari versions state that the stepmother punishes the poor girl by depriving her of lunch and for wasting a fish, the Tunisian version emphasizes her cruelty, describing her as she beats



the girl severely and prepares lunch for her by cooing a fish after soaking it more than necessary, and orders her to eat it before forcing her again to mill barley, which is hard work that girls of her age cannot do. The girl becomes thirsty because the salt which she has eaten, then she cries bitterly. The fish, which the girl has released, comes and asks the girl a kind tone “Why are you crying, Warda?” So, she tells it her story with her stepmother. The fish gives the girl a braid and requests from her to throw off one hair whenever she needed her help. Then, the fish prays saying “Warda, may Allah make your face beautiful like a rose, and your hair like a palm tree (i.e. like a palm leaf), and whoever sees you opens his/her mouth stunned because of your beauty”.

In contrast to the lack of detail in describing the punishment of the stepmother for the orphan girl for her deed, and depriving her [the orphan girl] of lunch compared to the Tunisian version, the Gulf narration highlights how the fish satisfies the girl with delicious foods, once she complains to it that her stepmother starves her. Every day, the girl finds on the seashore a plate covered with the best food twice a day at lunch and at dinner, and she eats them happy and goes home with joy and happiness, (“Badiha” in *Folktales of UAE*, p. 35) or the fish itself comes and gives her a meat stick (“Bint Al-Sammak” in *Folktales of UAE*, p. 38), as in two Emirati versions. On the other hand, in “Fasijrah”, the Qatari version, the girl goes to the seashore and calls out to the fish “Oh mother, I am hungry, I need lunch», then the fish comes from the sea and brings her bread and fish” (“Fasijrah” in *Folktales of Qatar*, Vol 2, p. 133).

When she throws a hair from the braid that the fish have prepared for her, the Tunisian Warda becomes beautiful as a rose: a beautiful rose, as if all beauty is created in her, that raises her stepmother's anger and jealousy, so she beats her as usual. The evil stepmother realizes that there is a secret in the matter, and that this secret is related to the sea and fish. So, she orders her daughter Hafsa to go to the sea and wash the fish there, in the hope that she would become as beautiful as her stepdaughter. When she is about to wash the fish, happens to her what happened to Warda, the fish says to her “Please release me, and you will find me at the time of distress”, but Hafsa, unlike Warda, do not release it, so the fish raises its voice praying and saying “May Allah makes your face like thorns, your flesh like the trunk of a palm tree, and your stature like a palm tree, and whoever touches you be pricked (as if she picks him/her by pins), and your mouth fumes and does not speak properly, and your tongue does not come out of what is except what is shameful”. Her mother comes and finds her terrifying and reprehensible because of her excessive length, folds in two, and mutters meaningless words.

This part is not existed in the Arabic Gulf versions, which prefer that the daughter of the stepmother appears in a terrifying and disgusting



appearance at the end of the tale, when her husband discovers the extent of her dirt and filth in the night of the wedding, so he punishes her and her mother with divorce. Society attributes this abject failure to the mother more than her daughter, considering her inability to raise her daughter in a good way and provide her with valuable and wise advice that makes her maintains husband in all circumstances and conditions.

However, the Gulf versions prefer that the punishment be psychological rather than physical, the Tunisian version prefers physical punishment in its extreme manifestations: death penalty. All of these Arabic versions of the tales of the orphan girl and the fish are under the umbrella of the international model of the “Cinderella” story which becomes famous in its European and Western narration in all parts of the world, especially after transforming it into a representational film directed at children, broadcast by television channels and programs dedicated to.

The humanization of fish in this tale and the animal in general that is benefited from in fairy tales, the hero, who is usually an orphan bad treated or excluded from human society, lost and homeless in the forests, had drawn the attention of the Russian scientist Vladimir Propp, so he devotes himself to understanding and analyzing him in the human heritage. Propp acknowledges that giving animals that benefits human is a complex subject in folktales and should not be taken lightly and linked to the residues of old beliefs that are rooted in different human cultures.

It is natural that this giving is influenced by the nature of the culture in which the tale is formed and from which it derives its material. Propp notes that in some tales, different kinds of animals seem to return a favor to the hero, so they make themselves owe to him/her. For example, an animal gives a human a magic incantation enables him to get out of an ordeal and becomes, accordingly, an aid to his salvation. “All of us - Propp says - evoke the case of the hero while he/she is lost in a forest and starving, then a locust, hedgehog or bird intercepts him/her, then he/she is about to kill it in order to prepare food for himself/herself, then he/she sees a hawk fly over him/her and directs a bow at it saying: Hawk, I will kill you and eat you uncooked. The hawk replies: “Don't eat me and you will find me a supporter in times of distress. Do not eat the animals that will stand in your rugged and perilous way because you will find them as your support when needed.” (“Fasijrah” in *Folktales of Qatar*, Vol 2, p. 133.) What the hawk says on the tongue of Prop, according to the Russian tale, is similar to what the fish says to the orphan girl in the tale of “the fisherman’s daughter”, which is in several Arabic dialects from one country to another, as when she is about to peel or braid it upon the order of her stepmother, who uses to a persecute her and assign her with hard works.



Propp (1983: 201) explains the stop of harming animals that later come to the hero's aid, and the stop of eating their flesh with totemic residues.

This totemic belief<sup>1</sup>, according to Propp, takes another form with the transformation of human from a primitive lifestyle to a life of stability and an agricultural lifestyle. The ancient primitive totemic equivocation between human and animal is compensated by the friendship between them in societies that have come a long way in civilizing, a friendship that is based on harmony and cooperation between them and the compassion of one for the other. In some tribes, as Propp points out, this relationship is attributed to the ancestor, the founder of the tribe, and is explained by the fact that he was in a past time when he was in dire need of someone to help him and save him from certain doom. He finds his way in a sacred animal that saves him from an imminent danger. According to Propp, there are many tales about this relationship, and he takes, for example, a tale about ancestor, the founder of the Tah tribe in a forest, who was very hungry and thirsty until he was about to die. In this case, an animal comes to him and leads him to a spring of water to drink from, or shows him the way through which he returns to his family and clan, or that the founder ancestor is fleeing from his enemies, they follow his steps to arrest him and abuse him, then a river intercepts him on the way of his escape, which makes it impossible for him to flee, but in this case he is confused about his matter, he may despair of survival, a huge fish comes out for him from the river and carries him on its back to the other bank and saves him from his enemies.

After discussing the reasons that explain the intimate relationship between humans and animals in fairy tales, Propp concludes that in Africa the totemic relationship appears in the best way and better than it is in European fairy tales because the phenomenon of totemism, according to his opinion, is still vibrant in the cultures of African peoples, south of the desert, in his era, i.e. in the first half of the last century. From Propp's point of view, these tales are very important because they describe the way in which human and animals make a covenant or agreement of cooperation between them, which he considers the pole of the millstone around which totemism revolves.

In some other tales, the bird takes on the task of taking an abandoned baby to its nest, and raising him until he grows up, matures, and becomes strong. Undertaking the task of taking the hero from one place to another, and carries him to distant places by the bird is usual in fairy tales. Propp is concerned about him and brings him back to the image that man formed in his

---

<sup>1</sup> About the concept of the Totem, which has its roots in the beliefs of the primitive human holds a kinship relationship with an animal that refuses to eat it because he believes that it protects him from harm and helps him when needed: See: (Métais, 1951).



mind from the bird and its relationship to distant places, especially seas and rivers (Propp, 1983: 270), noting at the same time that this perception of the bird is only found in the culture of the peoples who live on coasts. Thinking to the bird and contemplating it excessively when it crosses seas, these peoples are able to create boats, therefore, in the arts of some peoples, the bird is drawn in the form of a boat (Propp, 1983: 270-271). Propp adds, drawing our attention to the fact that we hardly find the bird in the tales of the peoples of Central Africa, who are far from coasts, but it is present in the fairy tales in America and in the countries that lie on the banks of the Indian Ocean and then in the fairy tales in the Arab countries that are located on the coasts of seas; Propp does not mention them because he apparently do not know their cultures (Propp, 1983: 272-273).

In conclusion, the humanization of fish in Arabic folktales which is could be explained by totem survivals relates not only the intimate relationship between human being and animals, but also the nature in general: Trees and plants are humanized too in order to make the word livable and less aggressive.

## REFERENCES

- Douik, M. T. (1984). "Fasijrah" in *Folktales of Qatar*. (in Arabic), 133, Doha: Center of the popular Heitage of the Countries of Arabic Golf.
- Fatima bint Qalam ibn Khamis al-hannai (2006). *My Grand Mother Told Me*. (in Arabic), Oman: Ministry of Heritage and Culture.
- Jones, E. (1951). *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis: Essays in Folklore, Anthropology and Religion*, Vol II, London, The Hogarth Press LTD,
- Maryam Juma'a Faraj (2015). *The folktales in UAE: An Approach between the Local and the Global*. (In Arabic), Hamdan Bin Mohammed Heritage Center.
- Métais, P. (1951). Essai sur la Signification du terme "totem". in *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, 83-119, Année.
- Propp, W. (1983). *Les Racines historiques du Conte merveilleux*. (Traduit du russe en Français par Lise Gruel-Apert) Paris: Gallimard.
- Thompson, S. (1935). *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature- A classification of Narrative elements in Folk-Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, And Local Legends*, Volume 5 (L-Z), Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica.