

Water in the Moroccan Folk Tale

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Abstract

The main interest of this paper is to analyze the use of water in one of the main manifestations of Moroccan culture, namely the folk tale. Based on the socio-cultural approach, this paper will try to demonstrate that the use of water in the Moroccan tale is part and parcel of the way it is conceived of and used in the Moroccan society. The crucial role of water in the Moroccan tale stems from its being a structural element of the tale, of triggering the tale's action and playing a major role in the plot's denouement. To illustrate this assumption, this study will rely on a selection of six Moroccan tales translated from Moroccan Arabic into English: "Lalla Khulala Khadra", "The Princess and the Rolling Ball", "The Merchant's Daughter", "Yetu and her Step Mother" and "The Wise Woman"

Keywords: folk tale, water, frame work, plot, denouement

ملخص

الهدف الرئيسي من هذا المقال هو دراسة الدور الذي يلعبه الماء في الحكاية الشعبية المغربية باللهجة العربية المغربية. ويأتي هذا الاهتمام بالماء في الحكاية كانعكاس للدور المحوري الذي تلعبه هذه المادة الحيوية في حياة الإنسان ككل، وحياة الإنسان المغربي بصفة خاصة. واعتمادا على رؤية سوسيو اجتماعية، تقوم الدراسة بتحليل ومناقشة كيفية توظيف الماء في مجموعة من الحكايات التي يمكن اعتبارها مثلا على أهمية الماء في الحكاية الشفاهي المغربي. وتتضمن هذه الحكايات: لالا خلالالة خضرة والأمير والكوبيرة ولالا عيشة بنت التاجر ويطو وزوجة أبيها والمرأة الحكيمة. ومن خلال دراسة هذه الحكايات يكتشف الدارس ما للماء من أهمية قصوى، أولا في بنية الحكاية وكذا في ما يخص انطلاق أحداثها وتشابكها من أجل تطوير حبكة وإغنائها كما يلعب دورا حاسما في خاتمة الحكاية وإعادة التوازن إلى عالم الحكاية وحياة شخصياتها. الكلمات المفتاح: الحكاية الشعبية، الماء، البنية، الحبكة، الخاتمة

Résumé

Le but du présent travail est d'analyser le rôle de l'eau dans le conte populaire oral marocain en arabe dialectale marocain. Cet intérêt porté à l'eau vient du rôle vital de cette matière dans la vie des êtres humains en général et la vie des marocains en particulier ainsi qu'à son importance dans le conte marocain qui n'est en fait que le produit de la société marocaine et de sa culture et l'image dans laquelle se manifeste tout ce qui se passe dans cette société. Inspiré par l'approche socioculturelle, mon but est de démontrer que dans le conte populaire marocain, l'eau délimite la structure du conte, il déclenche l'action du conte et contribue au développement de l'intrigue et joue un

rôle primordial dans le dénouement des événements à la fin du conte. Pour se faire, j'ai choisi une sélection de six contes marocains : Lalla Khulala Khadra, La Princess et la Petite Boulette, La Fille du Marchant, Yetou et Sa belle Mère et La Femme Savante.

Mots clés: conte populaire, eau, structure, intrigue, dénouement.

Introduction

Talking about water means talking about life, for without it life is unconceivable. A mere glance at the world around us makes us realize how necessary water is for every living organism, whether it is natural or human. Human beings need water not only as individuals but also as whole communities and big civilizations. Water shapes the life of communities and their culture and may even change the course of their history in cases of wars fought over it or in cases of drought or floods. Nowadays, it has become a truism to say that it is the geographical location of a certain community or country, especially whether it is in water abundant areas or in dry, arid areas, that determines the type of culture prevailing in it, hence, the difference between the culture of coastal or rainy areas and deserts, for instance. In return, it is culture that shapes individuals' minds and ways of thinking.

1. Water in the Moroccan Society

In the Moroccan traditional society in which there was no running water in houses and where the countryside folks used to fetch it from far away wells, fountains or rivers, it had always been considered a precious thing to be used but not abused. In fact, though the actual Moroccan society claims to be a modern, urban society, on the whole it is still very much dependent on water in the form of rain and hails its coming as a blessing from God and its lack as a curse and punishment. Even today, many Moroccan people hold the belief that if rain fails to come it is because human beings have become so morally degraded that God punishes them by retaining rain. The main reason for this reliance on rain is that the Moroccan land depends so much on agriculture, and rain water is its main source of subsistence since the irrigated areas are very limited. This accounts for the great importance given to rain as it guarantees a good harvest for farmers and feeds wells, fountains, streams and rivers ensuring, thus, a life of prosperity and wellbeing for farmers and non farmers.

In Morocco, even when people are not farmers, they feel ill at ease and uncomfortable when rain fails to come because they know that the lack of rain will entail a bad agricultural season and a bad season may lead to a shortage of food which may result in an increase in goods prices and so on and so forth. What is noteworthy in this respect is that there are special prayers, special rituals and ceremonies dedicated to rain in cases of drought. When there is little rain or when rain fails to come, prayers are organized all over Morocco to implore God to bless his creatures with rain. In Moroccan rural areas ever since pre-Islamic era, special rites have existed for this purpose, the most important

of which is Taghunja which is also found in other parts of Africa: “the ceremonies known under the name of Taghunja are widespread in North Africa. Their goal is to provoke rain when, after a long drought, harvests are on the verge of being destroyed.”¹ But if the Moroccan people want rain, they want it with moderation. This is why all that is associated with moderate rain which falls in the right season and without causing floods is praised and desired. For Moroccan ordinary people, too much rain may lead to famine and no rain may lead to famine. When expressing their wish of getting rain for instance, a Moroccan person will use the Moroccan saying: “may God give us rain according to our needs”, that is to say without excess because excess leads to floods.

What is noteworthy also is that in Moroccans’ daily life, water is essential in daily uses, in ceremonies and celebrations, in religious rituals of purification and in sacred performances when visiting saints and sanctuaries. This omnipresence of water in people’s life explains why it is celebrated in children’s and adults’ traditional songs and why it permeates proverbs and tales among other manifestations of folk culture. In the Moroccan people’s religious life, water is a must in performing their religious duties. Any people who observe the principles of Islam and practise their daily prayers must purify themselves in observance of the principle of cleansing or Tahara which the Prophet (PBUH) considers as half of a Muslim’s faith. It is only in specific cases that a Muslim person can perform ablutions without water by means of the Tayamum.

This great importance given to water reaches its peak in the belief in its sacredness, especially if we consider the great place it is awarded in the Qur’an in which it is the symbol of divine manifestation: “we created every living thing out of water.”² It is the genesis of human life as the foetus’s life starts with a drop of water, as the Qur’an states. Hence, in “sexual terminology, water is the symbol of the sperm”.³ But in the Moroccan society, water is also sacred because it is associated with saints and sainthood.⁴ This is what accounts for the existence of wells and fountains in many of saints’ sanctuaries.⁵ This idea of water’s sacredness endows it with “purifying, healing and magical powers which can break magic spells”⁶ when it is brought from religious places like mosques or from saints’ sanctuaries.

¹. Emile, Laoust, *Amazigh Words and Things*, Trans. Ahmed Chaabi, al Maarif Al Jadida, Rabat, 2004. pp. 44-45.

². The Qur’an. Surat al-Anbiya, Ayah, 30.

³. Malek, Chebel, *Dictionnaire des Symbole Musulmans, Rites, Mystique & Civilisation*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1995.

⁴. Amal, At-Tasawuf Fi al-Maghrib, 41, 2013, pp. 22- 23.

⁵. Emile, Dermingham, *Le Culte des Saints dans l’Islam Maghrébin*, Gallimard, Paris, 1954.

⁶. Doctoresse Lègèy, *Essai de Folklore Marocain: Croyance et Tradition Populaires*, Sirocco, Casablanca, 2009, pp.75-76.

It is from this crucial importance given to water in the Moroccan society whether in people's lives or in the diverse cultural manifestations that the essence of this article stems. The folk tale, among the other aspects of oral culture, is but a representation of people's needs, rituals, worries, dreams and aspiration; and water is omnipresent in all these for the simple reason that when and where there water there is life.

2. Water in the Moroccan Folk Tale

By definition, the word "folk" tale refers to a story produced and reproduced by the ordinary, common people of a certain society and used as a means of understanding the world and making sense of it, of controlling it and shaping the world view adopted by the society or the community which produces this tale; it is a mirror that reflects societies' values, norms and beliefs and is a valuable source of information on people and their ways of living. This is why it "can be used by researchers to study a certain culture and how it has evolved."¹ Hence, anyone who listens to or reads Moroccan folk tales will notice that they are permeated with various types of water. They include wells, lakes, rivers, sweet rain water collected by people for future uses and sea water which means salty water as opposed to sweet one. To illustrate this idea and analyze how water is used in the Moroccan folk tales, I have chosen a selection of tales including "The Merchant's Daughter", "The Princess and the Rolling Ball", "Yetu and her Step Mother", "the Wise Woman" and "Lalla Khullala Khadra".²

A. Water as Part of the Tale's Framework

One dare say, and from the outset, that in the Moroccan folk tale water is used as a kind of framework. It is present in the opening and closing formulae of the tales told by women, for tales told by men are completely different. Many of the folk tales told by women in Moroccan Arabic start with an opening like:

"There was and what there was!
There was the basil and the lily,
Growing everywhere in the prophet's lap,
Our Master Muhamed,
Peace and blessing be upon him."³

¹. Muhamed, Khair Eddine, *Difā'an 'an al-hikāya al-ša'biya al Mağribiyya*, imprimerie al-Wataniya, Marrakesh, 2002, p. 8.

². The tales are taken from Malika El Ouali, *Kan Ya Ma Kan : Moroccan Folk Tales on Women*. Afaq, Marrakesh, 2013.

³. "kan ya ma kan
kan lhbaq u ssussan
nabet f kul mkan
fhjar nnabi l3adnan
sidna mohamed 3lih as-salat wa ssalam"

The mention of the basil and the lily which are so present in the Moroccan traditional society's life evokes water and freshness, for wherever they are, there is water. They are evocative of a sense of comfort, stability and wellbeing as they are associated with a well established social category of people, hence their presence in the tale entitled "The Merchant's Daughter." Moreover, the evocation of water through these plants implies that it is the latter that grants people the possibility of having a good life which can allow them to live in peace and harmony and entertain themselves with tales in the absence of other means of entertainment in days of yore. So this metafictional device which opens the tale informs the reader that the journey he/she is embarking on is not a real but a fictional one, besides the fact that it makes the tales aware of itself as a narrative, fictional form. In addition to this, it also establishes the fresh, cosy atmosphere for tale-telling which would not have been possible without water. If we interpret this formula from the conception of the tale as a kind of wish-fulfilment, we can say that it embodies the tale teller's aspiration for a life of freshness, comfort and stability, that is an ideal life with plenty of water and green plants represented by the basil and the lily, especially if we know that most Muslim countries are located in dry, arid areas or in deserts.

If we consider the closing formula of the tale:

"My tale has flowed with the river

With you gentle folks I here stay forever"¹

The evocation of water is very important here again. The use of the river enhances the nature of the tale as a very fluid and spontaneous discourse which flows like a river leading the listener through the various phases of the tale into foreign, magical lands full of wonder and excitement till the end without his/her being aware of it. In addition to that, it brings the tale to a psychologically relieving end and the audience back from the world of fantasy to the world of reality.

B. Water as the Instigator of Action

Apart from this, the analysis of the selected tales, and surely of many others, shows that water is the pivot of life and the element without which life is impossible. Water is the instigator of the action whether for good or bad outcome; it is the element which can make things happen. If we recall what Todorov says about narratives, we can realize the crucial role that water plays in the Moroccan folk tale. Todorov argues that "all stories begin with what he calls an 'equilibrium' where any potentially opposing forces are 'in balance'. This is disrupted by some events, setting in train a series of events, to close

¹. "hajayti mshat m3a lwadlwad / u ana bqit m3akum a ljawad" ibid.

with a second, but a different type of ‘equilibrium’ or status quo”.¹ Bearing this in mind, we can notice that in many of the tales mentioned above it is water which disrupts the equilibrium of the narrative.

In “The Merchant’s Daughter,” it is when Lalla Aisha the tale’s protagonist goes up the terrace to water her plants that the prince sees her and starts courting her. This means that it is water which triggers the initial action of the tale whose plot consists of a sequence of antagonistic speeches and acts which start from that very moment. So it disrupts the equilibrium of the merchant’s daughter’s peaceful, ordinary life and the prince’s life of leisure and amorous adventures. In the latter’s case, we can also say that it disrupts the equilibrium of his belief that he can have all the women he wants because the latter are incapable of reasonable thinking and that they are created only for his pleasure. Moreover, it is this breach of equilibrium which triggers the many acts of defiance which both the prince and the merchant’s daughter carry out throughout the tale to prove their superiority over each other. Noteworthy also is that in this tale, water is celebrated throughout its recurrent formula which goes:

“Oh Lalla Aisha, merchant’s daughter!

You that the basil water and nurture

How many leaves do its branches feature?”

These first provocative questions addressed to the merchant’s daughter represent the first challenge that the prince sets to her and to which she responds by another challenge which is going to trigger the whole action of the tale:

“Sidi Muhamed, O king’s son!

You who the book of Allah know,

So cultured and so educated,

How many fishes are in the sea?

How many stars are in the sky?

And how many dots are in the holy book?”

It is this answer from Lalla Aisha which teases the prince and arouses his interest.

So we can say that this formula which celebrates water is at the heart of action throughout the tale. Each time one of the two characters triumphs over

¹. Todorov, in Gill Branston & Roy Stafford. *The Media Student’s Book*. London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 26.

the other he/she repeats the formula in the middle of the tale before giving free vent to his/her triumph over the other party. The prince always repeats the first challenge he sets to Lalla Aisha “you who the basil water and nurture, how many leaves do its branches bear?” and she repeats the more difficult challenge to the prince when asking him about the number of stars in the sky, the number of fishes in the sea and the number of dots in the Qur’an. In fact, it is this initial reply from her that triggers the prince’s curiosity and his desire to court and then vanquish her.

In the second tale entitled “Yetu and her Step Mother,” Yetu is living peacefully with her father before he marries again; and even when he gets married she continues her life with her step mother despite the latter’s plots against her and her complaints to her father. It is only when she drinks water from the jar in which her step mother has put a baby snake and her womb starts swelling, because the snake begins to grow inside her, that her father takes her to the forest to kill her after succumbing to his wife’s accusations of his daughter as being debauched.

The same role is played by water in “Lalla Khullala Khadra”. In this tale, the story revolves around a king whose wife gets only girls. For many years, and every time the queen gets pregnant the king hopes to have a male heir but in vain; instead of this the king and his wife have six daughters. However, the seventh time the queen is pregnant, her husband the king threatens her that if she has a baby girl again he will kill her along with her baby. After this, the queen gets another daughter and tells the king that she had got a boy who died just after birth. She hides her daughter and the equilibrium of the tale’s fictional world remains intact as the king does not know about the girl’s existence. However, the equilibrium is disrupted when drought, which is again caused by the lack of water, strikes the king’s kingdom and he decides to move away and settle in a place where water is abundant. At that very moment, the queen decides to carry the box in which she is hiding her daughter to make sure no one can know about the latter. But the box is so heavy and the queen so tired that she decides to forsake it in a forest where she thinks her daughter will be devoured by wild animals. However, her deed proves to be futile as the girl manages to get out of the box and integrate the house of three brothers who welcome her and make her one of them by marrying her to their elder brother.

Again, in “The Princess and the Rolling Ball” water is the main instigator of the action but in the form of a drop of wax or, to say it otherwise, the tears of a candle. In this tale, a prince who comes from a far away land falls in love with a princess. What attracts the princess, apart from the latter’s personality, is a necklace fastened by means of a little lock he wears around his neck. Whenever the princess asks him about its secret, he refuses to answer saying he will let her know in due time. But because she succumbs to her curiosity, she steals the key and opens the lock as he is sleeping one day.

Opening it, she discovers the prince's secret which is his big fortune hidden in the tunnel to which the key leads. She enters the tunnel but when she is going out of it, and trying to lock the little necklace again a drop of wax falls on the prince's face and awakes him only to discover that the princess has disobeyed him by stealing his key and going through the tunnel and he decides to leave her once and for ever. We can say that the equilibrium is disrupted when the princess breaks the interdiction that the prince sets to her by asking her not to ask questions about the necklace, and wax which is but another type of water as it is liquid here, plays a role in disrupting the equilibrium.

C. Water as a Means of Restoring the Plot's Equilibrium

But if water triggers the action of these tales by disrupting the equilibrium, it also has other important roles. It restores the disrupted equilibrium and has liberating and regenerating powers. At the end of the "Princess and the Rolling Ball", for instance, it is water which is going to deliver the princess from her suffering and restore her love story with the prince. The little ball which encloses the prince comes through the river. So we can say that water disrupts the equilibrium and restores it at the end of the tale as well. In "Yetu and her Step Mother", when Yetu flees from her father's attempted murder against her she stays in a forest not knowing what to do until a Jewish passer-by advises her to eat salt and go near a well so that the thirsty snake can get out of her belly at the smell of water. The use of salt in this tale is very important if we consider the way the Moroccan society conceives of it.

In the Moroccan society, Moroccan people give a great importance to salt not only in food but for many other purposes. Salt is omnipresent both materially, as an ingredient used in food, and symbolically. For instance, food without salt is uneatable according to the absolute majority of Moroccan people because it is tasteless and because salt is assumed to protect against genies and evil spirits. So food without salt is eaten only by genies and a person who eats food without salt is supposed to eat with them and may be possessed by them. Essentially, salt is supposed to have great powers not only in preserving food like dried meat but in fighting against magic spells and evil eye and chasing evil spirits and genies. Thus, it is a protection against all the above mentioned elements. For instance, Moroccan people hold that one should put salt in raw meat to prevent genies from eating it. It is also used as a protection for the new born baby and his mother, especially if the baby is a boy. Traditional people put a little bit of salt in a little bundle which they tie to the ankle or the wrist of the new born baby. Salt is sometimes put under the baby's pillow or in his bathing water. The same thing is done for the mother who gives birth to a baby. Sometimes salt is brought from saints' tombs and sanctuaries to be used as a

means of breaking magic spells and as a protection against evil eye.¹ Thanks to this power with which salt is endowed, when it is added to water it gives the latter magical dimensions. For instance sea water is supposed to break magic spells and girls who cannot get married are advised to bathe in seven sea waves. It is also assumed that people who bathe in the sea cannot be affected by magic.

This very conception of salt in the Moroccan society seems to account for its use to deliver Yetu from the snake inside her and to regenerate the Wise woman's hands in the tale entitled "the Wise Woman". In this tale, water plays a double role of salvation and regeneration. The fact that it is sea water seems to be very significant as the latter is supposed to be a protection against magic spells and a means of purification and cleansing by breaking magic spells as mentioned before. So when the king's mother puts her daughter in law inside a box, the latter and her baby who are locked inside the box are rescued by some fishermen who host them and take care of them. During her voyage in the sea, the wise woman even regains her hands which were cut off by her own brother. So water here acquires regenerating powers. Hence, in this tale as well, we can say that water restores the equilibrium of the story, especially when the king finds his wife and son safe and in good health. In this tale water can also symbolize the journey which in literature stands for the spiritual and psychological journey that people may undertake and during which they are transformed at the end. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad is the most representative of the use of the journey in this sense.²

In these tales, water has yet another function. It is a means of punishment. In "Yetu and her Step Mother", when Yetu comes back to her father's home and asks for hospitality, she tells her father and her step mother her story and when her father realizes that the woman who is in front of him is in fact his own daughter whom he banished many years before, he cries until he drowns in his own tears, which makes tears, which are all water, a means of punishment. His wife is also partly punished by means of water. Yetu's husband ties her up to two camels, a hungry one and a thirsty one, and puts water in front of the hungry camel and food in front of the thirsty one, and trying to reach the water and the food the two camels tear her apart.

¹. Malika, El ouali, *As-Salih al-Murrakushiyat*, imprimerie al-Wataniyya, Marrakesh, 2016, pp. 69-70.

². Joseph, Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Books, 1973.

Conclusion

As this analysis has tried to show, the importance of water in the Moroccan folk tale is only part of its crucial role in the Moroccan society. This is why it is far from being a second rate element in the Moroccan folk tale. Because of the decisive roles it plays in the tale's plot, it can be considered a character in itself; it triggers action, changes the course of events and contributes to the tale's denouement. Given the crucial role it plays in the Moroccan society, this is not surprising.

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