

Cultural Patterns in Algerian Oral Folk Narrative A Cultural Critical "Approach to the Tale of "Fatima el-M'aakra

الأنساق الثقافية في الحكاية الشفهية الشعبية الجزائرية: مقاربة نقدية ثقافية لحكاية "فاطمة المعكرة"

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Received 2026-03-28 Accepted 2026-08-29 Published. 2026-09-20

Abstract:

This study examines the development's methods of oral folk tales in Algerian heritage by demonstrating their formative structures to reach their profound structure, considering this type of narrative as a cultural repository in which society's perceptions, symbolic representations, and established values accumulate. Algerian folk heritage is rich with narratives intricately woven in a distinctive artistic manner carrying profound connotations. The tale of Fatima el-M'aakra is among the narratives that embodies the model of women in the popular imagination as a cultural structure governed by a system of implicit patterns. Deconstructing these implicit cultural structures in the tale of Fatima el-M'aakra reveals the intertwined relationships between the constituent elements of the social mentality of different classes of the Algerian society.

Keywords: Folk Tale; Cultural Criticism; Implicit Patterns; Algerian Oral Heritage.

ملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفيات بناء الحكاية الشفهية الشعبية في التراث الجزائري، وذلك باستجلاء بنياتها التكوينية وصولاً إلى بنيتها العميقة باعتبار هذا النمط من الحكايات مستودعاً ثقافياً تتراكم فيه تصورات المجتمع وتمثلاته الرمزية وقيمه الراسخة. إن التراث الشعبي الجزائري زاخر بحكايات محبوكة بطريقة فنية متميزة تحمل دلالات عميقة، وحكاية فاطمة المعكرة من الحكايات التي تركز نموذج المرأة في المخيال الشعبي بوصفها بناءً ثقافياً محكوماً بمنظومة من الأنساق المضمرّة. وتفكيك هذه البنى الثقافية المضمرّة في حكاية فاطمة المعكرة يحيلنا على العلاقات المتشابكة بين العناصر المكونة للذهنية الاجتماعية لطبقات المجتمع الجزائري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحكاية الشعبية؛ النقد الثقافي؛ الأنساق المضمرّة؛ التراث الشفهي الجزائري.

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1. Introduction:

Folk tales passed down among people preserve the foundations of community identity, carrying their beliefs, ideas, and cultural elements. They are simple narrations of daily events blending reality and imagination, told by a narrator or a storyteller. This type of narration is characterized not by stability but by continuous change according to environment and circumstances, while maintaining its essential content, which usually aims to guide opinions and reinforce principles and noble morals. It is a form of expression that often conceals cultural patterns hidden behind this simple expression. How are these patterns formed within narrative structures in folk tales? How can cultural criticism deduce and interpret these cultural elements? What is the extent of these patterns' influence on the recipient and directing their thought?

2. Cultural Criticism:

Cultural criticism does not critique texts in themselves but as linguistic and aesthetic structures behind which cultural patterns are concealed, where "it treats the text as a carrier of (pattern), and does not read the text for itself or for its aesthetics, but rather uses the text to reveal through it the tricks of culture in passing its patterns" (al-Ghadami & Astif, 2004, p. 3). From the perspective of cultural criticism, literary texts come charged with patterns, values, and cultural dimensions, and the critic's task focuses on demonstrating and interpreting these values.

Cultural patterns, in literary works, are formed on the basis of repetition and accumulation: "When ideas, values, customs, and ideologies are reinforced within culture and incorporated into its texts, only then do they become patterns exercising their influence within and outside the cultural text on both the acts of production and consumption" (Al-Tamimi & Al-Shujairi, 2014, p. 316). These patterns do not acquire their value in effectiveness merely by their existence but by being rooted within culture and directing social consciousness.

Cultural criticism can be said to have come about because of a reaction to the dominance of systemic methodologies in literary criticism, which seemed to be rather too closed within the meaning of a literary text, notably linguistic structuralism and critical theory that followed.

This is because they saw the text as being purely a linguistic and aesthetic phenomenon that is self-contained in generating its aesthetic effect through the interaction of its internal elements that make up its overall structure without deconstructing this structure or seeking to understand its meanings within a cultural context.

The new intellectual orientation is marked by its integrative nature that offers wide avenues for various activities to engage with literature, assist in its formation, and take part in the critical process to help in its understanding and interpretation.

The cultural critical methodology is particularly appropriate for literary works, as it perceives them as discourse to be analyzed and explored in search of cultural and intellectual programs in their multiple forms. The scope of cultural critical analysis includes all genres of literary works, such as poetry, prose, daily speech, and even folk literature. In this regard, any discourse is perceived as having cultural markers to be analyzed in search of their meanings and interpreted in search of cultural and cognitive implications. It is flexible to include other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, history, hermeneutics, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Cultural criticism has great importance as one of the modern methodologies in literary criticism, which has greatly altered the way in which one perceives a literary text. The text is not viewed

as an independent linguistic entity in search of an independent aesthetic form, yet as a cultural producer reflecting society's perceptions, values, and consciousness.

3. Oral Folk Tale:

The oral folk tale can be regarded as the mouthpiece of societies and the lens that portrays every detail of social and cultural life; "*A narrative form that recounts the details of a real or imagined event, typically applicable to simple stories characterized by an implicit and loosely cohesive plot*" (Fathi, p. 140). These are narratives that appear simple and uncomplicated on the surface, but to those who delve deeper into their construction, a network of patterns concealed within that structure and common themes is revealed.

The folk tale is considered a type of oral narration, as it is circulated through oral transmission before being written down, passed from generation to generation, carrying society's consciousness and reflecting the group's perceptions, customs, and culture. Its heroes are humans, animals, or imaginary beings, and its events come simple and sequential, usually ending with the triumph of good. "The folk tale governs its structure to reach a deep philosophy of life, and this philosophy is characterized by both ambiguity and clarity, because it is a reflection of the experiences we live, and these are experiences marked by complexity and strangeness" (Ibrahim, p. 210). The folk tale is not arbitrary narration whose purpose is momentary pleasure, but rather it is a carefully structured work that seeks to articulate a profound life philosophy through symbolic meanings that encapsulate society's awareness of existence and life.

Algerian folk tales are a living heritage that carries the experiences and knowledge of previous generations from one generation to another. The reason for the longevity of this narrative tradition is that it is a unique blend of simplicity and depth, and "accessible yet inimitable." The style of narration is also varied according to the environment and context in which it is narrated. This instills awareness and wisdom in the reader, especially among children, as they are left with a sense of satisfaction due to the triumph of good over evil and wrongdoers being punished.

The folk tales carry the concerns of societies and their beliefs toward the world. These tales cope with a variety of issues that cover politics, society, religion, history, psychology, and culture.

4. The Tale of Fatima el-M'aakra:

This tale from Algerian oral heritage deals with the story of two orphaned sisters living in a house left to them by their father in a neighborhood of the old Casbah in Algiers. The elder sister is married and characterized by composure and wisdom, enjoying the respect of neighbors and social status, however, she is known for her extreme stinginess. As for the younger sister who is known for her recklessness and lack of modesty, she would dress up, show off her beauty and enjoy her life, which affected her reputation negatively.

One day, the elder sister was preparing lunch, and its aroma spread to reach their poor, pregnant neighbor who was experiencing cravings, so she deliberately came making excuses to borrow things repeatedly hoping they would offer her some of the dish.

Fatima el-M'aakra noticed this, so she went and asked her about the reason for her repeated knocking on their door. The neighbor frankly told her the truth about her craving for that food and that she was having pregnancy cravings. Fatima's heart softened, and she asked her older sister to share some with her, but she refused due to her extreme stinginess. Fatima's attempts

to convince her failed, and after her despair, she suggested to her sister to give her charity from her share of the food. She agreed after setting a condition: to relinquish her share of the house. Fatima agreed to give it to her the next morning, she gave the food to the neighbor and in the morning at the appointed time, the older sister knocked on Fatima's door to execute her condition of leaving the house, but she did not respond or open. The scent of musk emanated from her room and light shone from it. The older sister sought help from the neighbors to break down the door, and they found her dead and shrouded. She was buried in the same room, and her grave became a shrine that visitors flock to this day, considering her a righteous saint.

Image No. (1): The Shrine of Fatima al-M'akkra, located in the Casbah of Algiers



5. Implicit Cultural Patterns in the Tale of Fatima el-M'aakra:

5.1. The Pattern of Morality and Identity in the Narrative:

Folk tales encapsulate the cumulative essence of the experience of humanity as it evolves through successive generations in a society, thereby informing a set of moral precepts that define what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a society. In this regard, the folk tales in most societies are mobilized to promote the virtues of goodness and punish evil, thereby promoting a form of moral justice that primarily relies on the symbolism of talking animals, ogres, witch-like old ladies, and supernatural occurrences so that the message may be readily understandable by a wider audience at different levels of comprehension, including children. In this regard, folk tales have a significant influence on the recipient while at the same time breaking the monotony, tedium, and dislike that may be inherent in a direct form of moralizing.

The folk tales are united in their function of imparting values through universally accepted moral precepts such as the repudiation of evil, glorification of good, and the eternal struggle between both forces that inevitably leads to the triumph of good. Nonetheless, they also retain the Peculiarities of each society, which is the reason for the variations in any given tale among various societies.

Through analyzing the tale of Fatima el-M'aakra, the moral pattern that characterizes Algerian society appears, manifested in multiple meanings:

5.1.1. Modesty:

The Algerian woman, according to narrated popular heritage, is characterized by modesty, which is one of the foundations of her personality and manifestations of her religiosity, as Islam encourages modesty. Allah says: (Then, one of the two women approached him, walking bashfully) (Surat al-Qasas). The righteous woman follows her religion's teachings, and this appears through the narrative where the older sister was characterized by modesty, which imposed her respect and earned her a distinguished status in her society, while the younger sister was the opposite, which negatively affected her reputation.

It is also manifested in this tale that the Algerian woman is shy of men who are not her male relatives (mahram), where the man before entering the house would clear his throat, i.e., make a sound, so that when the women sitting in the courtyard heard him, they would enter their rooms out of modesty. Thus, this tale embodies the system of social values based on mutual respect and safeguarding privacy.

Modesty is reflected in this tale as an honorable ethical principle, where characters who practice it are depicted positively in contrast to behavior not aligned with ethical standards. It is also linked with self-esteem and self-respect, and it is an expression of cultural society, which is passed from one generation to another through cultural heritage. Algerian society attaches great importance to the appreciation of modesty as an essential part of a straight personality, notably in women. Modesty is regarded as an essential expression of femininity to such an extent that, in Algerian society, femininity is considered to be equivalent to modesty.

5.1.2. Generosity:

The trait of generosity is one of the most prominent traits for which Algerian society is known, which enjoys mercy and support. According to the tale, the older sister was characterized by extreme stinginess, which did not benefit her in anything, and her stinginess led her to the point of trying to seize her sister's share of the inheritance but did not succeed. As for Fatima, despite her bad manners, her characterization by generosity and her compassion for the poor woman and her relinquishing of her food to her made her finally attain a sacred position, and even now she has become, according to circulating folk narratives, a righteous saint. This embodies an established moral system in the social structure. Generosity in the popular imagination is one of the most prominent moral values rooted in social identity.

Generosity in Algerian folk tales is in close connection with social solidarity, charity, and cooperation. It is viewed as an attribute of nobility and humanity. It is often intrinsically connected with the nature of the hero in the story, who shows his generosity to weak and poor people and is rewarded in return for his benevolence and magnanimity. One such Algerian folk tale is Fatima al-M'akkra, where "Fatima" is an epitome of generosity in its highest form.

5.1.3. Good Neighborliness:

This tale reflects a moral value represented in compassion between neighbors and the resulting good neighborliness. The neighbor is not merely a partner in the residential area but a partner in the family and an extension of it. The tale of Fatima el-M'aakra embodies good neighborliness in its finest form, expressing the philosophy of living together. Fatima was

rewarded with goodness as recompense for her compassion for her poor neighbor as a symbolic affirmation of social justice.

Algerian society attaches great importance to good neighborliness, coexistence, and sharing both pain and joy. It also highly values the reinforcement of principles such as solidarity and cooperation between neighbors, based on the idea that "when joy is shared, it is multiplied; when pain is shared, it is diminished and fades away." This leads to greater social cohesion between members of the same society, especially in traditional society. The idea of good neighborliness is reflected in the story of Fatima al-M'akkra through simple situations in life, such as women's evenings spent chatting, singing, dancing, and sharing skills such as cooking, embroidery, and other activities in life. These scenes clearly demonstrate the level of social cohesion in Algerian society and its inheritance.

5.2. The Pattern of Life Philosophy in the Tale:

In effect, folk tales are a worldview common to all individuals in a social group. They are a portrayal of society in its deepest form, where life experiences have been accumulated to form a knowledge or wisdom, which in turn can be passed on from generation to generation to form principles. Ultimately, folk tales are a reality rather than an idealized world. They are attempts to convey a reality through an imaginative form which transcends direct narration in order to attain an aesthetic or artistic effect. In this way, they seek to put forward cultural patterns in such a way that they remain embedded in messages, which lie deep beneath an expression that is apparently simple in nature but profound in its content.

5.2.1. The Dialectic of Immortality and Disappearance:

Immortality in the popular imagination is achieved through impact; a person lives as long as people remember them and becomes an eternal symbol, while disappearance is extinction and a person's passing into oblivion. According to what the folk tale transmits, the shrine of Fatima el-M'aakra still exists today in one of the neighborhoods of the old Casbah, while her sister, her husband, and even the poor neighbor has disappeared. The tale shows that the goodness of one's intention is linked to their reward. For Fatima el-M'aakra due to her kindness and compassion, her reward was a good ending and the immortality of her name.

Human beings are naturally inclined to immortalize their experiences, and this is a fundamental reason why they inherently reject the concept of obliteration and decay. In the juxtaposition between the desire for continuity and the certainty of death and disappearance, we find the conflict which is reflected in many folk narratives; which describe this conflict in their narratives, yet serve as a means to preserve the past.

5.2.2. The Pattern of Woman and Beauty:

Women, by their very nature, have a penchant for beauty, which allows them to relate to harmony, psychological satisfaction, self-expression, and self-confirmation. The love for beauty is a universal human need, not exclusive to the feminine gender. Society has stereotypically identified the concept of beauty as being associated with the feminine gender, equating physical attractiveness with beauty of soul, delicacy, and gentleness. In this regard, women are perceived as being sensitive and emotional, yet strong, resilient, and responsible.

Woman is always a symbol of beauty and femininity. Fatima el-M'aakra was obsessed with love of adornment and showing off her beauty, and she was famous for this, which is an innate trait in women in general. The Algerian woman, like most women, is characterized by love of

adornment, putting some eye-liner and lipstick, which are simple adornment tools that were used in that time.

Image No. (2): Approximate Image of Fatima al-M'akkra Based on the Tales' Descriptions



Algerian women have always been recognized for their keenness in maintaining their looks, beauty, elegance, and harmonious dressing, and this tradition has continued to date in the diversity of their traditional dresses.

In the era of Fatima al-M'akkra, Algerian women in Algiers used to don different types of dresses, including the karakou, Dziria trousers, haik, and others, which signify the depth and richness of Algerian society.

5.2.3. The Pattern of Song and Interaction with Life:

This is because song is a significant part of the social life, which helps in the expression of belonging, cultural identity, and intense emotional states. It is usually performed in groups, which helps communities release their emotions and express their inner feelings. It has a significant impact on the audience, especially folk songs, which touch the hearts of the audience most.

The musical heritage in Algeria is rich and varied, including different styles such as: Chaoui and Setifian song, Gnawa, Bedouin, and Naïli; Sahrawi and Tarqi, Kabyle, Raï (which is mainly practiced in the western region), Andalusian, and the Chaabi songs in Algiers. Each style has

its own characteristics, time for performance, and the audience who interacts with it. This diversity is due to the variety of environments and cultures in Algeria, which reflects the rich history and authenticity of the social identity.

Some women were famous for their love of playing and singing. On occasions, they would gather and sing out loud, finding pleasure in singing, among them Fatima el-M'aakra, who was known for the sweetness of her voice and her good playing and singing. Women would invite her on occasions to enliven weddings and feasts with her melodious voice.

5.2.4. The Pattern of Authoritarianism:

The pattern of authoritarianism is regarded as one of the vital concepts that cultural criticism has focused on in terms of the analysis of folk tales. It is defined as a set of behaviors that makes an individual submissive to a specific authority, programming their minds to see this authority as something inevitable and necessary that cannot be resisted or rejected. By deconstructing various discourses, cultural criticism reveals the underlying structures that control individuals' thoughts and promotes awareness as an alternative.

Most folk tales carry a glorifying energy of masculinity, enhancing the status of men by providing them positions of dominance in society, whereas the status of women is compromised by marginalizing their role in society. Masculinity is regarded as a criterion of strength and power, which carries positive attributes such as bravery and wisdom. On the contrary, femininity is depicted as weakness and emotionalism. Although this is a cultural structure, it has been accepted as a 'natural' phenomenon, leaving little space to question the credibility of this concept, although some women prove to be superior to men in knowledge, bravery, and leadership.

This tale carries a direct image of the centrality of masculinity and its dominance in the first place, while femininity comes as a follower or subordinate centered in the margins, which appears through women giving exaggerated consideration to the men of the neighborhood and bearing on their shoulders the responsibility of their comfort after their return home and providing means of comfort for them.

They also, out of their conviction, grant priority to males in everything good, a conviction derived from the inspiration of a society that precisely outlined their steps, so they dare not violate what it has drawn, otherwise they are considered outside its customs, deserving of blame and insult!

6. Conclusion:

The implicit cultural patterns behind the structural construction of the tale of Fatima el-M'aakra came as an accurate portrayal of the depth of Algerian society in its spontaneity.

It is a product of popular imagination and deals in its contexts with themes that simulate the depth of the common person's mentality in their ordinary life, which allows it to touch reality in its authentic form without distortion or falsification.

Cultural criticism treats the folk tale not just as a narrative, but also as a carrier of meanings and values, a reflection of social and historical status, and a medium for the reproduction of culture in society. Through it, it is feasible to understand the formation of the mental frameworks of individuals.

Folk tales are not innocent or simplistic; instead, they are a reflection of cultural patterns that may be hidden to the point of invisibility or may appear in a striking manner, exercising a powerful influence on the minds of individuals.

6.1. Results:

- ✓ The tale of Fatima el-M'aakra carries within it cultural, religious, and social implications that touch the status of Algerian society.
- ✓ The Algerian oral folk tale is a fertile field for cultural critical studies.
- ✓ The symbols and connotations carried by the folk tale transcend the boundaries of naive pleasure to reveal intellectual awareness, cultural complexity, and distinctive social specificity.
- ✓ Implicit cultural patterns in folk tales are conveyed indirectly, and thus, folk tales may be seen as a way of reproducing values in society.
- ✓ Folk tales emphasize the eternal and permanent conflict of opposing values, such as good and evil, justice and injustice, reflecting society's aspiration for the symbolic victory of good.
- ✓ Most of the Algerian folk tales demonstrate that a masculine paradigm dominates in society, although there are some that depict women as active and central actors.
- ✓ Cultural criticism is one of the essential methods of understanding society's deep structure by analyzing implicit cultural patterns in both oral and written folk tales.
- ✓ Folk tales are not concerned with the ideals of the characters, but rather the image of the ordinary man in the simple happenings of everyday life.
- ✓ Algerian oral folk tales are characterized by their flexibility, which allows them to pass down through generations that may be significantly different from the original one in spite of the differences in the environment and interests.
- ✓ The collection, documentation, reading, and analysis of folk tales in Algeria are of great importance and necessity, given that they constitute part of the intangible heritage that reflects the identity of Algerian society.

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