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Not just a pretty face: Women as storytellers and subjects in the folktales of Northern Sudan

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Like fairytales in many other cultures, the folktales of Northern Sudan are not only reflective of the deepest aspects of culture, but also major formative influences on it. However, a central and often overlooked feature of these stories is the role women played as narrators and performers, and the related centrality of female figures within the narrative. In most of the popular stories, the heroine is the one who has all the action, and is not just the pretty girl who awaits her prince. In fact she is self-sufficient, and it is the handsome and valiant prince who figures as an extra. The heroine is always intelligent, resourceful, wily and at times even brutal, but is she who saves the day and performs the needed tricks to save lives and conquer evil. It is only then that she is rewarded with the handsome prince as her prize. It looks like the perfect revenge of women against a patriarchal society which denies them such roles. **Key words:** Northern Sudan, Sudanese folktales (*ahaji*), women storytellers.

The corn-on-the-cob is vigorously boiling on the stove, which was brought into the room to warm it up. The room is filled with the delicious aroma, and the children are cuddled snugly sitting in their beds, wide-eyed in anticipation of both the promised delicacy and *Habboba's* enchanting tales. *Habboba* (Grandma) shifts position on her *bambar* (low stool) in the middle of the small room, contemplating the three eager faces and taking her time before starting them on that enchanted journey into the land of magic and mystery.

That room was our first classroom. There we learnt about right and wrong, especially dreams and disappointments, reality and myth: that lying will take you straight to hell-fire, or even worse, the *su'luwwa* might eat you alive. That *ghouls* die from one strike but live again and become invincible if struck twice, and that when you do good, you are sure to live happily ever after.

Stories and (women) storytellers

Our experience was one which millions of children throughout our native Northern Sudan have shared throughout the centuries. Here, in the intimate context of the home, a whole world of fantasy and dreams was created by mothers and grandmothers. It is a world in sharp contrast with the prevailing order of the patriarchal society. It

does not deny or negate it, but it aims to subvert it and navigate its way through it. While in the real world men controlled everything, in the dream world of stories, women reigned supreme. In this regard, this reflects one strategy for dealing with the social context. “The figures and events of fairytales personify and illustrate inner conflicts, but they suggest how these conflicts may be resolved, and what the next step in the development towards a higher humanity might be” (Bettelheim 1991: 5).

Sudanese folktales, or *ahaji* (singular *hujwa*), have evolved over a long period of time and become a defining feature of the cultural and social scene in wide areas of Northern Sudan. They mirror local traditions and draw from local myths, legends and histories, as well as from scenes of every day life in villages or towns. Usually narrated to children by older people in the community (mainly grandmothers), they are transmitted orally across generations (El-Nour 1997: 19).

An anthology of these stories entitled *Al-Ahaji Al Sudaniyya* was compiled by Abdulla al-Tayib, a renowned Sudanese Arabic scholar. Al-Tayib, like most of us, heard these stories firsthand within the family, and recorded them from memory, supplementing his records by consulting storytellers in different parts of northern Sudan. In 1999 he translated the *ahaji* into English under the title *Folk Stories from the Northern Sudan*.

I first wrote these stories from memory, and then added more details which I learnt from relatives and other acquaintances. From the first I felt it was important to write down whatever I could remember or be reminded of, or told about, because all of this oral literature would be forgotten completely when new ways of education and entertainment come to take their place. (Al-Tayib 2003: 5).

As in our case, the narrators of these stories are usually women in the community, especially grandmothers, and they are told to children as bedtime stories or as means of entertainment during the long and dark evenings. Narrating stories in daytime is strongly discouraged and could at times be considered taboo. The narrator would begin the story by reciting, in the colloquial Northern Sudanese dialect, a semi-poetic formula the meaning of which is completely lost in translation.

Hajjaitkum ma bajjaitkum
Kheiran jana wjakum
Akal 'ashakum wjara khalakum'

(Here is a riddle for you clever ones,
A good thing has come to you and me
But it has eaten your supper
And run away from you)

My own translation to the traditional chant, as I have heard it as a child and responded to it, would be:

I am telling you a tale
Lying to you I am not
Bounty has come to you and us

The children would then reply:

Akheir Allah min hujak²

(Allah is more generous than your tales).

The narrator then presents a riddle as a warm up to challenge the listeners and put them in a state of anticipation and gradually takes them into the world of fiction and along the path of building their own creative thinking.

The stories invariably have happy endings and are full of enchantment, fanciful scenes and myths. Genies, ogres and witches, evil and good, with their assorted magical powers, populate the world of *ahaji*. These magical characters intervene at the appropriate time to secure a happy ending for the hero or heroine, change destinies, and make dreams come true. In this, they exhibit features shared with African fairytales in other regions.

The story is set back a little further from reality by the introduction of some marvellous element in setting, event, or character. The man who goes to woo a woman, for instance, may have to undergo a series of far-fetched or even magical tests before he can win her – perhaps sowing and harvesting some crop in a single day, or guessing his beloved’s closely guarded and amazing secret, or avoiding death only through the magical help of animals or spirits. Similarly the cunning of the central character may rest on enchanted powers and lead the listener into some far-away world of fantasy. The imagination of both teller and audience can rove freely and the exploits of the hero become the more romantic and exciting for being enacted against this imaginary background. (Finnegan 1970: 365).

Unlike the other forms of storytelling the *ahaji* do not require a specialized performer and are narrated by members of the family, usually mothers or grandmothers, which made their influence on the community widespread and deep. As in many other areas, these tales would represent the child’s first introduction to art and literary forms. There are also some local variations, reflecting the influence of local cultures and environment. “Today as in the past, the minds of both creative and average children can be opened to an appreciation of all the higher things in life by fairytales, from which they can move easily to enjoying the greatest works and literature and art.” (Bettelheim 1991: 23).

The narrator would then introduce the characters, setting the tone and giving a hint about the likely path of events. *Kan ya ma kan*, (once upon a time, there was) a very beautiful princess, a very wise old woman, a poor wood cutter etc. In each instance the tone of voice is modulated to fit the description and evoke the appropriate emotions in the listeners. The narrator is the maestro, the instructor, and the fairy godmother:

The limitations on this general mastery of the art of story-telling arise from local conventions about the age and sex of the narrators. In some societies, it appears, these are quite free; in others there is a definite emphasis on one or another category as being the most suitable one for a story-teller. In some areas it is the women, often the old women, who tend to be the most gifted, even when the stories themselves are universally known. (Finnegan 1970: 375).

While entertainment is the obvious role of the folktales, they also constitute an important part of traditional education in rural areas. "In the narration of *huja* to children, a moral twist and a didactic conclusion are always expected. The children learn the intended lesson by identifying with the hero of the tale and they equate his behaviour with what they should do in order to be admired and rewarded by the society." (Hurreiz 1977: 33).

The older members of the community use these tales as 'social stories' to indirectly and craftily inject the desired moral values according to the conventions of the community or the tribe, and to warn (the listeners) against ignoring or breaking them. Events and characters are derived from familiar contexts and settings to bring the tales closer to home. Recurring themes include the evil deeds of a wicked stepmother, the conspiracies of the older wife (or wives), the wisdom of an old woman, the wit and craftiness of beautiful girl, etc. "The basic human dilemmas implied by so many of these figures have clearly brought inspiration to hundreds of story-tellers practising their otherwise diverse skills throughout the continent." (Finnegan 1970: 361).

In most of these themes supernatural beings like *jinn*, *ghouls* or *su'luwwa* (ogress) and sorcerers, good or evil, lend a helping hand to alter the path of the narrative and secure a happy ending for the worthy hero or heroine, or a fitting punishment for the villain.

The "Love- Gift"

In traditional Sudanese households, especially in villages and rural areas, women used to occupy separate quarters from men, usually the inner part or back of the house. Male members of the family reside in the *diwan*, at the front of the house, where they receive male visitors and relax after a long day in the fields. Food is brought to them from the inner quarters.

Women lead a life of their own, combining house work with leisure activities. Young girls and very young boys are part of this private section of the household. Grandmothers are the “queens” of this self-contained community. They occasionally help with housework, but their main occupation is looking after their grandchildren. In this secluded corner of the home, storytelling is part of the daily life for the women; it constitutes an integral part of their leisure time and socialising.

Women have their own storytelling parties as do children.

One of my female informants said that for a few months after she was widowed, her elderly female relatives were anxious to amuse her and keep her company so that she would not feel lonely. Therefore they used to spend the night with her and hold storytelling sessions at her house. Consequently she became a storyteller herself. (Hurreiz 1977: 31).

Young children who are part of this secluded female-dominated realm would eagerly assemble in front of their grandmothers and listen to their tales. The story, narrated in a simple unassuming language, adapting embellishing and adding new or different details to the stories that are repeated on different occasions, reflects the flexibility of verbal narration.

These evening sessions are a shared experience between these two generations and fulfil a reciprocal need between narrator and listener. The children crave the tales for the magic, a worldview that corresponds to their own, for the reassurance of grandma’s soft trusted voice taking them through different possibilities to a definite happy ending, handing them the gift of a future full of hope and confidence. The female narrators need to tell the tales, to live vicariously through their creation a life denied to them in reality, to gain autonomy and change, or at least, control their destiny. Through these stories, they regain, if only in imagination, control over their lives, and rebel against conditions which may otherwise seek to deny them this control over one’s own life. “We must remember that to deny someone control of their own lives is to offer them a most profound insult, not to mention the injury which the frustration of their wishes and the setting at naught of their own plans for themselves will add.” (Achufusi 1994: 107).

This role might be regarded as subversive in the same way “medieval and early modern literature often depicts women as dangerous and subversive precisely because for their uses of speech acts as gossip, scolds and tellers of immoral tales” (Nufeld 1999: 420).

Classical times writers have referred scornfully to the image of the ‘maundering old woman’ telling stories by the fire in order to, as Boccaccio states, ‘scare the little ones, or divert the young ladies or amuse the old’. Medieval authorities such as Augustine and Macrobius use these classical and early Christian images of a devalued oral culture associated with the private world of women to shape literary aesthetics.

They invoke the term 'old wives tale' to denigrate certain tales as immoral, false or superstitious. (Nufeld 1999: 421).

This is not how grandmothers were viewed in the Sudanese context, where they also played a unique role in society at large. Pre-Islamic Nubian society in Sudan was a matriarchal society, while the Arab-Islamic society which succeeded it, was inclined towards a patriarchal structure (Nobles 1996; Al-Rahīm 1970). The grandmother continues to play a 'matriarchal' role which bridges these two worlds. She wields undisputed authority over both men and women. Through her role as a storyteller, she also bridges the worlds of fact and fancy, and wields a formative influence over culture.

Imagined women: the female 'superhero'

This decisive role is reflected in the way women are portrayed in folktales. Female protagonists in Northern Sudanese folktales are towering figures. Almost invariably the central character is a female: she is extremely beautiful, wise, and loyal, and she invariably gets the handsome prince at the end. She occupies centre-stage throughout, while the male protagonists is a mere extra who has a walking part at various points in the story. She is also extremely resourceful and can work all sorts of miracles and ingenious feats. In short, she is a superwoman and a superhero. This says a lot about grandmothers' bias and wishful thinking

In one of these stories, *al-Malik al-Bakhil* (The miserly king), the king has one daughter he kept hidden in the tower of his palace. A foreigner saw her by chance on her balcony and wanted to marry her. When she harshly rebuffs his advances, and fearing that she might inform her father the sultan of his behaviour, he decided to get rid of her before her father came back from the pilgrimage in Mecca. He sent a message to the sultan that his daughter "is great with child". The furious sultan wrote back: "If I find my daughter in the palace, I shall kill her and tear her to pieces and cast her flesh to the dogs. And the best the best thing for her to do is to leave the palace and not to wait in it until I return." Knowing that her father meant what he said, the princess fled. She encountered various obstacles and hardships on her way, disguised herself as a man, and wore a dagger on her arm, and a sword hanging by her side. In her travels she met Wad al-Nimair, the bravest, richest and most handsome young man from the neighbouring tribe. The young man suspected that the stranger was not who he said he was. "This person," he said to himself, "has the dress of a merchant, but the voice and the features of a female." He tried, with the help of an old woman, to trick the princess into revealing her secret, but his numerous attempts were not successful.

After two years the princess decided to go back to her father's land as he would be back from his long pilgrimage. She wrote a letter to Wad al-Nimair thanking him for

his hospitality and revealing her true identity. In the end she managed to return to her father who had found out the true story and had ordered the foreigner to be beheaded (El-Tayib 2003: 23). The princess ended up marrying Wad al-Nimair who followed her to her father's land, and lived in total happiness.

In *Ya Hamam ya Damam* (O pigeons, O doves), Maryam the Fair has seven brothers who loved her dearly. She befriends beautiful Fatima, who happens to be a *ghoul's* daughter, but with a very "humane heart", loyal both to Maryam, her friend and her father the *ghoul*. But as expected, a clash of interests occurs and her loyalty is tested when Maryam's brothers sever the *ghoul's* head. Well aware of her friend's magical powers, Maryam wept and said to Fatima "remember the sharing of salt and bread with me. Kill me, but spare my brother." Fatima replied: "No, to you I shall not do much, simply I shall stick you to this wall. As for your brothers, I must take revenge of them somehow." And she did that by transforming the seven brothers into bulls. Maryam was later freed by a passer-by, and kept looking after her brothers the bulls. She refused all offers of marriage, saying that she only wanted to look after her bulls. When the Sultan offers to marry her and looks after the bulls, she accepts. However, Fatima finds her, and turns her into a dove. Her five-year old son witnessed this incident.

And his mother, after she had become a dove used to settle on a branch of a tree nearby, accompanied by a flock of doves. And the little boy would stand under the tree every morning, and as the flock approached would sing:

"O pigeon, O dove
"Is the mum below or above?"
And the mother in the flock answered:
"Your mother is above,
Eager for you my love,
For you and the seven,
I pray to God in Heaven."³

But through magic and trickery, and a little help from a female servant, the normal order of things is restored. The thorns were pulled out, and Maryam the Fair and her brothers were changed back to normal. Fatima, the *ghoul's* daughter, is banished from the land after she promised never to return. So here we notice that the subtle message is that loyalty to family is a commendable virtue (even if it is a family of *ghouls*).

In northern Sudanese culture, the mother-figure is often portrayed as a fount of wisdom and a vital agent in the process of maturation. And this is how the mother comes out in *wad al-Sultan* (the son of the sultan), where the wise mother helps her son choose a friend and companion who does not seek his friendship only for his wealth and power. She advised her bewildered son to invite his friends to share a meal with him.

Order three hard boiled eggs, and whoever you wish to choose for a friend, invite him to take breakfast with you and serve the three eggs. If the new companion takes only one and leaves the other two for you to eat, do not befriend him any more, for he is an obsequious and sly one who wishes to show that he prefers you to himself, which is false. But if he eats up two eggs, and leaves only one for you, likewise shun him, for he is selfish and greedy. Only befriend him who seeks a fair division of the three eggs.

Using this simple, but clever, elimination test devised by the mother, the sultan's son rejects the son of the vizier, the son of the judge and chooses the son of the woodcutter, who proved a fair and trustworthy friend. When he succeeds his father as sultan, he makes the son of the woodcutter his vizier, 'and between them they ruled the land in true harmony ever after'. What this tale seeks to highlight is the value of wisdom, listening to mother's advice, rejecting social and class discrimination, sharing humility, the importance of good company, lessons as valid for the youth of today (even more so) as they were once upon a time.

There is usually an unfair bias towards beauty in folktales in many other cultures. We find this in the stories of Rapunzel, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, etc., where the girl with the long golden hair and wide glittering eyes and clear skin, is also endowed with an equally beautiful heart, and a bit of good luck, which leads her (eventually) to the handsome prince on a white horse. This inclination towards perfection, so to speak, is prevalent in the Sudanese folktales to the point that the 'ugly girl' is almost ganged up against by nature and fate. The beautiful girl takes all, while the 'ugly sister' gets a raw deal. In the story *Al-Naito and Al-Li'aib*, the handsome Muhammad al-Shatir (Muhammad the Clever), sends his servant Bishara (which incidentally means 'good tidings') to check out the girl he seeks to marry. His description of Al-Naito is extremely negative. Her face is like a pipe, her hair like that of a wet cat. And so on. As an epitome of ugliness, this description is so exaggerated, to the point that till this day, the term *Al-Naito* is synonymous with imperfection and disappointment.

Having been tricked into offering to marry the girl, the hero runs away. In the new place, he hears again about another girl, and sends his servant to check her out. This time, he comes back with a marvellous physical description

What is her face like?

Like a hallowed full moon.

And tell me about her nose?

Like a golden ornament, worked by a crafty Nazarene.

And how about the neck of Al-Li'aib, O Bishara?

Like a mug of gold placed among pots of baked clay.

And tell me about the shape of her neck?

Neither tall, nor short, tender and slender.

Her arms and hands?

Like the Nubian whip made from the hide of the hippopotamus.

And tell me about the appearance of her waist?

Like a well-wrapped piece of Indian silk.

And what is her back like?

Similar to a gazelle carelessly asleep on its side.

And the hair of Al-Li'aib?

The long soft plumes of an ostrich.

And her feet?

As nimble as the steps of a pigeon on a beach⁴

Muhammad al-Shatir is filled with joy when he heard this description; he marries the girl and lives happily ever after.

In *Asha ya Na'im* (Wake up Sleepy One) the beautiful girl gets the help of the good old witch to escape from the *ghoul* and foil the conspiracy of her jealous step-sisters who wanted her out of the way. Fatima in *Akhdar Azar fi Gazaz* (the Green One in a Glass) is a beautiful and non-materialistic girl who truly loved her father, but due to an intricate web of deceit by her step sisters and their mother, she almost lost the love of her father, and was about to be killed by the prince she loved. She married a handsome prince who loved and cherished her. Her stepsisters were extremely jealous; they tricked her into asking her father to bring her *Akhdar Azar fi Gazaz* (The Green One in a Glass), something neither of them knew what it was. After a long search, he discovers that this was the name of a person, who was human but has seven mothers who were *sa'ali* (witches) and were very protective of him. The young man eventually marries the daughter, but the stepsisters are not happy. They trick her again into asking him about his weaknesses. He confided in her:

I am the son of seven ghoulish ladies whose magic is very great indeed. But I myself possess only the good kind of magic. I only do harm to one who harms me, and that not always because I am a forgiving person. I am generally healthy, for if I became ill, I shall surely die, that is my weak point, and broken pieces of glass would cause me to be ill and die.

The wicked stepsisters scattered pieces of glass on his bed. He flew home to his seven mothers in his last breath. Fatima was saved from the wrath of her husband and his mothers at the last moment due to her intelligence, perseverance and luck. Disguised as a religious man, she travelled looking for the palace of Akhdar 'Azaz, an old woman who she met on the way gave her directions and told her that the prince is dying and that the only medicine that would cure him would be the liver of two rare birds. And lo and behold, when she was tired and lay down to sleep under a tree, a sparrow came and perched on one of the branches. Another sparrow squatted saying:

The Green One in a Glass, alas, alas.
The second sparrow said:
Sickly sickly, will die quickly
The first sparrow said:
But my liver
The second sparrow said:
And my liver.
Then both of them said:
Will cure him
And they repeated this several times. So Fatima picked a stone and threw it at them, and they both fell down.⁵

Fatima, still disguised as a man, then prepared the medicine from the liver and went to cure her husband. When he was cured and came to kill her in revenge, thinking it was her who tried to kill him, he discovered the truth, they lived happily ever after. Needless to say, the wicked stepsisters were appropriately punished.

It is magic!

In these tales all things are possible: miracles do happen. Time and distance are objects to be played with; the fairytale ignores time, going over and beyond it. "The fairy tale and similar genres remove us from the time continuum and make us feel that there is another way of viewing and experiencing life. That behind the birth and death, there is another world, resplendent, imperishable and incorruptible." (Lüthi 1976: 45).

Magic is there for all good (and beautiful) people to make use of. In *My Uncle, the Brother of my Father*, the ground opens up to hide Fatima from the wrath of her uncle, who killed her brother for eating a corn cob, while their father was performing the pilgrimage in Mecca. As she was telling her story to men in a passing caravan, her uncles appears and wants to catch her. 'O Ground, Swallow Me!' And then opens up at her command to bring her out when she felt safe. 'O Ground, Now Let Me Out!'

She goes on to tell her story to another caravan:

My uncle, my father's brother, O Caravan!

Has killed Muhammad my brother, O Caravan!

Just for a corn cob, O Caravan!

And the corn cob, O Caravan!

Has been eaten by a sparrow, O Caravan!

And it flew and fell into seven seas, O Caravan!⁶

Her father happened to be travelling in that caravan, and emerged to save her.

In *The Lady of the New Island*, magic allows a man to get pregnant instead of his wife when he ate the magic meat prepared to help her get pregnant. He cuts his foot and 'gives birth' to a beautiful baby girl who, in turn goes through a cycle of ordeals at the hands of her husband's other wives and his mother. In the end she triumphs through her courage and with the help of magic, and her adversaries receive the capital punishment when they were eaten by a hungry crocodile.

Legendary women

Some authors include the story of Tajuj and Muhallaq in their anthologies of *ahaji*, although the story does not belong to the genre, as it is a legend based on a true tragic love story between a legendary beautiful woman from the Humran tribe in Eastern Sudan, and her warrior-poet husband, Muhallaq. Tajuj destroyed her love and consequently her life, to keep her pride and honour when she felt that her husband disrespected her (he asked to parade herself naked for him. She complied, but immediately asked for a divorce). Muhallaq ended up roaming the desert, reciting poetry about his love until his death. This tragic love story is immortalized in songs, plays and poetry.

In these stories, women know that they have power and are not afraid to use it, even when the outcome may prove tragic.

In all these narratives where women prove themselves the equals of men, the social and political status of the whole family is changed by the efforts and accomplishments of a girl. It is important to point that all such stories are narrated by female narrators and are popular among women. (Hurreiz 1977: 69).

The portrayal of the female protagonist in the *ahaji* reaches its culmination and legendary status in the story of *Fatna al-Samha* (Fatna the Beautiful). The long and intricate woven story starts when the champion of the land found a strand of hair long and strong enough to tie his horse with. He promised that "the maiden to whom this strand of hair belongs shall be my wife." Learning of her brother's promise/threat, Fatna escapes with six of her friends. They spend the night at the hut of an old woman (who turns out to be an ogress). Fatna, being as smart as she was beautiful, suspects the old lady's identity and stays awake. She then warns her friends, who all refuse her offer of food, giving different excuses. The only one who insists on eating ended up being the ogress's dinner. (Here a long and detailed description of how she was cooked in the oven is given). Fatna deceives the ogress and the girls escape unharmed.

On their way Fatna met an old man who asks her to delouse his hair. She then gruesomely steals the old man's skin while he was asleep, using one prick in the head with a *kitir* thorn. She then wears the skin to disguise herself as an old man, knowing that she would be easily recognized because of her extraordinary beauty.

The girls are then rescued by a caravan, and each of them finds a good husband among the men in that caravan, except Fatna (the old man), who finds a job as a servant with the caravan leader Wad al-Nimair, looking after his pigeons in the company of a deaf and dumb slave. The slave discovers her true identity, as she went swimming. When Fatna catches the slave gazing at her, she strikes him, saying:

What are you gazing at dumbest of mankind?
What are you gazing at, my you be stuck blind?
A good looking person, who's like is never seen,
As fair as a field of corn, rich and green,
With hair as an ostrich feather soft and tender,
And steps like a pigeon's, delicate and slender,
Dumbest of mankind,
Be forever deaf, forever, blind.⁷

The dumb slave tried to sign his news to his master, but Fatna used trickery to escape detection, ignorant of the fact that Wad al-Nimair had already found out her true identity. Only through beating her at her own game of trickery was Wad al-Nimair able to confront her and reveal her concealed identity. 'O, Old Uncle, let us play a game of *sijah* (board game), and the winner should rip off the skin of the loser.'

To cut a very long and marvellous *hujwa* short, they lived happily ever after.

It is noticeable that in most of these fairytales, we encounter a fair degree of violence, even brutality, especially given that these tales are primarily narrated to children. The listeners, however, are not astonished by it, accepting it as they accept miracles, magic and supernatural characters. Some see this as the necessary price for growing up.

Every process of development and maturation demands great bravery: to let go, to take leave, requires children to whom we are inclined to be overprotective show ample courage, to deprive them of tales of violence is to transfer to them our own fears and thus to keep them from facing up to the fact of life. The ancient witch not only represents the wicked establishment, she also the disordered terror the adult world. (Lüthi 1976: 17).

It is good to comfort ourselves and the children listening to the stories that, in the end, good will always prevail.

Fatna al-Samha is the tale which represents all fairytales. It is the one *hujwa* that assumed a national identity. In songs, poetry, prose narratives, *Fatna al-Samha* is frequently used as a metaphor for the beloved, the perfect women. The term has been elevated and generalized as the symbol of the Sudanese woman, even the nation, to whose bosom the exiled come back (or dream of coming back, circumstances permitting). *Fatna* is extremely beautiful, extremely intelligent, extremely brave (if somewhat unscrupulous). Only a man who is her match can win her in the end.

Every tale has a particular message, every storyteller intends to deliver one. The grandmothers (the true heroes of the narrative) who tell the stories to young children are aware of the educational values of these tales. They are disguised 'feminists' delivering wisdom and reality through fiction and fantasy. Every girl wants to be Fatma al-Samha and be in control of her destiny, hopefully with a lesser degree of brutality.

Conclusion: 'Not just a pretty face'

In examining the *ahaji* in search of female depiction, we conclude that the status of women in the culture of Northern Sudan is not only clearly and intentionally confronted, but in fact themes dealing with female concerns dominate the majority of the narratives. This must not be confused with modern feminism, which emerged in Sudan later and is still trying to make its mark in society (Ibrahim 2010). In the traditional, pre-feminist universe of the *ahaji*, the female protagonist is not rebelling in defiance to her patriarchal society. She is, just trying to make the best of an adversarial situation. Her weapons for survival include her beauty, intelligence and resourcefulness. And then there is magic and miracles. But above all, there is the power of disguise. A woman can beat the world of men by becoming part of it.

In these tales the episode of the disguise of femininity plays a central part. A certain female disguises herself and passes for a man because she is dressed in men's clothes and behaves in a masculine manner. She then forsakes her seclusion, seeks adventure achieves wonders, competes with men and mostly emulates them. In this way she shapes her future life, makes her own fortune and better her status and the status of her family. (Hurreiz 1977: 47).

We can safely assume that women were not only the crafty narrators of the *ahaji*, but they were also creators and authors. They certainly had the need, opportunity and time, being secluded in a closed community where their sole entertainment was conversation with each other. They could not plan their future or object to how their men folk run their lives. But they could dream about it, a collective dream they share and relate to each other. They perfected the dream into an art: Scheherazade's survival mechanism. In their invented world there is justice, wisdom and beauty. They decided that beauty on its own is not enough. For the heroine to succeed in her quest she needed brains as well. The narrator-creator uses the tales to reinvent herself and re-imagine her society. She became the master of her own destiny. In her narrative universe, male characters play only secondary, complementary roles. They were there as means for the heroine to fulfil her dreams. Fatima the beautiful was perfectly content in her role as a pigeon carer, swimming in her leisure time, admiring her jewellery and guarding her secret. Only when Wad al-Nimair discovers her secret is she moved to act and involve him in her plans. This union was on her terms.

In this world of make-belief, the heroine, as women do, multi-tasks. She dispenses wisdom as an old woman, gives sound advice as a mother, acts loyal as a daughter and a wife, is a genius with her disguises and practical in tackling her predicaments. If that was a tall order and difficult to achieve, then let there be magic.

The use of the magic motif to achieve self-fulfilment was the only possibility in most situations in their imagined existence. This demonstrates how difficult, almost impossible, they viewed their struggle to be. Ironically, in almost all of these tales, the happy ending and the resolution to conflicts is achieved by marriage. Maybe that is the compromise they have to make with reality!

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Notes

- 1 حجيتكم ما بجيتكم/ خيراً جانا وياكم/ أكل عشاكم وراح خلاكم
- 2 أخذ الله من حياك
- 3 وكانت أمه بعد أن صارت حمامة ترك دائماً فوق شجرة قريبة من البيت ومعها بقية الحمام. وكان ولدها يقف تحت الشجرة كل صباح ويكي يقول:
يا حمام يادمام/ أمي ورا ولا قدام؟/ وتقول أمه:/ امك قدام يا غلام/ واشوقي عليك/ وعلى السبع تيران
- 4 كيف وش اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ قمره السبعين الليها دارة/ كيف نخرة اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ قمم الضهيب عند النصاري/ كيف رقية اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ كوز الضهيب وسط الحرارة/ كيف ضهر اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ فتر وشبر ليهو انفرارة/ كيف إيد اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ كراباج العنج عند البطاري/ كيف بطن اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ ود الجدي الراقد حدارة/ كيف شعر اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ هضليم نعم خاتي انقصاره/ كيف قدم اللعيب يا بشارة؟/ قدم الحمام فوق الحجارة
- 5 جاء عصفور فرك فوق الشجرة، ثم جاء عصفور آخر فرك إزاءه على غصن آخر. وقال العصفور الأول: أخدر عزاز، أخدر عزاز/ وقال العصفور الثاني: مرضان مرضان مرضان وقال الأول: دواه شنو؟/ وقال الثاني: كبيدتي وكبيدتك/ ورمتهما فاطمة بحجر فوقها من أعلى الشجرة، فذبحتها واستخرجت كبدتهما ونشفتها ثم وضعت كل ذلك في حق.
- 6 عمي أخو أبوي، يا جلابة/ كتل محمد أخوي، يا جلابة/ فيشان قندول، يا جلابة/ والقندول، يا جلابة/ أكلو الزرزور، يا جلابة/ وطار وقع في سبع بحور، يا جلابة
- 7 شن بتعاين يا بيكم؟/ تعاين العمى يا بيكم/ زولن سمح يا بيكم/ مثل القمح يا بيكم ريش النعام يا بيكم/ قدم الحمام يا بيكم

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