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The Motif of the Patient Wife in Muslim and Western Literature and Folklore

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Abstract: In her article "The Motif of the Patient Wife in Muslim and Western Literature and Folklore" Monia Mounira Hejaiej examines the tale of modern Tunisian tale of "Sabra" told by women to an all female audience. Hejaiej's analysis includes some of the tale's analogues in oral folklore from various linguistic and cultural contexts such as Tunisia and including readings of the medieval variant written in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* Hejaiej argues that a comparative analysis provides us with a broader scope of interpretive paths in order to deconstruct essentialized readings of the tale, on the one hand, and to challenge previously accepted conventional boundaries between cultures on the other. Hejaiej offers a critique of literary scholarship that has ignored the relevance of folk variants of similar themes in various languages and cultures and of feminist scholars who have read reductively the motif of the patient wife as misogynistic.

Monia Mounira HEJAIEJ

The Motif of the Patient Wife in Muslim and Western Literature and Folklore

Folklore is a dynamic tradition of culture and literature enriched by subsequent performances and variant narratives in its ability to accommodate and reflect new realities. Oral tales, stamped by their local cultural imaginary, enter into unwitting conversation with their analogues across time and space. Considered within their temporal and cultural contexts, variants reveal their rich different layers of meaning, but what can we discover looking at tales across time and space? Through comparative analysis, we can deepen and refine our understanding of how the "same" story can sustain quite different readings. The tales "mean" differently and work differently depending on the social and cultural contexts that foster these differences. Examining the multiplicity of variants and approaches should help us to discover a common sense of human experience while maintaining diverse, local, or oicotypal (see Sydow) differences. How can we understand the allure of canonical tales, tale types or motifs for listeners outside a particular temporal or cultural contexts, what is the powerful attraction of these types?

As a case in point, I examine in my study the motif of the patient wife, in the West known as the Griselda motif and circulating since Chaucer in the fourteenth century and compare Western texts of the motif with its analogues found in folk repertoires in North Africa in its various forms, oral and written. By looking at a modern Tunisian oral variant of the motif of the patient wife told by women to an all female audience and examining some of its analogues from various linguistic and cultural contexts, including readings of its medieval variants, I argue that consideration of various versions provides us with a broader scope to explore alternative interpretive paths in order to deconstruct essentialized readings of the tale, on the one hand, and to challenge the previously accepted conventional boundaries between cultures on the other. I set forth a reading of how the motif of the patient wife has been used historically to socialize according to patriarchal dictates and argue for a woman-centered reinterpretation of the tale. Thus, I demonstrate how contemporary female story tellers in North Africa could reclaim and reconstruct the figure of the patient wife to combat discourses that undermine women's agency and sense of power.

Variants from East and West traditions of folklore have rarely been brought into dialogue. In my view, not only should such a dialogue occur for its own sake, but because it would allow us to question some of the still dominant and unchallenged conjectures of historic-geographic folktale scholarship. An important implication of comparative postcolonial scholarship is the critique and deconstruction of the binary opposition European and non-European traditions have in the structure of Western epistemologies. The notion of storytelling exchanged between East and West will hopefully help effect reconciliation of these opposed geographic, cultural, and political locations and spaces. Criticizing the Orientalist point of view that places East and West in binary opposition, Chilla Bulbeck argues that "there is no pure West and East, people, goods, ideas, and texts travel backwards and forwards across the borderlands" (6) and María Rosa Menocal suggests that the influence of Arab culture on medieval and Renaissance European culture was erased and ignored intentionally by scholars (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-culture-of-translation/>). Clearly, expanding the canon of medieval literature by incorporating, for example the Arab component and a variety of texts that parallel medieval European ones will not only shed light on the scope and structure of both and thus would enrich our interpretive possibilities. Further, literary scholarship has ignored the relevance of folklore and this omission may be in part owing to the predominant space Western literary scholars accord to written texts and print culture, with literature privileged over orature except in folklore scholarship (see Webber). Working from the many vibrant oral cultures that exist around the globe, scholars of folklore can bring to literary scholarship what textual analysis of written texts, especially when limited to one language, has not considered.

The motif of the patient wife is a global motif that contains and sustains various political agendas, especially those pertaining to women's role within the family. The motif exists in Western Europe and in variations in North Africa, the Middle East, Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere (see, e.g., Al-Assimi; Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar; Dempster and Dempster; Hejaiej; Noy, Vasvári). Western medieval literary versions include Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Petrarch's *Seniles, Le Mesnagier de Paris* (, *Le Livre*

Griseldis (Anonymous), Philippe de Mézières's *Miroir des dames mariées* (*Le Miroir des femmes*), Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" in his *Canterbury Tales*, Christine de Pisan's *Livre de la cité des dames*. Thematically, the story of the folktale is this: a wife endures silently her husband's cruelty for many years while he deprives her of her family and friends, her children, and even her position as wife. When she finally speaks out, he praises her patience, recognizes her as his wife, and reunites her with her children, now grown. The Western variation of the motif is best known as in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale." However, Chaucer borrowed the theme from Petrarch, while other versions exist in Boccacio and Pisan's in *Le Livre Griseldis*, a French translation of Petrarch's work. Petrarch latinized and abstracted the tale from history for the sake of allegory but also including the tale's moral component: "Griselda's constancy in adversity becomes for Petrarch a moral pattern" (Koff and Schildgen 282; see also Morse). In turn, Chaucer gave "The Clerk's Tale" a narrative and a moral complexity within its cultural space, English. It is by connecting Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer that I examine in my study a twentieth-century variant of the motif circulating in North Africa I recorded in Tunisia.

In Chaucer's rendering of the tale, the people of Saluzzo urge the Marquis Walter to marry and provide a successor. He chooses Griselda, the virtuous, lovely, and hardworking daughter of a peasant. On their wedding day, Walter does not reveal whom he chose to marry, prepares rich garments and jewelry for her, and has his servant dress Griselda. In their wedding vows, Griselda promises that she will always obey him. Griselda proves to be a good wife, bears Walter two children, and is much loved by the people. However, Walter wants to test her devotion to the extreme and puts her through a series of three contemptible and humiliating ordeals. Walter takes her children away telling her that he must kill them because the people feel that his heirs must not share her lowly ancestry. Then he pretends to have murdered them. During all this, Griselda does not utter a word of complaint. Finally, under the pretence that she has displeased him, Walter divorces her and informs her that he has done so to take another wife of rank whom his subjects will approve. She asks only for a simple dress, just like the ones she used to wear in poverty, to spare her from suffering the indignity of returning home unclothed. Griselda strips herself of all her riches and returns home in her poor clothes. But Griselda's humiliation does not end there. Walter also asks her to return to the castle and prepare the rooms and the feast for his new bride, with the crowning humiliation when he asks her how she likes the bride. Although she begins by praising his new bride, Griselda then says, "I never saw a lovelier in my life, one thing I beg you never put her on trial, adversity forced on her would be harder for her to suffer than for me" (369). The narrator, at the end of this part, compares the suffering Griselda has endured to the Biblical Job. After endless humiliation, Griselda has patiently endured it all, so at last Walter, the husband, says, "That is enough Griselda mine," and takes her in his arms to kiss her. He reveals to her that her children, now grown and whom she had thought dead, are actually alive and the supposed new wife is actually her own daughter. He honors her and has others honor her as well.

Chaucer did not want to leave the true purpose of his parable undefined: This story is not told, says the clerk in substance, to exhort wives to imitate Griselda's humility, for that would be beyond the capacity of human nature. It is told in order that every man or woman, in whatever condition of life, may learn fortitude in adversity. All Western medieval versions share the plot of wifely obedience, making Griselda an ideal wife who endures without complaining the trials imposed upon her by her husband. Petrarch finds Griselda to be a sort of exemplar of virtue for which the ordinary woman can strive but never really hope to achieve and Petrarch states that his object was "not to induce women of [his and Boccaccio's] time to imitate the patience of this wife [Griselda] ... but to lead [his] readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy and to submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband" (136). Conflating class, gender, and religious hierarchies, and seeking an allegorical version, Petrarch, whom Chaucer quotes in at the end of the story, endorses Griselda's humility as the ideal behavior of a Christian subject.

A facile reading of the tale would confirm clichéd perceptions of submissive women as compliant victims despite Chaucer's cautionary conclusion and this is followed in other medieval collections of didactic tales for women. For example, de Mézières, like his predecessors, constructed the tale as a story of wife testing and translated it into the vernacular for a female audience in order to teach women their place. Similarly, *Le Mesnagier de Paris* overflows with suggestions for a woman's obedience,

such as "it is through good obeisance that a wise woman obtains her husband's love and, in the end, receives from him what she desires" (119).

Chaucer's ambivalent and ironic version vacillates between Petrarch's sublimating interpretation and de Mézières's more practical one. The Clerk criticizes the husband's cruel and self-indulgent behavior as tyrannical and increases the irony in Griselda's speeches; however, he also privileges the notion of wife taming by concluding his narration with a lengthy parody of praise for the Wife of Bath and all unruly wives, thus framing his tale of Griselda as a nostalgic tribute to the age of wifely obedience in the West. Read from this masculinist angle, the Griselda tale fits the medieval patriarchal paradigm and we can easily read this story as reinforcing normative values and aiming at the domestication and repression of women. de Pisan's version, however, reframes the tale to celebrate Griselda's strength and her success in reforming her husband and de Pisan presents Griselda as the first of many examples of female strength, seeing Griselda's patience not as a quality that benefits her *per se* but as what enables her to restore order. In Western culture, the Griselda motif still unsettles some today who reject it for propagating the dominant construction of women as "weak, silent, and worse," read as a classic case of sexual abuse of the sort that is inevitable in patriarchal social structure (on this, see, e.g., Vasvári). I should also like to point out that in most of anthropological and folklore scholarship there is a lack of the perspective of women (see, e.g., Ardener and Ardener). And, interestingly, in contemporary fiction there are examples where the medieval tale is criticized as a story of submission. For example, Gillian Perholt, the narrator in A.S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* — a British feminist writer who goes to a conference in Ankara held on "Stories of Women's Lives" — during her conference presentation expresses "outrage at what was done to Griselda," viewing her story as emblematic of the "stories of women's lives" that are "the stories of stopped energy (145).

The motif of the patient wife as received by the North African audience, is heard differently than by Perholt. The use of feminist stories to encourage rebellion, transgression, or transformation is different in the two contexts. While in the West confrontation is seen as strength and expression of the self, in the Middle East it is seen as lack of restraint and a self-centeredness that disrupts harmony. Perhaps the key is that feminists in both contexts are trying to transform social practices, but the way they approach gendering differs according to the accepted social practices and values in the two spaces of culture. In the Middle East variants of the Griselda legend survive in the repertoire of folklore of contemporary female story-tellers, especially in the Maghreb. These analogues are performed in all-female gatherings and often emphasize the patient wife's role in reforming her husband, preserving the family, and thereby restoring order to their marriage and her life (see my *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis*). The version I am analyzing here is a Tunisian version called "Sabra" as narrated by Sa'diyya, an informant for my book *Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunis*. The present version was recorded in the Summer 2003 during a storytelling event organized by myself, in Sa'adiyya's words:

A merchant has an extremely intelligent and beautiful daughter. When she is of marriageable age, he puts a sign on the door of his shop which reads: "I will marry my daughter Sabra to whoever gives three loads of gold as a bride price. One for her beauty, one for her wisdom, and one for her patience." A rich dignitary sees the sign and decides immediately that this exemplary woman should be his wife. Soon after their marriage, he decides on a plan to test his wife putting her through humiliating ordeals. Sabra conceives and nine months later her husband calls an old neighbor to help with the delivery. The newborn, a son, is pampered and when he is two years old, the husband takes him away without saying anything to her. Sabra says nothing, but she goes to the attic and makes a clay doll, she calls the doll *Ummi Tfeyla* (My Clay Mother) and complains to her. The doll always answers, "Be patient. Patience is good. She who is patient builds a happy home." Rather than putting the child to death (although allowing Sabra to believe her child was dead), the husband instead sends the child to be raised by the old neighbor. Sabra remains steadfast and dedicated to her husband, accepting her fate silently and that of the child whom she believed dead. A few years later the second boy is born and Sabra's husband tests her with the staged disposal of their second child. The clay doll again calls for her to be patient, "Be patient. Patience is good. She who is patient builds a happy home." The third born is a daughter and again she is taken away from her and Sabra does not utter a word of complaint. Sabra's husband always leaves her alone, although he always provides food for her. Sabra always shares her sorrows with the clay doll every day. Twenty years pass, and her husband finds mates for his grown boys. Then he tells Sabra that he wishes to remarry soon and redesign the house to make room for his new bride. He insists that she finds the bride and plan the ceremony. She agrees patiently and begins with the ar-

rangements. She goes from house to house looking at prospective brides. When she says, "I am looking for a bride for my husband," the women loathe her. Sabra, unruffled by the women's disapproval, devises the next step. On the wedding day, she greets his bride and escorts her into the nuptial chamber. As she is giving her husband away, Sabra's scarf brushes a candle and catches fire, she puts it out with her hand, and says, "You took away my children and burned my flesh and blood. Now I have a rival, my patience is exhausted and my wisdom has run out." He kisses her, praises her for her patience and reveals that the supposed bride and her brothers are Sabra's own children, secretly raised by the neighbor. Sabra tells joyfully the doll that her children are back. They all live together in the rebuilt mansion. Then, one day her husband asks her how she had survived in silence and Sabra shows him the clay doll. He hits the doll with his cane, breaking it into pieces: it is filled with worms. He says to her: "I should have been given not three loads of gold, but six. Had you not emptied the cares of your heart, you would have perished long ago": from that day on, he does not go out at night, but stays with his family and all live in affectionate happiness thereafter.

Sa'diyya is a sixty-year old distant relative of mine. She is not literate and had no opportunity to go to school. She is a well-known figure in my family, appreciated for verbal skills, and invited occasionally to our family's social events. She considers her talent as a gift from God and a compensation for her illiteracy. The story was told to an all female group. In my reading of the tale, a story that is extremely misogynistic on the face of it, takes on new and positive meanings through retelling in this particular local context. It is interesting how Sa'adiyya shapes the story to her life, or maybe how her life alters the way in which she narrates the tale. In my understanding, Griselda's story parallels her own since she had to endure the cruelty of her in-laws in silence. In a discussion of the tale Sa'adiyya explains, "I defeated my in-laws with silence." The imaginary frame serves as a veil for self-expression, as Joan Newlon Radner and Susan S. Lanser note in their discussion of coding strategies that mask women's experiences.

Tale telling fulfills the function of revealing the self indirectly and is essential as an expression of personal experience and consciousness (see my *Behind Closed Doors* 35-60). Further, both Lila Abu Loghod, in *Veiled Sentiments*, and Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics in their "Introduction" to the collected volume *Women and Power in the Middles East*, discuss the social location of women in the Middle East and differences between societies where people are other-centered rather than self-centered or autonomous as seen in Western societies. Thus, by any contemporary standards of behavior, Sabra's actions are reprehensible, but in her rendition Sa'adiyy emphasizes the husband's reform (a male initiation?) and domestication in his devotion to Sabra. Whereas at the beginning of the tale both husband and wife are fragmented (the husband's presence limited to impregnating and providing for the wife), the tale ends with two complete humans collaborating in creating a family. In Sa'diyya's narration, the reunion does not end the conflict between husband and wife: he must ask her how she survived the trials, thus admitting his defeat. More than cheerful obedience, the husband seeks an inherent trait of character that stands apart from obedience. When he destroys the doll, the worms that pour forth testify to the depth of Sabra's sorrows. The most moving passage of the tale finds Sabra leading her husband into the wedding chamber. The reclaiming of her voice is fully articulated in Sabra's outburst at the tale's climax which challenges directly her husband's behavior. At this moment her head scarf catches fire, symbolizing the return of her life and spirit.

In this tale, the wife serves as a model that could be linked to Petrarch’s celebration of the patient wife as a pious exemplar. Sa'adiyya's use of metaphor is indirect yet forceful, illustrating her emotional suffering over the children's loss and connecting it with the physical pain of her burnt hand
She breaks with her conditioning and speaks about her pain, bringing herself back to life, and sets the terms for the renewal of their marriage. She regains her creativity (her children) and true love (her reformed husband, without his cruelty). However, the tale might also be seen as a mechanism upholding tradition and "putting women back in their place (obedient to father, husband) and a weapon that enforces the mandate of an entrenched patriarchy, aligning Tunisian women with the medieval Griselda and her world, and thus a less advanced society. In Tunisia, this tale is entitled "Sabra" and is told in a context of socialization, in a space for women's encounters, and for sharing their wisdom. Social life takes place in the home, primarily a female space, sitting, talking, and visiting with one's friends and family to maintain the ties of exchange and support that define the resources upon which women can survive in an increasingly urbanizing nation. It is assumed by many feminist scholars that women, everywhere, ultimately desire individual rights rather than collective rights (with

regard to this approach to folklore, see, e.g., Hollis, Pershing, Young). In fact, as Bulbeck puts it, "Muslims see individual identity as a disturbance of collective harmony" (74). Thus, the narrator of the "Sabra" tale might choose to position patience and humility as virtues of the feminine. This emphasis on patience and its practice represents a difference between the culture of the East and the West. In Arabic, connotations of the noun *sabr* ("patience") include composure, equanimity, steadfastness, firmness, self-control, self-command, self-possession, perseverance, endurance, and hardiness, reflecting the actively resistant potential of patience. In Muslim Arabic popular wisdom, the discourse of patience and resistance transcends the boundaries of gender to become the ultimate principle of life, weaving the fabric of community and providing a model for all to follow.

In Sa'adiyya's variant, we move from the "trafficking" of a female figure to a more integrative and egalitarian resolution, emphasizing the mutual benefit of solidarity and the family unit. In it is this context that Tunisian women find Western feminist preconceptions about the individualistic nature of the self problematic. While seeking female autonomy and self-assertion, Tunisian women may endorse negotiation rather than rupture, pacifism rather than violence, indirection rather than confrontation, and patience rather than rebellion as viable strategies that benefit the family as a whole and bring greater person fulfillment for women. The skeptic might argue that silence in the face of oppression — however strategic — can never be understood as "control." However, "suffering and patience" are virtues that in the Tunisian Muslim context have a different semiotic meaning than they do in the West. One reading of the tale illustrates a process of initiation in order to safeguard a female subjectivity that triumphs over violence. But on a deeper level the tale is a tale of initiation that socializes and reforms the husband whereby the social link is restored and the happy reunion is made possible. The deep structure of all versions of the motif of the patient wife reflects a schema of disorder, conflict, and restoration of order and as a folktale in this version it is possible to interpret it neither as misogynist nor as feminist. This variant appropriates and manipulates the motif to suit the teller's agenda, reinterpreting the tale, and renewing it with each telling thus making narrators not only tradition bearers, but also creators in their own right. And I propose that an analysis employing structural semiotic methodology where narratives may be interpreted according to collective archetypes and symbols— such as employed by Carl Jung or Alan Dundes involving episodes and symbols — would reveal one major theme which amounts to female initiation into roles and activities typical of and appropriate for young heroines. Here, I go further and suggest we could also read it as a male initiation. Thus the generic paradigm involves three major phases: 1) Initial situation, 2) Acquisition of support or a benevolent mother figure (e.g., clay doll), a narrative device that depicts the unconscious symbolically or a second self with whom a heroine is in conflict, and 3) Social transformation along Arnold van Gennep's model of ritual in which a figurative or ritualized "death" facilitates dramatic change.

Focusing on Sabra's personal development over the course of her experience, Sa'adiyya's emphasis on Sabra's wisdom and patience as qualities and assets ready for her own conscious use illustrates social transformation via the acquisition of support by the symbolic benevolent "mother," i.e., the clay doll. While from a Western point of view the tale can be interpreted as patriarchal, values embedded in the tale in fact questions this interpretation and presents an alternative reading of these values as feminist: "Patience is good," says Sa'adiyya, if it benefits the family as a whole. Sa’adiyya's faith in the rightness of her patience might awaken conflicted concerns in a feminist interpretation — as for example in Haya Bar-Itzhak's and Aliza Shenhar's *Jewish Moroccan Folk Narratives from Israel* where they interpret the motif of the patient wife as to how women internalize values of patriarchy — and this interpretation suggests, as I mention previously, the opposite of Sa’adiyya's endorsement of negotiation and passive resistance as strategies that bring greater fulfillment to women in Muslim culture. Similarly, in twentieth-century Moroccan tradition there are a number of tales about patient wives, for example "Ommi Sannoura" ("The Patient Wife") including a variant of the clay doll in "Sabra" and these versions suggest an interpretation aligned more to what I present here, thus contrary to a disruptive and aggressive stance (see al-Assimi). And in her *Patience and Power: Women's Lives in a Moroccan Village*, Susan Schaefer Davis presents the following exchange: "Anthropologist/Me: You want to get married, but what if you don't like the man your family chooses, or what if you don't get along after a few years? Moroccan Girl: Ghadi nsber, bhal mwi. I'll be patient, like my mother" (v) and Davis comments on this conversation writing that "To a Westerner, this reply may suggest a kind of submission, a bearing of whatever happens because this is a woman's lot and she has no alterna-

tives. I often heard women say 'I'll be patient' or 'Women are patient,' but after I became more familiar with the culture I realized that this meant much more than just enduring whatever came their way. They were patient — *until* they fully understood a situation and decided which was the best move to make. The mother of the girl above was patient with her first engagement until she decided she really disliked the man and … the marriage was never consummated"

Trials of love and marriage structure many tales in my collection of tales *Behind Closed Doors* and embedded in these narratives is women's discourse that expresses an affirmative view of suffering and patience as character- and consciousness-building trials in order to support the working of family life. Despite these trials, women in Muslim culture do not renounce their social roles; rather, they work within their culture, challenging it, revising it, recreating it anew. They are learning the power of language and according to their differentiated resources manipulate it to their advantage (on this, see Sadiqi). Thus, to them, Western models of feminism tend to offend owing to their attacks on Muslim culture and their extreme privileging of the individual over the community. Family continues to be of prime importance for most Muslims and thus also so in Tunisian culture. Modern Tunisian women may embrace the new story of expanding opportunities while still cherishing the practices and behavior of women as mothers who enjoy their husband's devotion. A contemporary carrier of folkloric knowledge and who accords the culture expressed in the folktale about the patient wife relevant value and enacts it, Sa'diyya is a woman who lived through post-independence social upheavals and while she applauds the new opportunities open to women enabling them to enjoy a maximum of choices in shaping their lives, at the same time she opts for negotiation and mediation instead of rupture, as exemplified by Sabra of the folktale.

In conclusion, by examining the motif of the patient wife in Muslim folklore and literature and the motif of Griselda in medieval Western literature, in the modern Tunisian oral variant of the motif we can see how the same story can sustain different readings and that social and cultural contexts foster these differences. My reading of the Tunisian variant of the folktale suggests an alternative to the reading of the folktale in Western scholarship. The Tunisian variant I recorded and analyze here remains part of a living oral culture suggesting that the tale still has resonance and relevance in contemporary Tunisian society.

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