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Female Kayd in Moroccan Storytelling: "The Woman and the Devil"

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, oral storytelling has shaped cultural memory and reinforced moral frameworks. Within Morocco's oral tradition, "The Woman and the Devil" presents a striking case in which female cunning not only rivals but surpasses the devil's malevolence. Using close reading and cultural contextualization, this article examines how the tale constructs the female character as a site of danger and deceit, while also reflecting deeper cultural anxieties about gender, power, and morality. Drawing on psychoanalytic, anthropological, and gender-theoretical perspectives, the analysis explores how the woman's actions embody destructive cunning, mastery of language, and the use of witchcraft—figures that resonate with Moroccan proverbs and beliefs about female potency. While on the surface the story reinforces patriarchal stereotypes that equate women with evil, a closer reading reveals a more ambivalent message: women are portrayed as both destructive and commanding, capable of subduing even the devil himself. By situating the tale within Moroccan oral traditions and cross-cultural variations, this study demonstrates how such narratives function not only as vehicles of misogynistic discourse but also as cultural mirrors that reveal male vulnerability and latent admiration for feminine control.

KEYWORDS

Women

Folktales

Oral Tradition

Gender

Patriarchy

Storytelling

Introduction

For centuries, folktales have served purposes far beyond entertainment, pedagogy, or the simple pleasure of storytelling. As Thompson and Wojcik observe, oral narratives function simultaneously as aesthetic forms and as social instruments through which communities articulate values, fears, and collective memory (144). Within Morocco's storytelling traditions, such tales have not merely provided "moments to forget about the harsh reality" but have actively shaped moral imagination and gendered worldviews, embedding patriarchal anxieties in narrative form (Fakhr Eddine 21). From an anthropological perspective, this cultural work is constitutive rather than peripheral: as William Bascom famously argues, folklore is "one of the important parts that go to make up the culture of any given people" (284). The implication is clear. The narrative fragments that scholars collect and interpret are not curiosities; they are privileged resources for construing Moroccan popular culture. Ben-Amos argues that folklore should be understood not as a residual domain of irrational or rural survivals but as a culturally specific mode of communication embedded in social practice (6–7). Building on this view, Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones emphasize that folklore must be understood as an integral component of culture—created, learned, and transmitted through social practice, and

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essential to collective social identification (159–60). As Hasan El-Shamy further observes, "the basic factor which keeps folklore and all other aspects of culture dynamic within a society is the transmission of culture from person to person, and from one generation to the next," highlighting that the survival of folktales depends not on textual fixity but on continual oral circulation and re-performance (17).

Within this narrative ecology, oral traditions that cast women as cunning or malevolent occupy a revealing space, showing how patriarchal communities negotiate female agency through mythic form. Foundational and feminist ethnographies converge on this point. Edward Westermarck documents the ubiquity of *shur*—scribal charms, women's sorcery, *jnun*-mediated interventions, and sympathetic logics—embedded in everyday pursuits of love, protection, prosperity, and revenge, alongside counter-charms (570–608). As Stefania Pandolfo observes, "It is not by accident that witchcraft occupies a central place in the imaginary of illness and modernity in Morocco," underscoring that *shur* functions not as marginal superstition but as a culturally central explanation for disorder, vulnerability, and social anxiety (Pandolfo 59). Deborah Kapchan reframes *shur* practices as creative agency enacted through performance, market speech, and domestic ritual, revealing how women's verbal and ritual repertoires both challenge and reaffirm patriarchal norms (Kapchan 231–275). Fatima Sadiqi, likewise, underscores the paradox of women's orality—socially devalued as "vulgar" yet indispensable to the transmission of moral and cultural knowledge in largely oral, multilingual communities (41–43). Together, these accounts show that women's speech and ritual power are at once productive and policed, admired and pathologized.

At the same time, ethnographic and sociological works record how Moroccan gender ideology frequently recasts female potency in negative terms—equating speech with danger, sexuality with corruption, and age with witchcraft. Vincent Crapanzano's portrait of gender among the Hamadsha notes women as "weak, defenseless, treacherous, and untrustworthy" (8). Fatima Mernissi, on the other hand, analyzes how the menopausal woman can be figured as meddling or diabolical, her influence recast as a moral threat (113–114). The old woman, in particular, condenses this ambivalence: feared for sorcery yet respected for experience—a tension crystallized in proverbs such as *لي يديرو الشيطان في عام، تديرو لمرا الشارفا في ساعة*—*What Satan does in a year, an old woman does in an hour*. As Rachel Newcomb observes, recent legal and social changes have produced "an increased climate of fear and suspicion on the part of men," a climate in which women are often portrayed as deceptive or morally dangerous (51–56).

It is within this intersection of gender, morality, and narrative that the Moroccan folktale "The Woman and the Devil," narrated by Abderrahim El Makkouri and translated and published in 2011 by Richard Hamilton in *The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco*, must be situated. In the tale, an old woman outwits the devil, creates domestic and communal catastrophe, and ultimately enslaves him—moving from mere cleverness to sovereign control. On the surface, the narrative rehearses a familiar patriarchal trope of female malice; beneath it, however, lies an admission of male vulnerability and a fascinated regard for feminine intellect. This article analyzes this specific Hamilton version as its primary text. This version is selected because it presents the most fully developed narrative contest between an old woman and the devil, culminating in the rare motif of the devil's permanent enslavement. Its narrative completeness and explicit dramatization of female *kayd* make it particularly well suited to a close reading that combines psychoanalytic interpretation with Moroccan cultural and proverbial contexts.

Methodologically, this article proceeds from the premise—articulated by Alan Dundes—that the serious analysis of a folk narrative is "a critical task," requiring attention to genesis, textual

accuracy, wide-angle historicity, and "a sense of anthropological pattern and contrast" (22). In line with Stith Thompson's call for historically, anthropologically, linguistically, and psychologically informed approaches, the present analysis is resolutely interdisciplinary (6). It integrates anthropology, psychology, and cultural analysis; draws on Jungian theory—especially the animus as elaborated by Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz—to read the tale's female figure as a dramatization of destructive and transformative psychic energies; and treats Moroccan proverbs as interpretive lenses that both crystallize and contest the tale's gendered meanings. By aligning close textual reading with ethnographic context and proverbial discourse, the article argues that "The Woman and the Devil" functions as a cultural allegory: it encodes tensions between fear and reverence, repression and resistance, thereby revealing how Moroccan storytelling simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes patriarchal understandings of women's power.

While Moroccan oral tradition has been extensively documented by folklorists and anthropologists—often with an emphasis on narrative structure, symbolism, and cultural preservation—comparatively little scholarship has undertaken a sustained close reading of a single tale to examine how female malevolence operates simultaneously as misogynistic discourse and as a symbolic expression of women's power. Moroccan works such as Mohamed Fakhr Eddine's *Al-Ḥikayah al-Shaʿbiyah al-Maghribiyah: Bunyat al-Sard wa-al-Mutakhayil* (2014) and *Mawsuʿat al-Ḥikayat al-Shaʿbiyya al-Maghribiyya* (2018), as well as more recent collections by Mohammed Al-Bouabidi, *Miʾat Ḥajaya wa-Ḥajaya: Jard, Tafsir wa-Taʿliq* (2021), and Hassan Bahraoui, *Ḥikayat Shaʿbiya Maghribiya* (2023), offer invaluable insights into symbolism, variation, and narrative imagination across broad corpora. Feminist scholarship has likewise addressed female cunning, most notably Hasna Lebbady's *Feminist Traditions in Andalusi-Moroccan Oral Narratives* (2009), which examines *kayd n'ssa* through a comparative textual and visual analysis of a limited corpus recorded from women in Tetouan. In this article, I pursue an in-depth, tale-specific analysis that integrates close textual reading with cultural contextualization, Moroccan proverbial discourse on *kayd*, and psychoanalytic interpretation. This article offers a focused reading of "The Woman and the Devil," demonstrating how a single narrative serves as a site where cultural anxiety, gendered power, and symbolic authority are negotiated.

Synopsis of the Tale

The story opens with an old woman seated on a rocky summit in the High Atlas Mountains, gazing down at the small town nestled in the valley below. Lost in contemplation, she is approached by Satan, who invites her to witness the mischief he can create. Descending into the town's souk, he spots a man carrying a jar of olive oil. With a sly maneuver, he slips between the man's legs, causing him to stumble and spill the oil. Triumphant, Satan returns to the mountain, expecting the woman's admiration. Instead, she smirks and dismisses his feat as trivial. Determined to outdo him, the woman enters the town and approaches a spice merchant's young wife. Planting seeds of jealousy, she convinces the wife that her husband, Abdullah, intends to marry another woman. Desperate to prevent this, the wife accepts the old woman's suggestion: she prepares a potion, drugging her husband's tea and cutting tufts of his beard for the charm. The old woman then approaches Abdullah, warning him that his wife plans to kill him. Suspicious and fearful, he pretends to drink the tea and feigns sleep. When his wife leans over him with a knife, he stabs her in self-defense. Her family retaliates, and a bloody feud erupts between the two households. From her mountain vantage point, the old woman smiles at Satan and declares her superiority: "This is more than knocking over a jar of oil" (218). Finally,

tricking Satan himself with a tale of a magic ring, she seals him in a jar, carrying him with her wherever she goes.

Structure of the Tale

The narrative is built on a contest of cunning between the woman and the devil, each seeking to surpass the other in the scale of destruction they can cause. The devil begins the rivalry with a minor disruption: he causes a man to stumble in the souk, spilling a jar of olive oil, and delights in the commotion. The old woman, unimpressed by the triviality of his trick, descends into the marketplace with the intention of creating something far more devastating. Her strategy unfolds in two deliberate stages. First, she manipulates the young wife by exploiting her insecurities, persuading her to cut tufts of her husband's beard and prepare a potion under the guise of ensuring his fidelity. Second, she turns to the husband, Abdullah, warning him that his wife intends to kill him that very night. Deceived by her authoritative tone and convincing reasoning, Abdullah follows her advice, pretends to drink the drugged tea, and feigns sleep. When his wife approaches with a knife, he kills her in fear and suspicion. The murder sparks a cycle of revenge, culminating in a violent feud between the two families and escalating into civil conflict. The tale concludes with the woman's final act of triumph: through deceit, she traps the devil himself inside a jar. By turning the devil into her prisoner, the woman not only proves her superiority but also demonstrates mastery over the very embodiment of evil.

Adaptation of "The Woman and the Devil"

Cristina Bacchilega, in *Fairy Tales Transformed* (2013), argues that while traditional fairy tales invite unquestioned belief in the supernatural, modern adaptations blur the line between fantasy and reality, encouraging critical reflection (109). In the Moroccan context, this adaptive impulse is evident in a corpus of films and television productions that rework folkloric motifs, including Farida Benlyazid's and Fatima Boubekdi's works such as *Al-Kameen* (2002), *Amoud* (2003), *Romana O Brtal* (2005), *Souk N'ssa* (2005), and the *Hdidan* series (2009). Boubekdi also directed *Douaiba* (2003) and *Zhar Ou Mricha* (2014), which vividly portray women's cunning and wisdom. The tale of "The Woman and the Devil" has not remained confined to oral tradition but has been assimilated into other cultural forms, most notably the Moroccan television film *Souk N'ssa* (2005), directed by Fatima Boubekdi. The film centers on a young man, Jawad al-Alami, who has memorized the Qur'an and mastered the principles of language, jurisprudence, and religion. In accordance with custom, his community celebrates his achievements and nominates him for the position of imam while encouraging him to marry. He refuses, insisting instead that he must first study "Women's War" (*ḥarb nisa'*), a phrase suggesting a deeper need to understand the nature of women. The narrative unfolds as the young imam encounters Taja (played by Sanaa Akroud), a shrewd woman who draws him into a web of schemes and deceptions. Through trickery and cunning, she places him in compromising situations, effectively schooling him in women's reputedly conniving ways. The story shifts further into the realm of the supernatural when the imam encounters a jin that had been imprisoned for many years by a malevolent old woman. In a scene strikingly reminiscent of "The Woman and the Devil," the jin recalls how he was trapped inside a jar through the woman's cunning use of a magical ring. This adaptation demonstrates how the folktale continues to resonate within Moroccan cultural production. By transplanting the tale's central motif—the old woman's triumph over the devil—into a modern visual medium, *Souk N'ssa* reinforces long-standing associations of femininity with deceit and danger, while also highlighting the enduring power of oral storytelling to shape contemporary narratives.

Variations of the Tale

Classified as ATU 1353 ('The Old Woman as Trouble Maker') in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther index, 'The Woman and the Devil' circulates in numerous variants structured around a recurring motif: a woman whose cunning enables her to surpass and ultimately dominate the devil. One example appears in the Brothers Grimm's "The Devil and His Grandmother," a story of three deserters who have sold their souls to the Devil, and escape damnation when the Devil's grandmother secretly learns and reveals his riddle, allowing them to outwit him, demonstrating how female cunning and insider knowledge can override devilish authority (405). In other traditions, however, the woman's role is more overtly malicious. In Karl Bartsch's "An Old Woman Worse Than the Devil," an elderly woman sows distrust between a married couple, leading the husband to murder his wife. Similarly, Martin Luther's German version, "The Devil's Tyranny Against a Married Couple," presents a woman whose manipulation drives a husband and wife into violence, earning her the devil's admiration. In the Swedish tale "Katie Grey," collected by Baron G. Djurklou, a wife is persuaded to cut her husband's beard, an act that spirals into both their deaths. In these variants, the devil himself acknowledges the woman's evil capabilities, often rewarding her from a distance, wary of her power. From the cunning witches of European folklore to the demonesses of Asian mythology, the same archetype emerges: the woman as a figure whose intellect and ambition can eclipse even the devil's.

The Moroccan tale, however, represents an extreme instance of this archetype. Here, the woman does not merely outwit the devil but proves her superiority by trapping him in a jar, carrying him as her captive and living symbol of triumph. This narrative recalls the motif of the pact with the devil—known in Christian mythology as the Faustian or Mephistophelian bargain—where an individual exchanges their soul for worldly rewards such as youth, knowledge, wealth, or power. Moroccan storytelling likewise incorporates such motifs. For instance, in "The Nobleman and His Three Sons," also published by Hamilton, Messaoud enters into a bargain with Satan, wishing for the destruction of the noble family he serves. With Satan's aid, he transforms the nobleman's three sons into birds. Yet, with the intervention of Zoubida and the sage Sida Slimane, the brothers are restored, and Messaoud is punished, transformed into a hyena as an eternal warning. The resonance of this motif also extends into literary tradition. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, for example, embodies a similar archetype: she invokes evil spirits to strip away her compassion, persuades Macbeth to commit regicide, and ultimately unravels under the weight of her guilt. Like Lady Macbeth, the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil" is defined by her ruthless ambition and destructive cunning. Unlike Shakespeare's character, however, she does not collapse but prevails, not only outmaneuvering the devil but enslaving him. Her final triumph marks her as the ultimate embodiment of malevolence and control.

Analysis of the Tale

Before turning to the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil," it is essential to begin with Carl Jung's foundational concept of the *animus*, which provides a useful framework for understanding her character. It must be clarified that the Jungian concept of the *animus* is not employed here as a diagnostic label or as a universal explanation detached from social context, but as a heuristic tool for reading narrative symbolism. In the Moroccan setting of this tale, destructive animus does not operate in abstraction; it is articulated through culturally specific discourses of *kayd*, sorcery, age, and female speech. The figure of the old woman thus emerges not simply as a pathological embodiment of evil, but as a culturally intelligible agent whose

archetypal force is shaped, amplified, and constrained by Moroccan social anxieties surrounding women's power.

As Marie-Louise von Franz explains, the animus represents the masculine embodiment of the unconscious in women. According to Jung, the animus may take both constructive and destructive forms. On the one hand, it can inspire creativity, spiritual insight, and inner strength. On the other hand, it can appear as obstinate conviction, destructive rigidity, or hostile judgment, often disregarding lived reality. Typically, the animus derives its authority from the figure of the father, carrying his unarguable beliefs and shaping the woman's inner world (186–187). In the tale, however, the reader is given no information about the old woman's father or background. Instead, her motives remain unexplained, compelling us to focus directly on her psyche and her self-conscious drive to become the most destructive force on earth. Jung describes the negative animus as a "death-demon," capable of pulling a woman away from human connection and into obsession, hostility, and destruction. This dark power, Jung argues, fosters destructive behaviors that not only harm others but also perpetuate inner disconnection, passivity, or despair (187).

The tale illustrates this destructive animus from its opening scene. The woman is first introduced seated upon a rocky summit in the High Atlas Mountains, gazing silently at the prosperous town below: "She sat there for a long time, gazing at the town and wondering about many things" (216). The mountain setting symbolizes detachment and contemplation, placing her physically above the community, and metaphorically in a position of power. From this height, she observes without participating, embodying a force that stands outside the ordinary and anticipates disruption. When the devil descends into the souk and causes a man to drop a jar of oil, he laughs at the trivial chaos. Yet the woman remains unmoved. Her stillness and scorn imply that she awaits a more destructive release of power, one capable of shattering not just a marketplace but the entire community.

As the story unfolds, her schemes prove far more catastrophic than the devil's petty trick. In calculated stages, she destroys a marriage and triggers a civil war that annihilates both families. In this sense, the woman becomes the embodiment of Jung's destructive animus: a latent force that bursts into violence, channeling hidden obsessions into ruinous action. Yet Jung also insisted that the animus is not purely negative. He noted its potential to become a creative and purposeful force. In his discussion of a forty-five-year-old woman's dream of two veiled intruders, Jung shows how even tormenting figures could suddenly reveal artistic impulses. If integrated, the animus can evolve through four developmental stages: raw physical power; directed initiative and action; embodiment through words and knowledge; and, finally, the highest stage of meaning and spiritual insight. At its fullest form, the animus serves as inner support, enriching a woman's intellect and spirituality and granting her access to creative vision. Von Franz emphasizes that for such transformation to occur, a woman must find the courage to question her deepest convictions and remain open to the unconscious, even when it contradicts her assumptions:

> The woman must find the courage and inner broadmindedness to question the sacredness of her own convictions. Only then will she be able to take in the suggestions of the unconscious, especially when they contradict her animus opinions. Only then will the manifestations of the Self get through to her, and will she be able consciously to understand their meaning. (Jung and von Franz 205–207)

When this framework is applied to "The Woman and the Devil," the tale clearly dramatizes the destructive form of the animus. The old woman's knowledge of her society, its cultural

expectations, and its religious precepts allows her to weaponize words and schemes, driving others to ruin. In her, Jung's theory finds a narrative embodiment: an animus that, instead of bridging toward creativity or meaning, manifests as hostility, cunning, and annihilation.

The destructive skills that the old woman employs in the narrative, one must note, derive not only from her innate cunning but also from her calculated use of the social codes and religious tenets of the Moroccan community. Her ability to manipulate others is rooted in this cultural knowledge, which she deploys strategically to achieve devastating ends. Significantly, the tale provides no explicit rationale for her actions. The absence of motivation—whether maternal concern, personal resentment, or social grievance—deepens the enigma of her character. Readers are left to puzzle over her behavior, and one logical inference is that she lacks the conventional attributes associated with femininity: nurturing, relationality, or empathy. The story is equally silent about her marital status or whether she has borne children, leaving these fundamental aspects of her identity unresolved. This silence does not merely complicate her portrayal but amplifies her menace, making her a figure without domestic ties, defined solely by destructive intent.

Within Moroccan tribal discourse, such figures are readily aligned with evil. Popular wisdom crystallizes this in the proverb: *لي يديرو الشيطان في عام، تديرو لمرا الشارفا في ساعة—What Satan does in a year, an old woman does in an hour*. The saying asserts the superiority of female cunning over satanic trickery, stressing the speed and efficacy with which women are imagined to act. This proverb is dramatized in the tale itself, where the devil, after causing a minor accident in the souk, watches in awe as the woman's plot leads to the downfall of families and the eruption of civil war, ultimately admitting, "I could never have done what you did" (218). Another widely circulated proverb reinforces the point: *كيد النسا قوي وكيد الشيطان ضعيف—Women's plot is powerful, and the devil's plot is weak*. Here, the hierarchy is explicit: the devil's schemes are weak in comparison to the lethal potency of women's cunning. The narrative itself underscores this hierarchy. When the devil causes a man to drop his jar of oil, the woman dismisses the incident with scorn: "That's nothing," the woman replied, "watch me." She then proceeds into the town while the devil, once boastful, resigns himself to the role of silent observer: "The devil took her place on the mountaintop while she descended into the town and visited the souk" (216). His transformation into a spectator signals his defeat before her destructive power has even been unleashed.

Other proverbs articulate this suspicion of women's nature through metaphors of the body. One declares: *لمرا ضلعة عوجا، إلى جيتي تسكمها غا تهرس، أو إلى خليتها راها عوجا—A woman is a twisted rib: if you try to straighten her, she breaks; if you leave her, she remains crooked.* The statement posits the immutable crookedness of women, warning that any attempt at reform will only worsen the situation. This cultural maxim, deeply embedded in Moroccan oral tradition, reinforces the belief that women are inherently inclined toward corruptive deeds that harm others. In the context of "The Woman and the Devil," the woman not only confirms this stereotype but exceeds it, proving herself capable of defeating even Satan, the embodiment of ultimate malevolence.

This association is reinforced by a theological reference. In Moroccan culture, men frequently cite the religious account of Eve's persuasion of Adam to eat from the forbidden tree, an act that led to humanity's exile from paradise. This narrative is often invoked in everyday discourse to explain female inclinations toward deception and transgression, thereby presenting women as inherently predisposed to malevolence. The woman in the tale can thus be read as a continuation of Eve: the primordial temptress reborn in oral narrative form, her cunning amplified to diabolical proportions. Mernissi points out that in Moroccan society, elderly women hold great power despite being socially pressured to renounce sexuality after menopause. No longer valued as wives, they gain influence through gossip, reputation-making,

and control over marriage prospects, often surpassing men in decision-making. Folk proverbs, for her, portray them as dangerous intriguers, feared for their ability to plot, while jokes mock their loss of sexual worth. Yet, they also act as mentors, passing down vital knowledge of beauty, refinement, and traditional remedies to younger women. Thus, while stigmatized as destructive, older women wield significant authority in shaping family honor, marital choices, and the lives of the younger generation (112–114).

At the same time, Moroccan oral and popular religious retellings complicate this accusatory theology. In some widely circulated versions of the Fall, Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree simultaneously, both deceived by Satan acting within their thoughts rather than through female persuasion. These alternative narratives do not erase misogynistic interpretations, but they reveal that the association of moral transgression primarily with women is culturally produced rather than theologically inevitable (Rosen 113).

The evil imagery extends to animal metaphor. In Moroccan popular culture, women are often likened to serpents: *لمرا لفعا ومتحزمة بإبليس*—*A woman is a snake, girded by Satan.* This image, deeply embedded in orality, explicitly pairs the feminine with animal venom and diabolical force. Another saying sharpens the comparison: *لمرا بحل لفعا الغرطيطا*—*A woman is like a twisted serpent.* Both proverbs collapse the woman into the serpent, a creature historically symbolic of treachery, seduction, and lethal cunning. The venomous snake becomes an emblem of women's supposed natural capacity to lure others into ruin while obstructing the path to eternal happiness. In this symbolic register, the old woman in "The Woman and the Devil" is not simply a character but the very incarnation of serpentine danger.

To read the tale through these proverbial lenses is to recognize that the female character represents the distilled essence of evil, the fusion of archetypal Eve, the crooked rib, the serpent, and the rival of Satan. Yet it is crucial to note that these sayings are not mere expressions of misogyny. They also reveal a deeper male fear of women's potency, a fear that betrays an awareness of women's ability to resist, destabilize, and even overpower masculine authority. Moreover, these sayings are not restricted to men's discourse; women themselves have sometimes deployed them ironically or assertively as tools of self-empowerment, turning stereotypes into strategies of dominance. The woman's scheme is particularly noteworthy for revealing her calculated understanding of how to instigate chaos. She begins with Abdullah's wife, whispering suspicion into her ear: "You should watch out," said the old woman, "I've heard your husband is going to get married again." The young wife, shocked, protests: "That's not possible. He's married to me" (217). But the old woman is prepared with a justification, cloaking her manipulation in the authority of age and religious law: "I'm afraid that's just how men are. When you reach my age, you'll realize that a man grows bored with just one wife, and besides, the law allows him to marry many times over. I tell you what, I'll make a magic potion that will stop him from marrying anyone else" (217).

What is striking here is that the old woman anticipates the wife's incredulity, yet her rhetorical strategy is so finely tuned that the wife is persuaded almost immediately. She legitimizes her claim through reference to religious precepts—marrying four wives is permissible in Islam—and appeals to the authority of experience, contrasting the naïveté of youth with the supposed wisdom of age. In doing so, she not only normalizes polygamy but also insinuates inevitability: "a man grows bored of just one wife" (217). By exploiting this cultural and religious rationale, she draws the young woman into complicity with her destructive scheme, offering the additional lure of a mystical potion, a familiar element in Moroccan traditions of domestic magic.

This manipulation resonates with a proverb often cited in Moroccan oral culture: *لمرا كتربط من لسانها ولعودا من لجامها*—*A woman is tied by her tongue as the mare by its bridle.* The saying

conveys that the most effective way to restrain a woman is to control her speech, for her words are understood as the chief instrument of her power. In the tale, however, the proverb is inverted: rather than being silenced, the old woman's tongue is set free, and it becomes the weapon she uses to cause catastrophes. After deceiving the wife, she immediately turns to Abdullah, fabricating another story that pits husband against spouse. With chilling efficiency, she warns him: "Her family wants to inherit everything you own. I've heard that tonight she'll attack you with a knife" (217). This strategy recalls the tragic arc of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Just as Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful, leading to her murder, the old woman persuades Abdullah of his wife's treachery. In both cases, the manipulation is effective not because of physical coercion but because of language—whispered words, framed plausibly, that corrode trust and unleash violence. What one sees here is the creation of a story within a story, where lies masquerade as truth and words become the catalyst for destruction.

From this perspective, the old woman's tongue is more lethal than any sword. It is the emblem of her dominance, enabling her to outwit and overpower every character she encounters. The narrative makes this explicit: "From the top of the mountain, the old woman and the devil looked down on all this bloodshed and conflict" (218). Unlike the devil, whose prank in the souk produces only laughter, the woman's verbal manipulations destroy families and incite a civil war. Her tongue, in effect, becomes the agent of total devastation. It is at this point that the devil, once proud of his cunning, acknowledges his defeat. Watching the chaos unfold, he admits: "I could never have done what you did" (218). The devil—embodiment of universal malevolence—finds himself humbled before a mortal woman whose schemes have surpassed his own. Despite his immense power, he is outmaneuvered at every turn. The narrative emphasizes this reversal. The devil is reduced from actor to spectator, from adversary to captive.

Even this triumph does not satisfy the old woman. Having annihilated both families and compelled the devil to confess her superiority, she escalates further. She invents yet another tale of a distant devil who rewarded her with a magical ring. Using this ruse, she traps Satan in a jar: "A long time ago, I met another devil in a place very far away, and as I performed amazing tasks for him, he gave me his precious ring as a reward" (218). The story concludes with her absolute victory: "So the woman went on her way, and from then on, wherever she travelled, she always had the devil with her inside the jar, forever" (219).

The motif of witchcraft is critical here. Through *shur*—the practice of black magic—the woman achieves her personal ends. In Moroccan society, witchcraft is closely entwined with both spiritual and religious discourses, and its use is often directed toward the resolution of personal or social dilemmas. At the same time, it is feared for its destructive capacity. The narrative makes clear that women, more than men, are imagined as masters of this occult realm. Abdullah's wife is portrayed as innocent and naïve, but the old woman demonstrates the darker possibilities of female sorcery. Edward Westermarck's ethnographic work confirms this association. He records widespread belief in the enduring effects of women's enchantments:

> A woman's enchantment has generally a more enduring effect. Women can really do wonderful things by sorcery. A Berber from Glawi told me that in a neighbouring tribe an old hag once transformed eight scribes into sheep, and that the enchantment lasted until a clever magician buried the hag alive and read incantations over the sheep, sprinkling them with earth. (571)

The tale resonates closely with this cultural understanding, situating the old woman's destructive power within a broader context of Moroccan beliefs about sorcery and gender. The association of women with witchcraft is by no means confined to Morocco; it has long been a prominent theme in Western tradition as well. Winfield S. Nevins's *The Witches of Salem* (1994)

recounts the infamous hysteria that swept Salem Village in 1692, beginning in the household of Reverend Samuel Parris. His daughter Elizabeth, niece Abigail Williams, and servant Tituba displayed symptoms interpreted as evidence of witchcraft. Dr. Griggs, the local physician, confirmed this diagnosis, and under mounting social pressure, the girls accused Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osburn of sorcery. Tituba's coerced confession implicated others, triggering a cascade of accusations that culminated in overcrowded jails, the establishment of the Court of Oyer and Terminer under Governor Phips, and a series of trials that resulted in numerous convictions and executions. Despite Cotton Mather's cautious advice, proceedings continued until September 1692, when the final executions took place. By 1693, a new, less zealous court effectively ended the hysteria (9–46). The Salem events thus illustrate how accusations of witchcraft overwhelmingly targeted women, aligning them with supernatural evil.

Elizabeth Reis, in *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (1997), underscores this dynamic: "The witchcraft episodes of the seventeenth century, when women were accused and convicted far more than men and when women actually confessed to being in the devil's snare, display the sense of women's inherent wickedness which the community—women and men—endorsed" (2). Statistics bear this out: nearly 78% of those accused and convicted of witchcraft were women. Reis explains that this disparity derived from Puritan theology and broader New England culture, both of which cast women as inherently sinful and more prone to damnation than men (xvi). She further observes that, in Western imagination, the devil frequently sought women as collaborators, noting: "It was women, by and large, whom the devil tortured, hoping to recruit them into his service as witches" (2).

In this sense, "The Woman and the Devil" participates in a cross-cultural pattern that links women with occult danger. Unlike Abdullah's wife, who embodies innocence and naivety, the old woman assumes the role of terror through her *shur*, or black magic. The Moroccan setting reinforces this association. A walk through the alleyways of the souks reveals shops filled with the paraphernalia of sorcery: animal hides, bird plumage, hedgehog carcasses, hyena skulls, and serpent skins. Morocco has long been regarded as one of the countries where black magic is most actively practiced. The *shawafa*—female sorceress—is frequented predominantly by women, who seek her powers for a range of purposes: altering fate, protecting loved ones, restoring fortune, or, conversely, destroying enemies. While Westermarck notes that "many sorcerous practices are of a preventive character," he also catalogues their destructive uses:

> to cause illness or death, to make a person stupid or foolish, to excite love, to make a husband obedient to his wife, to cause a divorce, to make husband and wife quarrel, to change friends into enemies, to deprive a woman of her singing voice, to rob people of the baraka which provides them with butter, and so forth. (571–577)

In the tale, the woman's triumph rests precisely on this pattern. Her concoction of a magic potion appears, to the young wife, as a benign remedy to safeguard her household, but it inadvertently unleashes destruction upon her entire family. The old woman's mastery of sorcery demonstrates the destructive power of women in Moroccan belief, even as it echoes Western traditions where female witches dominate the landscape of demonology. Yet the narrative also gives her a distinctive agency. Unlike other Moroccan oral tales in which women are relegated to secondary roles, here the old woman is central. She not only manipulates, deceives, and destroys but also transcends conventional female confines, asserting herself as a rival and superior to the devil himself. In this way, she simultaneously reproduces cultural anxieties about female malice and subverts them by inhabiting a position of unrivaled authority.

The moral message of the tale is ambivalent. On one level, it functions as a warning against sorcery. A Moroccan proverb makes this explicit: *مادا كتبات وسحرات، ولعافيا في قبرها شعلات، وكون كان السحور يدوم كون الدنيا ما تقوم*—*She conjured and wrote too much (spells and charms), yet fire was lit upon her grave; if sorcery could endure forever, the day of judgement would never arrive.* This proverb admonishes witches that their victories in life are short-lived, for divine punishment awaits them in death. It stresses the futility of sorcery: no matter how powerful or successful it is, it cannot forestall mortality or the apocalypse. Similarly, the Qur'an (Surah al-Baqara, verse 102) condemns witchcraft that severs marital bonds, a precise description of the old woman's machinations in the tale.

At the same time, however, one must recognize the gendered perspective embedded in these warnings. They reflect a masculine view that consistently frames women as agents of evil, threats to social cohesion, and embodiments of destructive power. Yet such proverbs and narratives also disclose an underlying male anxiety about women's capacity to resist domination and overturn patriarchal authority. In this respect, the Moroccan tale aligns with a broader, universal pattern—from Salem to the Maghreb to Medieval Europe—in which societies project their fears onto women, casting them as witches, tempters, and rivals to the devil himself.

Conclusion

The tale of "The Woman and the Devil" is saturated with messages that portray women as the origin of evil. This universal motif is evident both in the unfolding of the narrative itself and in the oral traditions of Moroccan culture. Yet such depictions must be read critically: they emerge from a masculine perspective, one that reflects an ingrained fear of femininity and a desire to subordinate women within a cultural framework that historically privileges men. As the story demonstrates, this fear is not unfounded in imagination, for women are figured as capable of inflicting harm through cunning manipulation, the power of language, and the dangerous efficacy of witchcraft. At the same time, however, the tale paradoxically creates space for women to resist the social order that confines them to obedience, service, and silence.

While the narrative foregrounds female malice, it is equally important to recognize that the practice of witchcraft is not limited to women. Men, too, engage in sorcery to fracture marital bonds or secure personal gain, and Moroccan oral tradition preserves proverbs that expose this duplicity. For example: *يا الفقيه شحال تكتب او تسحر او ملي انجحو الناس انت ماتفلح*—*Oh Faqih! You may write countless spells and practice endless witchcraft, but when others succeed, success will not be yours,* and *يالفقيه كتب و خطط او فجاهنم تمغط*—*Oh Faqih! Write your spells and practice your witchcraft, and in hell, you shall stretch*. Both sayings stress that while a *faqih* may experience temporary success, the ultimate consequence is divine punishment. In the first, success is stripped of authenticity, for it culminates not in blessing but in judgment; in the second, the sorcerer's fate is eternal damnation.

Ultimately, "The Woman and the Devil" reinforces a long-standing trope of the evil woman, one deeply rooted in both local Moroccan and wider cross-cultural traditions. It exposes a discourse in which women are demonized as destructive agents, yet it simultaneously reflects the deep-seated anxieties of men toward women's cunning, resistance, and latent power. The tale thus offers a window not only into Moroccan storytelling but into the universal ambivalence surrounding the figure of the woman: feared, maligned, yet never without power. And while it perpetuates a negative portrayal of the female persona, it exists within a vast repertoire of Moroccan oral tradition—one that is rich, complex, and capable of offering alternative, even redemptive, visions of women's place in the Moroccan community.

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