**At the Table of Myth: The Semiotics of Ghoul and Food in Palestinian Folktales**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the dual and dialectical relationship between the ghoul (monster) and food in Palestinian folktales from an anthropological and semiotic perspective. Through the analysis of selected stories, the research reveals how the ghoul-food dynamic functions as a rich symbolic system reflecting societal fears, values, and power structures. The study demonstrates that ghouls in these tales embody various cultural anxieties, from primal fears to representations of social and political oppression. Food emerges as a multifaceted symbol in Arab culture, representing hospitality, betrayal, gender roles, and socio-economic dynamics. The study concludes that the ghoul-food narratives in Palestinian folktales offer profound insights into cultural identity, social relationships, and collective aspirations for overcoming societal challenges. This research contributes to the understanding of Palestinian folklore within the broader context of Arab and global folk traditions.

**Keywords:** Palestinian Folktales, Ghoul/ah, Food Symbolism, Cultural Anthropology, Semiotics, Social Criticism.

Folk tales across cultures are rich with supernatural and mystical forces such as jinn, demons, ghouls, and spirits, which have formed implicit patterns for depicting the features and beliefs of human societies. Ghoul stories occupy a prominent place in Arab and global folk tales; there is scarcely a culture whose stories do not mentions monsters or ghouls and attempt to describe them and narrate stories about them. These stories also capture the special interest of recipients, especially children, due to the strange and mysterious events they find in them, and the unusual surprises that grab their attention. In folk beliefs, the ghoul was used to frighten rebellious and mischievous children who don't sleep early or don't respect their elders. Ghouls were also present in Zajal (a form of colloquial Arabic poetry), children's lullabies, and their play songs. In Arabic folk literature, the ghoul appeared in several sources, most famously in One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights). In Palestinian folk literature, it was also mentioned in several stories, the most famous of which is Jbene, The Clever Hassan, Nuṣṣ Nṣeis (Half-half or Halvsiesis) and others.

**The Ghoul in Arab Heritage**

In Arab Heritage, the ghoul, and its female counterpart the ghoulah or ghouliyyah, is one of the offspring of jinn or demons, combining characteristics of humans and monsters. It is huge, hairy, with long nails, sharp teeth, known for its tall stature and massive build, loves to eat human flesh and is never satiated (Khatīb 1984, 10-11: 184).[[1]](#endnote-1) Ghouls are associated with evil, brutality, and poor appearance. They possess cunning and vast knowledge. They marry, fight, and care for their children. The ghoul or ghoulah lives in forests, wilderness, abandoned ruins, and graveyards. Both represent the evil elements in folk tales, confronting the hero to prevent them from achieving their goal.

Ghouls come in many types, including the evil ones that cause harm and damage to humans, attributed with the most horrific and terrifying traits; and the good, kind ones, who offer help and assistance to humans and the tale's hero in their journeys and travels, to achieve their goal and purpose. Sharīf Kanāʿna points out that since folktales are primarily a feminine art told by women to their children, “women in our Arab society project their perception of the differences between men and women onto ghouls.” He adds that “the differences between the male and female ghouls in the popular mind, unconsciously, exaggeratedly depict the differences between men and women in that society as they perceive them.” (2011, 96).

Just as food plays a major role in human cultural and social life, it also plays a fundamental role in folktales, beliefs, and superstitions. Food is an essential element linked to defining a people's culture and determining their identity. In his book *Elements of Semiology* (1977), Roland Barthes considered food as a signifying and a cultural system with connotations and meanings that go beyond mere nutrition. He pointed out that food plays an important role in cultural and social upbringing, in self and body awareness, and in the language system (1968, 27-28).[[2]](#endnote-2)

From an anthropological perspective, eating is considered a complete social and cultural event, combining food components and preparation methods, along with knowledge, behaviors, and ethics related to eating. Since food lies deep in personal and collective human memory, it forms a kind of sign and symbol language. Through folk tales, various food-related symbols can be revealed, such as: the cultural and social content carried by food; the pleasure food gives to eaters; gender roles of men and women and the relationship between them; types of expression in eating rituals; moral values through food, and more.

In the world's most famous fairy tales, food themes “rely on starvation, cannibalism, and hunger. They turn on mysterious and uncurbable cravings (Rapunzel), poisoned gifts of food (Snow White), and an astonishing amount of cannibalism (Snow White, The Juniper Tree, and Sun, Moon, and Talia)” (Dolan 2018, 296). We can see the same themes in Arab folk tales as well, such as in the stories of “Jbene” and “Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ” (Watad 2023, 1, 2, 3).

Examining numerous ghoul tale texts reveals that the ghoul symbolizes a creature that hates humans to the extent of eating them, flesh and blood. This is in addition to the fact that it hoards treasures, prevents people from accessing pastures and springs, forcibly holds the beautiful princess against her will, and it is the one that separates humans from the secret of immortality. It is a greedy and gluttonous being, in daily need of a portion of fresh meat. Wilkins and Hill point out that meat has held a high status since ancient civilizations. Meat is one of the precious natural products. “Animals, therefore, were widely acknowledged as indicators of wealth. Rich citizens, not to mention the gods, expected to benefit from the flesh of animals” (Wilkins and Hill 2006, IX).

There are Arab and Palestinian tales that include extraordinary details about the size of the ghoul's meal and food, emphasizing its voracity and savagery. One such detail says: The ghoul returns to its domain carrying a tree on its back and a cow in its mouth. The ghoul then proceeds to the tree, sets it on fire, roasts the cow over the fire, and devours it (Kanāʿna 2011, 96). In folk beliefs, people in some countries used to leave some food outside the house for the ghoul to eat and spare them from its evil. They believed that the ghoul frequented houses to eat luxurious food and consumed huge quantities of food. In some folk tales, we encounter ghouls that dig up graves and eat corpses, as well as ghouls that eat their own children to maintain their strength (Qaddoūrī 2021, 195).

As for the female ghoul *ghoulah*, she is known for her intelligence and cunning in procuring her food. She can transform into any form, particularly convincing men that she is their aunt, so they bring their families to live with her. She then feeds and fattens them to eat them. When the man's wife discovers she is a ghoulah, she fails to convince her husband of this, so she flees with her children while the man stays with his ghoul aunt who eats him. This becomes the fate of the man who doesn't listen to his wife's words.

Some stories also revolve around food and sex for the ghoul as interacting desires; the ghoul has two main concerns: eating and sex (Kanāʿna 2011, 96). Eating and sex represent the basic drives for survival and reproduction, and in the ghoul, these desires are amplified to become voracious and uncontrolled. The ghoul may appear as a monster threatening children, trying to kidnap, kill, or sexually assault them (Qaddoūrī 2021, 195). Often, it kidnaps human females to have sex with them or, in the polite language of the tale, to marry them. However, the human female usually tricks him; the ghoul's strength, like that of the mighty Samson, is in his hair and the human female tricks him by allowing him to rest his head on her lap. He falls asleep, and she plucks three hairs from his head, causing him to lose his strength. Then a human man comes and cuts off his head (Kanāʿna 2011, 96).

In this portrayal, food as a sensory pleasure is inextricably linked to other primal urges, particularly sex, with the ghoul emerging as a representation of raw, instinctual forces that embody its savage nature.

1. **Ḥikāyat al-Ḥaṭṭāb wa-al- Ghoulah** (The Tale of the Woodcutter and the Ghoulah)

In the Palestinian tale of the Woodcutter and the Ghoulah, the ghoulah,[[3]](#endnote-3) appears in human form. She approaches the woodcutter who went to the forest daily to collect and sell wood, using the money to buy bread, meat, vegetables, and fruits for his family. When she learns that he has many children, she suggests that he and his family come to live with her, saying:

“*You are a large family. How about you come and live with me? Every day, you'll have a sheep to slaughter, cook, and eat, living happily." The woodcutter was delighted and agreed to her proposal. He quickly returned home and said to his wife, "Get up, woman, hurry!" She asked, "Where to, man?" He said, "Follow me." They carried their mat and blanket on their donkey; put their sons and daughters in the donkey's saddlebags, and all traveled until they reached the ghoulah's land. The ghoulah welcomed them and settled them in one of the houses. She brought a sheep and told the man, "Slaughter this sheep, skin it, cut it up, have the broth for lunch and the meat for dinner. The next day, the woodcutter went around the town and saw no humans, but he saw sheep grazing and coming and going every day without a shepherd. The woodcutter began to take a sheep every day to slaughter for food for himself and his family, and this continued for ten days. After that, the woodcutter's wife said to the ghoulah, “Auntie, we're tired of meat. I want to cook 'mujaddarah' from the lentils and rice I brought with me, and I'll send you a plate of it*” (26-27).

The ghoulah's demeanor and words are rife with hypocrisy, greed, and gluttony. Her invitation for the woodcutter to slaughter a sheep daily for the children's consumption harbors a sinister motive; she intends to fatten them up, transforming them into a delectable and substantial meal to sate her appetite. “Cannibalism is often used in folklore as a metaphor for the dark aspects of human nature, such as greed, violence, moral corruption, and vice, including being a means to explore the limits of what is considered acceptable behavior in society, and highlighting the consequences of violating these norms” (Watad 2023).

We also notice in this passage semiotic references and social connotations that appear through the food theme. First, we see that the world of ghouls is not different from the human world in terms of family ties; ghouls live within a family consisting of children, aunts, and uncles. We can understand this through the story when the woodcutter's wife started calling the ghoulah “aunt”. [[4]](#endnote-4)Then, the ghoulah welcomed the woodcutter and his family; this refers to the trait of honoring the guest and welcoming, which is considered more important than the food itself in Arab culture. In other words, the ghoulah's reception of the woodcutter and his family and her welcome is a translation of a set of inherited values and customs in Arab and Palestinian culture. Food is also considered a message through which the host expresses their pride in their guest and honoring them. As soon as the family arrived, the ghoulah brought a sheep for the woodcutter to slaughter and cook for them to eat, indicating the host's service to their guests and showing generosity and hospitality. In addition to this, like humans, we see that the ghoul owns good housing and livestock, which carries economic value as a source of livelihood.

On a symbolic level, we observe a transformation in the ghoul's approach to food and behavior, shifting from primitive natural instincts to cultural behavior; the ghoulah here cooks the sheep for the family rather than presenting it raw, and in other stories, the ghoul cooks its victim before consumption. This symbolizes a transition from primitive nature (consuming raw meat) to culture (cooking), potentially reflecting the conflict between savagery and civilization in humanity's collective consciousness.

The story continues that the wife returned and told her husband about her suspicions towards the ghoulah, but the husband’s feeling of comfort in the ghoulah's house and not having to struggle to secure a livelihood made him not care about what she said, but accuse her of not appreciating the blessing. The events of the story begin to turn when the woodcutter's wife discovers the truth about the ghoulah:

“*The wife cooked the mujaddarah and filled a plate, and asked one of her daughters to take it to the neighboring ghoulah's house. When the girl reached the ghoulah's house, its door was open, and the girl saw a young man hanging and the ghoulah eating him. She was frightened, and the plate fell from her hands and broke. The ghoulah heard the sound, came to the girl and asked her what happened. The girl pretended she didn't see anything and told the ghoulah she had stumbled and the plate fell from her. The ghoulah said to her, “No problem, go to your house.” The girl then returned home and told her mother what she saw in the ghoulah's house*” (27-28).

The wife told the story to her husband, the woodcutter, and when her husband didn't believe her, the woman took her sons and daughters and returned with them to their village.

Mujaddarah is a famous traditional popular dish in the Arab Levant such as Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. It has simple ingredients, consisting of rice and lentils with fried onions, and is eaten hot. In this regard, sources indicate that Arab food in ancient times was characterized by simplicity, and that many ancient Arab dishes of legumes, dairy, dates, and others are considered healthy, soft, nutritious, and delicious foods (Jamīl 1994, 186-190).

The quoted passage highlights the irony and contradiction in the ghoulah's character, juxtaposing her role as a hospitable host offering food with that of a predator consuming her guests. This abrupt transformation from host to predator represents a shocking violation of the sacred Arab hospitality rules and reflects the dual nature of the ghoul/ghoulah and the impossibility of trusting them. In other words: offering and sharing food traditionally represents building trust and friendship, and the ghoul's betrayal of this trust makes its act more heinous in the eyes of society. We also note that food here forms a turning point in the plot of the story; the girl's observation of the female ghoul eating the hanging young man was a means for her, the mother, and the children to survive. In other folktales, food may be a means of survival when the hero succeeds in poisoning the ghoul's food, or uses the idea of food and eating to distract the ghoul and escape, as we will see later in the story of Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ.

“When the man woke up and found none of his family in the house, he feared that the ghoulah might have eaten them, so he hid in a storage jar that was in the house. The ghoulah came shortly after, and when she found no one in the house, she became very angry and started saying: “I fattened them and didn't eat them, oh how lovely the redness of their cheeks was.” When the woodcutter heard her words, he became very frightened and moved inside the jar. The ghoulah sensed the movement, so she struck the jar with her hand, breaking it, and the woodcutter appeared. The ghoulah said to him: “You let the woman and children with tender flesh escape and you stayed, you old cursed man? From where shall I eat you?” He said: “From my ears that didn't listen to my wife.” So she ate his ears. She repeated the question to him, and he answered saying: “From my legs that didn't carry me back to my wife,” so she ate his legs. And so on, until she had devoured him entirely” (29).

The ending depicts how the ghoulah devoured the woodcutter gradually, eating him piece by piece from his ears to his legs. This portrayal can be interpreted as the folk tale narrators' desire to highlight the deep-rooted fear of ghouls, or of strangers, or of the 'other' that is imprinted in the popular consciousness.

In addition to the values and implications related to the duality of the ghoul and food in the story of “The Woodcutter and the Ghoulah”, there are other implications and cultural loads within its folds. These include appreciating the value of work, toil, and effort to secure a living, and not relying on others. It also teaches that one should be cautious and not trust others easily, and to think carefully before making decisions. The tale also reflects the relationship between man and woman, where we see that the dominance was for the male woodcutter, as he was the one with the final word and decision despite falling into error. This is a reflection of the prevailing values that defined the roles of men and women in a patriarchal society. We also notice that the hero of the folk tale overcomes the ghoul/ghoulah with intelligence and cunning; Humans can overcome the forces of evil through their intellect, which distinguishes them from other creatures, even if these forces are supernatural or terrifying.

1. Ḥikāyat Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ (Half-half or Halvsiesis)

The story of "Nuṣṣ Nuṣeiṣ is one of the most famous Palestinian folktales. It is also found in other regions of the Arab world, with slight variations in different areas. Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ, a weak and small-bodied boy. His brothers would each ride their horse and go hunting every day while he remained sleeping. One day, his mother gave him a lame lamb named "Nukhālah" and asked him to ride it and go hunting with his brothers.

“*Once when he and his brothers were in the wilderness, they met an old woman. She greeted them and told them she was their aunt, that they were her brother's children, and invited them for dinner at her house. The boys accepted the invitation and went with the old woman to her house. When they arrived, she tied up the two horses and the lamb, gave barley to the horses and gave them milk to drink, but gave only clear water to the lamb "Nukhālah". After dinner, the boys slept, but Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ was uneasy about her and couldn't sleep. After an hour or two, he heard the old woman singing alone and saying: 'Oh my teeth, oh my teeth, sharpen yourselves for Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ and his two brothers.' When Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ heard her, he suddenly started screaming. The old woman came to him and said, 'Why are you shouting?' He said to her, 'Because I can't sleep on the ground. I want to sleep in a basket that you hang from the ceiling.' The old woman brought him a basket to sleep in and hung it from the ceiling. After a short while, he woke up and started shouting saying: 'The ghoulah has come, the ghoulah has come!' The ghoulah came and said to him, 'What's wrong with you, why are you shouting?' He said to her, 'How can I sleep when my stomach is empty of food?' She said she would bring him food if he stopped shouting. When she went and got busy preparing the food, Nuṣṣ Nuṣeiṣ got down from the basket and went to his brothers, woke them up, and told them that the old woman was not their aunt but a ghoulah who wanted to eat them.*” (Kān Yāmā Kān 1997, V.2, 9-10).

The image of food here appears as an anthropological feature and as a social and cultural system. The ghoulah/woman's task is to take care of the house and its affairs, especially cooking, in contrast to the work of the ghoul/man who spends most of the day hours outside the house. In many cultures, food is considered a resource controlled by women and its preparation falls on them; where the mother is judged by her ability to cook food, while the father is judged by his ability to provide food. As to Bynum, “Women were associated with food preparation and distribution rather than food consumption. The culture suggested that women cook and serve, men eat” (1985, 10).

This story also expresses the nature of food in Arab culture. “Arab food was characterized by simplicity, meaning that foods are cooked with as few utensils as possible, i.e., one-pot meals.” (Jamīl 1994, 178). In many folk tales, the ghoulah appears filling the pot with water and lighting the fire under it in preparation for cooking. In other stories, the ghoulah would prepare food and wait for her ghoul husband to return so they could eat together. This is another image of food being an integral part of Arab social life; “Food is eaten collectively where the group gathers around the bowl or the table to eat it. By eating together, sanctity or friendship is achieved between people for sharing salt and bread. Food is sustenance and blessing and has a sanctity that is not insulted.”(Jamīl 1994, 191).

“*When the ghoulah returned to them with the food and didn't find them, she knew they had escaped, so she rushed out to catch up with them. When she saw them from afar, she used her magical power and called on the milk she had given to the horses saying: 'Oh milk, freeze and tie the legs of the horses!' The milk froze and the horses' legs were tied, so the brothers left them and rode on the lamb behind their brother Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ. The ghoulah ran after them, and when she reached the horses, she quickly ate them and ran after the brothers. When Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ looked back and saw her behind them, he shouted to his lamb: 'Today is your day, Nukhalah, fly.' And Nukhālah flew until it crossed the river with them*” (9-10).

The interpretation of this passage blends reality with the supernatural, intertwining the human world with the extraordinary realm of ghouls. The ghoulah is portrayed as insatiably greedy and gluttonous, devouring two horses in an instant. This description speaks to body language and eating habits, highlighting the extremes of gluttony and excess in consumption on one hand, and the dangers of unchecked desire and appetite on the other. The ghoulah's behavior starkly contradicts both ethical and literary standards.

The story ends with Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ and his brothers overcoming the ghoulah. He convinced her to extend her hand to pull her to them, but he let her go and left her to fall into the river and drown in it, while they returned to their family and country and gave them the good news that the ghoulah had died. This is another example of the end of the folk tale where the small hero overcomes the ghoul with cunning and intelligence, where the ghoul is defeated and evil is vanquished either by outsmarting the ghoul or killing it.

1. **al-Qurṣa** (The Bread Disc)

The story of al-Qurṣa (The Bread Disc) (Sarḥān 1974, 182-186) tells of a woman with seven sons who wished for her to have a daughter. When the woman became pregnant, her sons told her: “If you have a boy, hang the rifle, and if you have a girl, hang the kohl container” (182). The woman gave birth to a girl and told the midwife to hang the kohl container so that when the boys return from hunting, they would be happy. However, the midwife made a mistake and hung the rifle as a sign of a boy's birth instead of hanging the kohl container as a sign of a girl's birth. When the boys returned from hunting and saw the rifle hanging, they left the country, saying: "We won't stay in a country without girls." The girl grew up waiting for her brothers to return. One day, "the girl went to the oven to bake bread, but the bread fell from her hand and rolled and rolled until it stopped at the door of a hut. The girl found the clothes messy, the bed unmade, and the dishes unwashed. She started arranging things, washed the dishes, swept the porch, cooked and prepared food, and went to hide" (183).

We can now discern the portrayal of women in these tales; once again, we encounter the stereotypical gender image of women presented in Arab and Palestinian folk tales, reflecting the patriarchal and masculine nature of society. The woman's role is confined to managing household affairs - cleaning, cooking, and washing. “All biological activities, from sleeping, eating, and childbearing, are confined to the home and exiled from the outside world. This is the world of women, tasked with managing everything natural, while she is excluded and removed from public life. This picture comes in contrast to men's work, which is done outside in the open air; women's work is condemned to obscurity and invisibility” (Bourdieu 1990, 276). This explains the man's perspective versus the woman's towards the house and things; “Men look at the house from the outside, while women look at it from the inside.” (Bourdieu 1990, 282).

As for the young brothers, they go out hunting daily to secure their food. In the forest, food is the essential and original essence of society, where movement through the forest - literally and often - is associated with the pursuit of food, either in the context of searching for food or predation. Also, much of the food provided by the forest is vital and conscious; food in the forest has a life of its own (Long 2014, 242-246). This is another aspect of anthropology that shows us that the forest is an example of a vital place where an individual can find everything they need in their simple daily life, from firewood, water, and hunting. The ghoul in the story is the opposite of the seven brothers. As it feeds on human and animal flesh, it is “the opposite of house-dwelling hunters who create and nurture culture by using hunting tools; it is an image of the savage world that must be avoided to maintain a balanced life” (Qaddoūrī 2021, 198).

When the seven brothers realized that the girl was their sister, one of them said, “*This is our sister… our sister… our beloved sister. They promised to protect her and began to go hunting every day while she finished her work and waited for their return alone. She had a cat to entertain and keep her company. One day, the girl was eating a chickpea. The cat insisted on eating the chickpea she had eaten. When the girl couldn't find another chickpea, the cat urinated on the fire out of spite, extinguishing it. The girl needed fire, so "she went looking, walked and walked, saw this fire. She walked towards it. And there was a ghoul sitting by the fire roasting a cow. She said, 'Al-Salām ʿAlaykom (Peace be upon you), our father ghoul.' He said to her: 'Peace be upon you. If your greeting hadn't preceded your bones, I would have made the blue flies hear the crushing of your bones.' She said to him, 'I want a piece of fire.' He said to her, 'Here's the fire, take it.' She took it and left. The next day, he kept following her tracks until he found the hut. He found the door, she was sitting alone. He said to her, 'Extend your finger so I can suck it.' The girl was afraid and extended her finger, and he sucked it. The third day was the same. The girl started to weaken. Her brothers said to her, 'Sister, what's wrong with you? What's the matter?' and told them the story*” (183-184).

There is a striking parallel between the ghoul's behavior in this story and that of vampires in Arab and Western mythologies. The ghoul's act of draining the girl's blood, leading to her deteriorating health, mirrors classic vampire lore. In both traditions, there's often an implicit sexual undertone to the blood-sucking, which represents a form of control and exploitation. This narrative device pits the forces of good (humanity) against the forces of evil (supernatural beings).

At the level of Arab societies, most sources link the ghoul to authoritarian regimes. The ghoul here is the human ghoul lurking in the depths of the tyrannical human, and it is a symbol of the authoritarian person who controls people's livelihoods and affairs. The same point applies to Palestinian folk tale; we find that the people used the character of the ghoul to symbolize exploitation and the exploiter who lived on what he derived from the money, effort, and hunger of agricultural workers in Palestine in the feudal estates and sheikdoms that were prevalent in the Ottoman era. In the Arab context, "we may believe that the popular conscience meant by the ghoul those sheikhs and influential exploiters throughout the ages of darkness in our country since the decline of the glory of the Abbasid states and through periods of foreign rule, as well as all symbols of exploitation and human oppression of humans. The ghoul with its simple features present in the folk tale does not exist, but it is merely a symbol of oppression and hideous exploitation and in confirmation of this, what came in the popular saying, “There is no ghoul but the son of Adam” (Folk Tales - Stories 2021).

The story ends with the usual happy ending in folk tales. When the girl's brothers asked her why her face was withering, she told them the story. One of the brave brothers stood up, went to the ghoul's location, attacked it, cut off its head, and threw it into the valley. When the female ghoul saw her husband in this terrible state, she decided to take revenge. She enchanted the seven brothers into bulls. The girl took them and walked until she reached the Sultan's palace. There, the Sultan admired her and married her. But the female ghoul followed her and enchanted her into a dove. The ending was that the spell was broken from the brothers by pouring water on them, and they all returned to their normal state. Then people came with a big fire and threw the female ghoul into it, and she burned. The Sultan rejoiced at the return of his wife and her brothers.

**Summary**

This study aimed to identify the most important features that characterize the association of the ghoul with the issue of eating and food in Palestinians folktales, from an anthropological and social perspective. The study found that the ghoul, with its simple features present in the folktale, is a symbol of human oppression and hideous exploitation, and that cannibalism is a metaphor for the dark aspects of human nature; such as greed, violence, and corruption.

The article also highlights how food forms a symbol for social beliefs, as well as for the gaps in the culture and identity of the Arab and Palestinian society, such as gender discrimination. The research demonstrates that food/eating distinguishes between men and women, while simultaneously serving as a channel of communication between them. Food/eating also reflect power relations between women and men, and their role in obtaining, cooking, and consuming food.

The study concludes that the ghoul in these folk tales serves as a potent symbol of oppression and exploitation, both political and economic. Furthermore, these stories echo human aspirations in the struggle against nature and the desire to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of civilization. This research contributes to a more profound understanding of Palestinian folklore within the broader context of Arab and global folk traditions, illuminating both the universal and culturally specific elements in these narratives.

1. For more about ghoul in Arab culture see also: Khaṭīb,1984, V.11-10, 143-150;

 Khaṭīb 1984, V.9, 121-125. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Barthes views the food system as similar to the language system in its rules, classifications, and composition methods. The menu, for instance, reflects a cultural and social structure, varying with context. He concludes that the relationship between actual food and its system resembles that between speech and language in linguistic theory, rendering food a cultural system with meanings beyond mere nutrition (1968, 27-28); (1988, 157-159). See also: Barthes 1991, *Mythologies.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Ḥikāyat al-Ḥaṭṭāb wa-l-Ghūlah*: In: d.m, Kān yā mā kān - al-Qiṣaṣ al-Shaʿbiyya, 1997, V.2, 26-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In the subsequent story "Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ," we also see that the ghoul disguises herself and convinces the brothers that she is their aunt.

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