**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. Analysis of a selection of folktales 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 socioeconomic dynamics. In conclusion, 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.

Folktales from every culture are richly populated by supernatural and mystical forces such as jinn, demons, ghouls, and spirits. These figures have shaped implicit patterns for depicting the features and beliefs of human societies. Ghoul stories occupy a prominent place in Arab and global folktales. In fact, there is scarcely a culture In the world whose stories do not feature monsters or ghouls. These stories also engage the interest of readers and listeners, 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 did not keep to their bedtimes or disrespected their elders. Ghouls were also present in Zajal (a form of colloquial Arabic poetry), children’s lullabies, and their play songs. In Arab folk literature, ghouls appear in several sources, most famously in *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*). In Palestinian folk literature, which belongs to the broader Arab culture, they feature in several stories, the most famous of which are *Jbene*, *The Clever Hassan*, *Nuṣṣ Nṣeis* *(Half-half or Halvsies)*, and others.

**The Ghoul in Arab Heritage**

The English word *ghoul* is a direct borrowing from the *ghūl* in Arabic. In Arab folklore, the ghoul and its female counterpart, the *ghoulah* or *ghouliyyah*, are the offspring of jinn or demons, combining characteristics of humans and monsters. Ghouls are massive, hairy beasts with long nails and sharp teeth, known for their appetite for human flesh and their insatiable hunger (Khatīb 1984, 10–11: 184).[[1]](#endnote-2) Usually associated with evil, brutality, and ugliness, ghouls possess cunning and vast knowledge. They also marry, fight, and care for their children. Ghouls live in forests, wilderness, abandoned ruins, and graveyards. In folktales, they represent evil and are often the antagonists attempting to frustrate the heroes from achieving their goals.

Ghouls come in many types, including evil ones that cause harm and damage to humans. To such ghouls are attributed the most horrific and terrifying traits. However, there are also kindly ghouls who offer help and assistance to humans and help the heroes of folktales along their journeys and in achieving their goals. As Sharīf Kanāʿna points out, this distinction may be the result of folktales being primarily a feminine form narrated by women to children: “Women in our Arab society project their perception of the differences between men and women onto ghouls.” He adds: “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).

Mirroring its fundamental role in human cultural and social life, food 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 considers food a signifying and cultural system with meanings extending beyond mere nutrition. He observes 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-3)

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 psyche it forms a kind of sign and symbol language. Through folktales, 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 relationships 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 folktales as well, such as in the stories *Jbene* and *Nuṣṣ Nṣeiṣ* (Watad 2023, 1–3).

In numerous folktales, ghouls are represented as harboring a deep hatred towards human beings that extends to wanting to kill and eat them. Ghouls also hoard treasures, block people from entering pastures and springs, imprison beautiful princesses, and withhold the secret of immortality from humans. They are gluttonous and feast daily on fresh meat, an important feature, with Wilkins and Hill noting that meat has been held in high regard since ancient civilizations. Because meat has traditionally been one of the most valuable 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 Arabic and Palestinian folktales that include extraordinary details about the massive amounts ghouls are able to devour, emphasizing their voracity and savagery. In one story, a ghoul returns to its lair carrying a tree on its back and a cow in its mouth. The ghoul then sets the tree on fire, roasts the cow over the fire, and devours the entire animal (Kanāʿna 2011, 96). As Qaddoūrī points out, in popular beliefs, people would 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. There are also some folktales in which we encounter ghouls that dig up graves and eat corpses, as well as ghouls that eat their own children to maintain their strength (2021, 195).

The female ghoul, or *ghoulah*, is known for her intelligence and cunning in procuring food. They can shapeshift and often deceive men by taking the form of an aunt and luring them and their families to come live with them. They then feed and fatten them up to eat them. Often in stories featuring a ghoulah, the man’s wife, having discovered that the “aunt” is a ghoulah but failing to convince her husband of this, flees with her children, leaving him to be eaten by his ghoul aunt. This becomes the fate of the man who doesn't listen to his wife’s words, again reflecting the predominantly feminine form of folklore.

Some stories also revolve around food and sex as intertwined desires. In these cases, the ghoul is obsessed with eating and sex (Kanāʿna 2011, 96). Eating and sex represent the basic drives for survival and reproduction, and in the ghoul, these base 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, ghouls kidnap human women to force them into sex; 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. A human man then comes and cuts off the ghoul’s head (Kanāʿna 2011, 96).

In this portrayal, food as a sensory pleasure is inextricably intertwined with 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-4) appears in human form. She approaches the woodcutter, who goes 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:[[4]](#footnote-2)

“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.” Delighted, the woodcutter 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 donkeys’ 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 theme of food. First, we see that the world of ghouls is not different from the human world in terms of family ties. Ghouls, known for their frightening appearance, strength, and brutality, are never depicted as the offspring of parents. Instead, they are at most portrayed as a husband or father within a family structure consisting of children, aunts, and uncles. We can understand this through the story when the woodcutter’s wife started calling the ghoulah “aunt.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In welcoming the woodcutter and his family the goulah’s behavior refers to the trait of honoring and welcoming guests, 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 represents a translation of a set of inherited values and customs in Arab and Palestinian culture. Food is also considered a message whereby hosts express their pride in their guests and honor them. As soon as the family arrives, the ghoulah brings 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 boasts good housing and livestock, the latter endowed with 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 with the wife returning and telling her husband about her suspicions about the ghoulah. Still, the complacent husband is comfortable in the ghoulah’s house, and not having to struggle to secure a livelihood makes him disregard his wife’s warning and, instead, 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 tells the story to her husband, the woodcutter, and when her husband does not believe her, the woman takes her sons and daughters and returns with them to their village.

*Mujaddarah* is a famous traditional popular dish in the Arab Levant, including 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, digestible, nutritious, and delicious foods (Jamīl 1994, 186–190). The woodcutter’s wife’s choice of mujaddarah in this folktale creates a significant contrast with the ghoulah’s offering of lamb meat. While the ghoulah’s intention was to fatten up the woodcutter’s family with rich and heavy meat meals in order to eat them later, the wife’s preference for mujaddarah demonstrates her desire for a more comfortable eating experience, especially as she and her family are poor and more accustomed to simple and modest meals like mujaddarah.

This contrast between the simple, healthy mujaddarah and the excess consumption of lamb meat serves as a metaphor for the conflict between the family’s modest and human way of life and the ghoul’'s excessive and threatening presence. It highlights a moral element in the tale, suggesting that simplicity and moderation are preferable to excess and gluttony.

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 rules of Arab hospitality and reflects the dual nature of the ghoul/ghoulah and how they cannot be trusted. Offering and sharing food traditionally represents building trust and friendship, and the ghoul’s betrayal of this trust makes its act all the more heinous in the eyes of society. We also note that food here becomes a turning point in the plot of the story. The girl’s observation of the female ghoul eating the hanging young man is 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 responded: “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 gradually devours the woodcutter, eating him piece by piece, from his ears to his legs. This portrayal can be interpreted as reflecting the folktale narrators’ desire to highlight the deep-rooted fear of ghouls, strangers, or 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, not trust others easily, and think carefully before making decisions. The tale also reflects the relationship between man and woman, where we see that the male woodcutter is the dominant figure, the one with the final word and decision despite falling into error. This reflects the prevailing values that define the roles of men and women in a patriarchal society. We also notice that the hero of the folktale 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 Halvsies)

The story of *Nuṣṣ N*s*eis* iṣ 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 is a weak and small-bodied boy. His brothers ride their horses and go hunting every day while he remains sleeping. One day, his mother gives him a lame lamb named “Nukhālah” and asks 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 Nṣeiṣ climbed 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; the mother is judged by her ability to cook food, while the father is judged by his ability to provide food. According 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 folktales, the ghoulah appears, filling the pot with water and lighting a fire under it in preparation for cooking. In other stories, the ghoulah prepares food and waits for her ghoul husband to return so they can 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 by 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, Nukhālah, 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 relates to body language and eating habits, highlighting the extremes of gluttony and excess in consumption on the 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 convinces her to extend her hand to pull her to them, but he lets her go and leaves her to fall into the river and drown in it while they return to their family and country and convey the good news that the ghoulah has died. This is another example of the end of the folktale 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 Disc of Bread)

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 becomes pregnant, her sons tell her: “If you have a boy, hang the rifle, and if you have a girl, hang the *kohl* container” (182). The woman gives birth to a girl and tells the midwife to hang the *kohl* container so that when the boys return from hunting, they will be happy. However, the midwife makes a mistake and hangs the rifle instead of the *kohl* container. When the boys return from hunting and see the hanging rifle, they leave the country, declaring: “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 hands 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 again discern the portrayal of women in these tales. Once more, we encounter the stereotypical gender image of women presented in Arab and Palestinian folktales, 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 naturally 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).

The young brothers go out hunting daily to secure their food. In the forest, food is the essential and original essence of society. 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). The meaning ascribed to the food is another anthropological feature showing 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 exclaims:

“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 she 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 is often an implicit sexual undertone to the bloodsucking, which represents a form of control and exploitation. This narrative device pits the forces of good (humanity) against the forces of evil (supernatural beings).

Within Arab societies, most sources link the ghoul to authoritarian regimes. The ghoul here is the human ghoul lurking in the depths of tyrannical humans, and it is a symbol of the authoritarian person who controls people’s livelihoods and affairs. The same point applies to Palestinian folktales. 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 folktale, 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” (*Folktales – Stories 2021*).

The story ends with the usual happy ending in folktales. When the girl’s brothers ask her why her face is withering, she tells them the story. One of the brave brothers stands up, goes to find the ghoul, attacks it, cuts off its head, and throws it into the valley. When the female ghoul sees her husband in this terrible state, she decides to take revenge. She bewitches the seven brothers, transforming them into bulls. The girl takes them and walks until she reaches the Sultan’s palace. There, the Sultan admires her and marries her. However, the female ghoul follows her and transforms her into a dove. The tale ends with the brothers breaking the spell by pouring water on themselves, whereupon they all return to their normal state. Then, people come with a big fire and cast the female ghoul into it, and she burns. The Sultan rejoices at the return of his wife and her brothers.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to identify the most important features that characterize the association of the ghoul with the matter of eating and food in Palestinian 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 and eating distinguish between men and women while simultaneously serving as a channel of communication between them. Food and 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 folktales 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-2)
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-3)
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-4)
4. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. 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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