

Lies and Lying in the Palestinian Folktale (*)

At the end of a visit arranged specifically for the taping of a session of coffee-grounds reading, the woman who had read fortunes in the cups said : "Well it's all lies.. It's lies through and through" (*kullo kisib fi kisib*). I have also heard my own mother say in the course of singing a lullaby to her grandson : "I'm lying to Shukri until he falls asleep" (*ana baksib 'a Shukri tanne ynâm*). The older, mostly illiterate women, who have preserved the Palestinian tradition in folk narrative characterize the tales they tell as consisting of lies. The so-called "Tale of Lies" (*Schlaraffenland*, *Aarne-Thompson Type 1930*) is popular in every region of the country, and tellers are often judged by how well they can weave together the different lies of which the tale is composed. Clearly, there is a connection between traditional verbal art and the notion of lyins and the purpose of this presentation is to explore this connection in relation to folk narrative, where it sees its fullest illustration. However, the association of folktales with lies is not specific to the Palestinian or the Arab tradition in general. As Linda Dégh mentions, it exists in many other traditions as well (1).

The subject may be conveniently analysed in terms of the act of speaking, the teller and the tale. With regard to the first, we note that a distinction is drawn in Palestinian-Arab culture between speech, acts that require some kind of performance, as in folktales, and ordinary conversation, which is governed at least to some extent by pragmatic constraints that prevent it from straying too far away from what is generally acknowledged to be the truth. In the folktale, these constraints are lifted. By labeling the tales as lies, the tellers demonstrate an awareness of the performance aspect of their art, and an essential feature of any performance is its attendant style. Thus in Palestinian folktales we have a highly developed verbal style which relies on

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(1) Folktales "are believed to be fictitious and are cited as lies by story tellers and commentators, who mean that tales are the creations of human phantasy. 'Let's lie' urged an Irish storyteller on a competitor, and a Russian storyteller boasted that he was a renowned liar who could fill three sacks with lies". See Richard DORSON (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife : an Introduction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 60.

frequent invocations and feminine forms of address; it is derived from the speech mannerisms of women in daily life. It is a style meant to magnify the distance between the world of ordinary conversation and that of fantasy and fiction.

The assertion that the tales are lies may be better understood as what Gregory Bateson calls a "metacommunicative frame" - that is, a statement about a discourse that sets it apart from other kinds of speech (2). The affirmation of the lie in this case sets the folktale apart not only from ordinary conversation but also from other types of folk narrative, such as tales illustrating proverbs or saints' legends, which are understood not to be lies, regardless what supernatural elements they may embody. By virtue of this framing statement, tellers in effect are saying: "What is inside this frame is play. It is a kind of ritual". When we examine the structure of a folktale session, we note that indeed it is always framed with opening and closing formulas. Typically, such a session would not be restricted to the performance of one tale only: it might consist of three or four tales, and each must be framed at the beginning and the end. A tale is usually begun with exhortation: "Testify that God is One!" (*waHHdû llâh*) to which the audience replies: "There is not God but God" (*lâ ilâha illâ llâh*). It is of course highly significant that should begin with this essential truth: once it is affirmed, the lying can proceed. At the end of the tale, another formula, not necessarily religious, is added for example. "The bird of this tale has flown, and a good evening to all" (*Târ ittêr u-titmessu bil-xêr*). After that, a new tale is begun, again with the exhortation to testify to the unity of God.

A word of caution should be added concerning the notion of performance, which must be understood in its cultural setting. Palestinian folktales are household tales per excellence. Women usually tell them at home to an audience of children and other women in the context of the extended family. They narrate calmly, without gesturing or raising their voices. Though tellers are aware of what I call the "performance aspect" of the tales, they cannot be said to "perform" them if by the word "performance" something theatrical is understood. Arab culture places a high value on verbal ability, and all gesturing in a Palestinian folk narrative event is done verbally.

(2) Gregory BATESON, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*, New York, Ballantine Books 1972, p. 188.

This concern the notion of lying is of course not incidental; it arises out of well-established attitudes concerning the ethical import of fiction at the level of the folk as well as that of official culture. In the Islamic religious tradition, there has been no stricture against verbal art, though a sharp division is generally acknowledged to exist between religion, which is the domain of truth and revelation on the one hand, and art, the domain of pleasure and entertainment on the other. The Qur'an does not condemn literature as such, though it does berate poets because they "say what they practice not". Furthermore, those who "follow" poets are called "erring men", or men "straying into evil" (3). Though the actual content of what the Qur'an says is more damning of poets than of poetry itself, the context of the passage is damaging to the interests of verbal art since it is contrasted with religion, and those to listen to it or believe what it says are called "followers", as if literary activity were a kind of false religion.

In labeling the tales as lies, the tellers show awareness of their fictional nature. The fantastic events described in them are not likely to take place in real life. In the words of the Qur'an, they - the tellers - say what they practice not. By adopting the metacommunicative frame of the lie, in effect a ready-made-defence of their art, tellers protect themselves and the folktale tradition by directing the audience, or a possible ethical censor, not to take the tales seriously or literally. It is difficult to determine to what degree this urge selfprotection arises out of a conscious decision on the part of the tellers. It would be more accurate to say that the perspective that the tales are lies is itself part of this tradition, just as it is a part of others, and tellers absorb it along with the tradition. Be that as it may, the caveat represented by the metacommunicative frame is essential, for the kinds of fantasies projected in the tales, where heroines go on adventures and fall in love, would be inexpressible in any other manner in a traditional patriarchal society in which women's behavior is subject to the code of honor.

In fact, because the tales are taken to be lies, women can use them without fear of censure to focus on the conflicts found in their lives - conflicts stemming from their place in the social structure. Traditional Palestinian society is not only patriarchal, but also patrilineal, where descent is defined through the male line; patrilocal, where the wife is under the authority of her mother-in-law; endogamous, where a young woman is committed to marrying her first patrilineal cousin whether she wants or not; and polygynous, where she may have to compete with

(3) Sura XXVI, "The Poets", verse 226.

a co-wife and her children for the husband's affection and for her own children's share of the family inheritance. These are the issues that animate the Palestinian folktale, issues touching on women's lives and arising out of their daily experience in the household, expressed in the standard narrative motifs of international tale types. For example, the single most important issue in a Palestinian woman's life is having children. We thus find this subject to be the most commonly treated in the tales. We also find that competition between co-wives occupies a disproportionately large narrative space in the tales in relation to its actual occurrence in the society. Polygyny is obviously a highly charged emotional issue for the women, and it is not at all surprising that we should find it occupying such a large place in the tales, many of which revolve around the conflict among brothers. In a polygynous situation, it would be natural, as is the case in the Palestinian folktale, to portray the conflict as being among co-wives, and/or their respective children, who are half-brothers.

It would thus appear our consideration of the hypothesis that folktales are lies has led us into a paradoxical situation. And, indeed, as Bateson demonstrates in the article referred above (4), a metacommunicative frame containing the lie" - is inherently paradoxical and contradictory. For, if the statement were true, then what it affirms would not be a lie, and vice versa. Though, as I have tried to show, the assertion that folktales are lies constitutes a metacommunicative frame, folktales are not composed of logical statements. Hence, we do not expect to judge a folktale by the same criteria we use in logic. True, the claim that folktales are lies leads us into paradox, but that is a completely different thing from contradiction. Paradox is tolerable in the imaginative world of the folktale. Perhaps it is even essential, because the assertion of the lie says something about folk narrative's believability and nothing about its truthfulness. Completely different criteria of judgment are necessary for the analysis of believability, such as verisimilitude and the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief, from those necessary for the analysis of truthfulness, which lie more in the domain of the logician than that of the folklorist or critic.

With reference to the content of the tales, we thus see they are far from being lies as such, meaning statements that do not conform to the truth. The assertion that they are lies is therefore not to be taken as belonging to the domain of ethics, but rather to that of aesthetics. As

(4) "A Theory of Play and Fantasy", see above note (2).

we have just seen, one kind of truth they articulate is contextual truth about the living situation of women. There is not enough time to explore all the kind of truth that a folktale can embody, whether psychological, linguistic, thematic or symbolic. We can simply say the embody the kind of truth found in all works of fiction, which we might label the truth of the imagination.

When we look at the folktales themselves, we find in them a distinction between degrees of believability. One very common stylistic device in the Palestinian folktale is the interjection: "If the tale is to be believed" (*la dhimmit ir-râwi*). Some tellers resort to it more frequently than others, but the basic situation in which a teller is likely to use it is when she herself believes an action to be too improbable relative to the action he had just described. For example we are asked to believe that a king's daughter has forty friends and has spent every day walking in the garden for pleasure. But when one of them stumbles on a metal ring and pulls it, and opens the door to an underground passage, the teller might question the credibility of the story.

Folk narrative achieves believability (and effect) by juxtaposing the possible and the probable with the improbable and the impossible. Often, this is achieved through the device of the tale within a tale, the included tale being less probable than the main one. The "tale of lies" (Aarne-Thompson 1930), when it occurs with other tales, usually takes the form of an impossible task the hero has to perform. Through this juxtaposition, the audience is made to feel that in comparison with the kinds of unbelievable lies which compose the "tale of lies". The lies of which the main tale is composed are more believable. When we think about it, it is very difficult to tell a totally unbelievable lie in a work of fiction. This is beautifully brought out in a tale collected in Damascus, where three brothers are on a search for the Golden Bird for their father. He who can tell a tale that is all lies stands to win a magic garden. "That's easy", says the eldest, and commences: "Once there was a merchant". The guardian of the magic garden immediately stops him, saying that since merchants do exist, his tale could not be considered a lie from beginning to end. The second brother fares no better. Only the youngest can perform the task correctly: "When I was three years old, he begins, and my son was fifty...", and he continues with a most improbable tale (5).

(5) For an extended discussion see Ibrahim MUIHAWI and Sharif KANAANA, *Speak Bird. Speak again: Palestinian Arab Folktales*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p. 368-370.

That folktales are considered as lies is perhaps the chief reason why the Palestinian folk narrative tradition has been preserved and transmitted. Grown men willy hardly ever tell folktales, though the great majority were exposed to them as children. Being lies, folktales are not considered serious enough to interest the men, whose domain is outside the household. They prefer to listen to stories that ring of historical truth, like the Hilali epic stories, whose heroes are thought to have existed, or could have existed. These epics were recited in public places where the men gathered, like the coffee house or the guest house. But with the change that took place in Palestinian society, particularly urbanisation and dispersal, the institution of the clan guest house disappeared. So did the itinerant reciters of the epic stories. The epic tradition therefore has long been dead in Palestinian society, whereas the folktale has survived precisely because it consists of lies that belong to the domain of the hearth, where women and children gather.

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