

Gender Representation in Omani Folktales: An Analysis Through Kristeva's Symbolic and Semiotic Framework

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Abstract

Oral traditions, including folk songs, myths, legends, and folktales, are integral aspects of every society, encapsulating collective beliefs, customs, religious practices, cultural heritage, and everyday lifestyles. Collectively termed "oral literature," these traditions serve as vital repositories of societal values. Omani folklore is particularly rich in oral literature, with folktales acting as significant vessels for cultural heritage, offering profound insights into the nation's traditions, values, and social norms. Although these narratives play a significant role in preserving and reflecting social constructs, few academic studies have explored the gender dynamics portrayed within them, leaving a gap in understanding the sociocultural foundations of gender roles within Omani society. To bridge this gap, this paper analyzes the representation of gender roles within six Omani folktales, employing qualitative methods, specifically content and thematic analysis, through a Kristevan feminist lens. The findings reveal four key themes, which are women's voice and agency, familial and communal support, transformation, and sacrifice, demonstrating that these tales not only mirror and uphold gender dynamics but also inspire people to challenge societal expectations. Therefore, this study contributes to Omani folklore studies, Middle Eastern studies, and literary criticism by offering a fresh feminist perspective on a largely understudied corpus and opening avenues for further interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: folktales, folk, Oman, gender roles, feminism, women's empowerment

1. Introduction

Folktales as a genre of oral literature reflect the historical and societal structures of the community in which they emerged. There are many definitions for folktales; Bascom, for instance, defines folktales as "prose narratives which are popularly regarded as fiction." According to Bascom, this type of literature is mainly said to be for amusement purposes (Bascom, as cited in Motshwari, 1998, p. 4). Folktales and other folk narratives, like legends and myths, are parts of the oral tradition passed from generation to generation. They mirror their societies' traditions, values, customs, and beliefs, enriching collective identity.

Folktales are commonly short, simple, and very often predictable. Therefore, people enjoy listening to them and interacting with the performers (Motshwari, 1998). Due to their short length and straightforward structure, memorizing those folktales and passing them from generation to generation was easy.

Omani Folklore is rich in oral literature, with folktales serving as repositories of cultural heritage that provide insights into Oman's traditions, values, and norms (ElMahi & Khatheri, 2015). They can be seen as a platform for self-contemplation, urging audiences to question and think of preexisting values and norms and re-evaluate their perceptions. Thus, Omani folktales are not only tales told for enjoyment but also an effective tool for social commentary and change (ElMahi & Khatheri, 2015). A reader of Omani folklore will find that many international folktales have their Omani local versions that are tailored and narrated to reflect Oman's traditions and customs. For example, there are Omani versions of the well-known tales of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and many others.

This article aims to study and critically analyze the representation of gender roles within Omani folktales, adding to the general understanding of Omani cultural tales and gender dynamics within this framework. Folktales are rich and deep since they reflect the cultural heritage of Oman. They are full of moral values, wisdom, and societal traditions as they are used to raise the collective conscience of Omani folks (ElMahi & Khatheri, 2015). Even though they play a significant role in capturing social constructs, few academic studies have focused on gender dynamics within these stories. This limited academic recognition leaves a gap in the general understanding of the sociocultural roots of gender in Omani society. Hence, this study aims to bridge this gap. This article has three main objectives which are:

1. To examine the gender portrayal in the selected Omani folktales to achieve a deep and nuanced understanding of how these tales contribute to offering new perspectives on Omani gender studies.
2. To study these narratives from a feminist perspective to provide new insights.
3. To find out how the symbolic and semiotic factors interact to present the female characters in the selected folktales.

This study argues that Omani folktales mirror and uphold gender dynamics among other societal norms. Oral literature, in

general, and folktales, in particular, preserve societal traditions and values. One of the roles that folktales played in the past was to reinforce cultural and societal norms as they used these tales to affect and form folks' expectations and perceptions regarding their roles in society (Abou Adel et al., 2024). In male-dominated communities, storytellers sometimes convince the audience to believe in societal norms, including patriarchal rules and gender stereotypes (Maliki & Housni, 2020). Thus, exploring masculinity and femininity within these tales may add new lenses to Omani folklore studies.

Moreover, based on the analysis of the Omani folktales using Julia Kristeva's model of the symbolic and semiotic orders, this study argues that these tales not only mirror societal norms but also inspire people to fight and challenge societal expectations. Like other literary genres, folktales serve as a dynamic realm where traditions and beliefs are contrasted, renegotiated, and sometimes transformed (Weinger et al., 2018). The article supports this argument by studying the cases where characters fight the conventional gender roles placed upon them, or the examples where characters play new and unexpected roles in the community. To support this argument, this study utilizes content and thematic analysis to elucidate and explain gender representation within the Omani context under the feminist literary criticism framework. This may help provide a mechanism to delve into the selected tales, uncovering the complex methods in which they discuss gender roles and norms.

The examination of gender in Omani folktales has received limited recognition, creating a gap in academic research and literature. So, this study aims to fill this gap by offering a nuanced understanding of the representation of male and female roles in Omani society within these tales. The study hopes to add significant value to the theoretical approaches to non-Western literature and the academic discourse of folklore studies, Middle Eastern studies, and literary criticism.

2. Review of Related Literature

The critical investigation of gender in literature aligns with the theoretical perspectives of feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler who recognize gender as socially constructed rather than biologically determined (He, 2017). They argue that this construction leads to alienation, which is a consequence of the disconnect between one's internal sense of gender identity and the gender roles and expectations imposed by society. In a patriarchal society, women are viewed as "the other": they are marginalized, objectified, and characterized solely by their differences from male norms and values and by what they (supposedly) lack but males (allegedly) possess (Tyson, 2006).

Julia Kristeva's concepts of the symbolic and semiotic orders align with Tyson's discussion of gender as a social construct. Her framework illustrates how cultural and linguistic systems contribute to establishing gender norms as well as encouraging resistance and renegotiation. Kristeva's symbolic order which is reflected in structured language, law and male-dominated societies matches feminist critics' notions of gender roles. However, the semiotic order, rooted in the pre-linguistic, instinctual realm related to maternal energy and maternal drives, acts as a source of potential subversion of rigid gender norms. Kristeva's approach emphasizes the ways in which socially constructed norms suppress individuality while also offering a means for understanding and resisting these constraints. She highlights the importance of the constant dialogue and the dynamic interplay between these two primary modes of expression, the symbolic and the semiotic to the ongoing renegotiation of gender and identity (Alhourani et al., 2026). This framework provides the analytical lens through which the studies reviewed below are examined, as each engages — explicitly or implicitly — with the tension between socially imposed gender norms and women's resistance to them.

2.1 Gender Representation in Folktales: Between Passivity and Resistance

A significant body of scholarship has examined gender representation in folktales across different cultural contexts, revealing a recurring tension between the portrayal of women as passive, subordinate figures and their emergence as active agents of resistance.

Tanka Bahadur Rai's "Gender Representation in Nepalese Folktales" highlights that Nepalese folktales often portray women as marginalized and passive figures dependent on men for survival, expected to be beautiful and self-sacrificing (Rai, 2009). Female characters are depicted with dichotomous features, either as divine manifestations or incarnations of evil traits. However, Rai (2009) reveals that there are instances where Nepalese women are represented as rebellious figures who challenge patriarchal roles, playing the trickster to subvert traditional gender norms, and can be controllers, heroines, protectors, and even violent. Even though the researcher acknowledges a few examples where female figures challenge traditional roles, these instances are not sufficiently explored in depth. Therefore, putting an equal emphasis on powerful female characters could balance the critique and provide a more reliable view of gender dynamics in Nepalese folktales. This tension between submission and subversion mirrors Kristeva's semiotic order, where pre-linguistic drives disrupt the symbolic structures that confine women to passive roles.

Similarly, Mir et al.'s "Female Heroism and Folktales" challenges the assumption that heroism in Kashmiri folktales is exclusively masculine, demonstrating that female characters can and do perform heroic actions that subvert gendered expectations (Mir et al., 2022). The authors succeeded in bridging a significant gap in literature by examining female heroism; they challenged the notion that heroism is only attributed to male characters. However, a deep investigation of the societal and cultural consequences of subverting the norms and society's reaction towards female heroism could add valuable insights to the study. The study's limitation lies in its failure to examine how the symbolic order responds to or reasserts itself against such subversions, a gap this present study seeks to address.

2.2 Folktales as Tools of Social Commentary and Feminist Coding

Another prominent trend in the literature examines how folktales function not merely as entertainment but as vehicles for feminist social

commentary, particularly in Arab and Gulf contexts.

Al-Khalaf's "Feminist Voices in Saudi Folk Tales" argues that Saudi folktales act as an agent for social commentary and a call for change (2019), narrated historically by women who used storytelling to introduce feminist notions through metaphorical feminist coding. For example, Salma transforms herself into a bird as coded resistance to patriarchal constraints (Al-Khalaf, 2019), a notion that aligns with Kristeva's semiotic, where bodily and imaginative expressions disrupt the rigid symbolic order. The author provided valuable insights about Saudi folktales and the representation of gender, and the feminist themes embedded in them. She included Saudi children's perspectives which is a great way to indicate the tales' continuing relevance. However, the limited scope of the paper, three folktales, provided a narrow view of the topic.

Ali Al-Jafar's "Women's Search for Stability" similarly examines the Cinderella story in the Arabian Gulf, noting that folktales are generally narrated by elderly women as transmitters of cultural heritage (2007). However, women in these tales often play roles of subjugation, relying on supernatural support rather than their own agency, and the paper neglects the role of male figures and power dynamics (Al-Jafar, 2007). Even though the paper offers a nuanced view of female-centered storytelling traditions in the Gulf and how this tradition is used as a tool to assert influence and inspire others to question and challenge patriarchal norms, it lacks the analysis of power dynamics employed in the analyzed Cinderella tales. From a Kristevan perspective, the female characters in these tales remain largely confined within the symbolic order, with limited semiotic disruption, which leaves the deeper power structures unexamined.

AL-Hemyari et al.'s "Arab Women's Role in the Tales of Arabian Nights" contrasts the negative portrayal of women in Arabian Nights with their actual roles in Arab-Islamic societies, where women work in professions, take part in decision-making, and have equal rights in inheritance and divorce (2018). It is worth noting that this paper succeeds in offering an accurate depiction of Arab women in Islamic societies by challenging the false portrayal of Arab women in Arabian Nights and shedding light on the powerful roles that Arab women held in their communities. The inclusion of Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH) sayings about women's positions in Islam and about the honor men earn by respecting women, as well as the historical examples of women leaders, adds depth to the paper.

2.3 Gender-related Themes in Folktales

Across different cultural traditions, folktales reflect significant variations in gender roles and stereotypes, shaped by the culture and time period of their origin.

In patriarchal societies, people value male attributes while devaluing female ones; thus, female characters are traditionally portrayed as submissive, obedient, cunning, and wicked figures. They are rarely portrayed as heroines or wise women (Alhourani et al., 2025a; Shaheen et al., 2019). They can be depicted with powerful traits but usually as wicked stepmothers or witches "whose assertiveness and independence prove to be self-destructive at the end" (Rai, 2009, p. 29). These stereotypes indicate that for women to gain romantic admiration, they must be vulnerable and beautiful and always need a man to rescue them. In contrast, men are frequently portrayed as oppressors, authoritative, wise, and strong, exemplifying characteristics such as strength, bravery, and wisdom, thereby mirroring societal expectations and stereotypes imposed upon them.

Furthermore, folktales play a transformative role in reshaping the patriarchal notions about gender roles. For example, in some tales, women are depicted with characteristics usually associated with courage and power, such as heroines or wise women, indicating a vivid resistance to the existing gender roles and affirmation of female agency. For example, in the Nepalese folktale "How the Clever Wife Outwits the Cheaters," the daughter-in-law rebels against her arrogant husband who believes that wives are their husbands' slaves (Rai, 2009). In some South African folktales, female figures are given attributes of courage and bravery that male characters lack, like in "Umfazi nemamba" a woman takes a risk no man dares to take and saves her community from a venomous snake (Gebregeorgis, 2022). According to Al-Barazenji (2015), folktales are tales of old grandmothers, and they are told from women's perspectives, so women are sometimes given these traits to show their visibility and power in a male-dominated society. This complex representation of gender offers a critique of rigid gender stereotypes, pointing out the multifarious nature of male and female identity (Al-Hawawsha et al., 2022; Adel et al., 2024).

2.4 Gender in Oman and Omani Narratives

Culture, society, and economy all play significant roles in forming traditional gender norms in Oman. Karadsheh & Zar (2017) indicated that gender roles, especially women's place in society, are influenced by structural group systems, which are affected by natural resources, demographic features, family income, and society's values and norms. In the past, women's roles were largely limited to domestic responsibilities, while men were responsible for providing for the family (Karadsheh & Zar, 2017). Due to the country's quick transformation toward modernization and urbanization, a shift happened in society's expectations of gender roles, and women gained freedom, possibilities, and power (Amzat et al., 2017). Life circumstances drastically changed for Omani women in the 1970s when Sultan Qaboos bin Said began to rule the country and started its modernization. In modern Omani society, it is ordinary to come across women holding more diverse professional jobs than they historically did, like doctors, engineers, lawyers, diplomats, pilots, and entrepreneurs. Women also occupy high levels of both public and private authority (Amzat et al., 2017). These societal shifts are reflected in Omani literary works.

2.5 Gender Roles in Omani Narratives

Like many literary works, Omani narratives mirror societal and cultural norms and values, including the portrayal of gender and societal

expectations and stereotypes. Jokha Alharthy, in her novel “Celestial Bodies”, presented the complexities of gender dynamics in Omani society by depicting the struggles that the heroines go through within the patriarchal framework, especially in the context of marriage (Wood, 2019). She captured the conflict between traditional values and the influence of modernity in Omani society. The novelist challenges the traditional gender roles that view women as passive figures. She eventually portrays the characters as individuals with voices that are heard and with aspirations. Through the characters, Alharthy creates a sense of self that transcends the societal expectations and norms of Omani motherhood. She also depicts how women fight for agency within their marriages (Wood, 2019).

2.6 Research Gap

The reviewed studies identified two significant gaps the present study aims to address. First, scholars have examined gender roles and attitudes in folktales across different cultural contexts; however, Omani folktales remain an understudied corpus, with little academic recognition given to the gender dynamics they contain. Second, none of the reviewed studies applies Julia Kristeva’s theory of the symbolic and semiotic orders to Omani folktales, leaving a gap in understanding how these tales simultaneously uphold and subvert societal gender norms. Therefore, this study aims to bridge these gaps by examining six Omani folktales through a Kristevan feminist lens, offering new insights on gender representation in Omani oral literature.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative method to offer a nuanced understanding of the selected Omani folktales and their role in presenting a clear image of gender dynamics in Omani society. This method is suitable for analysing the content of the tales and identifying common themes related to gender. To examine the way these folktales mirror, uphold, or contradict societal beliefs and norms about gender roles and relations, the study uses the feminist theoretical framework specifically Julia Kristeva’s theory of the symbolic and semiotic orders. Julia Kristeva, a renowned feminist philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst of Bulgarian-French origin, introduces the symbolic and semiotic orders in her groundbreaking work, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Her theoretical framework is deeply rooted in her engagement with psychoanalysis, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

According to Kristeva, the symbolic and the semiotic orders represent two fundamental, yet interrelated modes of signification (Kristeva, 1984). The “semiotic” is deeply inspired by Freud’s theory of the unconscious and his emphasis on two primary psychic drives: Eros (the life drive) and Thanatos (the death drive), which uphold human behavior and mental states. It is rooted in the pre-oedipal phase of development, and it pertains to the maternal body, primal drives, and the unconscious, which are integrated into unstructured language. Kristeva indicates that the semiotic cannot be articulated as it is the “real” individual self that is derived from natural desire and physical drives (Kristeva, 1984). It is expressed through rhythms, tones and body gestures rather than structured language. In contrast, the notion of the symbolic order in Julia Kristeva’s theory is deeply rooted in the realms of structured language, culture and social structures. According to Kristeva, the “symbolic” encompasses the realm of language, logic and social norms which is initiated by the paternal interdict, thus giving rise to subjectivity through the law of the Father that initiates children’s entry into the patriarchal culture (the symbolic) (Kristeva, 1984). The symbolic, according to Kristeva, represses the semiotic, imposing a system of meaning that often obscures or denies the pre-linguistic experiences and drives that shape our existence (Kristeva, 1984).

Building on this, Kristeva argued that the maternal is not just a precursor to subjectivity but an ongoing influence through the semiotic (Kristeva, 1984). She asserted that the semiotic, reflected by the maternal body and pre-linguistic drives, questions the rigidity of the symbolic. Kristeva insisted that women’s experiences and their roles in societies are important to human development rather than shallow and marginal to male-dominated narratives (Kristeva, 1984). Moreover, in Kristeva’s framework, language acts as a tool of transformation which also aligns with feminist theorists’ notions. Through poetic and creative language, the semiotic disrupts the symbolic order leading to possibilities to challenge and resist existing societal norms (Kristeva, 1984). This idea is similarly explored by feminist critics as they indicate that language can be used to express marginalized experiences and fight dominant structures.

With regard to data collection, a purposive sampling technique is used to collect the folktales, a non-random selection involving studying six specific tales relevant to the theme of gender and providing rich and deep information that aligns with the research objectives. Because of the limited number of translated folktales available, the data was collected from six published collections of Omani folktales translated into English.

Concerning data analysis, the study used content and thematic analysis to elucidate the chosen Omani folktales, which were the research’s primary data sources. First, the researchers used content analysis to analyze the six selected tales by systematically coding symbolic representations of gender roles, behaviors, and identities. This involved identifying structured, linguistic, and socially conventional depictions of masculinity and femininity such as gender roles and expectations, subversion of gender norms, power and agency, and explicit narrative descriptions. Following content analysis, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the themes and then identify the implicit messages within the selected tales. This was done by grouping the coded symbolic representations into broader themes to present a profound analysis of the meanings and implications within the broader sociocultural context of Oman and how these themes reflect, challenge, or provide new insights into the representation of gender in the Omani community. After identifying the symbolic themes, the selected tales were revisited to study the semiotic elements such as unstructured, pre-linguistic, bodily, affective, rhythmic, and unconscious expressions that complicate or disrupt the symbolic meanings. This involved analyzing imagery, similes, rhythms, metaphors, repetitions, emotional intensity, and bodily gestures within the tales. Finally, both analyses were integrated by analyzing how semiotic elements challenged or complicated symbolic gender interpretations and indicated deeper cultural tensions.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Within the Omani oral tradition, folktales have served as a means for older generations to impart knowledge and values to the younger population. Despite being primarily orally transmitted, these tales possess unique coherence due to their adaptability by the storytellers and the absence of fixed texts. They are used to mirror the Omani society and inspire the audience to change through the use of rich symbols, expressive language, evocative dialogues and significant themes.

4.1 Voice and Agency

The examination of the selected tales does not only focus on the narrative elements but also on the cultural functions and implications of the female characters' forms of agency within the Omani contexts. Some of the tales presented feature female characters who ingeniously escape traps set by powerful figures, revealing that a female position does not necessarily result in powerlessness or victimization. For example, in the tale "*The Invisible Woman*" Iman's strong autonomy and agency are evident in the tale when she rejects the proposal of Khadeer, who is known as a wealthy merchant and sorcerer, feared by the villagers. Having a lover is not allowed or practiced in Omani society. It is usually something strange and unwelcome, so no one expects Iman to refuse the wealthy man's proposal. However, she makes her own decision based on personal integrity and love. According to Kristeva, women are speaking subjects having their own needs, desires and agency (Kristeva, 1984).

In this tale, Iman is portrayed as an active agent who prioritizes her inner feelings and love for Ahmed over traditional expectations of marrying for wealth and status. This is evident through her dialogue with her father when she declares that she does not care about money. She says, "father, I don't care about his money. There's something about him that is not quite right" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 18). Her response shows that she is a thinking individual and responsible for making her own decisions. Moreover, Iman resists oppression through her confrontation with Khadeer, her escape, and her reunion with her father and Ahmed. Her actions symbolize a fight for self-determination and embody her empowerment and courage as she refuses to remain a victim. Iman's dialogues mirror her assertiveness emphasizing her independence and strength and challenging traditional narratives that picture women as passive victims who always await rescue (Rai, 2009; Alhourani et al., 2025b).

Iman receives great respect and support from her father and Ahmed. They both respect her choices, indicating her active agency. For example, when Khadeer proposes to Iman, her father acknowledges Khadeer's worth, stating, "my son, your kindness and wealth are well-known to all. A man like you is most welcome in our family." However, he immediately emphasizes Iman's agency, adding, "but Iman is my only daughter, and her happiness is what counts most" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 18). This shows that he cannot force his daughter to accept since it is her own choice. Also, her society's acceptance of her story emphasizes that her voice is heard and validated.

To emphasize this point, Halimah in *Halimah and The Snake* is pictured as an active character who does not succumb to despair but rather seeks solutions to the impossible tasks assigned to her. Her stepmother represents the cruel aspects of the symbolic order. She forces Halimah to perform challenging tasks, like collecting crooked sticks which are impossible to find and devoid of any practical meaning, embodying the control of the symbolic order over Halimah's life and the suppression of her semiotic self and her pre-linguistic, intuitive needs (Kristeva, 1984). Halimah's engagement with supernatural elements such as the mermaid and the snake symbolizes her alignment with the semiotic as she expresses her feelings freely beyond the constraints of the symbolic order. These natural elements represent the semiotic's capacity to disrupt and transform as they help her change her fate and demonstrate her active agency and participation in forging her life journey. Halimah's voice gradually gains strength when she shows her willingness to marry the snake, even though it is an unconventional decision and unrealistic to her society. This growing strength is evident in the exchange:

"O girl! What evil have you brought into your father's house" "Wife of my father, I beg you not to kill it." "But it's a poisonous snake!" "Please let me marry him!" "Are you out of your mind? How can you marry a snake?" "Don't worry about me" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 3).

In her perspective, marriage acts as an avenue to escape the harsh surroundings and may be interpreted as a symbol of resistance against oppression and a tool that enhances her position. Halimah's marriage, despite appearing to contradict societal conventions, embodies her autonomy in making choices and her active agency in reshaping symbolic limits (Kristeva, 1984).

The folktales *Mahad*, *Mariam and the Palm Trunk* and *The Good Wife* illustrate the impactful actions of women. In *Mahad*, the theme of voice and agency is apparent in the characters of Budur, the old woman, and the Sheikh's daughter. Budur's voice grows stronger and clearer as the narrative progresses. At first, her voice is metaphorically unheard due to her poverty and blindness, but this changes when her sight is restored. Her voice is first heard when she accepts to be Mahad's wife. As the narrative progresses, she makes decisions that her husband respects and values starting from staying in her uncles' tribe to working as a fisherman with Mahad, a craft that is traditionally performed by men. Her role in discovering the treasure and keeping it, which leads to their fortune and prosperity, highlights her as an equal partner who effectively contributes to improving their income. These decisions showcase Budur's active agency, assertiveness, and willingness to challenge societal norms for securing her family.

Mahad seeks the old woman's guidance, wisdom and insights to find a suitable girl for marriage. Her role in guiding Mahad and providing him with important information and advice indicates that she is a wise mentor and a respected woman with a powerful and valued voice in her community. Her strong agency is highlighted in the narrative through her actions, initially from facilitating the way for Mahad to negotiate with Adam's Sheikh, to her role in advising him to accept his fate. Unlike traditional narratives that portray men as

wise figures whose advice everyone seeks (Shaheen et al., 2019), this tale pictures the old woman as an influential character who shapes the story's outcomes. This reflects the role of elderly women in Omani society as their words are heard and their advice is worth following. It also emphasizes that elders are respected within the symbolic order.

Although the Sheikh's daughter is not a central figure in the tale, her voice is not to be overlooked. When Mahad proposes to her, she lays down specific terms and ultimately rejects his proposal. As the text notes, "the Sheikh's daughter refused his proposal of marriage on the grounds that his father's money was much less than her father's" (Hamad, 2006, p. 42). Her refusal acts as a testament to her agency, demonstrating her as a woman of action who has autonomy in making crucial decisions regarding her own destiny.

Similarly, in *Mariam and the Palm Trunk*, the actions of the female figures transcend limitations and boundaries. The tale commences with Aisha meeting her companions by the Falaj, a system used to supply water for farming. Omani women used to wash garments and share and discuss their familial and societal concerns. The inclusion of the falaj at the tale's outset may be interpreted as a representation of vitality and sustenance, acting as a platform for the reinforcement of societal norms. Women's gatherings near the falaj and their discussion of family issues match Kristeva's notion of the symbolic order as these gatherings reinforce social bonds and community cohesion (Kristeva, 1984). By discussing family issues, women engage in the symbolic act of maintaining and reinforcing social ties, a key aspect of the symbolic order.

Aisha expresses to her friends her despair regarding childbearing and promises that if Allah blessed her with a baby girl, her daughter would marry her off to the palm trunk. Her expressive promise indirectly foreshadows the supernatural events to come. According to Kristeva (1984) language is used here as a tool of structure as the descriptions and the dialogues between the characters highlight some of Omani norms and expectations, for example, Aisha's promise is a verbal contract, binding within the community's symbolic framework, since one is expected to keep one's word. This incident may be seen as an initial stage in the story where women's voices are central. Aisha shows commitment to her promise regarding marrying her dear and only daughter to the palm trunk, even though it seems eccentric and whimsical. This may indicate that her agency is rooted in abiding by her moral values.

Moreover, Mariam throughout the tale shows her great ability to communicate her needs and desires effectively when interacting with her family, friends, and her husband. For example, the initial incident between Aisha and the palm trunk shows Mariam's inquisitive nature as she asks about the story behind her mother's promise. Moreover, her conversation with the old man to reunite with her jinn husband reinforces her determination and resolution. This illustrates that she is an active agent with a heard voice. A reader of the folktale would notice that Mariam, throughout the story, is an active character who makes critical decisions—from fulfilling the old palm trunk's orders to negotiating with her jinn husband and undertaking the toilsome journey. Each decision shows her active role in steering the course of her destiny.

Furthermore, Safia in *The Good Wife* is also portrayed in the tale as an active agent but in a different way. Her agency is illustrated through her silence, a non-verbal semiotic resilience, and through her pretense of being a deaf and mute servant, both of which lead to her triumph. The descriptive language of the tale's characters and their actions takes on a moralistic tone to emphasize an important function of the tale which is mirroring social and ethical values of the Omani community. Moreover, the tale also utilizes contrasting language to shed light on the differences between characters and their actions. For instance, Safia's patience, resilience and loyalty are juxtaposed with the first wife's treachery and greed that lead to her downfall, stressing their opposing natures. Safia's agency depicts women as insightful figures and capable of influencing outcomes. Her actions showcase her significant role in driving the tale's resolution and highlight the complexity of female characters in the narrative.

4.2 Familial Bonds and Communal Support

Omani family bonds are very sacred, and this is reflected in many folktales where familial bonds and communal support are central themes, highlighting the essential role of the Omani family and community in coping with life's challenges and obstacles. The selected tales portray female characters who draw strength and support from their close-knit families or supportive communities, indicating unity and collective resilience of the Omani society. For example, in "*The Invisible Woman*" and "*Mariam and the Palm Trunk*" the female characters' actions illustrate the strong and deep emotional bond between them and their families. In *The Invisible Woman*, Iman's father's love, unwavering support and grief for his daughter's disappearance and her persistent attempts to reunite with her father emphasize the strength of their relationship. Khadeer allows Iman to visit her father but on one condition: she must wear a black abaya that makes her invisible. She tries to talk with her father, but all her attempts are in vain. This enforced invisibility is poignantly illustrated when, despite her desperate attempts to communicate, no sound comes out of her mouth:

"father, don't be sad. I am alive! I have come home!" But no sound came out of her mouth! Iman shouted louder and louder, hoping her father would hear her. She knocked on the window until her hands bled" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 19).

Her inability to talk and communicate verbally with her father embodies the symbolic order where her voice is silenced. However, her desperate attempts to make noise hoping that her father would hear her represent the semiotic as she tries to connect with her father beyond language (Kristeva, 1984). Iman considers her father a powerful source of strength that enables her to survive difficulties. This highlights that family support helps in overcoming adversity.

Another example is Mariam in *Mariam and the Palm Trunk* as she receives great support from her parents despite the hard challenges that she faces. She values her familial bonds and the collective strength one gets when having a close-knit family. This theme highlights that

many Omani communities act as a wellspring of empowerment, nourishing women's strength.

In the selected narratives, the relationship between couples acts as a mirror of cultural values and societal norms. It offers insights into the dynamics of marital relationships in the Omani culture. For instance, the tale of *Mahad* depicts the couples' interactions to shed light on the importance of love, understanding, mutual support and cooperation in building strong, enduring partnerships. The relationship between Mahad and Budur reflects a mutual understanding and support and a strong partnership. When they are robbed by a band of highway robbers and left stranded in the desert, which is a symbol of the difficult challenges that they experience and must endure to fulfill their goals, their bond becomes stronger and a reason for their survival. They work together and listen to each other to overcome adversity. Budur's decision to join her husband in fishing, signifies their commitment to their focused goal. Their collaboration deepens and strengthens their relationship and contributes to their success. It is a pragmatic approach, driven by semiotic instincts, that leads both to discover the treasure that symbolizes a culmination of their survival and prosperity, and transformation as individuals and as a couple.

The selected tales also emphasize the profound role of community support in shaping main characters' destinies and overcoming adversity. They portray how female characters endure trials and tribulations and find guidance, welcome and triumph through the collective resilience and unwavering solidarity derived from the shared bonds of their communities. For example, *Iman in The Invisible Woman*, receives great support from her lover Ahmed and her community in confronting Khadeer. She seizes the opportunity to escape when she notices that "the invisible ropes that kept her tethered to the cave break" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 19). The invisible ropes can stand as symbols of her liberation from Khadeer's control. She quickly seeks help from Ahmed "faster than a falcon swooping down on its prey, headed straight for Ahmed's house" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 19). Iman's movement is compared to the falcon's speed and precise dive. The comparison to a falcon represents the semiotic indicating that even when silenced with force, her inner strength cannot be suppressed; she is a force to be reckoned with. This simile also emphasizes that Iman is urgently heading to her lover's house with a focused goal in her head that he will be her savior. Ahmed welcomes Iman even when she is in a monstrous form and helps her break the spell and get rid of the sorcerer. The community welcomed Iman even though they thought that she was dead and even held a funeral for her. This collective support highlights that fighting oppression requires solidarity and strong communal bonds.

Another example can be found in *Mahad*, where the couple in the tale also receive support from their community and their extended family to overcome challenges. When the robbery happens, a caravan's men rescue them and help them go to Al-Jazir where Budur's relatives live. They are also welcomed by Budur's uncles who provide them with the means to rest and recover. Their decision to work rather than rely on the hospitality of their relatives showcases their will to integrate into the community and not be a burden.

In contrast to Ali Al-Jafar's study, male characters are not passive in the selected tales as they provide guidance and support to the female characters. The strong familial and communal bonds depicted in the tales mirror the Omani culture which prioritizes family and community ties. As it is indicated in the tales, the presence of these bonds holds society's cohesion and provides safety connections during times of adversity.

4.3 Transformation

The theme of transformation is pervasive in numerous Omani folktales. It is used as a metaphor for personal growth and the triumph of good over evil. It serves as a narrative device that drives the plot forward or introduces conflict and resolution. Transformation in folktales can be physical, emotional or spiritual and often leads to central changes in characters' lives. These changes shed light on the potential for renewal and the idea that individuals are not constrained by their initial circumstances or appearance.

In *Zahrah*, *The Invisible Woman*, *Mariam and the Palm Trunk*, *The Good Wife* and *Halimah and the Snake*, the theme of transformation intertwines with the empowerment of the female characters. The main characters in these tales Zahrah, Iman, Mariam, Safia and Halimah face several challenges; however, they all undergo significant transformations that elevate their agency within their communities. For example, the tale of Zahrah starts with the villagers of A'Seefa suffering from drought. Their prayers are not answered thus they request Zahrah who is a well-known religious woman to intercede with God, to grant them rain. This indicates how some Omani societies rely on symbolic structures such as religion and designated individuals to tackle crises. It also shows that Zahrah has a unique position in the village and is known for her special status. The drought and the unanswered prayers can be seen as symbols that foreground Zahrah's role as a savior of her people. Zahrah's transformation into a shining star that people today stare at and glorify is a form of empowerment as she transcends human limitations. The star could be seen as a symbol of eternal remembrance, immortality and guidance since A'Seefa is a small fishing village along the coast of Yiti and many villagers use stars to know the directions so they will always stare at Zahrah's star. This transformation raises her to a divine status, illustrating a form of respect and recognition. Her direct communication with God and then her transformation into a celestial figure places her in a special sacred role. Giving a woman this role that in many tales is given to male characters, mirrors Omani society's views on the important and central role that women play in communal well-being. Zahrah's non-verbal mystical act and her transformation into a star reflect Kristeva's semiotic order as they break from the linguistic structures and societal norms of the community (Kristeva, 1984). Her transformation illustrates a move beyond the traditional symbolic order of the human realm to a higher revered position. This metamorphosis may emphasize Zahrah's active agency and her elevation from a human being to a sacred figure in the cosmic order.

In *The Invisible Woman* Iman's resilience during her imprisonment transforms her into a figure of self-reliance and inner strength. Her rejection of Khadeer's proposal stirs up evil feelings in him. He represents the symbolic power structure through his wealth and sorcery as he tries to use his force and power to control Iman. Thus, he decides to use his skills as a magician to abduct and imprison her in a cave on

a high, deserted mountain and deprive her of food and drink. However, she manages to survive on minimal resources and maintain hope. She uses many survival skills such as eating acacia trees' spiral pods and drinking rainwater, as the text describes, "Iman survived by eating the flat, spiral pods of the thorny acacia trees and drinking the muddy trickles of water from last year's rains" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 18). The acacia tree, which is found in abundance in many Omani mountains, symbolizes Iman's resilience and survival in harsh conditions. These detailed descriptions and vivid imagery help the listener be immersed in the tale and its events, making Iman's sufferings and triumphs relatable and tangible. Iman's period of captivity can be seen as a metaphor for her personal growth and transformation. Through adversity and suffering, Iman becomes stronger, and more self-determined.

Iman's reunion with her father and marriage to Ahmed signify a reintegration of the semiotic and symbolic. While she re-enters the symbolic order (as a wife and daughter within societal norms), her experiences reflect the enduring presence of the semiotic—the emotional and corporeal forces that shaped her survival and resistance. The riches left by Khadeer, now used for her happiness, suggest a reconciliation of the symbolic's oppressive elements with the semiotic's vital energies.

Moreover, Khadeer's fall signifies an important shift in the power structures of the narrative. At the beginning of the tale, he is described as a powerful magician, but at the end, Iman uses his own magic against him, leading him to lose his power. His defeat does not only symbolize a personal loss but also a transformation in the societal structure. It denotes a collapse of the unjust power dynamics, creating a space for a fairer society.

In *Mariam and the Palm Trunk*, Mariam's journey transforms her physically and emotionally. When her parents prepare her with new clothes and jewelry before she is taken to the palm trunk, it signifies Mariam's transition from being a young girl who lives in a small village to an independent woman who endures several big challenges and from an earthly existence to a mystical life. Her journey marks a significant rite of passage, transforming her into a strong resilient person.

Mystical and non-verbal elements are involved in many pivotal incidents in the tale, like the speaking old trunk, the jinn, the giant flying bird or the tasks Mariam performs to secure her return to her husband. These elements expressed through actions not words, which are done beyond the structured language, are at odds with the conventional Omani societal norms which reflect Kristeva's notion of semiotic order. They also influence Mariam's metamorphosis that happens by forces beyond the earthly world. Her interaction with her jinn husband embodies the semiotic through their deviation from the norm and the limitations imposed by the symbolic order. This relationship transcends the conventional symbolic rules of Mariam's community as the jinn realm and mode of communication are unconventional and mystical which do not fit within the ordinary Omani social structures.

In *The Good Wife*, Safia experiences an important transformation, from a passive and hidden figure into a good wife who plays a pivotal role in protecting her husband's wealth and honor. Initially she is portrayed as a servant who endures silently Harun's first wife's harsh treatment and conceals her intelligence and loyalty by pretending to be deaf and mute. This is exemplified when she instructs Harun:

"Husband, I know that you are already a married man but do not tell your first wife about me. Tell her you have brought back a new servant who is deaf and dumb" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p. 34).

Safia's silence represents the semiotic power of nonverbal communication. Even though her endurance of the cruelty of the first wife can be seen as a form of weakness and passivity, it is an indication of her inner strength, resilience and cunning. Her decision to disguise herself as deaf and mute is seen as a strategic plan to enable her to observe, understand, and ultimately challenge the prevailing power dynamics. By rejecting the structured verbal language—the primary medium of the symbolic—she tunes into the unspoken and pre-linguistic dynamics in the household. However, her role undergoes a dramatic shift the moment she becomes aware of the first wife's treachery and overhears her deceitful plot to steal Harun's wealth. Her keen observations expose the first wife's deceit and underscore how pre-linguistic awareness disrupts symbolic control. The first wife's attempt to steal her husband's riches and her frantic digging when the treasure is missing symbolize a corruption of stability and societal values and reflect her semiotic drives of desperation and greed that led to her failure to uphold the symbolic ideal of a "good wife." When Safia unveils to Harun the betrayal of his first wife and her dishonorable plan, she safeguards his wealth and the stability of the family. He therefore divorces the first wife and acknowledges Safia as his true partner. His action represents the resolution of the symbolic-semiotic tension as he embraces Safia's semiotic intuition and rejects the symbolic betrayal of the first wife leading to his prosperity. Moreover, his action also reflects symbolic order of the Omani society that places importance on societal expectations of justice and loyalty. The clear denunciation of the first wife's deception and the eventual triumph of Safia's patience and faithfulness highlight the symbolic order's influence on the narrative's resolution.

In the folktale *Halimah and the Snake*, the protagonist, Halimah, experiences a significant transformation from a timid and helpless girl to a confident and independent woman. Throughout the tale, she discovers her inner resilience, strength and ability to think independently. Seeking help from the mermaid acts as a pivotal moment that sparks and awakens Halimah to trust her instincts, allowing her to overcome the challenges and limitations imposed by her stepmother and forge her own destiny. The mermaid symbolizes the semiotic realm that disrupts the oppressive structure enforced by Halimah's stepmother, denoting a turning point in her journey. Her presence represents guidance, female solidarity and support, suggesting alternative ways to happiness. The narrative begins with Halimah enduring the harsh treatment of her stepmother in a modest dwelling and ends with her living a joyful life in a grand palace. This transformation is vividly captured when the narrator exclaims, "there was no cave, but a grand palace. And there was Halimah, looking like the Sultan's wife!" (Todino-Gonguet, 2008, p.3). These contrasting settings illuminate Halimah's transformation and the shift in her personal resilience and social standing. The palace itself symbolizes a physical transformation that reflects Halimah's internal growth, mirroring her newfound

empowerment. Her journey of transformation demonstrates the disruption of the symbolic order and the assertion of her semiotic self.

The perception of the snake as a symbol of fear and danger is common, yet in this tale, it is portrayed as a source of reward for Halimah, not a monstrous threat. Her acceptance of being the snake's wife, despite not knowing his real form, indicates that she values his character and inner worth over outward appearance and rejects conventional beauty standards. The snake's metamorphosis into a handsome prince highlights the notion that true worth can often be hidden beneath a humble and unexpected exterior. Moreover, his true identity indicates the potential of the semiotic to reshape the symbolic and its capacity to empower Halimah within the symbolic structure.

Through these transformations, the folktales shed light on women's capacity to transcend challenges and achieve positions of power and esteem.

The theme of transformation is intricately woven in *Mahad*, affecting both the central characters and the broader narrative arc. Budur undergoes three distinct forms of transformation, physical, personal and social. Firstly, her recovery from blindness symbolizes an important physical transformation, not only enhancing her beauty, but also representing her newfound insight and clarity in life. Secondly, her transition from a dependent, blind girl to an empowered woman capable of making powerful decisions signifies a profound personal transformation. Her involvement in fishing and discovering the treasure is a testament to her resilience and personal development, while also disrupting the established symbolic order and challenging traditional gender norms since this role is commonly performed by men. Lastly, Budur's social standing undergoes a notable elevation, transitioning from a modest girl to a wealthy woman through her marriage and the discovery of the treasure.

Mahad also experiences a major transformation in his perspective as his journey shapes his outlook. The tale begins with his quest for an affluent bride whose father's wealth equals his father's. This is made clear by his declaration: "I want to marry a girl whose father and mine are of equal wealth and fortune" (Hamad, 2006, p.38). In his community, marriage is a way to consolidate wealth and social standing. It functions within the symbolic framework as it contributes to preserving social status. His proposal to the Sheikh's daughter is a perfect match within this symbolic order; however, her refusal based on the comparative wealth of their fathers symbolizes the strict adherence to the norms of this framework.

Ultimately, after deep thinking and listening to the old woman's advice, his perspective shifts to treasuring inner qualities. He decides to follow his heart, which overflows with true love for the old woman's daughter, Budur. The imagery of a heart consumed by fire powerfully illustrates his love for Budur: "his heart was entirely consumed by the fire of the blind girl's love" (Hamad, 2006, p. 39). His feeling toward Budur symbolizes a powerful semiotic drive and conflicts with his father's insistence on marrying a girl with equal wealth and status. The imagery could represent the tension between the semiotic and symbolic frameworks. This shift symbolizes a transformation from the pursuit of material qualities to appreciating personal traits and virtues. His marriage to Budur also indicates that his understanding of partnership has altered and his acceptance of Budur to go fishing, despite societal expectations signifies his growth in respecting and valuing his wife's agency. Moreover, Mahad harmonizes his personal desires with societal standards when he returns to Salalah, his homeland, with a loving wife and newfound wealth. Therefore, it can be said that he reintegrates with the symbolic framework but with a transformed perspective.

A transformation also happens in the progress of the tale's plot, moving from a story of a search for wealth and social status to a narrative of true love, mutual support, resilience and overcoming challenges and hardship.

4.4 Sacrifice

One of the powerful elements in Omani folktales is the theme of sacrifice as it is used to shed light on the depths of human altruism, courage, responsibility and the complex interplay between personal preferences or choices and communal welfare. In the selected tales, this theme is portrayed through the characters who prioritize others over themselves thus they cede something that they value—be it physical or emotional—for the honor of a promise, the greater good or the well-being of dear ones. Sacrifice in these tales stands as a reflection of societal values and the moral lessons that storytellers intend to instill in their audience.

In *Mariam and the Palm Trunk* and *Zahrah* the theme of sacrifice is used as a tool for the sake of love and duty. Mariam's journey across the seven seas is a form of agency. The seven seas act as symbols of trials and sacrifice since Mariam desperately wants to be reunited with her jinn husband, even if it requires a huge sacrifice, like cutting a part of her flesh. Also, the act of throwing meat into each sea symbolizes the desire to bear hardships for the sake of love. This quest symbolizes Mariam's immense physical and emotional strength and might be seen as a testament to her determination and resilience.

In this tale, Mariam seems to be controlled by the symbolic order that sets rules for her to follow such as her mother's promise, the vow of silence about her husband, and the sacrificial conditions of her reunion journey. However, the semiotic order keeps breaking through—first with the jinn's insistence on the marriage promise and then with Mariam's deep desire to reunite with him even if it causes her great sacrifice. This is emphasized through the final act of cutting her flesh to reunite with her husband. It indicates that the semiotic drive for reunion defies symbolic order, overpowering societal conventions and logical reasoning.

Similarly, the theme of selflessness is highlighted in *Zahrah*. The main character, Zahrah, bears a name with several interpretations, one of which represents a type of flower that can be a symbol of purity and beauty. Throughout the tale, she shows willingness to rescue her village, A'Seefa, from the prolonged drought by transforming into a star. The resolution is encapsulated in the statement, "Zahrah would have to join him in the sky and become a shining star. When she agreed the drought was broken" (Al Taie & Pickersgill, 2008, p. 66)

underscoring her active role in bringing about the end of the drought and restoring prosperity to her community. Despite the brevity of the narrative and the absence of direct dialogue between the characters, Zahrah's decision to sacrifice herself is considered a powerful act of agency. Her sacrifice shows her unwavering determination and autonomy to steer her life towards the common good, free from any form of force or coercion. It is a conscious choice that reflects Zahrah's resilience and fortitude. The villagers glorify her sacrifice, deeming it a noble act. Their response towards Zahrah's actions acts as a representation of collective acknowledgment and appreciation and a longing for something beyond the symbolic order.

According to Kristeva the symbolic and semiotic are in constant dialogue, neither fully replacing nor dominating the other. In this tale, Zahrah's sacrifice becomes symbolic when the villagers name her a "shining star," making her beauty and sacrifice eternal and transforming her into a symbol of hope. However, Zahrah's willingness to give herself over can also be seen as a reflection of the semiotic, a non-verbal, almost corporeal surrender to something greater. Her drive and self-sacrifice reflect raw, unspoken motivations that transcend cultural expectations and linguistic structures, showing that her semiotic connection to life and nature remains intertwined with the symbolic.

The deliberate and noble act of Zahrah's sacrifice to save her community contrasts with Aisha's sacrifice. Aisha's frivolous promise made at the beginning of *Mariam and the Palm Trunk*, which is: "it is impossible for me to bear a child, but if I become pregnant with a girl, I would marry her to this old palm trunk (Kaschinski-Arafeh & Arafeh, 2018, p. 29) " can be interpreted as the catalyst for a narrative deeply intertwined with sacrifice. Her commitment to her word, despite the profound sorrow and anguish it entails, illustrates the theme of sacrifice for the sake of honor and integrity. While both characters show unwavering commitment, Aisha's sacrifice illustrates the price of upholding one's word.

Both folktales highlight the impact of the female protagonists' sacrifices on the societies in which they live. Mariam's sacrifice to reunite with her beloved husband has the potential to positively influence the emotional fabric of those around her. Likewise, Zahrah's sacrifice elevates her to a celestial guide for her community.

The tales underscore the notion that sacrifice acts as a spark for change and has a far-reaching impact not only on the individuals who make the sacrifices but also their wider communities.

The mentioned examples indicate that female characters in the selected tales are courageous and play heroine roles to save their families or communities in general. Unlike medieval societies and literary works that reflect a gendered heroism pattern in which the term hero is only associated with masculinity and physical prowess (Mir et al., 2022), heroines are present in Omani tales to mirror the bright side of the society where Omani women contributed to developing the country.

5. Conclusion

The current study sheds light on gender roles' representation within Omani folktales by employing a qualitative method using both content and thematic analysis. Through the feminist theoretical framework, specifically Julia Kristeva's theory of the symbolic and semiotic orders, the selected six tales (*The Good Wife*, *The Invisible Woman*, *Halimah and the Snake*, *Mahad*, *Zahrah* and *Mariam and the Palm Trunk*) were examined to study the way they mirror, uphold, or contradict Omani societal beliefs and norms. The analysis revealed that these tales do not merely reflect the symbolic order, the realm of structured language, patriarchal law and societal norms, but also generate spaces of semiotic disruption, where female characters assert agency, resist oppression and reshape their communities' expectations of gender.

The findings uncovered four common themes, voice and agency, familial bonds and communal support, transformation, and sacrifice, all of which point to a recurring pattern across the selected tales. Rather than portraying women as passive figures confined within the symbolic order, the tales consistently present female characters who embody semiotic resistance: they make autonomous decisions, draw strength from communal bonds, undergo transformations that elevate their social standing, and perform acts of sacrifice that earn them communal recognition and power. Female characters in the selected tales dispute the passive, one-dimensional female figure often depicted in Western tales as their actions showcase their significant role in driving the tales' resolutions and highlight femininity's complexity in the Omani folktales. This matches Mir et al.'s findings that heroism is not only associated with a particular gender.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this study makes several significant additions to the field. It analyzes in detail gender representation in Omani folktales, an area that has received limited academic recognition, and offers a new theoretical perspective by applying Julia Kristeva's approach of the symbolic and semiotic orders to a non-Western oral literary tradition, thereby broadening the application of Kristevan feminist theory beyond its conventional scope and contributing to theoretical approaches to non-Western literature. It also reveals a complex and nuanced depiction of female characters in traditional Omani folktales challenging the common Western perception of gender roles in the Middle Eastern cultures. By doing so, the study adds significant value to the academic discourse of folklore studies, Middle Eastern studies, and literary criticism, and opens avenues for interdisciplinary studies that intersect the domain of gender and folklore studies.

This study encounters some limitations that must be acknowledged. The analysis was limited to published translated folktales, and the sample was restricted to six tales, which is not adequate to have a clear understanding of gender dynamics in Oman. Future studies could address these limitations by studying a wider range of Omani folktales, examining how contemporary Omani audiences receive and interpret these tales, and conducting comparative studies to analyze regional similarities and differences in gender representation.

This research revealed that Omani folktales offer a rich and complex depiction of gender by reflecting societal norms and inspiring people to challenge some of the societal and traditional expectations. Examined through Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic framework, these tales emerge not only as cultural artifacts but as dynamic sites where gender norms are simultaneously upheld and contested, and where the semiotic voices of female characters continuously disrupt the symbolic structures that seek to confine them. In conclusion, while this study represents only a small step in understanding the rich tapestry of Omani folklore and its representation of gender, it is our hope that it will inspire further research and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Omani culture and gender dynamics.

AI Tools Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence structure improvement, and Claude (Anthropic) for assistance in reorganizing the abstract. All content was subsequently reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the published work. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation of findings, or reference selection.

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Author contributions

Sumia Al Hadhrami conceived the study design, conducted the primary research, and drafted the manuscript as part of her MA thesis. Khaled Abdulrahman Al Ahdal supervised the project, provided feedback, proofread, and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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