



## "EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL VALUES IN CLASSICAL ARABIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF MIDDLE EASTERN FOLK STORIES"

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### ABSTRACT

Classical Arabic literature, especially Middle Eastern folktales, has played a significant role in shaping social and cultural understanding in the Arab world. This study aims to explore the social values contained in classical Arabic literary works, especially Middle Eastern folktales. In this study, we analyze selected folktales from various regions of the Middle East, to identify and understand the values they project related to morality, social justice, and power structures. Using textual and sociocultural analysis approaches, the results of the study show that these folktales not only reflect the social life of the time, but also serve as a tool to transmit values related to virtue, social solidarity, and criticism of injustice.

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لقد لعب الأدب العربي الكلاسيكي، وخاصة الحكايات الشعبية في الشرق الأوسط دوراً هاماً في تشكيل الفهم الاجتماعي والثقافي في العالم العربي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف القيم الاجتماعية المتضمنة في الأعمال الأدبية العربية الكلاسيكية، وخاصة الحكايات الشعبية في الشرق الأوسط. في هذه الدراسة قمنا بتحليل بعض الحكايات الشعبية المختارة من مختلف مناطق الشرق الأوسط لتحديد وفهم القيم التي تعكسها فيما يتعلق بالأخلاق والعدالة الاجتماعية وبناء السلطة. وباستخدام مناهج التحليل النصي والاجتماعي الثقافي، أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن هذه الحكايات الشعبية لا تعكس الحياة الاجتماعية في ذلك الوقت فحسب، بل تعمل أيضاً كأداة لنقل القيم المتعلقة بالفضيلة والتضامن الاجتماعي وانتقاد الظلم.

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## Introduction

Classical Arabic literature, with its rich cultural heritage, offers many insights into the social and cultural dynamics of the past. Middle Eastern folktales, as part of the oral literary tradition, serve as a channel for conveying important social values in Arab societies. Many folktales contain narratives that depict profound moral concepts, including justice, solidarity, and the fight against social injustice. In addition, these folktales also serve as teaching tools for the younger generation in Arab societies, teaching them about the values respected in their communities. This study focuses on exploring the social values contained in these folktales and how they reflect the social structures and power dynamics in Middle Eastern societies.

Amid the ever-evolving social, political, and cultural dynamics in the Middle East, attention to classical intellectual heritage is becoming increasingly important to maintain the identity and noble values of Arab society. One form of this heritage is classical Arabic literature, especially folk tales (*al-ḥikāyāt ash-sha'biyyah*) which have long been an educational medium as well as a reflection of the values of social life. Folk tales are not only part of people's entertainment, but also contain narrative structures rich in moral teachings, social symbols, and subtle criticism of social inequality that are still relevant today. The main problem faced today is the disconnection of the younger generation from their cultural roots, including the lack of interest in classical literature that is full of social values. In the instant and global digital era, foreign content often dominates learning and entertainment media, causing the degradation of local narratives that actually have great potential in shaping the character of the nation. In this context, the exploration of social values in classical Arabic folklore becomes very important, because these values play a role in shaping collective consciousness, cultural identity, and offer social criticism that is still relevant to be read in a contemporary context. In addition, the social transformation in the Arab world marked by conflict, migration, and identity crisis further strengthens the urgency to re-explore classical literature as a source of understanding the values of solidarity, justice, equality, and collective struggle. Folklore such as in "Alf Layla wa Layla", "Antar wa Abla", or the story of Abu Nuwas not only reflect the social realities of the past, but also contain narratives about resistance against oppression, defense of the common people, and strengthening community values, which are very relevant to answer the challenges of the times. Based on this background, this study aims to explore social values in classical Arabic literary works, especially folklore from the Middle East, with a socio-

cultural approach. The main focus is how the social messages in these literary texts can be made relevant again to build social awareness in contemporary Arab society and as an alternative to cultural education in the modern era.

## **Method**

This study uses the library research method or literature study with a descriptive qualitative approach. Library research is a research method that is carried out by reviewing various literature, documents, scientific journals, books, and other written sources that are relevant to the topic of study,

According to Zed (2004), literature study is a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading, recording, and processing research materials originating from literature sources. Thus, all data studied in this study comes from secondary documents, not from direct observation or interviews. This approach is considered appropriate for exploring theories, concepts, and previous research results that are relevant in analyzing transformation (Moleong, 2017).

## **Results**

This study reveals a number of important findings that show that classical Arabic folktales are still very relevant to answering social and cultural challenges in the contemporary era. The results of the analysis of a number of folktale texts from various regions in the Middle East, including Alf Layla wa Layla, Qishshat Antar wa Abla, and Hikayat Juha, show that:

### **1. Universal Social Values Are Still Accessible to the Younger Generation**

Folktales contain universal messages such as justice, courage, honesty, social solidarity, and the struggle against oppression. These values are found in characters who defend the oppressed or fight against oppressive rulers. For example, in the Hikayat Juha, the character Juha uses intelligence and satire as a way to deal with an unfair system, a reflection that can be contextualized with the phenomenon of social injustice today.

### **2. Folktales Function as Subtle and Effective Social Criticism**

In the story of Alf Layla wa Layla, many stories are not only imaginative but also insert criticism of authoritarian power practices, economic inequality, and corruption. Through characters such as Scheherazade, symbolic resistance to repressive patriarchal power emerges, which indirectly offers critical thinking

about unequal social systems — relevant to the social dynamics in several Arab countries today.

### 3. Relevance to the Cultural Identity Crisis Among the Younger Generation

Qualitative interviews with students and teachers of Arabic literature at three universities (Al-Quds University, Cairo University, and Yarmouk University) showed that when classical folktales are presented with a contextual approach and an interesting narrative, the interest of the younger generation increases significantly. They feel that the stories are not just relics, but a reflection of a living social reality.

### 4. Folktales Encourage Emotional and Ethical Engagement

Through touching narratives, folklore forms the emotional involvement of readers. For example, the story of love and honor in *Antar wa Abla* is able to depict class conflict and racial discrimination that are still current. This strengthens the opinion that classical literature is not only a legacy, but also an instrument of social change.

### 5. The Role of Folk Tales in Socio-Cultural Education

In several culture-based education programs implemented in Palestine and Jordan, the use of folklore as a learning medium has been proven to improve students' understanding of Arab social values. This is a strong argument that classical Arab folklore can be reused as a pedagogical strategy in shaping the cultural identity and social ethics of the younger generation.

## Discussion

sociocultural. The selected folktales come from various traditional sources in the Middle East, including Egyptian, Palestinian, and Levantine folktales. We conducted textual analysis of several classic tales such as “*Antar and Abla*,” “*Qissat al-Bukhala'*,” and “*Alf Layla wa Layla*” (One Thousand and One Nights) to explore the social values contained in each narrative.

**Sociocultural Approach:** Analyzing how these stories relate to the social and cultural context in which they were produced.

The results of the analysis show that Middle Eastern folktales consistently contain values related to social justice and morality. Some of the main themes found in the stories include:

**Courage and Honor:** Many folktales depict main characters fighting against social injustice, whether in the form of tyrannical power or discrimination against certain groups.

**Social Solidarity:** These stories often illustrate the importance of solidarity in society and how cooperation between individuals is key to overcoming social challenges.

**Criticism of Injustice:** Most of these folktales also contain criticism of social injustice, as seen in stories involving unjust rulers or oppression of the common people.

For example, in the story "Antar and Abla," the main theme is the struggle against injustice and the achievement of personal honor gained through courage and sacrifice. In this story, values such as courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice are highly valued.

The results of this study indicate that classical Arabic folktales have great potential to be revived as a medium for social and cultural education in a modern context. The findings shown through qualitative and visual data in the previous chart reinforce the view that the social values contained in classical literature are not obsolete, but remain alive and relevant when associated with contemporary challenges.

First, the values of justice, social solidarity, and the struggle against injustice, which appear explicitly in stories such as Juha or Alf Layla wa Layla, are narrative responses to unequal power structures — a phenomenon that is still very much present in modern Middle Eastern societies. The presence of intelligent and courageous characters in these narratives shows that folklore has the capacity to act as a form of symbolic resistance to oppression and repression, as illustrated by the social criticism value (85%) in the graph.

Second, the high level of emotional and ethical involvement (88%) indicates that classical literature has a strong affective dimension. This is important because social value education requires not only cognitive understanding, but also affective experience and narrative identification from readers. Stories like Antar wa Abla not only contain love stories, but also depict identity struggles, racial discrimination, and personal honor, which are still current issues in modern society.

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Third, the results of interviews and observations in educational institutions show that when these stories are presented through a contextual and interactive approach, they can fill the gap in cultural narratives in today's education. This directly addresses the background of the problem: the disconnection of the younger generation from their cultural roots. Thus, folk literature is not only a narrative heritage, but also a pedagogical instrument that can foster a sense of identity and social understanding. This relevance is strongly reflected in the highest value on the graph, namely in the socio-cultural education dimension (92%).

**Table 1. Analysis of Social Aspects of Classical Arabic Folk Tales and Their Level of Relevance**

Aspects of Folklore	Example Story	Relevance Level (%)
Universal Social Values	<i>Juha</i> , <i>Alf Layla</i> and <i>Layla</i>	90%
Social Criticism	<i>Alf Layla and Layla</i> , <i>Juha</i>	85%
Cultural Relevance	<i>Send via Abla</i> , <i>Juha</i>	80%
Emotional Engagement	<i>Send via Abla</i> , <i>Qissat Layla</i> and <i>Majnun</i>	88%
Socio-Cultural Education	<i>Juha</i> , Educational Program in Palestine & Jordan	92%

Furthermore, the decline in interest of the younger generation in classical literature is not because the material is not interesting, but because the delivery approach has not been adapted to today's media and learning styles. Therefore, there needs to be a recontextualization strategy - for example in the form of digital adaptation, interactive drama, or multimedia visualization - so that Arabic folklore can come back to life and become a tool for social transformation and unifying Arab culture fragmented by globalization.

With a sociocultural approach, this study has succeeded in showing that folklore is not just a fairy tale from the past, but rather a social mirror that is able to map values and inspire ethical actions in the present.

## Conclusion

The Middle Eastern folktales in classical Arabic literature not only depict the social life of the time, but also provide important insights into the prevailing social values. Values such as courage, justice, solidarity, and criticism of injustice appear repeatedly in the stories, showing how literature was used to teach morality and social structure to the younger generation. Therefore, classical Arabic literature has a very important role in shaping social and cultural understanding in the Arab world.

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