

## **Salu'ah: The She-Wolf of Arabia**

**Hanan Alazaz, Lancaster University and Princess Norah University**

**Abstract:**

This paper reviews a number of folktales that represent the Salu'ah, the she-wolf of Arabia. Telling the tale of a monster roaming the deserts of Arabia looking for men to devour, narratives about the nature of the Salu'ah are charged with horror. Her demonic nature shifts her from human to animal. But, her gender questions the very structures that abject her as a monster and a female. The discussion analyses how the narrative functions within the Bedouin social environment. It considers how the imagery within these narratives generates an image of the context in which this myth operates. Through a psychoanalytic reading of the narratives, the paper analyses how the myth shifts the social hierarchies to empower the feminine. It reviews the role of her transformation into the maternal and how it contributes to the figure of the werewolf as a female and as a monster. These narratives invert gender structures of heteronormative discourse when the monstrous feminine in the she-wolf destroys the location of its abjection that functions within the patriarchal discourse. The exaggeration of her abjection highlights her as an emasculator. She is a mother that devours. The Salu'ah emerges as more powerful than men of the desert where the Bedouin man is perceived to be the hero. She represents his most horrific fears.

**Key Words:** Werewolf, She-wolf, Middle Eastern folktales, Monstrous Females, abjection-lycanthropy

A veiled<sup>1</sup> old woman wanders the deserts of Arabia wrapping herself in the fragility of old age and the darkness of the desert. She spots her victim and plans to exploit all that is noble in his heart. When he sees her in her covers, he rushes to help the old woman. He approaches her only to uncover his death. The Salu'ah emerges, transforming into a demonic wolf-like creature. She devours her victim and moves on to another with the taste of victory lingering in her mouth. This paper investigates the myth of the Salu'ah and how she fits into the social context of Arabia. It traces the impact of perceptions about gender revealed through Bedouin narratives about women and the Salu'ah. The paper will begin by analysing how the myth of the existence of the Salu'ah has emerged in Arabia. A reading of a number of narratives about the Salu'ah along with the social context represented in these narratives will explore key points about the powerful image of the Salu'ah. She is the monstrous feminine who emasculates men. The narrative about the Salu'ah is ambivalent between assigning monstrosity to the female figure while utilizing this monstrosity to liberate her.

Bedouin folktales give this mythological creature the name *Salu'ah*, *سعلوة* in Arabic, which is specific to the feminine grammatical form as opposed to *Salu*, the masculine form. An anthology of narratives about the Salu'ah in Arabia was published in 2011 by Fatmah Alblui: *Salu'ah: Between Fact and Fantasy*. Alblui travelled and collected tales that have been transmitted orally from elderly Bedouin men and women around the northern region of the Arabian Peninsula<sup>2</sup>. Her anthology documents folktales about the Arabian werewolf in that area and also contains relevant tales about the supernatural and monstrous humanized animal and human-animal transformations. These narratives represent the Salu'ah as a hairy, ugly animal-like woman. She hunts primarily men and occasionally children and women. She has sharp teeth and she howls like a wolf (Alblui 2011: 149). Although this monster takes the form of a dog or wolf, she has the ability to transform herself into an old woman (30). The gender of the she-wolf of Arabia stands as an integral point in relation to the culture of Bedouin tribes in Northern Arabia. Specific points about the perception and treatment of women in the traditional narratives of these tribes collide with the representation of the monstrous feminine in the figure of the Salu'ah. Perceptions of abjection and monstrosity attached to women are utilized in the narratives about the Salu'ah to empower her as a feminine figure.

### **One Werewolf, Different Cultures**

The origin of the myth of the Salu'ah can be traced either to the Bedouins' identification with the wolf or to the dissemination of the European myth of the werewolf. The Bedouins had an

ambivalent relationship with the wolf. On the one hand, it represented a great danger for their children and animals. On the other, they also developed respect for the wolf and its abilities as a hunter. Jibrail Sulayman Jabbur's *Bedouins* (1988) describes how respect for the wolf influenced Bedouin traditions such as drinking its blood, believing that it would give the drinker courage. Bedouins also mixed the ashes of the wolf's eyes with their Kohl because they believed that this potion would give them the ability to see demons in the desert (Jabbur 1988: 93-4). One of the signs of this veneration is to identify with the wolves that roam the deserts and mountains of Arabia in the myth of the Salu'ah. Her potential as a hunter of animals and humans is a relocation of the wolf's powers onto the human body. The images in the narrative exceed drinking the wolf's blood to borrow a single quality from the wolf. The humanization of the wolf in the figure of the werewolf is part of the Bedouins' respect for the wolf's power. However, Hannah Priest refers to this notion as a 'romanticisation' of the myth of the werewolf (2015: 1). Having considered the historicisation of the belief in werewolves, she insists that the notion of the werewolf myth, as a product of the ancient man's affinity with the wolf, is exaggerated. It is, according to Priest, specific cultural ideologies that produce the werewolf. Although this paper traces how cultural specificity can influence the myth of the werewolf, we should not rule out the relationship between humans and wilderness as it is the medium in which they both perceive and express themselves. Predators like the wolf, in that sense, are the mirror in which the Bedouins wish to see their power. The Salu'ah for the Bedouins in Arabia represents the fear of living in the wilderness and having to protect themselves and their herds against attacks from wolves. They are constantly under the pressure of proving themselves as worthy opponents of this predator. The wolf finds its way into the traditional narrative about power in the wilderness.

The Salu'ah's gender, however, reflects the Bedouins' ambivalence towards identification with the wolf. As much as the Bedouin man attempts to identify with the wolf's abilities as a hunter, the wolf's aggression stands between the image and identifying it with a male werewolf. The Arabian werewolf is feminized because its narratives are produced within an environment where specific perceptions about women are prevalent. The image of the Salu'ah identifies the Bedouin with the powerful fellow desert-dweller. Like the Bedouin, the Salu'ah lives in the Arabian desert and roams it looking for food. Like the wolf, she attacks people and animals to feed herself. However, the image is limited by gender due to specific cultural perceptions that associate women with violence. In spite of its cultural specificity, the myth of the werewolf of Arabia is a product of the Bedouins' identification with the wolf as the most powerful creature around them.

The dissemination of narratives about the werewolf contributed to how the image of the Salu'ah originated in the folktales of Bedouins in Northern Arabia. The myth of the werewolf most likely reached Arabia due to the dissemination of these narratives across the Red Sea or Jerusalem and the Levant. The nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins of Arabia has contributed to the adoption of European myths like the werewolf. Franz Boas in 'Mythology and Folklore' (1996) suggests a number of hypotheses as to the origin of myths and folktales. Boas does not rule out the hypothesis that some myths are similar in various nations because they originate from a universal human perspective and respond to their surroundings or what he calls the 'psychic unity of mankind' (72). However, he suggests that:

careful investigation of the distribution and recent spread of tales has proved in most cases the occurrence of similar tales is due to dissemination. This has been shown most satisfactorily for European and Asiatic folktales and for those of North America. (72)

Boas' suggestion is supported by the distribution of the myth of the werewolf in Europe and the Arabian Peninsula. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, colonization and the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouin tribes of the northern regions of Arabia, Iraq and the Levant has formed a traceable route of the dissemination of the folklore of the werewolf between Europe and the Middle East.

The distribution of folktales is not limited to the werewolf. Other narratives suggest a similar cultural overlap. This overlap confirms that narratives from both the East and West can have some similarities due to dissemination or a universal process of producing mythology. For instance, Alblui's book features one folktale that combines the myth of the werewolf with a tale that is similar to the European version of the tale of 'The Three Little Pigs'. The Arabian version of the tale is entitled 'Hadidun' referring to the name of a goat who is the hero. His name is derived from the material with which his mother builds his shelter to protect him from the Salu'ah: iron. The mother unfortunately uses less effective materials to build the shelters of the other two sons. She puts one son in a shelter made of 'ash' and the other in a shelter made of 'straw' (Alblui 2011: 118). Meanwhile, the Salu'ah follows the mother and tracks the hiding-places of the children. She goes back to the goat in the shelter made out of ash and tells him to get out or she will blow on his shelter. The little goat tells her to 'huff, then puff until your cheeks go limp' (119, my translation). She blows down the first shelter and eats the goat, and then does the same to the goat with the straw shelter. When she reaches the third shelter made out of iron, she tries to blow it down but to

no avail. The Salu'ah then attempts to persuade the goat to leave his iron shelter. The Salu'ah eventually catches the goat and takes him to her home and tells her daughter to cook him. The goat tricks the Salu'ah's daughter, kills her, skins her and, wearing her skin, cooks her and serves her to her own mother. When she discovers that she ate her own daughter the Salu'ah dies of grief. The plot in this tale and the European version, 'The Three Little Pigs', have a lot in common. Moreover, the plot twist where the potential victim transforms into the victimizer is reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel who kill the witch. The similarities between this tale and some aspects of European tales suggest that the myth of the Salu'ah formed part of the phenomenon of the distribution of myth and folktales between Europe and Asia. However, the werewolf is marked by the cultural context in these narratives such as the substitution of the pigs with goats.

In spite of the dissemination of the myth of the Salu'ah in Iraq and the northern and central regions of the Arabian Peninsula, reading two versions of the myth reveals a fundamental difference in the construction of the she-wolf. The Iraqi version is more sexualized than the one from northern and central Arabia. Jamal Assamurai in 'The Salu'ah in the Mesopotamian Civilization' (2008) includes a list of the physical attributes of the Salu'ah in Iraqi folktales. According to his study, the Salu'ah in Iraq is a seductress who lures men with her sexuality in order to devour them. Though she is hairy, her breasts are exposed and hairless (1). The highlighting of the sexual aspect of the Salu'ah's gender is fundamentally different from the one in Arabia. Instead of representing the lover, narratives in Arabia feature the image of the old mother or grandmother. The Salu'ah in these folktales lures the men with her fragility and trustworthiness. This difference is the result of the more conservative nature of the narratives in Arabia. Compared to Iraq and the Levant, the northern and central regions of Arabia are exposed to a specific set of rules about female modesty. Women follow a very strict dress code that includes the full covering of the female body. This will influence the reception of versions of the tales of the Salu'ah that includes female nudity as these tales would be perceived as immoral. Being exposed to one specific influence as opposed to the variety of cultures and religions further north in Iraq and the Levant, the dissemination of the myth of the Salu'ah in Arabia has undergone a censorship process. This process makes it compatible with the specific set of values attached to female modesty in central and northern Arabia.

Another interesting justification of the distinction between the image of the Salu'ah in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula is in the effect of each. The impact of the she-wolf in the Arabian version is more horrific. It exposes the uncanny in the image of the mother and

grandmother who are weak and fragile prior to their transformation into the Salu'ah. Old women, specifically in the Bedouin culture, are held in great respect and veneration. The narratives reveal that the image of the old woman connotes wisdom and the voice of reason and experience. She is consulted by everyone in the tribe whether man or woman (Alblui 2011: 77). She is everyone's mother in the tribe. They trust her because she cares about them and wants what is best for them. Associating the Salu'ah with the archetype of the mother in the old woman produces an image that is loaded with horror. More importantly, representing her as an old woman highlights her maturing femininity. She is made abject first through her womanhood and old age before revealing her monstrosity as a cannibal.

### **The Monstrous Feminine: Swallow me, earth, or I'll swallow you**

The Salu'ah is an abject woman, mother, demon, wolf and, above all, human. She weaves her fragmented self into a powerful figure that restructures the social hierarchies of gender in the narratives of Arabia. The gendering of the Salu'ah involves both psychological as well as physical attributes that are exaggerated in the image of the Salu'ah. As previously mentioned, some of these narratives feature the Salu'ah luring her victims by appearing like an old woman who begs men to come and help her. When she succeeds in leading them to her home, she shocks them with her transformation into a predator and devours them.

The Salu'ah's shapeshifting between the human and the animal highlights her monstrous femininity. In one of the narratives the Salu'ah's victims, a woman and her children, escape. Enraged, the Salu'ah 'jumps, screams, howls and hurls herself to the ground. She writhes around on the dirt and becomes a horrifying Salu'ah' (Alblui 2011: 149). The Salu'ah transforms while screaming and howling. The Salu'ah's liminality, caught between the human and animal, contributes to her monstrosity. The force and violence of her transformation can be seen when she hurls herself to the ground in order to become a monster. As she writhes on the floor, she strips away her femininity with all the meanings associated to it. Leaving her humanity and femininity behind, she dictates the force of the confrontation with her victim. This transformation or crossing of a 'border', as described by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) highlights the abject because

that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes... the function of the monstrous remains the same - to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (2012: 11)

These border crossings of the human, animalistic and demonic are what precipitate the werewolf into her monstrous othering. The destabilizing of the familiar established in the symbolic order is achieved by the transformation of the werewolf between human and animal. If transformation highlights the abject because it is a crossing of a border, the Salu'ah's abjection is doubled by her ability to transform and by her feminization. Although gender is destabilized by the encounter granted through the transformation into a she-wolf, it remains in the symbolic order. The transformation, however, restructures gender perceptions established in the symbolic order. Shifting between the two forms, womanhood and animality, allows her to dictate the rules of the encounter. She is not marked by the abjection of her gender and monstrosity, she controls both.

The Salu'ah's ability to control her transformation suggests her power over her monstrosity. She transforms into a monster once she acquires her victim. The werewolf of Arabia lures her victim into her home, whether a cave or a tent. When she corners her prey, she reveals herself as his doom. Hence, her transformation is voluntary. In her reading of the she-wolf in the film *Ginger Snaps* (2000), Creed alludes to the distinction between the 'voluntary and involuntary' transformation - the voluntary being a result of such things as wearing a wolf pelt, and the involuntary for those who were victims of witchcraft, a bite, or the full moon which causes them to transform into werewolves (2015: 181). The distinction highlights the prominence of the human rather than the animal in the case of the involuntary transformation. The Western werewolf in that sense is first a man, or woman, before transforming into an animal. The Eastern version of the werewolf, however, promotes the animalistic aspect of the monstrous feminine. It suggests that her animality is the origin and her humanity is an illusion. The Salu'ah hides behind the illusion of being a fully human woman to lure her victims. Her transformation is instinctive when she is alone with her victim. In one of the narratives, a group of young girls are playing near a water spring. They see

an old woman running down a mountain. You could only hear the rustle of her veil touching the trees on her way down. When she arrives, she tells them 'I want to play with you, girls'. They ask her, 'who are you?' She answers, 'I'm your auntie Turaitra'. (Alblui 2011: 162)

The girls do not hear the sound of her footsteps. Her humanity is questioned in the narrative by questioning the normalcy of her movement and physical impact. She, however, tries to

appear as human as she possible. Her clothes and mannerisms are human. She asks to play with them, asks to be addressed as an aunt and chooses a name that inspires pity instead of fear. The name *Turaitra* is a feminine-miniaturized form of the word *Tartur* بطرطور, which means an insignificant person in Arabic. Her name suggests her weakness as a human as well as her gender. Suggestions of fragility like femininity, old age and even her name combine to exaggerate the impact of her monstrosity. Humanity for her is a calculated performance. Turaitra's transformation is then addressed in the narrative when she lures the girls into her home. The Salu'ah 'turns to the girls, after she takes off her veil. She says in a quivering voice "Where will you go you silly girls?!" There appears her dark, wrinkled, scaly skin and she turns into a Salu'ah.' (Alblui 2011: 164) Calling the girls silly is a result of believing her performance. This implies that she is a monster first and becoming human is a trick to lure her victims. Humanity for her is a façade that crumbles when she obtains her prey.

However, narratives about the Salu'ah reveal ambivalence towards this monstrosity. A more humanized nuance of the image of the Salu'ah is reflected in the narratives in Arabia. The Salu'ah speaks. She can engage in logical conversations to lure her victim as in the previously mentioned tale of the Salu'ah who tries to convince the little goat (*Hadidon*) to leave its iron shelter. In one version of this tale, the Salu'ah tries to lure the goat out by trying to convince him to attend a wedding with her (Alblui: 119). When she fails, she tells him 'Hadidon, my son, the watermelon is sweet and red and tastes like sugar, how about you come with me to eat some?' (120). The language of the Salu'ah in this narrative reflects her attempt to adopt two roles of the human woman, the seductress and the mother. Masked with care, her motherly invitation to feed the goat, addressing him as 'my son' can also be read as seduction. She seduces the male goat with an invitation to taste the sweet fruit. Forbidden and sinful, the association with the fruit prepares the listener to identify with her as human who can be a lover and a mother. The invitation to the forbidden, dangerous fruit, as a cultural reference, humanizes the Salu'ah. It alludes to the various forms of her femininity which are the seductress, the mother and the old woman.

The Salu'ah's ability to communicate includes a sense of decorum when it comes to dealing with her victims. In one tale, the Salu'ah tells her victim to wait while she goes to sharpen her teeth and tells her son: 'I haven't eaten a human in a year. I'll go sharpen them and be right back' (164-5). Not only does she speak in Arabic and make herself legible to her victims, she does not resort to intimidation to make them wait to be eaten. Like a good hostess, she excuses herself before she leaves. She even acknowledges her weakness and her need to maintain her strength. The Salu'ah has a sense of community. She has a son and she

delegates responsibilities to him. When the Salu'ah speaks she ventures into the world of logical discourse that emphasizes her humanity rather than animality. When she speaks, she reasons. By negotiating with her victims, the Salu'ah negotiates her way back into humanity.

The way the Salu'ah communicates her love for her children is another aspect that reflects the humanization of her figure. In two of the narratives the Salu'ah is revealed to have a child. In both tales the child is killed by her human prey. The way the Salu'ah reacts to the news implies an emotional side to the Salu'ah. In one tale the Salu'ah 'gasps for air, falls and dies of grief' after she learns of her daughter's death (121). In another tale, when the Salu'ah discovers that her daughter has been killed by her prey, she 'collects her daughter's remains and buries her' (181). This image emphasises the human aspect of the Salu'ah who honours her children's remains with burial. Aside from showing a grieving Salu'ah, it reflects her sense of community and common values with humans. She is not only a predator. She can also be a bereaved mother who mourns her children.

The relation between the Salu'ah and mothering sparks another set of gender associations that alludes to her as the *devouring mother*. The association between the image of the she-wolf and the image of the caring mother contributes to her monstrosity. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva suggests a relation between the image of the mother and devouring. The mother is associated with the mouth, where language is materialized, and she is substituted by the symbolic language. According to Kristeva, speaking, 'which produces the linguistic signifier, coincides with the theme of devouring' (41). Kristeva insists that this horror-inducing association between the mother and devouring is necessary for subject formation. She argues that 'incorporating a devouring mother' will encourage a 'splitting: the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates' (54). Drawing on Kristeva, Creed stresses the same aspects of the association between the mother and horror in her relationship with her child. These aspects are related to the demands of subject-formation. The first is identified as a 'precondition of narcissism' when the child attempts to break away from the mother in order to establish his/her subjectivity (Creed 2012: 12). In order to achieve this stage the child pushes the mother into the domain of the abject. The second aspect in the symbolic association of the mother with horror and abjection is the fear of 'maternal authority' (12). Maternal authority is a medium by which the child learns about his body and 'the clean and unclean, the proper and improper' (12). This is the child's first contact with authority that develops, symbolically, into castration. Creed maintains that the abjection of the mother is utilized in horror films to maximize the effect of horror. Bedouin folktales about the Salu'ah in Arabia follow the same paradigm of maternal abjection. This association

between the abjected devouring mother and the monster in the image of the Salu'ah is not only established at the level of the devouring monster. The maternal aspect of the Salu'ah feeds into the theme of devouring. Her humanized maternal figure introduces associations with devouring prior to the act of devouring associated to the animalistic monster. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the Salu'ah's association with motherhood underscores her monstrosity. Her animality builds on the monstrosity suggested by her gender. Furthermore, the speaking Salu'ah is a reminder of this devouring. She speaks to her victim, then eats him while appearing both as a mother and monster. Every aspect of her form hurls her back into monstrosity and mutilation.

However, the association between the Salu'ah and motherhood is only a single facet of her image as a female. Patriarchal perceptions about femininity are exaggerated in the image of the Salu'ah to suggest the monstrosity of womanhood. Part of the cultural specificity, which resulted in the gendering of the werewolf of Arabia, stems from the abjection of women. Most of the narratives about the Salu'ah are ancient tales that document a pre-Islamic era when girls were victims of ritualistic infanticide. This ritual was enacted to preserve the honour of the tribe as only men could carry its name; women were a burden whose chastity and honour require guarding. They were perceived by the tribe as a source of weakness that could be threatened with rape should a raid occur. Fewer women in the tribe guaranteed better protection of the rest. The woman in the Bedouin society was perceived as a fragile body and a vulnerable honour.

In some Bedouin narratives about women, however, infanticide is justified by what is perceived to be women's diabolical nature. Rather than sympathizing with the murdered girls, the narratives represent them as the aggressors who should be murdered before they wreak havoc on their families. One of these tales contains a warning by the female herself that she deserves to be killed before she causes mischief and evil. The tale depicts a girl who speaks upon her birth, saying 'swallow me earth or I'll swallow you' (Alblui 2011: 142). In referring to the ritual of female infanticide, this narrative encourages the belief that it is undertaken to avoid female evil and treachery. The feminine is represented as a source of imminent danger. A woman, in that sense, is not othered only because of the biological aspect of her gender. Her othering is associated with immorality and violence as part of her gender. They are linked to treacherous acts of murder and horror rather than the heroic defence of the honour of the tribe. The child's threat to swallow the earth when she becomes a woman hints at her monstrosity. In spite of her potential as a victim who invites her family to bury her alive, she

reminds them that she will grow up to be the devouring mother. She resists her monstrosity by acknowledging it in the narrative.

The discourse about the evil, violent woman is amplified by the violence in narratives about the Salu'ah. The Salu'ah in one tale lures a whole family into her cave. As she prepares to eat them the wife escapes with her children, but the Salu'ah follows them into a camp. When the woman screams, the Salu'ah is killed by a mob. As she dies, the Salu'ah vows to reach out from the dead and kill the woman. The woman leaves the camp with the tribe that received her. The following year, the woman returns with the tribe to the same campsite. When trying to find a place to erect her tent, the woman steps on the bones of the Salu'ah, her foot gets infected and she dies. The Salu'ah's vindictiveness and violence are the central themes of this tale. They suggest that the Salu'ah's vengefulness is so intense that she reaches out to get her revenge from beyond the grave.

This narrative stems from a discourse that stresses the vindictiveness and violence of women in traditional Bedouin narratives. Associating women with evil in narratives about the Salu'ah locates them in the domain of the gendered body. It defines the origin of their abjection in their bodies that give birth and bleed. The female body is the location of defilement and the evil of the other. Kristeva addresses this issue in societies that are based on kinship such as the Bedouin. The source of abjection of these women is specific to their gender:

[f]ear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. [...] Menstrual pollution [...] can be interpreted as the symbolic equivalent of that conflict. [...] Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother. (Kristeva 1982: 77-9)

In these Bedouin societies the woman's abjection is associated with her reproductive body, the body that menstruates and gives birth. The abjected generative power of that menstruating body is related to the perverse. Its defilement through menstruation is monstrous. As a woman, the Salu'ah is always associated with blood, menstrual blood and the blood produced by devouring. The female body becomes a site of horror and cannibalism that needs to be subdued. The image of the werewolf, in the folktales of Arabia, conveys the symbol of the monstrous feminine. Her body is the site of her moral perversion. It is where violence originates and monstrosity emerges. Fear of the Salu'ah is the fear of the feminine. What is

perceived as the potentially diabolical woman is moulded into the monstrous figure of the Salu'ah who mothers, yet devours, communicates, yet annihilates.

The cultural environment of northern and central Arabia contributed to this perception of women as treacherous and potentially immoral. The area is the birthplace of the Abrahamic religions that highlight the immorality of women based on the story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden. Kristeva investigates the association between women, immorality and sin based on the narrative of Eve's seduction of Adam. She analyses how the narrative constructs women's abjection based on the concept of women's moral debasement of Adam when she writes that the 'brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes, but its roots and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation' (1982: 126). This perspective of woman that is specific to Abrahamic religions abjects women on the basis of moral perversion, thus entailing the inclusion of men in what is honourable and good. Narratives of temptation and cunning in Bedouin tales adopt this same perspective and isolate women as the origin of evil. These narratives are deeply rooted in the cultural background of the area 'for abjection, when all is said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjection's purification and repression' (Kristeva: 209). Placing the woman in the cast of the sinner guarantees the morality of the men in these narratives. It is their salvation and the woman's abjection: their normality is only guaranteed by her moral perversion.

Femininity has been associated in some of these folktales with violence and moral perversion. They feature women who can easily be manipulated through their emotions so that they may turn against their family at any given moment. One of these folktales tells the story of a young woman who falls in love with a slave. Because she is not allowed to marry him, she plots with the slave to kill her family and take their fortune. She kills her parents by pouring 'boiling lard' in their ears while they are sleeping (Alblui 2011: 56). When they are dead, she takes their sheep and camels. Womanhood in this narrative is associated with violence and immorality. The immorality of women suggested in these narratives feeds into concepts of her psychological perversion and monstrosity that stems from her othered gender.

The cultural specificity that contributed to the gendering of the werewolf of Arabia to associate femininity with violence is suggested in another narrative entitled *نخاشات صدع مروان* that translates 'The Stabber of Marwan's Old Scar' (Alblui 2011: 132). The title of the tale suggests that women's honour is a wound and that anything that besmirches that honour is akin to stabbing that wound. The scar serves to remind the men of the tribe how fragile their

women's honour is. The narrative suggests that the scar can be transformed into a fresh wound making the forgotten, yet visible, memory a bleeding violent reality of tarnished honour. The narrative portrays a girl who is placed in a cave to protect her after her father orders her mother to kill her. The father is afraid that she may tarnish her family's honour when she grows up. The mother gives the daughter to her son, Marwan, and begs him to protect her. He puts her in a cave and vows to protect her and hunt for her every day. However, during the brother's absence, the sister leaves the cave and meets a man who convinces her to elope with him. She insists that he should kill her brother first. So she devises a plan to put her brother's head on her thigh and sing him to sleep. When he does, the girl ties his braids to a wedge in the cave's floor. She beckons her lover who comes and kills her brother. To make sure that her brother is dead, she tells her lover to stab him in an old scar that has always hurt him. If he feels it, they will know he is alive. Although these tales suggest that women are potentially evil and vindictive, both allude to the woman who takes her fate in her own hands. Killing members of their families in both tales presents these women as rebellious and challenging the social system that positions them as subordinates. The women in the tales not only break the rules - they restructure them by eliminating the source that confines them in their role. While the women in these narratives can be read as examples of the evil woman, the tales introduce the narrative about the resisting woman.

The Salu'ah's vindictiveness and power of revenge is exaggerated because perception of the women's vindictiveness is shifted into the demonic and supernatural revenge from beyond the grave. The Salu'ah's power is intensified by associating her with an inevitable, fate-like force. Her power of destruction surpasses her living body. She, like fate, will eventually get revenge. The inevitable encounter with the immortal power of the Salu'ah lends a supernatural aspect to the gendered image. In her othering, she is stronger. Her othering includes a force that surpasses the material body. Encountering her force is as inevitable as meeting death.

### **The Toughest Girl in Arabia**

The association between femininity and the demonic wolf in the image of the Salu'ah restructures the gender binary in the folktales of Arabia. While most of these tales and poems celebrate the heroism of male members of the tribe, the Salu'ah questions the power of the Bedouin hero. The gendering of the Salu'ah and her position as a threat to the Bedouin hero revises his command of his environment and the social structures of the tribe. Men are portrayed as least powerful when it comes to combatting the female Salu'ah. The endings in

the narratives about the she-wolf of Arabia follow three specific patterns. She either loses her victim, is killed, or dies of grief. Yet her death is usually attributed to women and children who outwit her. The only narrative that features her being killed by men is implied as she is killed by a mob rather than one particular man. This contrasts to the narratives about the heroism of the Bedouin man. Escape and not fighting the Salu'ah seems to be the most effective way of dealing with her according to these tales. In many ways she is an invincible figure to men in these folktales.

The Salu'ah represents a lycanthropic woman who is liberated through her abjection and monstrosity. One aspect of this liberating monstrosity is her hairiness. To push the boundary of the female body further into the monstrous abject, the feminine aspects of that body are manipulated in the myth of the she-wolf. Her 'body covered in black hair' is shown to be a further sign of her monstrosity (Alblui 2011: 35). Hairiness for the she-wolf serves as both a sign of animality and the uncanny. In her review of Western fictional and nonfictional accounts of hirsute women's lives, Jazmina Cinanas cites John Bulwer's declaration of 1654 that a 'women is by nature smooth and delicate; and if she have many hairs she is a monster' (2015:77). The Salu'ah's hairiness is a sign of monstrosity.

The representation of hairiness as a sign of monstrosity in these accounts highlights the power of the male gaze over the female body and what that gaze expects. The standards of normalcy for the female body are limited by that gaze. The restructuring of the gender hierarchy suggested in the image of the she-wolf is discussed by Creed who identifies it as *femme animale*. She maintains that these images are 'designed to critique patriarchal forms of representation' and 'unsettles the traditional binaries of Western thinking in favour of more flexible discursive ways of thinking about the so-called human/animal and culture/nature' (2015: 184-6). Although Creed limits her analysis to Western cultural models, the Arab version of the *femme animale* operates in a similar way within its social structures. By disturbing gender hierarchies, the image of the Salu'ah also disturbs the social structures in which it was produced. A Bedouin man's pride with his facial hair as a sign of masculinity becomes a sign of horror when shifted to the female body. The hairiness of the Salu'ah encounters the male gaze with emasculation. This is because it is a form of boundary confusion that combines femininity with a sign culturally associated with masculinity. What marks the male body is confiscated to the female body in the image of the Salu'ah. The male gaze upon the Salu'ah triggers the fear of emasculation.

The Salu'ah's style in the victimization of men in particular suggests revised gender structures in these narratives. In one of the narratives a woman is invited by an old woman to

stay at her home in exchange for helping her with herding her sheep. One day, the woman decides to take a peek into a hole in the old woman's tent: 'To her horror, the woman sees the old woman standing over a man, then leans over to tear the man's flesh with her teeth, then chews it' (Alblui 2011: 108). The Salu'ah lures the men into her home before dragging them to the ground, climbing on top of them and eating them. This can be read as a physical violation of the men by the female monster. Digging her teeth in their flesh is an act of penetration. In one narrative, the Salu'ah asks the man how he wants to be eaten. He tells her to start with his beard because his wife (who escaped) warned him against the Salu'ah and he did not obey her. The beard is symbolic of masculinity in Bedouin culture societies. To start devouring his beard is an attack on his masculinity: a symbolic form of castration. Thus the she-wolf can be read as a *femme castrice*. The monstrous feminine 'terrifies because she threatens to castrate' (Creed 2012: 22); she is not placed in a binary with the masculine. Instead, the masculine is always in fear of being emasculated because he is terrified of what he perceives as the materialization of emasculation in the feminine body. This is fundamentally different from the feminine that has the potential to emasculate (22-3). The Salu'ah is the actualization of the gendered monster who castrates. She is a threat to both masculinity as well as human life in general. She entwines both the images of the castrating woman and the castrating monster.

The image of the Salu'ah combines both the *femme animale* and *femme castrice*. She is the monster that represents the most abject of materiality in the hairy animal. She awakens castration anxiety in her devouring craving of men. The animality of the figure of the she-wolf is a full identification with the animal. With that, the Salu'ah embraces the monstrosity that was forced upon her gender. Difference in the figure of the Salu'ah is utilized to empower her. She is the monstrous, animalistic, demonic, feminine who devours men. She is the fearful sovereign of the desert.

In spite of the patriarchal perspectives contained within Bedouin narratives about women, tales about the Salu'ah represent an inverted version of these perspectives. The evil vindictive victim, who resorts to cunning to achieve her goals, is re-sketched as the powerful emasculator who brings men to their knees. Specific gender ideologies are dispersed when they collide with the myth of the Salu'ah in these folktales. This is the point where ideologies related to gender are questioned allowing for the opportunity to re-envision them. The Bedouin woman, represented to be an evil and monstrous Other in the narratives is rewritten as an empowered monster in the image of the Salu'ah. The ideology that represents the monstrous-othered woman is resisted by the myth of the Salu'ah. Having defied the social

structures, the image of the Salu'ah is a rich source of inspiration for narratives that question their cultural values. The patriarchal discourse, that empowers men and others women by representing the Bedouin woman as deserving of death due to their potential for evil, is resisted. Feminine evil in the patriarchal discourse of these narratives about women is transformed alongside the Salu'ah.

The myth of the Salu'ah and the discourse from which its narratives originated display a tension created by the power that is attached to her figure. Narratives about the Salu'ah originate within a patriarchal discourse and exaggerate psychological and physical attributes to archive the monstrous feminine. The discourse that draws women as an evil that should be hidden in earth before it destroys it is exaggerated by the monstrosity of the Salu'ah. Her monstrosity liberates her and revises the structures in which her figure originated. The exaggeration of her abjection highlights her as an emasculator who penetrates men through the act of devouring. The Salu'ah emasculates and penetrates before she destroys. The she-wolf, the Salu'ah, emerges as more powerful than the man in the desert. She represents his most horrific fears. The male gaze on the Salu'ah is destructive for the men who see her; their last gaze is upon a powerful female.

Part of the richness of the image of the Salu'ah is the fact that she embodies feminine abjection but utilizes it to question the very same discourse that created the abjection. Narratives about the Salu'ah invert the gender structures when the monstrous feminine in the she-wolf destroys the location of its abjection, the patriarchal discourse. The discourse that abjects women, marking them as monstrous, collides with the discourse about the feared female emasculator. The two form a perfect storm from which the Salu'ah emerges, liberated by her abjection. Only when she is thrust into abjection as a monstrous feminine, the she-wolf of Arabia, the Salu'ah ascends the throne of power in the desert of Arabia.

---

<sup>1</sup> A traditional veil in the Saudi culture at the time these tales were recorded is an all-black cloth that covers a woman from head to toe called *abaya* or *abat*. This includes a full-face cover that reveals only the eyes and is called *burka*.

<sup>2</sup> Alblui's book is the first written record in Arabic dedicated to the folktales about the Salu'ah in Arabia. Folktales about the Salu'ah in Iraq are recorded earlier. See Assamurrai (2008).

## List of References

- فاطمة البلوي، السعلوة بين الحقيقة و الخيال روائع من موروثنا الشعبي ( *Salu'ah: Between Reality and Fantasy* )، الرياض: المفردات للنشر، 2011.
- جبرائيل سليمان جبور، البدو في البادية ( *Bedouins* )، بيروت: دار العلم للملايين، 1988.
- جمال السامرائي، 'السعلاة ( السعلوة ) في حضارة وادي الرافدين ( The Salu'ah in the Mesopotamian Civilization )، مجلة الموروث، العدد الثاني، ( اذار 2008 )، <<http://www.iraqna-iq.com/fp/journal2/23.htm>>
- Boas, Franz, 'Mythology and Folklore', *Anthropology, Folklore and Myth*, ed. Robert Segal, New York and London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 69-86.
- Cininas, Jazmina, 'Fur Girls and Wolf Women: Fur, Hair and Subversive Female Lycanthropy', *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. Hannah Priest, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015, pp. 77-95.
- Creed, Barbara, 'Ginger Snaps: The Monstrous Feminine as *Femme Animale*', *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. Hannah Priest, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015, pp. 180-195.
- Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Priest, Hannah, 'Introduction: A History of Female Werewolves', *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. Hannah Priest, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015, pp. 1-23.