

DEMONS IN IRANIAN FOLKLORE

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Abstract Folktales come from the lifestyle of the majority of a certain ethnic group and thus betray a huge amount of their beliefs, manners, and rituals. Such tales represent a nation's cultural identity. The difference between myth and folktales lies in the fact that myths mostly wear a religious aura, a sort of sacred mood, around them while folktales remain ethical and societal and still clearly inform us of how the myths influence the formation of such narratives and fables. (Mahjoob, 2008: 139) The popular narratives include stories that have undergone change and alterations throughout centuries, their heroes having been placed in different times and spaces, and their details being completed in time, bit by bit contributed through the imaginations of the storytellers. (Barati, 2012, 110) One of the most significant and recurring figures in folktales are demons. One of the defining features of demons in the folktales is their evilness and hostility towards God. (Darvishian, 2004: 193)

Demons and their Safe Havens in the Folklore In Iranian beliefs, water is seen as a threshold between the human world and the world of the supernatural beings. According to the folklore, the Jinn and the demons live in the places with water in them, such as baths, water supplies underground and cascades. (Ebrahimi, 2018: 49) One narrative documenting the connection between water and the supernatural world is recorded in the Bahira by Fozuni Astarabadi. In this book, he tells us of water beings, creatures who live around springs and waterfalls, who are always indulged in jolly fun, singing and dancing and cheering. But when one of them dies, they moan and weep and cry so excessively that makes human beings feel pity for them and bury the corpse of the dead water being in the element of earth that belongs to men. In another narrative in the Bahira, a girl from the water creatures falls in love with a man of humankind. She brings him a huge load of gold every day until one day the king gets wind of the affair and expels the man. The water girl becomes so melancholic after this incident that she dies of a broken heart. (Astarabadi, 1949: 469) It seems that water is a conductive element through which the supernatural beings may reveal themselves to the human beings or hide from them. The closer a land is to water sources the tighter is these beings' grip on the mankind's life. If a man stays in such places for a long time, or worse, if he dozes off in there, the supernatural beings will harm him. (Mazdapur, 2008: 29) Most of the narratives concerning human beings' confrontation with the supernatural entities are told by the farmers and gardeners. In one of such fables, the narrator tells us of the night he is irrigating his land while he hears a

female moaning from a cemetery nearby: it is a woman, apparently, sitting by a grave, wailing in sorrow. As he walks to the woman with the intention to condole her, she suddenly turns her face towards him and now he sees her visage. She looks so horrendous and abominable; he instantly runs away from her but she is now chasing him. The man begs her to leave him alone and stop disturbing him, but she only returns the man's own voice. She finally morphs into a kid, capering with a heinous and nightmarish cry into a well in the cemetery. (Mihandoost, 1976: 49) The common feature in all these narratives is the demons and the jinn meeting in places like wells and baths. The Iranians of not a very long time ago believed that Wednesday was when the evil forces of demons and the jinn were at their peak. So going to baths was forbidden on Wednesdays. In Lorestan, besides going to bath, swimming in ponds was also considered a bad omen because they believed that on this day the supernatural beings' harm will be grave. (Asgari Alam, 2009: 165) The people of the past also believed that mountains, deserts, and forests were among the dwellings of the demons and the jinn. The Iranian folklore holds that sitting under trees and dozing off under their shadows may end with lunacy and the jinn haunting the victim. In Gilan and Mazandaran, walnut and fig trees are considered dwellings of evil beings as well as ash tree according to the Lorestan folklore and fig tree according to the Fars folklore. A famous mountain is named Qaf. In Lorestan, people maintain that those who have gone to the Qaf have either never returned home or faced so many disasters. (Asgari Alam, 2007: 17) Another place best known as the supernatural beings' safe haven is the desert. The Lorestan folklore tells us that if a traveler wants to sleep in a desert for a night, they had better use talismans and magic in order that they could create a safe zone around them. These talismans are called Ker Daveth. To perform the Ker Daveth rites, a family member who is innocent and in possession of a good heart draws a circle around the traveler on earth with a stick, mentioning the name of God several times, and then the traveler will have a defence zone around them that no demon will be able to break in. The abandoned buildings, poultry farms, barns, towers, old castles, graveyards, mortuaries, old bridges, and underground buildings, all these places are considered safe havens for the demons according to the folktales. (Ebrahimi, 2018: 72) Folktales and oral traditions attribute behavior to the demons that is unprecedented in the myths. In such tales, demons can tell the human smell and are believed to be of cannibalistic nature. Some of the demons and evil creatures only hurt babies and children. Of all the harm they cause to the children they are best known to create ailment, to frighten the babies and to kidnap them. (Ebrahimi, 2018: 85)

People in many towns in Iran believe that children must not be left alone before they are seven. They must be looked after because the evil forces may cause harm to them. In the southern islands of Iran, the locals believe that a baby must not be left alone lest UmmiSibyan [mother of the children] should hear them and lay in wait for them to kidnap them. People also attach prayers and pins made out of metal to the children's clothes because they believe such objects will keep the evil beings away from their children. (Saedi, 1975: 130)

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