Women in Omani Arts: From Traditional Folk Tales to Contemporary Art

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Abstract

It is unusual to find a country that has been modernized in which practices encapsulated in folk tales dating back some 6,000 years are regarded as contemporaneous and intrinsic to the national identity. It is also rare for an oral tradition to be transformed into the visual arts medium, and in doing so, both accurately convey past narratives while translating them into expressions of present-day issues. This study specifically investigates representations of women in Omani folk tales selected from a collection in print translated into English from Arabic. The analysis of theoretical work in the field of folklore appears alongside outcomes from qualitative interviews conducted with six contemporary artists whose art work features depictions of women. These interviews canvassed the artists’ knowledge of, and influence from, folk tales in their work. It also gauged their perceptions of women’s situation in present-day Oman, in relation to values and beliefs expressed in folk tales. The analysis of folk stories found that women’s actions were portrayed in a positive light and that they were against practices that placed restrictions on women, such as choice of husband. The artists’ viewpoints in their work and during discussions confirmed these findings and revealed particular concern around continuation into the present sociocultural practices that would limit women and place them in difficult situations. Further research into linkages between different art modalities in relation to folk tales would be instructive.

Keywords: Folk tales; Women in Oman; Omani art; Omani folklore

Introduction

Oman’s folk tales are part of a rich cultural heritage in which women played an integral role. Alan Dundes defines folklore as “autobiographical ethnography”—that is, accounts by people of their own experiences and cultural knowledge rather than descriptions by people from the outside looking in (e.g., sociologists or social workers) [1]. Similarly, the work of local contemporary artists is a depiction of society by its own people, and therefore it is a kind of autobiography. Although a folk tale is verbal while painting is a visual medium—within a “dimension of social relevance”—as Eleanor W. Leach proposed in her study of mythological painting, it is possible to critically analyze the perception of women as represented in Oman’s folk tales, an old cultural art form and in the work of contemporary Omani artists, as an example of a modern art form [2].

In his introduction to Dundes’s essays, Simon Bronner argues that Dundes regarded folklore as a key method through which cultural knowledge and wisdom are passed on through generations. Dundes’s research invites the reader to use folklore as an “instructional tool” to enhance tolerance and learning [1]. Dundes further argues that folklore is not an artifact from the past but rather “an expression of present-day issues” [1]. In line with this notion, I would argue that folk tales in Omani society, although not always reflective of current issues, nonetheless serve as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists creating expressions of what they regard as modern concerns. Omani folklore is rich enough to be not only a means of celebrating Oman’s heritage but also to inspire the present generation’s efforts to understand its own identity and consciousness. Living within a society that still celebrates folk tales—passing them on from generation to generation—means contemporary Omani artists’ work is affected by them.1

Azza Heikal, a writer and comparative literature critic, emphasizes the reader’s role in adding creativity to a story as he or she interprets it. It is her view that despite the fact a novel may be based on a particular religious concept or inspired by religious events, it is not a sacred text and should be treated accordingly [3]. Likewise, local folk tales inspire Omani artists to add creativity to stories—for example, by viewing women in these tales through a modern lens, depicting them as having a more substantial and progressive role in society, not in an attempt to distort culture but rather to reflect its organic growth through art.

A chronology of the critique of gender roles in fairy tales can be found in Donald Haase’s essay, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship,” in which he demonstrates how construction of gender identity is more complex than simply labeling fairy tales as empowering or disempowering of women. Among the complexities he describes, I would emphasize his argument that “to test generalizations and theorize the role of gender in folk tales and fairy tales, scholars need to expand the focus of feminist fairy-tale research beyond the Western, European, and Anglo-American traditions” [4]. Likewise, in its exploration of representations of women in Omani arts, this paper does not aim to limit itself to the earliest Western feminist critics of fairy tales who...
criticize representations of women as either beautiful, “slumbering young girls or powerful … wicked and grotesque older women” nor to those who focus on the hierarchy of gender [5]. It will be argued here that females were indeed central figures in Omani folk tales and their roles at that time (some 6,000 years ago) and ever since have been a key source of inspiration for contemporary local artists.2

Aisha Al-Darmaki, a leading researcher and collector of Omani folk tales, asserts that oral narratives are seriously impacted by the storyteller’s conscious or unconscious influence over information conveyed or withheld. Al-Darmaki also examines the role of the construction of Self and Other in folk tales, arguing that a particular society’s ideology and culture (including class, age, gender, ethnicity, and race) are reflected in them. In an oral tradition, this dynamic of Self and Other between the narrator and characters in the tales makes it difficult to cast a value judgment on the depiction of women. Therefore, any attempt at exploring the representation of women in Omani folk tales aims to make allowances for the different social identities and culture within the society of the time rather than to assess them [6].

As indicated earlier, in seeking to establish linkages between Oman’s artistic trajectory and its cultural history, this paper will explore how representations of women in Omani folk tales have influenced the work of its contemporary artists. First, selected folk tales will be discussed in relation to their depiction of women’s roles in the past. Second, women are central figures in some Omani artists’ works and, drawing on semistructured interviews held with them, their representations of women will be closely examined. The aim is to provide an introduction into two highly complex and nuanced areas, Omani folk tales and the work of contemporary Omani artists, and to begin to explore the connection between them in a region that is underrepresented in literary and cultural studies. There is room for further research into particular aspects of this connection where more intricate details and a wider scope could be considered.

Women in Omani Folk Tales

Hatim Al Taie and Joan Pickersgill conceptualize Omani folk tales into three main categories. First, those pertaining to “the supernatural, jinn and magic.” Second, folk tales that reflect the power of the religious thinkers and the Sufi, “whose devotion to God has given them extra powers and respect.” Finally, the third category are historical folk tales immortalizing Omani heroes because of their bravery [7]. A few of the folk tales used in this study belong to the first category, and themes relevant to the second category can also be seen while all the folk tales discussed below are united by the central theme of women. All but one of the folk tales discussed in this paper were taken from Omani Folk Tales, a collection translated from Arabic into English by Abdulsalam Ali Hamad.3 The folk tales were originally compiled by the storyteller Abdullah Al-Wohaibi who reminds readers in his introduction to the book that these are, “tales which had never been written down” [8]. Consequently, critical analysis will not rely on interpreting the use of vocabulary or language per se; rather this paper will consider how women are portrayed in the stories selected for discussion.

Hamad asserts that Omani folk tales reveal connections between Oman’s artistic and cultural histories, and he reiterates that they are “beyond question part of the Omani national persona, and appropriate for the current Omani cultural revival movement” [8]. Further support for this position is evident in Sahar El Mougy’s work, “From Folk Tales to Woman’s Tales” [9]. El Mougy explains that folklore and the folk tale are considered a living part of the collective memory of a society. She explores how folk tales expressed “silent” parts of a society’s social and cultural structure not captured by historians. She goes so far as to label folklore as being historical material that is more rich and flexible than official history. El Mougy explains that, once analyzed, folk tales reflected the values of a society that in turn fueled its social thinking [9]. The way in which folk tales created “national persona” [8] or the “collective memory” [9] of a nation becomes evident within an Omani context when we observe the use of the folk tale as a genre passing on wisdom and cultural values from one generation to the next and how these tales are still used, as Hamad explains, in “family gatherings, tribal assemblies (seblah), and night gatherings (remshah) as well as public meetings” [8].

Despite the fact that in Omani folk tales men often play the role of savior (usually from a beast or a serpent) to protect their family’s honor, in many other tales, it is women who take charge of the family, regardless of whether they are an older, motherly figure or a young girl. In the Tale of the Woman and the Genie [8], males were constantly the saviors. In this tale, a beautiful woman was harassed by a serpent whenever she went to the falaj to bathe (a man-made channel); she was frightened and felt helpless until her husband found out and defended her by killing the serpent. In revenge, her husband was abducted by the other serpents, so she asked her brother-in-law for help, and he rescued his brother and saved the family. However, in the Tale of the Woman Who Marries Her Daughter to a Serpent [8], a stepdaughter facing the tyranny of her stepmother courageously listened to a mermaid and found help from a genie disguised as a serpent. The daughter agreed to marry the genie, thus releasing herself from an unjust situation and being rewarded with a prosperous life away from the stepmother. Another example of a woman making a daring decision without the help of a male is found in the Tale of the Woman and the Vow [8]. A barren woman promised her daughter in marriage to a tree should she have a baby girl. Years later, the tree haunted the daughter and reminded the mother of her vow. The woman agreed to fulfill her vow and was rewarded when it transpired that the tree was a wealthy prince, thus ensuring a happy life for the daughter. This story also signifies women’s strength and their sense of honor.

2. An inscription found in the Omani city of Adam dates back to 3,000 BC when Oman was known as Majan. One of the oldest limestone inscriptions depicting human civilization in Oman; in this illustration, a woman and a man stand together holding hands. This image was the logo for the Omani Legends and Stories exhibition.

3. I spoke with Nasser Al-Sawafi on September 21, 2015, in his office at the Department of Folklore, Division of Non-Material Culture in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. He explained that in 2011 the ministry published Omani folk tales in Arabic in a book titled Our Folk Tales: Folktales from Dhofar (which
In her work on woman-centered folk narratives—in particular those from islands in the Indian Ocean—Lee Haring examines local variations of folk tales that shared symbols but carried different meanings and interpretations. She argues that the gender of the rescuer in a tale is a marker of the narrative's social perspective; for example, in some versions of the tale of a woman who married a beast, the rescuer was the woman's brother while in others it was her sister [10]. The brother's aim in rescuing his sister from the beast was to prove his masculinity and the triumph of family honor, while for the sister it was a result of an awareness that "she has undergone an initiation; she has lost her innocence; she has gained a knowledge of the otherness of males, of an alien tribe in an alien environment. That knowledge is both loss and liberation" [10]. Comparing Haring’s concept to Omani folk tales, it is apparent that when the situation required it, despite their fear of the unknown, Omani women were capable of making their own decisions—even when it required dealing with a serpent–genie or a tree–prince.

In the classical structure of Omani folk tales, these figures carry the uncanny or supernatural concepts along with the ambiguity of the Other that help the reader to deal with their unspoken fears. Jack Zipes, a writer and critic on the fairy tale's social and political role in civilizing processes, has referred to the problematic issue of classical folk tales and fairy tales being regarded by progressive-minded critics and creative writers as backward looking because of their racist, authoritarian, and patriarchal structures [11]. He argues, however, that it is irrational to consider the whole genre obsolete for today's children as many elements still speak to the needs of our human consciousness; for example, based on Sigmund Freud and Bruno Bettelheim's thinking, he suggests "that the very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset and makes the repressed unfamiliar familiar once again … [this] can be both frightening and comforting" [11]. In effect, Zipes's argument supports my own position on the importance of allowing the folk tale genre to be used in a more flexible way within community forums like classrooms, as Dundes suggested, or in art galleries, without fear of losing its originality and cultural significance.

Although women were usually represented as subordinate helpers and as physically and mentally weaker than men who were often depicted as wiser than women, there is a paradox in the depiction of women in Omani folk tales. Despite their physical vulnerability, there is much evidence for the strength of women's spirit and character that resulted in women acting to protect themselves and other women. Despite their physical vulnerability, there is much evidence for the strength of women's spirit and character that resulted in women acting to protect themselves and other women. On the one hand, women are described as "imprudent" and "stupid" as in the tale O Ramadan, Take Your Date Basket! [8], where a wife misunderstood her husband's statement that the dates he brought home could identify the strange living thing in his shop, and when a carpenter won the challenge, the daughter concocted a clever plan to save herself from an unwanted marriage. Described in this story as "cultured" and "beautiful," the daughter convinced the carpenter to make a box into which she secretly placed herself together with necessary food and clothing and the box was then flown away to a town near the sea, where eventually she chose to marry the governor's son. In the Tale of a Loyal Horse and a Loving Master [12], the daughter convinced her father to support her decision to not only choose her own husband but also a man below her social status. What made the daughter's choice even more significant was that her father was an Imam, the highest religious and social authority figure in her tribe. As the story goes, when the Imam decided to marry his three daughters to their three cousins, one of his daughters wisely followed the custom of that region, which was to pick up a green lemon and toss it at the man who had been selected to be her husband. Shaking the audience, instead of tossing the lemon at her cousin, she threw it to a stranger who was poor, and when her father, thinking her action a mistake, asked her to repeat the act ten times, she kept tossing the green lemon to the stranger. The Imam could not go against her choice of partner for his daughter had cleverly used the culture and local customs to assert her own will.

Polygamy is another important woman-and-marriage theme explored in Omani folk tales. Since "folklore is one way for both adults and children to deal with the crucial problems in their lives" [1], we find examples of inquiry into the effect of polygamy on women in folk tales. In the Tale of the Poor Man [8], when a woodcutter was advised to marry many times so his wives could assist him in his trade, he found that all his efforts did not lead to any improvement in his trade. It was only after his third wife gripped an axe and held on to a rope while calling on the other wives to do the same that the woodcutter received help with his work. Therefore, the man grew rich only after his wives agreed to cooperate with each other, thus implying that only a woman could convince the other wives to cooperate.

In a more pertinent example of the effect of polygamy on women, the heroine in the Tale of the Polygamous Man [8] devised a scheme to regain her husband's attention and to "tell him indirectly that women were not toys in his hands" [8]. This story captures the sense of helplessness experienced by an infertile woman who was expected culturally to seek out more wives for her husband. What made this story powerful was the woman's decision to announce her own engagement and wedding night in parallel with her husband's fourth marriage, thus creating
a situation approximating her own experience of their polygamous relationship. Her husband was furious because for him and other males it was “impossible and illegitimate for a woman to merely think of such a matter” [8], let alone act upon it. The husband outrageously entered his first wife’s chamber where he was stunned to discover that her new “husband” was simply a palm trunk intended to teach him a lesson. The wife challenged him to understand how she felt by telling him, “You married three times in addition to me, two of them I asked their hands for you myself, and I never got angry. But when you just learned that I planned to get married to another man, you turned into an angry beast. Do you see the repulsiveness of what you have done?” [8]. Her husband told her he regretted his behavior, apologized to his wife, and then promised that whether or not his fourth wife bore a child, he would not marry again. Not satisfied with this response, the wife questioned him further, “Dear husband, is it possible for a woman to have two husbands at the same time?” [8]. In an era in which polygamy was commonplace, this tale not only questioned the way males viewed polygamy but empathetically considered the wife’s emotions and portrayed her as clever in that she devised a plan that placed a man in a situation similar to that experienced by many Omani women.

In summary, despite some portrayals of female characters as weak and incapable, folk tales also represent women as being strong, clever, wise, and as occupying responsible and substantial roles in dealing with crucial problems. Omani folk tales also have a multilayered richness enabling present-day audiences to examine the past and then innovatively reconfigure its representations into a new social reality.

Women in the Work of Contemporary Omani Artists

In consultation with the Omani Society for Fine Arts, I conducted semistructured interviews with some of Oman’s contemporary artists who represent women’s lives in their artwork. A discursive method of analysis enabled the artists to participate in a manner that suited their differing circumstances, as well as encouraging flexibility around disclosure of individual viewpoints and perspectives in each of the artist’s personal responses. The findings outlined below would likely have been less revealing had a formal interview technique, survey, or questionnaire been utilized; however, these discussions were guided by a list of questions preprepared by the author (Appendix B). The interviews were oriented specifically toward establishing the artists’ perspectives on women as depicted or revealed in their own particular artworks. The influence of folk tales in general was also explored as another way of investigating linkages between contemporary art and Oman’s cultural history.

Anwar Sonya is a pioneer among contemporary Omani artists, and during our discussion about his work, held on August 17, 2015, at the Omani Society of Fine Arts, he commented, “Women are a source of inspiration in all my paintings.” When asked about the perception of women in Omani society, he asserted, “If there is anything lacking in portrayals of women in art, it is never her shortcomings but it is society’s shortcomings in how they view her.” Sonya explained that he regards women and men in contemporary Omani society as not limited by fixed gender roles, rather than they are collaborating in their contribution to society. This concept fascinates the artist, and he believes its origin is deeply rooted in Omani culture as it is recorded in most of Oman’s folk tales. He explained that in folk tales and Omani folklore, men and women can be found dancing together in one arena during wedding ceremonies. Furthermore, women worked alongside men in the agricultural fields of the country’s interior region while on the coast women were working in the fish market. For Sonya, the diversity of the landscape resembles the diverse presence of women in different realms of Omani society. The artist explained that in his paintings, he extensively used two colors to represent the Omani landscape—blue for the sea and brown for the mountains. In one of his paintings (Figure 1), Sonya painted a market scene in which men and women are working together. In another painting, he portrays grateful men and women dancing together to celebrate and seek the blessing of the sea on their newly built boat in Sur, an old coastal city dependent on sailing and fishing for its income (Figure 2).

Sonya’s relationship with Omani landscapes brings to mind Richard Van Dongen’s analysis of children’s literature by Chicano writers and illustrators who come from the southwestern border region of Mexico and the United States. Chicano artists draw inspiration from “Aztlan,” perhaps a world that never existed, but one that is filled with passion and vitality in the hearts and souls of the indigenous peoples” [13]. For Van Dongen, those within the culture identify with its stories, characters, and landscapes, while others who are outside the culture nonetheless enter into its mystical glorious world through a transformative cultural [9, 10].
experience [13]. Furthermore, these stories and illustrations help to “bring the next generation into sustaining … [the] culture that is deeply rooted in the Aztlan landscape of the Americas” [13]. Similarly, Sonya draws inspiration from Oman’s rich culture noting that he is “extremely eager to convey the rich heritage of the Omani culture through [his] art to the future generation.”

Hassan Meer explains that women in the harah (colloquial Arabic for neighborhood) are a key inspiration for his conceptual art as are the houses and families that he regards as cornerstones of the society. Among Meer’s significant pieces of work is the series titled Wedding Memories focused on the nature of the marriage relationship. In our interview at Estal Gallery on August 24, 2015, he explained that this work links gender relationships with place, deeply rooted within heritage and tradition and symbolized through old buildings and physical spaces. The artist argued that such relationships and dynamics are formed and shaped through circumstances and social forces within society appearing also in Omani folk tales. For example, the need for men to sail and travel for trade and other forms of income in some regions of Oman often meant leaving women at home waiting for long periods, and their relationships largely had to be lived through written correspondence (Figure 3). In Rejection 3 (Figure 4), a man and a woman meet for the first time on their wedding night, in their wedding chamber or khila (the Omani name for the traditional room prepared for the bride and groom by neighbors). Although only followed by a minority of Omani tribes since the 1970s, this cultural practice was a social norm in the eras reflected in the folk tales. The notion of choice of partner, mentioned earlier in this paper within the context of folk tales, is taken even further in another work from Meer’s Wedding Memories series (Figure 5), where we find a woman holding a dagger—reflecting her caution and fear of the unknown—when meeting her life partner for the first time, paradoxically, on a night that represents the beginning of their union. Meer diminishes the sense of the male as an authority figure by covering his face to symbolically represent shared anxiety and apprehension, in addition to his feelings of estrangement from his new wife.

Another example of Meer’s work pertaining to women is the series titled Enlightenment: a collection investigating what he believes to be “women’s preoccupation with spirituality,” that is, their search for connection to a higher being or power linked to the world of the spirit. In a photograph, a woman is captured in a rapturous state against a stark desert backdrop (Figure 6)—looking upward, her face a glow of white light and hands clasped in prayer. In this conceptual piece, Meer has inserted several lines in Arabic from the poetry of Samaa Issa, a well-known contemporary Omani poet, linking the concept of women’s spirituality with place and time. The following stanza portrays images of the sea and the desert metaphorically to reflect the place of the journey while the time is beyond the present, in “another life”:

La’n al bahar sahra’ alam da’m
llrahlyn ila alnur
bhtan ‘an alhb
ydi’ Ihm hya ‘akhra

[Because the sea and the desert are in constant pain
For the traveler to the light
Searching for love,
Another life is revealed to them.]

Samahram, by Samaa Issa. Translated by the author.
The poet asserts that the path of enlightenment is a journey requiring pain, resembling harsh travel associated with the sea and the desert. However, because this journey is detached from all else except love of the Divine, the pain will be rewarded by achieving enlightenment and perceiving another world, beyond material existence. As noted earlier, Meer visually presents this image via a woman wearing a white outfit and a pearl necklace looking upward in a state of devotion to the Divine, thus reflecting purity and detachment in her spiritual quest. The winged flowers in the art piece rise up symbolizing her sense of fulfillment in this spiritual journey (the flowers are from the traditional design of an Omani woman's scarf called a laisu). Meer reminds the audience how this enlightenment, although pertaining to another world, involves a journey through the material world by contrasting the image of the woman with the desert backdrop. For Meer, conceptual art is “a true reflection of the self within the context of time and place.”

Alia Al-Farsi is another artist whose work often revolves around the theme of women and spirituality. When I interviewed her on August 15, 2015, at Alia Gallery, she told me she believes that in general terms, “The artist is connected to the society and its culture.” Although she does not confine herself to one style, she prefers to work in a semiabstract form: “Abstract gives me the freedom to paint a woman in the way I see her. I believe this promotes thinking and depth so that the audience can interpret my art the way they feel.” A good example of this is her self-portrait titled Zenith of Solitude (Figure 7) about a woman on a quest to understand spirituality through Sufism. She explained that she painted this while in a meditative state—indicated in the painting by the woman elevated, releasing herself from materialism as symbolized in the pieces of cloth falling around her. For Al-Farsi, “When there is trouble, spirituality is the salvation,” and she often expresses women in a manner reflective of her own independent spiritual identity.

In relation to broader questions around the representation of Omani women in her paintings, Al-Farsi’s work has evolved corresponding with societal changes for women, such as His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said’s reforms in 1970 enabling education for girls and legal recognition of gender equality. She explained that she used to always paint Omani women as having only one eye illustrating the sense that women were somehow incomplete (Figure 8). In other works, she would paint women showing only their backs, reflecting their shyness and lack of confidence (Figure 9). Al-Farsi has been strongly influenced by folk tales in which
women were shy and not permitted to make their own choices—a situation that, despite positive developments in female independence, Al-Farsi said she still witnesses in present-day Oman. After more closely investigating Omani folk tales in relation to their depiction of women, she said she had found a wealth of stories reflecting the strength of the woman, including plenty of examples of women managing families and households. “Now,” she explained, “I paint women with two eyes and I focus on her gaze as if she is boldly looking to the future with confidence.” One example is in her painting (Figure 10) about freedom of choice that portrays a woman holding a lock with two men expectantly standing behind her. The lock and key are common symbols in Arabic songs and pieces of jewelry. The lock signifies a woman’s heart while the key that opens the lock wins the woman’s heart. So each of the men positioned behind the confident woman is hoping she will choose him. Al-Farsi’s work also highlights the intellectual ability of females; in one of her paintings, a woman is confidently looking into the future while sharing her thoughts with and advising a male (Figure 11). By including lines of poetry from Burma (now Myanmar) written across the woman’s head, the artist is asserting women’s intellectual ability that goes beyond her own land to foreign places. However, despite her knowledge of international literature, the woman wears Oman’s traditional clothes indicating that she is deeply rooted in her own culture.

On August 17, 2015, at the Omani Society of Fine Arts, Saleh Al-Alawi said he believes that since contemporary Omani society still passes traditional folk tales from generation to generation, artists have an important role in presenting them in visual forms. He spoke about being drawn to aesthetic elements of Omani women’s traditional dress and accessories, referring to them as “queens” because of the grandeur and intricate diversity of their dresses, as well as the heavy use of gold and silver in accessories and dress embroidery. For Al-Alawi, the wearing of traditional clothes and jewelry symbolically represents Omani women’s majestic status in society, while variation in traditional clothes across different regions of the country reflects a rich diversity among women in Oman. In the southern region of Oman, the traditional costume of a golden headpiece resembling a crown reflects a female’s authority and standing in her community. The detailed texture of traditional clothes enables artists to fill their work with symbolism that broadens an audience’s imagination. As an example, Al-Alawi shared his painting titled Oh Beautiful, Oh Neighbor (Figure 12) based on the traditional Omani song of the same name, Ya helwa ya jaarah. In this piece, Al-Alawi painted females as a song to celebrate their beauty and traditional clothing. The neighborhood is also highlighted in lyrics...
beginning with the words “Oh beautiful, oh neighbor! The one who has illuminated the neighborhood.” Within neighborhoods, women are like pillars, and regardless of the passage of time, they remain the foundation or base that keeps a neighborhood together. The painting uses colorful pieces of traditional cloth twirled around the musical instrument as a symbol for the traditional song. Al-Alawi described this art work as contemporary but redolent of Omani’s past originality and identity.

Naima Al-Maimani is another artist who is interested in women in the context of the neighborhood; however, she is especially concerned with the sharing of folk tales taking place in this social space. In the coffee shop at Opera Galleria on August 19, 2015, Al-Maimani said she regarded folk tales as not very far removed from the present generation’s everyday life. Able still to recall folk tales told to her by her grandmother, Al-Maimani explained that she “gains inspiration from Omani folk tales” and feels “empowered by the women in these tales who were wise enough to know their rights and worth despite them being in some difficult situations.”

Polygamy is the subject of Al-Maimani’s series titled The One with the Single Earring, which was highly influenced by folk tales (as the name suggests). Still an acceptable practice in Oman (although now less favored by the younger generation), polygamy, as noted earlier in this paper, has been the subject of some folk tales in terms of its emotional complexity and especially the first wife’s painful experiences. In one of the paintings in this series inspired by a folk tale, there is a woman wearing a red top with a matching red apple on the table in front of her (Figure 13). The woman is an older wife who must arrange her husband’s second marriage to a girl younger than her own daughters. Al-Maimani explained that what attracted her to this folk tale was the older woman’s ability to act rationally and with power despite her pain, evincing women’s strength in difficult times. In the tale, the woman welcomed the new young bride and treated her like one of her daughters, making the young girl so fond of her that she called her, Oh Ma. The first wife therefore retained her authority and position as head of the household. After her husband passed away, the first wife remained the person who had complete authority over the family and its wealth.

Al-Maimani explained that the single golden earring is a major symbol in this piece symbolizing that women are yet to be accorded full rights in society and they are insufficiently aware of the fact; however, the woman’s lone golden earring is also what makes her distinctive and reflects women’s unique capacity to deal with difficult situations. In re-creating this folk tale, Al-Maimani painted the woman in a red
Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify linkages between Oman's artistic trajectory and its cultural history through an investigation of the role and representation of women in Omani folk tales, as an example of an old cultural art. Although women were often depicted as the gender in need of being saved and sometimes exhibited lesser physical strength than males, the folk tales also contained strong female figures who took charge of their family and showed strength of spirit, strong character, and mental acuity in order to protect, provide, and seek independence in situations as varied as facing family betrayal or being able to choose a husband.

The images of women portrayed in Omani folk tales are often paradoxical, reflecting their multilayered richness, which provides modern-day audiences with opportunities to innovatively rethink ideas imbued in them in a way that ultimately contributes to societal reforms. Folk tales are not simply historical artifacts but continue to be a source of inspiration in confirming women as central figures in contemporary Omani society, as exemplified in the work of local contemporary artists.

Through discussions with selected Omani artists and analysis of their art work featuring women, it was apparent that these artists celebrated female beauty, highlighted women's intellect and their spirituality, and, above all, depicted woman who were confidently and

Figure 13: Naima Al-Maimani The One with the Golden Earing: Untitled

Figure 14: Naima Al-Maimani The One with the Golden Earing: Untitled
wisely dealing with sociocultural restrictions applicable to their gender. As a significant influence on Omani culture and therefore a presence in everyday life, the heritage of the country and specifically its folklore inspire many artists and none more so than those whose art work features Omani women. As folk tales are a largely undocumented oral tradition linked to notions of family, national identity, and collective memory, the work of the artists in preserving the spirit of these tales gains a new level of significance.

Appendix B Questions for Discussion for Qualitative Interviews

General questions pertaining to the artist and his or her style—followed up by the questions, “How do you do this?” and “Can you please provide an example(s)?”

1. How do you describe your style to other people?
2. Is there any particular field or school of art you identify with? Why?
3. Why did you decide to become an artist?
4. Has your style changed and evolved over time?
5. What kind of work or aspect of your work do you enjoy doing the most?
6. What do you hope to achieve?

Questions on links between the artist, their work, and Omani women and Omani folk tales:

7. What memorable responses have you had to your work?
8. Do you do any research before beginning a piece or a series?
9. What inspires you? (Prompt: culture, heritage, older arts?)
10. Do folk tales inspire your work in any way—directly or indirectly?
11. Do you think Omani folk tales delineate gender roles?
12. Do you think your art goes beyond these roles (while preserving the culture of your home)?
13. What themes do you pursue?
14. Are women a central theme in your work or in a particular series/exhibition or artwork?
15. Have you addressed spirituality (and) women in your work?
16. Are any of the women in your work on a personal mission? Or searching for their spiritual identity? In what way?
17. Do you have a particular message to convey in your work?
18. How do you perceive the current reality of Omani society in relation to women?
19. Do you aim to raise a significant social question through your work [prompt: youth or women] and do you think you have succeeded?
20. How has your perception of women changed over time?
21. Does any of your work bridge the gap between old Omani traditions and today’s generation?

Appendix A Art Work by Contemporary Omani Artists

Note: Signed permission forms have been obtained from each of the artists (Anwar Sonya, Hassan Meer, Alia Al-Farsi, Saleh Al-Alawi, and Naima Al-Maimani) to be able to include copies of their artwork in this paper.

References