

From Folklore to Critical Discourse: The Use of Popular Heritage in Mourad Snoussi's Play "The Ghoul with Seven Heads"

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Received: 12/07/2025 ; Accepted : 25/11/2025 ; Published : 04/01/2026

Abstract:

This article falls within the study of mechanisms for employing popular (folk) heritage in contemporary Algerian theatre, through an applied approach to the play "The Ghoul with Seven Heads" by the writer Mourad Snoussi. The study focuses on the use of the character of the qwal (traditional storyteller), and on the evocation of myth and folktale as aesthetic and functional elements in constructing the theatrical discourse. The study proceeds from the hypothesis that the use of popular heritage is not limited to an aesthetic dimension, but goes beyond that to drawing closer to the audience and transmitting social, cultural, and political messages within a familiar form deeply rooted in the collective memory.

Keywords: Popular heritage, Algerian theatre, qwal, myth, folktale, Mourad Snoussi...

Introduction

Popular heritage is one of the most important pillars on which Algerian theatre has built its foundations. This is due to the deep symbolic and semantic load it carries and its intimate connection to the collective memory and popular sentiment. Algerian theatre practitioners have found in heritage—across its narrative, mythical, and oral manifestations—an effective artistic means to express societal issues and to interrogate the political, social, and cultural reality through symbolic forms that move beyond directness and declarative discourse.

It should be noted that Mourad Snoussi's play *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* fits squarely within this context. It

deliberately draws on Algerian popular heritage, employing the character of the qwal and invoking the worlds of myth and folktale to construct a theatrical discourse with multiple dimensions. Hence, the study raises the following problematic:

*How did Mourad Snoussi employ popular heritage in the play *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*? And what are the semantic, aesthetic, and communicative functions of this employment?*

The aim of this study is to uncover the mechanisms of employing popular heritage in the theatrical text and to clarify its functions in drawing closer to the recipient and conveying various messages, using the descriptive–analytical method.

1. Summary of the Play *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*

The writer drew the subject of his play from a folktale whose central idea revolves around marvelous and fantastic elements that exaggerate situations to the point that they are hard to believe rationally. Yet at its core, it addresses the gap between ruler and ruled—a relationship based on tyranny and arrogance—in order to reveal the unequal relationship between power and the people. Through his theatrical discourse, the writer seeks to lay bare the political reality by raising the duality of dictatorship and

democracy, from which Arab regimes in general, and the Algerian regime in particular, suffer. This is presented in a festive, circular (halqa) form that bestows on the text an aesthetic, artistic dimension.

The play *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* consists of eight scenes. In it, the writer draws from popular heritage the folktale of “the ghoul” in order to present a dramatic plot that depicts the issue of political injustice imposed on oppressed peoples. This is based on the principle that “no ruler has power except through his people, and no sultan has hegemony except through the weakness of those people, and democracy is not a game, but an inevitable choice in the imagination of peoples.”

The events of the **first scene** revolve around the beginning of seven days of celebrations marking the anniversary of the ghoul’s occupation of the city of “Al-Khayrat” (The Blessings), an occupation that goes back more than four hundred years. During this time he managed to tighten his grip on the entire city and everything in it. Among the manifestations of his celebrations is that every year he marries the most beautiful girl in the city, only to kill her the following day after consummating the marriage.

In the **second scene**, the ghoul meets with his ministers to inspect the organization of the festivities and check on the ogre-guests who have come to the city from various places to participate, in the name of their countries, in these celebrations.

The **third scene** depicts the tragic situation of the inhabitants of the city of Al-Khayrat under the rule of the Ghoul with Seven Heads, who has gone to great lengths to humiliate them and usurp their labor and dignity. The **fourth scene** portrays the citizens' exasperation with the waste and squandering of public funds on these celebrations, which bring no tangible benefit.

The events of the **fifth scene** center on the social situation of the character *Oum El-Kheir*, a seventeen-year-old girl whom the ghoul has chosen that year to be his bride amid the festivities marking the anniversary of his ascension to the city's throne. She is a beautiful girl and an orphan of the mother.

The events of the **sixth scene** take place in the ghoul's palace, where he appears at the height of his anger, holding an emergency meeting with his ministers and advisers to examine the case of the rebellious young man *Bachar*.

In the **seventh scene**, the play presents the ghoul's decision to feign magnanimity. The *barrah* (town crier) appears in the public

square, announcing to the people the ghoul's agreement to fight a duel with Bachar in response to the subjects' wishes.

The **eighth and final scene** takes us to one of the city's public streets, where the ghoul, through one of his representatives, attempts to buy people's consciences with money so that they will participate in a demonstration of support and solidarity with him against Bachar. At the same time, rumors spread widely among the people and through the media, while Bachar incites citizens to rise up against the ghoul.

The story ends with the killing of the monster. Seven young men seize the throne, taking turns in power and removing dictatorship. But the surprise is that these seven rulers are, in the end, nothing but another image of the Ghoul with Seven Heads. They engage in the same practices—perhaps even worse—and oppression continues.

2. Extracting the Heritage Elements that Appear in the Play

The theatrical experience presented in *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* by Mourad Snoussi relies on the employment of elements of popular performance (*farja sha'biyya*), in an attempt to root both heritage and Algerian theatre and to propose a theatrical form built on various traditional

expressive forms that reflect the people's reality and concerns.

The play rests primarily on a set of theatrical techniques in addition to its richness in popular heritage material. From this, it is possible to extract the most important heritage elements found in the text, as follows:

A. Employing the Characters of the *Qwal* and the *Barrah*

Mourad Snoussi opens *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* by employing a prominent heritage element: the *qwal*—a traditional storyteller—who is a heritage figure that has accompanied humans across their deeply rooted historical stages. In Algeria, the *qwal* constitutes a popular cultural phenomenon that aims to embed within it various popular forms generated by historical, economic, cultural, and social circumstances. These forms embody values that express reality with sincerity, emanating from the heart of this narrator to the hearts of the mass audience.

All this is achieved through his creative artistic activity, relying at times on musical instruments such as the *bendir* (frame drum) to attract attention and gather spectators around him in a circular formation. The *qwal* then begins to recount stories and tales. Snoussi portrays this figure in the play,

which is inspired by heritage, as can be seen in these excerpts where he begins the play with the following passage spoken by the *qwal*:

“Today begin the celebrations imposed by the Ghoul with Seven Heads in the city of Al-Khayrat.” (Snoussi, p. 13)

Thus the writer makes the opening of the play come from the mouth of this heritage figure, which represents an important element of popular heritage. In another passage of the play, the *qwal* says:

“The days went by, the wound scabbed over and healed.

The girl grew up just as everyone had hoped, and the neighbors too. She nursed at their homes, but she grew up in the big house her father built for her.” (Snoussi, p. 33)

From this study it is clear that the *qwal* enjoys a special place and strong presence in *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*, which is rooted in authentic popular heritage.

In addition, the play makes use of another heritage form: the *barrah* (public crier), who performs the same function as the *qwal* in essence—that is, conveying the story and news to the public. Both the *qwal* and the *barrah* strive to preserve the oral heritage of nations by transmitting it from one generation to another.

B. Employing the Element of the Folktale (Khrafah)

Abd al-Mu'in Khan says: "Imagination is the key to the doors of the folktale (khrafah) and the basis for generating myths." (Khan, 1937, p. 22). The folktale thus goes beyond the limits of reason into the realm of the irrational narrative.

Ibrahim Sahraoui states that "the folktale is a story that recounts events attributed to animals or even to ordinary humans who do things and engage in practices that transcend logic and the human mind's capacity to comprehend them." (Sahraoui, 2008, p. 47) Usually, the popular environment in which this imaginary story circulates assigns it a lesson and meaning that allude to something within that environment.

Every society has its own folktales, and in every region one finds its own particular myths. Some of these tales evoke awe and fear; others call forth desire and longing during their telling and hearing. This is because such tales contain a large quantity of suspense, hyperbole, wisdom, and moral instruction at the same time. In the traditional societies of the Maghreb, the folktale is called in the local dialect *h'jaya*, *khrafah*, or *khrifiya*.

It is usually told at night gatherings within the family, in a quasi-ritual atmosphere, around the hearth and beneath wool or hair blankets. It is forbidden to tell such tales during the day on the grounds that whoever tells them during daylight will be afflicted with harm to himself or his offspring. (Bouraoui, 2007, p. 7) In Algerian society, these tales are especially abundant in Amazigh popular cultures.

Among the most famous folktales recounted in Algerian evening gatherings is the story of "Baba Yennouba and his daughter Ghriba," as well as the tales of "the ogress (*al-ghoula*)," of which the present play is an example. Mourad Snoussi evokes the element of folktale in the main title itself, since the folktale and the fantastic story are popular heritage transmitted from generation to generation.

He focuses, among those tales, on the tale of "the ghoul," that gigantic mythical creature. Abd al-Malek Mortad says of the ghoul that it is one of the heroes of Arab and Amazigh folktales. Algerian folktales are replete with references to this mythical creature, attributing to it extraordinary deeds, depicting it in a frightening image, assigning it ugly traits, and endowing it with supernatural ability and destructive power that elevate it, in the eyes of the weak human

being with limited strength, to something formidable.

Even classical Arabic heritage books contain convincing chapters about this mythical creature and its connection to supernatural beliefs, particularly in pre-Islamic Arabia. Mortad adds that the name “ghoul” frequently appears in world literary heritage associated with the folkloric number seven: the ghoul may have seven complete heads, or seven daughters, and so on. (Mortad, p. 18)

The folktale, alongside the popular tale and proverb, forms a body of popular heritage of great value among the Algerian people. Mourad Snoussi employs the element of the folktale as a way of returning to the distant past in search of simplicity, nostalgia, and natural beauty.

C. Employing the Element of Myth

Myth appears with great force in Mourad Snoussi’s *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*. It must be noted that myth is difficult to define and conceptualize because it is a term with a wide semantic range. In Greek, myth is *mythos*, and in English it is also *mythos*; in both languages the meaning is “that which is spoken.” Here a link can be seen between these two words and the English word *mouth* (meaning “the organ of speech”). Thus, myth in its original sense is

“spoken words” or “narration.” (Khurshid, 2004, p. 60)

Based on this, the following myths employed by Mourad Snoussi in his play can be identified:

- The Myth of the Number 7

Numbers, like other entities such as individuals, colors, and sounds, derive their particular character from the circumstances surrounding them and the consequences associated with them. Yet the way in which human beings deal with numbers and think about them varies from one country and civilization to another, according to religious rituals and mythical beliefs. However, some numbers enjoy a strong presence in religious rituals and folktales everywhere because people share similar beliefs about them.

Among these is the number seven, which is employed extensively in *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*. This number is repeated more than any other in the play and is associated, since ancient times, with most religious rituals and popular beliefs. One reason for this is what God Almighty says in the Holy Qur’an: “He created the heavens and the earth and what lies between them in six days, then He established Himself on the Throne”—on the seventh day. (Said, 2010, p. 371)

The number seven is repeated strikingly in the Qur'an, where it is mentioned about twenty-four times. The verses in which it appears concern the heavens, ears of grain, cows, years, nights, the oft-repeated verses (*al-mathani*), the days of pilgrimage, seas, the gates of Hell, the Companions of the Cave, and so on. It is also repeated in Muslim rituals, such as circumambulating the Kaaba seven times, going back and forth between Safa and Marwah seven times, and stoning the devil with seven pebbles. (Bouzdiba, 2007, p. 238)

For this reason, Mourad Snoussi employs this number extensively in his play to give his work a comprehensive dimension with strong heritage and cultural references. The number seven is also widespread in popular beliefs and various ritual practices. For example, in local customs, a barren woman visits a saintly man (*wali*) for seven consecutive days and takes herbal concoctions prepared for her once every seven days to cure her sterility. There are many similar practices.

Thus, Snoussi carefully follows the popular mentality and its mythical beliefs by depicting its behavior and practices through this number, sensing the magical effect it has on the Algerian Arab popular mind in

particular, and the Eastern Arab mind in general.

The number seven is clearly and repeatedly present in the play from the outset: in the title *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*; in the fact that the celebrations last seven days; that his wedding takes place on the seventh day; that his bride is seventeen years old; that his palace consists of seven domes; and that the ministers who revolt against him and assassinate him are seven in number. The proclamation read out by the *barrah* in the city square to the inhabitants of Al-Khayrat also contains conspicuous repetition of the number seven:

- The barrah:

“... Accordingly, and in view of Article 7777 of the Constitution, the date of the battle with Bachar has been postponed until after the wedding night. And in view of Paragraph Seven of Article 7777, the weapon of the duel shall be the sword, and the place will be in accordance with the laws... And he asks you to remain calm while informing you that, pursuant to Article Seven, Article Twenty-Seven, and Article Seventy-Seven of the laws and the constitution of the masses, as of today these are all prohibited...” (Bouzdiba, op. cit., p. 56)

It seems clear that Mourad Snoussi has deliberately invoked this distinctive number,

with its broad heritage connotations, to bestow a marvelous quality on the dramatic situations, thus drawing the recipient into the world of the play. The number seven strongly manifests itself in the play and occupies a broad reading space, creating mythical atmospheres that pervade the theatrical space and intertwine the play's world with that of the folktale and popular story.

D- Employing a Popular Heritage Language

Mourad Snoussi uses a simple popular language drawn from reality and popular heritage—the language used by ancestors since ancient times and considered, across the ages, a key heritage component of Algerian popular culture, known as the colloquial dialect (al-‘ammiyya). He employs this language in *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* to harmonize with common people, since it is the popular language shared by all Algerians.

The first thing that draws attention is the play's title itself, *Al-Ghoul Bu Sba' Risan* (“The Ghoul with Seven Heads”), rendered in popular dialect and serving as a miniature expression of the play's content. Among the examples is what one of the citizens says:

- Citizen:

“I heard they're going to roast them meat that even the sides of meat can't roast...” (Snoussi, op. cit., p. 28)

Another example appears in the ghoul's own speech:

- The ghoul:

“I've heard about him. A tiny ghoul, still with his mother's milk in his mouth, and he wants to grow horns and build his reputation on my back!” (Snoussi, op. cit., p. 19)

Thus the writer employs the traditional popular language as one type of popular heritage, since it is the language of the *qwal* and the *barrah*, which Algerians have long been accustomed to hearing in circles, markets, and festive occasions. It is therefore a valuable popular heritage for all Algerians.

E- Employing Popular Customs and Traditions

Popular customs and traditions are prevalent phenomena in every environment, whether traditional or modern. They appear in the close relationship between individual and group and are tied to the ability to adapt to natural, economic, and social conditions in order to survive and preserve life. (Bousmaha, 2005, p. 12) There are two types of customs: those that arise from the group's interaction with the external world, and those that are internal, relating to the habits an

individual develops in managing personal affairs. Customs and traditions have multiple functions: social (organic cohesion between members of the group and organization of relations among them and distinction from outsiders), economic (saving effort and time), and moral (guiding and correcting individual behavior). (Bousmaha, op. cit., p. 12)

Customs and traditions are inherited through acquisition and practice, and form a vast field that includes the life cycle (birth, circumcision, marriage, death), annual and seasonal celebrations (religious holidays, national holidays, agricultural festivals, and others), and ordinary social dealings among group members (reception and farewell, hospitality, relations between young and old, rich and poor, male and female, family relations, neighborly relations, table etiquette, dispute resolution, arbitration, etc.). (Bouraoui, op. cit., p. 7)

In this play, Mourad Snoussi employs a considerable set of customs and traditions that people have grown accustomed to and have passed down from generation to generation. These can be classified, as mentioned in the play, as follows:

A. Marriage Customs

Among Algerian customs and traditions are wedding ceremonies and celebrations that include hosting banquets

and inviting people. One inherited custom is the traditional bridal dress, particularly well-known garments such as the *qaftan*, along with silk and gold jewelry like *louiz* (a type of gold coin necklace) and *dubloun* (gold coins). This appears in the following passage:

- The ghoul:

“Splendid, splendid! Oum El-Kheir, her legs must be buried in dresses—silk and gold and *qaftans*.

If the gold is not enough, then *louiz* as well, and *dubloun* that’s stored in the Solidarity Fund...” (Snoussi, p. 21)

The Algerian bride has long been known for her traditional attire, including the *qaftan*, and for her jewelry such as *louiz* and gold.

B. Customs and Beliefs Concerning Pregnancy and Childbirth

Among the customs and beliefs that pregnant women in the past used to hold and practice are visiting saints and offering charitable gifts and alms to the mosque in gratitude to God, while praying that He protect the newborn and keep it safe throughout its life. This is evident in the following passage spoken by the *qwal*:

“The parents gave alms and offered charity to the mosque... As for the mother, she visited all the saints, offered candles,

slaughtered birds, and painted henna on the walls of the house..." (Snoussi, p. 32)

These beliefs represent only a small portion of the vast array of customs and beliefs in which ancestors had faith. Algerian heritage is extremely rich in such traditional practices.

C. Customs and Traditions of Feasts and Occasions

Algerian occasions and celebrations are characterized by special and distinctive customs that set them apart from others, whether in religious or national holidays, or in banquets and communal feasts. Among these is what the writer mentions in the following passage:

"As for Oum El-Kheir, they say that gold pours from her hands—beauty, grace, and each finger with its own craft. She sews, weaves, steams the couscous, prepares the sauces.

Despite her young age, the old women would push her forward at the feasts so she could divide the meat, placing their trust in her to spare them from the anger of greedy stomachs. Whenever Oum El-Kheir was there, everyone ate, was satisfied, and the losses were reduced." (Snoussi, p. 34)

Among ancestral customs is the *melm* (also called *melma*—a communal banquet), where ancestors used to organize such feasts

from time to time as acts of charity, fulfillment of vows, or religious gatherings. Among the skills for which Algerian women have been renowned on such occasions are *tefwair* (steaming) and *tseyar* (sauce-making), both closely associated with Algeria's most famous festive dish, *couscous*.

Conclusion

The employment of popular heritage in Arab theatrical works in general, and Algerian ones in particular, indicates a liberation from the constraints of Western theatre in both form and content.

This is evidenced by the large number of Algerian playwrights who have drawn on this heritage in their plays in light of their awareness, thought, and the issues of their era. For them, heritage embodies the people's reality and concerns, as seen in their recourse to customs, traditions, beliefs, and popular knowledge—precisely what has been observed in Mourad Snoussi's *The Ghoul with Seven Heads*, the subject of this study.

The study has reached a number of conclusions:

- The use of popular heritage in *The Ghoul with Seven Heads* is deliberate and conscious. It does not stop at a folkloric or decorative dimension.

- This employment has contributed to constructing a critical theatrical discourse based on symbolism and allusion rather than directness.
 - The character of the *qwal* constitutes a central element in strengthening communication between the theatrical performance and the audience through narration, commentary, and breaking the illusion.
 - The evocation of **myth and folktale** has made it possible to reread social, cultural, and political reality within a symbolic structure open to multiple interpretations.
 - Popular heritage has helped the play draw closer to the audience by appealing to collective memory and shared culture.
 - This employment has enabled the transmission of social, cultural, and political messages through indirect yet effective artistic mechanisms.
- The research confirms that popular heritage remains a fertile creative source for Algerian theatre, capable of renewing its discourse and interrogating its contemporary reality.

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