



International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

Journal homepage:

<http://www.eltjournal.org>



The Wise Fool Djuha – a Quick Sketch

[PP: 99-103]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

The paper received on:

24/10/2014

Accepted after peer-
review on:

30/11/2014

Published on:

07/12/2014

ABSTRACT

This paper entitled *The wise fool Djuha – a quick sketch* presents the origin of the very known hero of Arabic folk literature, Djuha, the features of his personality, his travel to the all cultures of the world, his relation with another character, the Turk Nasreddin Hodja, and his adaptation to the problems of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Djuha, Arabic folklore, Arabic anecdotes, Arabic sense of humour, Nasreddin Hodja

Suggested Citation:

Grigore, G. (2014). The wise Fool Djuha-a Quick Sketch. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies* 2(4), 99-103. Retrieved from <http://www.eltjournal.org>



1. Introduction

Djuha (Ġuḥā), the omnipresent character in all anecdotes of the Arabic folk literature, whom we find under one name or another in all the cultures of the worldⁱ, is known as a clever man, with a practical sense, who is able to deal with any situation thanks to his exceptional humour, to the boldness with which he breaches the social norms, to his permanent inclination to play pranks, to his apparently candid way of looking at people's faults.

2. Djuha's history

The literary character has as starting point a historic character, Duġayn bin Tābit al-Fazāri, also known as Abū l-Ġuṣn, a *tābi*ⁱⁱ, transmitter of *ḥadīth*-sⁱⁱⁱ, who lived at the dawn of the Arabic-Islamic civilization in Baṣra and Kūfa, in Southern Iraq. This man, because by his words and deeds made people burst out into laughter, had been nick-named by his contemporaries Djuha (Ġuḥā)^{iv}, word which could be tied to *ġahwa* "buffoon", "harlequin", "clown", according to Kazimirski (1860). Despite this possible etymology, Djuha never appears in stories as a buffoon at the courts of the day's noble men, but he is a free man usually, having a respectable position in society, such as judge, imam, teacher, trader, scribe, either in a village or in the suburb of some big city. The most well-known hypostasis of his is that of traveller, he is either going somewhere or coming back, on his donkey, with whom he goes through various adventures.

The first stories featuring Djuha appear in the 7th century and they are told by 'Aslam, a person close to the caliph 'Umar bin KḤaṭṭab (c. 586/590–644). Al-Kutubī in his book *'Uyūn at-tawārīḥ* (1980), cites Mu'ayyad fī d-Dīnaš-Šīrāzī (1000–1078) who describes Duġayn as "being a very

funny man, very nice, tolerant, nick-named Djuha, about whom many things were made up" (p. 326), as well as Ibn 'Asākir (1106–1175) who claims that he lived longer than a hundred years (al-Kutubī, 1980. p.373). Another great scholar, aḍ-Ḍahabī (1274–1348), describes him that:

he was *tābi*ⁱ, and his mother had worked as a servant for the famous companion of the prophet, Anas bin Mālik al-'Ansārī (c.612–712): "He was very tolerant and had a clean conscience, and nobody should make fun of him^v. (p.326)

The Baghdadi scholar Ibn al-Ġawzī (2000) says that:

Djuha was the nick-name of Abū l-Ġuṣn, about whom it is told that he had a special ability to reflect and a great intelligence, but almost all the time he was absent-minded, with his head in the clouds, and it is said that those who envied him made up all sorts of stories about him (p.11)

Of all these stories which have as hero Djuha himself from the real life, that is Abū l- Ġuṣn, some are mentioned by the Persian man of letters al-Maydānī (2003) in his book, *Maġma' al-'amṭāl*^{vi}:

Of the thoughtless deeds of Abū l- Ġuṣn, from Fazāra, 'Īsā bin Mūsā l-Hāšimī tells the story of how he passed him by as he was digging a hole nearby Kūfa. Seeing him there, asked him:

–What are you doing there, Abū l- Ġuṣn?

And he answered:

–I buried some dirhams in this wilderness, but I can't remember the exact place where I did it.

–Haven't you taken something as a sign?

–Yes, I have.



– What?

–A cloud in the sky which was right above them, but I can't see that sign anywhere now. (p. 219)

Another incident, told by al-Maydānī:

Abū Muslim had just arrived in Kūfa and asked those around whether they knew Abū l- Ġuṣn, also known as Djuha, because he wanted to call him to meet him. Yaḳṭīn told him:

–I know him.

And he went and called him. Djuha entered the council hall accompanied by Yaḳṭīn, and there was only Abū-Muslim in there. Djuha then turned towards Yaḳṭīn and asked him:

– Yaḳṭīn, tell me which one of you two is Abū Muslim. (p.219)

According to some researchers, it seems that in real life there were two Djuha, the religious one, from Baṣra, who would have died in Kūfa in 777, victim of the disparagement of his enemies who attributed his deeds to another person, some kind of “everyone’s fool”, who would have lived in Kūfa during the same time and their personalities got amalgamated with the passage of time, giving birth to the character who is one time capable of great intelligence, one time of utter foolishness (Corrao, 1991, p. 21).

3. Djuha and his travel thru centuries

This would therefore be the real Djuha, out of which will come the fictional character who, just like a snowball rolling downhill, will incorporate many anecdotes produced throughout time in the Arab land, starting mainly in the 9th century when he becomes extremely popular. As Cervantez’ Sancho Panza, Djuha will cross century after century on his eternal donkey, always falling on his feet, transforming his defeats into

victories, passing through life serene, without malice, without envy, participating enthusiastically in everything around him. Djuha is a character who does not stand out either because of his physical appearance, nor because of his riches, nor because of too much knowledge, recalling in a sense the characterization done by Romanian writer Caragiale (2005) of his character, Mitićă, similar to Djuha in many respects:

he is neither old, nor young, neither handsome, nor ugly, not too much and not too little; he is a guy good at any task; but what sets him apart, what makes him have a marked character is his original and inventive spirit^{vii}. (p. 24)

Indeed Djuha gets involved all the time in matters that do not concern him, gives advices freely and, above all, enjoys himself on account of others pretending to be naïve, without malice however, giving them unexpected answers to the questions to which they thought he had no answer.

Far from being a static character, frozen in long gone ages, Djuha is very dynamic, adaptable, so that in this age he abandoned his donkey and travels by train, by bus, by car, by plane and he also changed his profession, working in line with the times as lawyer, politician, factory manager, policeman or even TV host. He is cited anywhere and anytime, of the thousands of anecdotes there is always one that fits in a certain context. Most of the times the Arab speaker who wants to back up his words with a statement of Djuha’s mentions only the title of the anecdote, because it is too well-known to those around him to be retold again. Relevant in this way seems to me to be the conversation I had on the streets of Baghdad twenty years ago when I stopped a taxi and asked the driver how much it would cost me to travel to a certain place. The driver started laughing and asked me:



– Do you really want to go there or are you asking as Djuha did?

–But how did Djuha ask?

–Oh, you must be a foreigner if you don't know!

–Well, Djuha had just arrived at the entrance to Baghdad and stopped a taxi, asking the driver how much it would cost him to go to the Karrāda street. The driver told him and invited him in, but Djuha replied: “No, thank you! I only asked you so that I know how much I am saving by walking there!”.

The anecdotes of the Arab Djuha have been borrowed by other cultures who invented other anecdotes specific to them but on the same pattern. Thus, during the Arab occupation of Sicily – The Emirate of Sicily (965-1072) –, Djuha is borrowed by the Sicilian folklore under the name of Giufà, and later, his anecdotes will travel throughout the entire southern Italy under the name of Giucca in Tuscany, Jugale in Calabria, Giucà in Trapani (Fiorentini, 2004, pp. 11-15). Also, under the name of Djohá, he enters the Jewish Sephardi culture, according to Koén-Sarano, (2008) and thus travels throughout the entire Europe, adapting to the most diverse situations, eventually confronting Hitler himself.

4. Djuha and Nasreddin Hodja

During the 19th century, when the anecdotes of Nasreddin Hodja (in Turkish spelling *Hoca*) are translated from Turkish into Arabic, the two heroes start getting mistaken one for the other because of their identical type of humour, modelled throughout time in the multi-ethnic caravanserais of the Orient roads. Thus to Djuha will be attributed also the adventures of Nastrattin, and to Nastrattin those of Djuha. More than this, even their names start getting mixed up, and in some Arabic

collections the name Naşru d-Dīn Ğuḥā (Nasreddin Djuha) is found.

Nasreddin Hodja is said to be born in Akşehir, where he also has a symbolic tomb; he lived in the region of Konya, in the 13th century, during the Mogul occupation (1255-1355); this is the source of numerous stories in which he appears next to Timur Lenk (Tuncor, 1984, pp. 5-8).

His name, under various adaptations, can be found in the folklore of all the Turkish and Iranian peoples, each one of these considering him to be their own creation.

Nasreddin Hodja becomes familiar even in Romanian culture, under the name Nastrattin Hogeá, when his adventures were retold in verses by Anton Pan in the 19th century.

No matter what his name is, whether Djuha, Giufà, Djohá, Nastrattin Juha, Nastrattin Hogeá, Efendi, Molla, and no matter where he would live, in the Baghdad of the caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd, or in the Napoli of king Ferdinando, or in Anatolia under the occupation of the feared Timur Lenk, or in the far away China, Djuha is easily recognised from the first words he utters, always making those who listen to him smile big as if they had just met with an old and dear acquaintance, always ready to hear the story – how many times already? – and to exclaim in delight: *nobody is like him!*

5. Conclusion

These anecdotes, despite the passage of time, continue to amuse and are followed with great interest. Always current, because of the human universals on which they are based, these amusing stories continue to be published and republished, in original or in translation, to be the topic for a novel, for a cartoon movie, or for an artistic movie, throughout the world, thus becoming part of the universal patrimony.



About the Author:

George Grigore is Professor at the University of Bucharest, Arabic Department. He has a lot of translations from Arabic into Romanian, for instance, from Al-Ghazali, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Ibn Arabi etc. His translation of the Qur'an was most noteworthy and published in several editions, including a bilingual one, printed in Istanbul, in 2003. He has published studies on the Qur'an and Islam, as well as on the Arabic dialects spoken in Mardin, Siirt, Baghdad, etc.

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ⁱ As for example, according to Biṭună (2012), in Romanian culture, *Păcală*, in the Bulgarian one, *Hitar Petar*, in the Macedonian one, *Itar Pejo*, in the Hungarian one, *Lúdas Matyi*, in the German one, *Till Eulenspiegel*, in the Jewish Ashkenazi one, *Hershele Ostropoler*, etc.

ⁱⁱ Person who met some of the companions of the prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him), from whom they borrow several accounts about him.

ⁱⁱⁱ Accounts about the words and deeds of the prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

^{iv} Other wise Djuha's name is transcribed in various ways in the translations of his anecdotes in the European languages: *Goha, Djoha, Djuha, Dschuha, Chotzas, Giufá* etc.

^v All the fragments from Arabic language, in this work, was translated by myself.

^{vi} al-Maydānī, Abū l-Fadl. 2003. *Maġma' al-'amṭāl*. Beirut: Dār al-ġīl.

^{vii} Fragment translated by myself from Romanian language.