

Fawdent, The Unwanted Sister: Translation

They once said, may God keep us from the tattlers unless they are raiders or wealthy.

There was a great man but Allah is the greatest. The man had two wives. He had seven children with the first one, and none with the second. The girls with the first wife outnumbered the boys, and surprisingly for the family, she became pregnant again. When her term was due, the boys left home for fear of having a girl delivered by the mother. They set off and took the nearest path down the river. They asked their mother, once the delivery was successful, to throw either a tambourine or a wooden flour sifter in the river. If a tambourine reached them, they would know that their mother had given birth to a boy and they would come back home. If they got a wooden sifter, they would know that it was a girl and they would walk off further down the river.

The second wife eavesdropped on their secret plan. After a while, the first wife gave birth to a girl. So, the second wife, out of jealousy, threw a wooden flour sifter in the river. The boys figured out that their mother had given birth to a girl; so, they resumed their journey.¹

The daughter grew up and became a target of mockery and jokes. Her peers would make fun of her saying, “Fawdent, you caused your brothers to disappear.” Fawdent decided to find out the truth and asked her mother why her peers would make fun of her saying that she made her brothers disappear.

The mother explained, “Daughter, when I was pregnant, your brothers asked me to send either a tambourine or a sifter; if the tambourine reached them, they would understand that I gave birth to a boy; if the wooden sifter did, they would know it was a girl. In the first case, they would come back home, otherwise not.” The girl insisted on having her mother’s help to go look for her brothers.

¹ This story has different versions. As mentioned in the introduction to the tales, another version of this story goes like this: Fawdent, the protagonist, was born to her father’s second wife, not his first. Out of uncontrolled jealousy, the first wife, who had been expecting a girl but who delivered boys, wants to get rid of the second wife’s daughter – Fawdent – and, therefore, concocts a plan, together with Mimouna the slave, to send the stepdaughter to be eaten by a monster

The mother decided to help the daughter and asked a female slave to take care of her on their way down the river. The girl rode a mare while the female slave followed her on foot. Before they got ready to set off, the mother had hung two magic stones on the mare in case the slave misbehaved herself and wanted to ride the mare instead of her daughter, then asked Fawdent, in case this should happen, just to sing: “Oh, father! Oh, mother! Please deal with Mimouna’s stubbornness.”

The trip went on and the mother’s fears turned out to be true as the slave demanded to ride the mare. Fawdent sang as a reaction: “Oh, father! Oh, mother! Please deal with Mimouna’s stubbornness.” The magic stones interfered, so Mimouna, the slave, gave up harassing the girl with her request until she got really tired and threw Fawdent off the mare and took over by force until they got to the river. Fawdent had brought a box of clothes containing daggers, farajjias² and slippers. She, then, threw the box in the river and said, “Take away my box and may it be opened only by the very hand that had locked it in the first place.”

After a while, and as they were both about to meet the brothers, Mimouna threw a magic black ball of paint at Fawdent, which made her skin turn black, and then threw a white one at herself, which made her skin turn white. This way it would be easy to fool the brothers by pretending Mimouna was their sister. When both women encountered the brothers, the slave said, “Oh, brothers! People are blaming me for your departure!” The brothers asked, “Which of you is our sister?” Both women, convincingly, claimed they were. However, the brothers decided to believe the slave given her faked skin color and had their real sister herd the camels as a slave.

That way Fawdent became the brothers’ shepherdess and engaged in the tough work that Mimouna was supposed to do. She had to herd the camels. She would spend the whole day crying and mourning her miserable fate, while uttering, “Oh, take a look at me brothers, have mercy on poor Fawdent, poor Fawdent!” Out of pity, the camels, once, gathered around her and felt sad for her to the point that they would not eat or drink and would shed tears of sorrow for her all day long. The camels started to look unhealthy and thin.

² A djellaba-like garment which is a long, loose-fitting unisex outer robe with full sleeves that is worn in the Maghreb. Farajjias are mainly worn in summer time.

Their condition compelled one of the brothers to secretly follow the shepherdess in order to investigate the cause. When in the fields, Fawdent started crying and singing, "Oh, take a look at me brothers, have mercy on poor Fawdent, poor Fawdent!" The brother showed up and asked her why she would sing so. Fawdent told him that she was the real sister and told him about the magic balls the slave threw at her and at herself. The siblings, then, guided the camels back home. The brother told his other brothers about what happened, and the siblings forced the slave to undo the magic spell. Mimouna threw a black dust ball at herself and turned black while she threw a white dust ball at Fawdent who, in turn, turned white.

Fawdent told her brothers the whole story of their journey and pointed to the box. Mimouna claimed that she was the box's owner. Fawdent explained that the one who could open the box was its actual owner, so the brothers asked the slave to open it. The latter tried in vain while Fawdent could open it easily because she was the one who had sealed it with a spell. The brothers got fed up with the slave and asked their sister to suggest a punishment. Fawdent suggested that they tie her left leg to a camel's leg and put some water a short distance away on its other side and tie her right leg to another camel's leg on the other side and put some grains a short distance away on its other side. The brothers executed Fawdent's plan. After a while, the camels started pulling away, each towards opposite sides, and they tore the slave's body in half; thus, ending her schemes.

A little while afterwards, the siblings decided to move somewhere else. When they arrived at this new place, the brothers asked their sister to settle there because they would leave for a very faraway place to work. The brothers set off for work and left their sister behind. Meanwhile, a monster noticed her and paid her a visit.

The monster sang, "Hello, Fawdent, oh dear Fawdent!"

"Yes," Fawdent replied.

"Oh, dear Fawdent, would you be kind and give me some fire?" said the monster.

Fawdent gave the monster what he asked for.

The next day, the monster came again and sang, "Oh, dear Fawdent, would you be kind and give me some food?"

Fawdent fed the monster.

One day, Fawdent sent a messenger to her brothers complaining about the monster and his malicious attempts to eat her. The brothers came back and hatched a plan. The plan consisted of digging a ditch and setting a fire in it. At sunset, the monster came and sang,

"What are you doing, dear Fawdent, oh dear Fawdent?"

Fawdent replied, "I am preparing a donkey soup and stirring it with a donkey's foot."

The monster said, "This does not bear any resemblance to what you would always say, Fawdent!?" (.....)

"Seven men taught me so," Fawdent said.

The monster drew closer and fell in the ditch. Once caught, the monster said to the brothers, "I was only protecting your sister and checking on her while you were gone. Please help me climb up and I will treat you like a parent."

The brothers denied his request saying, "We do not need a parent; they were the cause of our wanderings on earth." The brothers left him there to die.

Afterwards, the siblings decided to move again. On their way ahead, Fawdent said that she had accidentally left a mirror and a comb. Her brothers promised her new ones; but Fawdent insisted that her items were unique and she would not continue the journey without them. The group headed back. Fawdent, once back, was curious about what had happened to the monster. She looked down the ditch and the monster hit her in the mouth until a tooth of hers fell off. The monster said, "You can travel wherever you want but one day, I will recognise you by your missing tooth and avenge myself." Threatened and frightened, Fawdent joined her brothers and told them about what happened. The brothers thought that was what she really deserved for being so curious. They all moved again to a nearby place.

Another day, the women at the new place where the brothers and sister had settled decided to weed out the fields to feed the cattle. Fawdent decided to join them and suggested that they should all move to a field with plentiful shrubs and long herbs. She meant to take them to where the monster was stuck. The women agreed. Fawdent harvested enough herbs, put them in a bag, and headed back with the group of women. On the way back, her bag kept getting heavier; she had to check it out. She did and the resurrected monster crept up suddenly out of the huge bag.

The monster chased all the women until they were cornered and had no way to escape. Being in full control of the situation, the monster asked them to smile in an attempt to identify a woman with a missing tooth. All the women obeyed the order, except Fawdent. Fawdent fled the scene for fear of being discovered. The monster chased her until they both came across a shepherd looking after a herd of goats. Fawdent asked the latter to give the monster a baby goat to stall it, or she would be devoured. The shepherd, who wanted to save her, was kind enough to offer up a baby goat.

The monster got the baby goat but chased Fawdent again. She kept running until she came across a group of mules and hid herself among the herd. The monster arrived, crept into the herd and tried to find her. Frightened by the presence of a stranger, one of the mules hit the monster hard in the paunch. The monster screamed, "You have hurt me so badly! May God make your species infertile forever!" And this is why mules have turned out to be barren.

Thus ends up my story, from the wicked may it be kept; in peace shall I find my path.