Palestinian Memory and Identity in Modern Children’s Literature

A timely and significant contribution to Palestinian children’s literature from 1967 to the present day, *Palestinian Memory and Identity in Modern Children’s Literatur*e examines a myriad of motifs and popular culture and the evolution of national identity and consciousness among young Palestinians. Utilizing analytical and in-depth readings, this text presents a thorough examination of the representations and role of folk culture in Palestinian children’s literature from both thematic and stylistic-linguistic perspectives. The analysis covers a wide range of diverse works representing popular culture published after 1967, including diverse works by writers from Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Palestinian diaspora. This volume will be of interest to academics and students exploring the vast contexts of Arabic children’s literature and Palestinian folklore.

Hanan Mousa is a lecturer at the Sakhnin College for Teacher Education in northern Israel since 2011.

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Hanan Mousa

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Preface

“The revival and reinterpretation of folk heritage for the emerging generations is a form of restoring the image of the homeland and evoking it in memory.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Folk heritage, with its various colors, has been an active phenomenon in constructing literary texts for children. This has enabled the Palestinian writer to discover the past in light of the manifestations of the present, in all its political, cultural, and social dimensions, constantly reshaping it anew. Before the First Intifada in 1987, Palestinian folk heritage was used primarily for narrative purposes in children’s literature, but with limited success. Following this historical event, emerging resistance against this traditional use reached its peak, as Palestinian writers showed increased interest in the content of their folk heritage and in incorporating elements of it into their artistic works. During this period, using Palestinian folk heritage became one of the most prominent techniques in Arabic literature in general, and in Palestinian children’s literature in particular.

Over time, especially following the Oslo Accords in 1993, the integration of folk heritage became an increasingly important phenomenon in Palestinian children’s literature. The sources of Palestinian heritage diversified, as did methods of its use. Additionally, different currents emerged that drew inspiration from Palestinian folk heritage and applied it in children’s literature. My examination of a considerable number of literary texts for children published since 1967 revealed that it was only in the late 1970s that the use of this form of inspiration reached artistic and technical maturity. Until then, the presence of different elements of folk heritage was scattered, perhaps even random, without serving the artistic context of the text. Interest in deploying folk heritage in literature intensified even more following the outbreak of the First Intifada, considered a defining moment in the Palestinian national movement that marked the beginnings of the formation of the entity known as the Palestinian people. Palestinian writers became infused with a sense of nationalism, convinced that the greatest threat to the Palestinian people was not that of physical extermination or of losing the land but of dissolution and loss of Palestinian identity. As a result, Palestinian writers recognized the importance of preserving the folk heritage in the service of safeguarding the collective memory of the Palestinian people and enhancing their cultural identity. This commitment to maintaining the unified identity of the Palestinians was focused especially on the younger generations, whose lives under the reality of occupation and in a diaspora could alienate them from Palestinian society and culture.

Arguably, the Palestinian folkloric movement can be said to be part of the Palestinian national liberation movement, running parallel to its course, suffering from the same problems, and facing the same difficulties. As a result, the use of Palestinian folk heritage underwent a transformation. The element of heritage in children’s literature was no longer employed merely for narrative purposes, as it became essential for symbolic construction. Communication was achieved between the past and the present through the use of folklore symbols imbued with many levels of connotations. Thus, after the First Intifada, Palestinian writers sought to artistically utilize heritage elements to express the concerns and pressing issues of their contemporaries.

In the mid-1990s, specifically after the 1993 Oslo Accords, the methods and trends in children’s literature shifted. As a result, writers took new and diverse forms of inspiration from Palestinian folk heritage for use in children’s literature, differing from writer to writer. At this point, the approach to Palestinian folk heritage evidenced far more awareness than in the past. This led to diverse forms of expression and uses of heritage elements in Palestinian children’s literature, as well as in the suggestive meanings of these elements to convey the new and modern content. Palestinian folk heritage thus became a source of creativity for many Palestinian children’s writers.

With these changes authors of children’s literature increasingly acquired artistic awareness of the Palestinian folk heritage that had evolved over the generations, followed by an aspiration to revive this heritage. Gradually, drawing on folk heritage for inspirations for children’s literary texts became an important part of creating the text structure and imbuing it with artistry.

While the literature about Arabic children’s literature in general is diverse and abundant, little attention has been devoted specifically to Palestinian children’s literature, including both local and diaspora children’s literature, the latter from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, it appears that not even one study has been dedicated to examining intertextuality in Palestinian children’s literature, specifically since 1967. This book seeks to fill some of these gaps and provide a unique perspective that answers the recurring questions about the nature of the relationship between children’s literature and folk heritage. It will also explore the importance of folk heritage texts that intertwine and merge into the new texts and delve into the theoretical levels of intertextuality in children's literature, in light of the unique relationship between children’s literature and folk heritage. This analysis will reveal the different techniques employed for incorporating folk heritage into modern texts, from the simplest to the most complex, transforming the heritage text, with all its components, into a text for children, crafted by the author in a new way.

This analysis draws on a number of important lines of study. Prominent among them is the important science of narratives, as found in the work of Vladimir Prop on fairy tales as well as the research of Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. To accomplish the goal of using textual analysis, I focused on the literary system in children’s literature and on theories of intertextuality in children’s literature*.* In this comprehensive study, I also relied on foreign references framing the textual structure theoretically and practically according to a modernist critical outlook, including Peter Hunt’s book *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* (1996), Christine Wilkie-Stibbs’ article “Intertextuality *and the Child Reader*,” and Emer O’Sullivan’s book, *Comparative Children’s Literature* (2005). On the issue of the importance of using folklore in children’s literature, I relied heavily on further foreign research—Jack Zips’ two books, *Creative Storytelling Building Community Changing Lives* (1995) and *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (2001).

This book is divided into two main sections. The first theoretical section is divided into three chapters. The first, which forms the basis of the second section on application, introduces theories of children’s literature theories and the emergence of scholarly and artistic interest in folk heritage in throughout the world, including in the Arab and Palestinian contexts. In the second chapter, I present the history of Palestinian children’s literature, including an introduction to clarifying the identity of the Palestinian writer. This chapter is divided into four chronologically based sections: the British Mandate period in Palestine (1917–48); Palestinian children’s literature in the diaspora after 1948; local Palestinian children’s literature after 1948; and Palestinian children’s literature in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after 1967. In the third and final chapter of the theoretical section, I discuss the most important forms of folk heritage, especially of Palestinian folk heritage and identify its characteristics.

The second section, presenting my applied study, is composed of three chapters, arranged according to the type of popular material and across periods similar to those presented in the theoretical section. The fourth chapter, the first in this section, analyzes popular stories and shows that the Palestinian folk tale was one of the most important sources inspiring the Palestinian writer. As noted above, Palestinian writers increasingly employed elements of Palestinian folk tales in novel ways, especially after 1987. In the fifth chapter on the use of folk proverbs, I demonstrate how Palestinian writers began to show cultural awareness and courage in accepting folk proverbs and dealing with the colloquial language. The use of folk proverbs in Palestinian children’s literature has taken on different dimensions, conveying several layers of meaning that go beyond the superficial narrative. The features of modern techniques for incorporating folk heritage into children’s literature have become clearer over time, especially after 1987. The sixth chapter, focusing on the use of folk songs in children’s literature, reveals an increased interest of Palestinian writers in Palestinian folk songs, particularly since the 1990s. These writers exhibited a deep understanding of all types of Palestinian folk songs and their artistic styles, using new methods of integrating them into texts for children, such as simulating the folk tale and mimicking the style of the folk song.

1. Sarhan 1979, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)