1 Introduction: The Features and Significance of Children’s Literature

Abstract

This chapter demonstrates how relevant theories of intertextuality have a distinct application in relation to children’s as opposed to adults’ literature. The relationship between the components of intertextuality in children’s literature (writer/text/reader-text/reader/context) has distinct characteristics in children’s literature. My theoretical framework perceives children’s literature as autonomous.

“Childhood” as a Term and a Concept

The term “children’s literature” emerged in relation to the study of childhood conception (Jenkins 1–48, Galbraith 87–205, Townsend 17). It is appropriate, then, to begin this study by defining the term “childhood.” The meaning and global significance of this term is the basis for understanding the emergence of children’s literature. Shavit’s definition of childhood relies on historian Philippe Aries’s hypothesis that the term childhood emerged as a cultural phenomenon in the early seventeenth century (Shavit *Act of Childhood* 15–65, Ariès *Centuries of Childhood* 73–83). Before that, children were viewed as “miniature humans” no different from adults except for their social status (Ariès *Centuries of Childhood* 179, Baruch 35, Karabe-Jarasi 33, Mashiach 35, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 26 and 27–29, Schichmanter 9). Shavit adds that several factors contributed to the concept of childhood not appearing until that point, including the integration of children into the labor force at an early age to help support the family economically, especially among the middle class. In this pre-seventeenth-century reality, there was scant interest in writing for children (Karabe-Jarasi 33–34, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 27–29). According to Shavit, it was only later in the seventeenth century, as the nannies and housekeepers of the middle and upper classes began telling stories to entertain their young charges, that the conception of childhood emerged. These were the first stories for which children, clearly the least powerful group in society, were the intended audience. Nonetheless, these stories did not address children’s psychological needs nor were they sensitive to the nature or perspectives of children, which are completely different from those of adults. In fact, there was no distinction made between children and adults as an audience (Gabian 78, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 9).

Historian Eric Hopkins has written that it was not until the social and economic changes of the industrial age unfolded that the term or concept of childhood emerged, reflecting the improvement in living conditions and the development of schools resulting from these changes (314). Shavit confirms that the term “childhood” was formulated very gradually and first among the aristocracy before slowly being disseminated among all classes (*Act of Childhood* 24–25). Shavit affirms that works written specifically for children that first appeared in the eighteenth century were effective in fulfilling the goals of educating and child-rearing. As the attitude toward children shifted from perceiving them as those who needed to be entertained to recognizing them as a group whose education and upbringing warranted attention, the texts written for children changed as well. The style of writing also changed to better suit their needs and cognitive abilities, as identified by the burgeoning education system (Shavit *Act of Childhood* 11). This was part of a process of distinguishing between the conception of children and the conception of adults and the emergence of a new entity: the child with its particular needs. All of this, in turn, eventually led to the emergence of a literature specifically for children.

Definition of Children’s Literature

The study of children’s literature (for more on this term, see Bourdieu 24) is based on the view that it is a unique genre distinct from and independent of literature in general. It is therefore shaped both by the parameters and limitations imposed by children’s culture and by social expectations that this literature should play a vital role in society’s education and child-rearing systems. Children’s literature has a system and fields of activity of its own; it also has its own forms of publishing, marketing, and criticism as well as its own libraries, all quite distinct from those of adult literature (Goldberg 45, Hastings 345, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 85). Within this system, children’s literature is defined not only by its textual register, but also according to the writer and the publisher as the agents in its production. In practice, adults are the ones who choose the texts addressed to children, thereby inevitably transmitting their own values, role models, and ideals to them (Shavit *Act of Childhood* 9–11).

The approach to children’s literature in this book is inextricably related to both the nature and the dynamics of the subject matter, thus requiring an intertextuality approach. The terms of communication between the writer and the child-reader are not based on equality of language abilities, experiences, and social position. This asymmetrical communication is a central issue in the theory of children’s literature, as it clearly reflects the realities existing outside of the text (O’Sullivan 14). This asymmetry also shapes the development of the child’s reading abilities. Based on this, children’s literature must align with the requirements and capabilities of its child-readers and bridge the communicative distance between the stakeholders by adapting the language, themes, and ideas of the narrative to the age group (O’Sullivan 14). The German children’s writer Kirsten Boie formulated the questions children’s writers ask before they write for children as follows:

What can I expect of children, whose conception of language has not developed as an adult’s has, without asking a great deal of them? What must I expect from children without compromising moral, educational, and psychological demands? Perhaps the most important question for every children’s writer is: What does the “market” allow me to do? And what does it want from me? Or what does it prevent me from doing in a rapidly developing media-driven society?

(O’Sullivan 14)

This asymmetry that characterizes children’s literature has an impact not only on its place in the literary polysystem (Even-Zohar 286), but also on all communicative aspects of children’s literature, beyond the linguistic boundaries. Boie poses her questions as a “real writer” of children’s texts.

Simon Chatman’s narrative theory (Chatman 21) has convincingly shown that the author does not communicate directly with the reader; rather, this communication takes place within the text itself (O’Sullivan 15, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 16) and this communicative process necessarily encompasses:

The real writer → the tacit writer → the narrator → the narratee → the tacit reader → the real reader.

While real writers “die” when writing their texts, the role of the tacit reader—the child—is to define the tacit writer (Shen 80, Harel 34, Mashiach 177, Nasi 26). This refers to the image of the real writer presented to the reader in the text, with a predominantly ideological framing of that image. Likewise, narrators, as mainstays of the narration, assist in this process, even if their presence is “masked.” The real writer must develop the narration while envisaging a particular reader with specific perceptions, imaginations, and thoughts. Hence, the real writer in this process must incorporate all aspects of the child’s reading needs into their considerations (Lucas 14–15, Rudman 12–23). Here, we are contemplating what the writer ultimately writes for children, and the most effective way for the writer to communicate their ideas to children.

Wilkie has developed a theory of intertextuality in children’s literature by focusing on the writer/reader axes. She contends that the relationship between the writer and the reader in children’s literature is an imbalanced one in power terms. Adults write for one other, but it is unusual for children to do so. In a sense, children become helpless recipients because adults choose what to write for them. Thus, children’s literature becomes an intertextual subgenre of adult literature. However, we now know, through experimental studies involving children in “intertextual games,” that, through intertextual processes, children acquire a particular text of their own beyond the text’s and its writer’s control. Thus, according to the theory of intertextuality, there is a barrier to the hegemony of one culture or worldview in children’s books written by adults, who work and are consciously or unconsciously influenced by the literature they read as children: the intertextual space. Despite children’s evident ability to “own” the text, the writer/reader relationship in children’s literature remains asymmetrical because children’s multisubject knowledge cannot be assured. The theory of intertextuality in children’s literature thus raises several questions, including, What is it required to be? What importance must be ascribed to it? For these reasons, the relationship between the components of intertextuality—writer/text/text reader/reader/context—is unique in the context of the theory of intertextuality in children’s literature.

Wilkie explains that the theory of intertextuality (179–230; see also Rose 54, Jones 287–315) is both dynamic and dialectical. The theory is also a linguistic one because the two subjects of reading and text are not only inherent in language but also composed of it. Thus, the issue is not confined to having ideas in relation to every intertextual text. It also includes the notion that these texts have become as they are because they are dialectically interrelated, themselves products of literary, cultural, and linguistic symbols (Wilkie 179–230).

Wilkie describes the process of crossing the barrier between writer and child as one of narrating reality through merging one text with another or several texts. This process serves as the basis of the theory of intertextuality. The child-receptors, through this process of narrating reality, acquire knowledge of the literary criteria and salient features of the literary work, through which they can determine its genre. In this way they learn, albeit unconsciously, that texts that refer to others have become embodied in the original (Wilkie 179–230).

Lesnik-Oberstein identifies two types of intertextual texts in children’s literature: texts adapted from literary works and imitative texts that seek to replicate, counterpose, paraphrase, or replace the original work, often acting as the pre-text (56). Based on this approach, texts that adults address to children largely reflect the world of adults. These texts convey adults’ inner conflicts and their suitability depends on how they align with the cultural norms and mechanisms associated with children. Consequently, children’s cultural mechanisms are an integral part of the general system of culture.

Syrian children’s writer Dalal Hatim (1931–2008) expressed a similar idea in her collection of short stories *Hikāyāt min Ṭufūlat Zaynab* (Tales from Zainab’s Childhood) published in 1966. She wrote in her brief introduction to the collection:

Did you, my friends, imagine how your fathers and mothers lived when they were your young age, days when there were few luxuries and civilized resources? I will not mention anything to you in this introduction about this so as not to spoil the joy of reading and discovery. If you want more, ask your mothers to tell you about some part of their lives and it may add beautiful dimensions to what I have written for you in this book. With my love to you, the men and women of the future.

(Hatim 3)

The author deals with the narrative in an autobiographical manner, speaking for the narrator, the child Zainab, about the stages of her childhood, describing the Syrian home in which she grew up. Couched in the phrases that frequently appear in folk tales, such as “It is told that…” and “Once upon a time…,” the author disengages from her narrative entirely, so that the person of the author and the narrator unite due to the original narrator being unknown. The author is content to be the conduit, relinquishing creativity, because the narrator here is not committed to faithfully conveying a lived experience. Instead, she selectively chooses the elements she wants, then adds her spirituality and artistry to them to respond to the needs of the times and the requirements of educational literature.

Folklore and Children’s Literature

This book draws on ideas put forward by Jack Zipes, one of the pioneers of modern theory on folklore. According to this theory, each work that adults create for children reflects the views of those adults (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* 65–121; see also Al-Shamas 102, Shavit *Act of Childhood* 34–56). The cultural knowledge of the child, still in its formative stage, is lacking due to a paucity of experience. In this context, the use of folklore within children’s literature is a crucial means of shaping national identity through the texts in which folklore is used. Confronting children with their heritage is, therefore, a vital task. This is especially critical in the early stages of childhood, as their imagination becomes active between the ages of five and nine. The world of fiction to which they are usually exposed tends to be one inhabited by strange fairies, witches, giants, dwarves, and other such creatures (Zipes, *Oxford Companion* 14). Consequently, what is needed is selective and astute deployment of instructive folklore tropes reflective of the important role played by this type of literature.

Zipes adds that folklore powerfully contributes to the development of children’s mental, emotional, and social capacities by shaping their personalities and attitudes. Through folk heritage, language and content are incorporated into the imagination. Drawing children into this environment stimulates emotions and fosters excitement, which has the greatest impact on nurturing children’s personalities, ameliorating their behavior, and steering the path of their lives for the better. Zipes argues that orally transmitted folklore, with its highly suggestive methods and the power of its symbolism, helps children focus their attention on it and commit it to memory, thus expanding their expressive range and linguistic resources and enabling them to acquire the ability to understand situations and solve social problems presented to them (Zipes, *Creative Storytelling* 23).

Beyond personality development, Zipes contends that the most important aims of using folklore in children’s literature are to introduce children to their heritage and history, to deepen their sense of national affiliation and identity, and to link them to the past (Zipes 15, Zipes 155). He argues that folklore has been the main source for children’s literature in the modern era, with many writers in Europe—such as Francis Osborne (1593–1659), Charles Perrault (1628–1703), Robert Samber (1682–1745), the “Brothers Grimm”—Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859)[[1]](#endnote-1)—and Hans Christian Andersen (1805–75)[[2]](#endnote-2)—being inspired by folklore in all its forms and deploying it in their stories.

Bacchiliga also urges the use of folklore in children’s literature, modifying it to take into account new values it can embody and functions it can have. Children’s literature can also be used to retell folk tales by continually building, creating, and evaluating them anew (24). Another scholar, Abdullah Abu Hayf, identifies two kinds of reasons for employing folklore as a source in children’s literature:

1. Conceptual reasons—Folklore provides ready grounds for narratives which facilitate the process of communication because folklore is ultimately a cultural element transmitted from one generation to the next and constitutes a large part of the collective memory.
2. Educational reasons—Folklore is more powerful for addressing educational weaknesses, as the child is able to interact with folktales (112).

According to Abu Hayf, one of the most important aspects of using folklore in children’s literature is that it can inspire. By this he refers to the writer’s efforts to create a new literary work based on the form or content of while adapting to the spirit of the contemporary age (121). Al-Shamas finds that using folklore is not a simple matter, because it requires the children’s writer to understand the heritage involved while seriously reconsidering it with scrutiny, scholarly criticism, and objective formulation. It is in this way that children come to terms with their heritage through a new vision, even if it leads to the modifying of the original text in favor of the new ideas presented (103–04).

To benefit from folk heritage, continual renewal is needed in order to respond to ever-changing conditions. Furthermore, two leading and closely related components of folklore must be reconciled. The first is the historical component that represents a people and their ideas over the course of different eras. The second is the functional component evident in the potential to deploy these ideas within a new framework with the aim of preserving this heritage’s identity and shaping the response of children who encounter it. It reinforces identity through folklore, an approach we can call folkloric inspiration (Hamami 116, al-Shammas 103–05).

Using Folklore in Arabic Children’s Literature

Nasir Ahmad has reviewed the motives that have prompted many writers of Arab children’s literature to employ folklore in their works. He views the defeat of June 1967 in the Six-Day War with Israel as having had a significant impact on the Arab literary movement in general and on Arab children’s literature in particular, as these events inevitably led to a review of all areas of life. Intellectuals and writers came to believe that as a result of this process of reappraisal, the changes they had dreamed of making could be realized by future generations. As a result, they took it upon themselves to educate these generations in both national and international human values, often employing folklore in their work to do so. The motivations and aims of writing are largely the same for all serious intellectuals and writers across the Arab cultural map. Therefore, in employing folklore, their literature has contributed to strengthening national identity and to clarifying its character in the minds of children (Ahmad 6–7 and 76–77, Jabir 21–23).

One writer who cherished folklore and employed it to promote the concept of nationalism to children was the Syrian poet Sulayman al-ʿIsa (1921–2012). Abu Hayf notes that al-ʿIsa was deeply immersed in folklore and deployed it in the children’s literature he wrote after 1967 (205). Al-ʿIsa believed that Arab children needed a cultural rehabilitation to meet the new conditions in the Arab world. He wrote poems and hymns inspired by popular songs that were collected in a ten-part divan, *Ghannū yā Aṭfāl* (Sing, Oh Children! 1977). Presenting diverse folkloric devices and forms to children, al-ʿIsa states the following:

Two basic elements are necessary to address heritage: a new vision and a new language. The new vision enriches the past, breathes life into it, and engenders new blood in the arteries of the present; a rich tributary to the river of tomorrow that cannot freeze or cease. The new language is the means that makes this past tangible, a cherished thing that lives with us, and bears our aspirations and dreams… It is the secret of renewal, and we stretch out our hand to heritage; we want to resurrect it from its long slumber.

(Abu Hayf 205)

Similarly, the Syrian writer Zakaria Tamer (1931–) has used folklore as a means of creating children’s stories with novel implications. He has drawn on ancient heritage and modernity in form and ideology, as in his collection *Limāḏā Sakata al-Nahr* (Why the River Was Silent, 1973) and the story “*Al-Jarrād fi-l Madīna*” (The Locusts in the City, 1982) (Qaranya 23).

Interest in folklore in children’s stories notably took another direction in the early 1980s. Originally deploying folklore in children’s stories to foster national identity and a sense of Arab belonging, their most pressing motivation for employing their local folklore now became their fear of losing their country’s heritage. These changes fostered interest in local folklore as an important source of inspiration linked to real life and to national heritage (Khuri *Al-Fulklūr* 60). Consequently, writers’ new inclination to deploy local heritage in children’s stories was reflected in the increase in academic studies of children’s literature that began to appear in certain Arab countries. In a study he conducted on the nationalist content in children’s literature in Jordan, Mahmoud al-Dibaʾ confirms that writers living in Jordan had begun using local folklore in their writings, especially songs, specifically to promote nationalism, especially in the early 1980s. Al-Dibaʾ adds that these writers did so to introduce children to their local heritage and to deepen their sense of belonging to the homeland, both of which support adherence to the national identity and develop children’s imaginations (99–105). For example, Jordanian writer Fakhri Kawar (1945–) introduces folkloric elements into his 1991 short story “*Ḥadīth maʿ Umaymah*” (Conversation with Umaymah), which describes the life of Jordanian villages in past decades and presents the Jordanian traditional folk games prevalent at the time (Miqdadi *Al-Qiṣṣa* 45).

We find this tendency to draw on local folklore among Syrian writers as well. For example, the writer Aref Al-Khatib (1946–) has drawn on Syrian folk tales and proverbs and transformed them into modern stories, such as in his tale “*Al-Thaʿlab wa-l Dajāja*” (The Fox and the Hen) in the 2008 collection *Mamnūʿ al-Ḍaḥk* (Laughing Is Forbidden) (Qaranya 52). Works bearing the name of the country in their titles are notable in this context. For example, the Syrian writer Raja ʿ52) Huwayla (1962) wrote a collection of stories entitled *Kāna Yā Mā Kāna Ḥikāyāt min Bilād al-Shām* (Once Upon a Time Tales from the Levant, 1996). A similar tendency is evident with the writer Khair El-Din Obaid (1954–) in the story “*Ḥikāyat Thalāth Layāl*” (The Tale of Three Nights) from the 2004 collection *Ḥikāyāt Shaʿbīya li-l Aṭfāl* (Popular Tales for Children). His tales drew on his environment, and he adopted the formulae prevalent in Aleppo and Idlib at the time (Qaranya 204–07).

The Egyptian Abdel Tawab Youssef (1921–2015) also took inspiration from folklore in his stories and plays. He deployed Egyptian proverbs in his 1987 play “*Juhā wa Shajarat al-Arnab*” (Juha and the Rabbit Tree) and wrote a popular 2002 story entitled “*ʿAwdat al-Saddīq*” (The Return of Al-Saddiq), in which he used Egyptian folklore relating to such matters as folkloric customs and traditions (Ghanim 251).

Interest in folklore increased significantly with the dawn of the third millennium: websites dealing with children’s literature proliferated, and writers who recognized the critical importance of exposing children to folklore began publishing their works in online magazines. In this regard, Qaranya says that this leap was a spontaneous response to the turmoil of globalization, which seeks to eliminate cultural particularity on the one hand and to link children to their past and family heritage on the other hand (14).

The Relationship of Children’s Literature to Palestinian Folklore

Folklore in its various forms has proven an effective tool in constructing texts for children. Writers are able to rediscover the past in the light of present phenomena, in all its human and social dimensions, and reshape it once again. Anyone who has followed how folklore was used in Palestinian children’s texts before 1967 will note that it was used directly for national political purposes only, without the functional educational goal.

In the late 1980s, and especially after the 1987 “First Intifada,” those who were prominent rebels against traditional children’s literature reached the apogee of their influence, as renewal began to impose its presence on its artistic forms. It was at that time that the use of Palestinian folklore became one of the most important general literary devices in Palestinian children’s literature in particular. The events of this time necessitated a review of all aspects of life among the Palestinian people, especially children. Palestinian writers came to believe that the next generation could bring about the desired changes. As a result, they made it their task to educate these generations on national and human values and used the Palestinian folklore to inculcate national values in their writing. Their writings contributed to strengthening the Palestinian national identity and clarifying it in the minds of children.

With the passage of time, this use of Palestinian folklore became a prominent phenomenon in texts. The sources of its heritage diversified, as did the methods of its deployment. At the same time, new trends in children’s literature emerged, including that of renewal, which adopted the idea of inspiring readers through employing folklore. It is noticeable that it took time for this form of inspiration to mature on a technical level. The folkloric aspects appeared randomly and did not seem to serve the literary construction of the text. In the 1990s, the employment of folklore took another turn, as the folkloric elements went beyond the simple narrative and became an essential element in symbolic construction. Thus, communication between the past and the present took place through the symbols of folklore, with wide-ranging connotations, as the writers of this period sought to employ the folkloric elements artistically as expressions of the concerns of and issues faced by contemporary Palestinians.

Given the development of children’s literature styles and trends in the late 1990s, we discover a new way in which Palestinian folklore can provide inspiration in literature directed at children and from one writer to another, from a variety of perspectives. By this time, Palestinian folklore was being dealt with in a more conscious manner than ever before. Literary forms multiplied; the traditional elements inspired by the texts varied, and their allusiveness was exploited to convey new types of content. Thus, it was at this time that Palestinian folklore became a key source of creativity for many writers who wrote for children.

In this way, Palestinian children’s writers’ level of artistic awareness and use of folklore evolved with time. These writers first used folklore in children’s literature based on their awareness of their cultural heritage and desire to revive it. Later, the use of folklore and its presence as a source of inspiration in stories became an important part of the literature’s inherent structure and artistry.

Summary

Writing for child-readers with the aim of educating them to meet their social and psychological needs began in the early eighteenth century. Texts then reflected a change in perspective toward children themselves. Subsequently, the conception of children changed fundamentally and the need to educate them emerged as an imperative, not only at home but also at school. This new mission dominated the eighteenth century, which led writers to adopt a predominantly romantic view of childhood. This led to a change in the style of literature addressed to children, making it compatible with their needs and cognitive abilities as determined by the education system. Children’s literature, while considered part of the education system, is based on its own systems. It has its own fields of activity, marketing, publishing, libraries, and criticism distinct from adult literature. The study of children’s literature thus differs from that of literature in general, given that the former field is a discrete and independent discipline.

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1. The Brothers Grimm collected folk tales from peasant narrations, trying to preserve them. Their intentions were both nationalist and romantic at the same time. They sought to preserve the remnants of Teutonic culture and to contend that this culture was no less great than that of the classical world. In many cases, they reworked the oral stories they had collected as they pleased and altered the tales to the standards of good taste appropriate to written literature. The Brothers Grimm began to combine multiple versions of the same story, as they thought, and came up with complex texts that were presented as if they were original. This was nothing more than an attempt by them to foster a legacy of national pride. Their manipulation of the spoken tradition served these national goals: see Kana’ina and Mahawi 2001: 2–3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andersen wrote an 1835 collection of Danish popular folk tales called *Andersen’s Tales*, rewriting and reframing these tales for children: see Ben-Amos and Goldstein 17, Hazan-Rokem 144; Regev 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)