4 The Use of Folk Tales in Palestinian Children’s Literature

Abstract

This, the longest chapter, introduces my argument that Palestinian folktales are the most important source that has inspired the Palestinian writers in the period I examine and scrutinizes the unprecedented and remarkable way Palestinian writers returned to the roots of popular tales and adapted them for children.

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two historically defined sections, one dealing with the period from 1967 to 1987 and the other from 1988 to the present, corresponding with those in the theoretical chapter.

In order to study the use of folktale paradigms in Palestinian children’s literature, one must focus on the extent to which writers preserve their features or adapt them to correspond to contemporary social and cultural realities. To what extent do stories reflect the aesthetic constructs of folktales and the techniques used by the writers of these stories?

To discuss the exploitation of folktale paradigms in Palestinian children’s literature, I have chosen a representative sample from various fields of Palestinian literature and compared them to Nimr Sirhan’s 1978 book *Ḥikāyāt Shaʿbiya Filasṭīniya* (Palestinian Folktales) and the 2001 book by academic researchers Sharif Kinaʿina and Ibrahim Mahawwi entitled *Qawwil Ya Ṭayr* (Speak, Bird!), both works considered essential sources of folktale collection.

The Use of Folktales in the 1967–87 Period

Introduction

Palestinian writers’ preoccupation with promoting Palestinian identity and its distinctive characteristic burgeoned after the 1967 *naksa* (“setback”) and Israel’s occupation of the remaining Palestinian territories. Due to these developments, the trends in story writing for children were subsequently based on translation from Arab or global heritage sources. Palestinian writers realized the importance of reviving Palestinian folk heritage in children’s literature by reworking the forms or narrative structures of folktales. Some of them began reworking folktale forms without altering the literary structures, while others reworked them by making fundamental changes to the narrative structures to make them compatible with the spirit of the age and the age group targeted.

The Use of Folktale Features

The Use of Traditional Styles of Beginning and Ending

During this period, Palestinian writers were keen to use Palestinian folktale stylings and researched the origins of folktales. They refined and adapted these tales for children, resulting in an unprecedented level of attention from the public. Nimr Sirhan evinced a great interest in reworking folktales, emphasizing their importance in the introduction to his short story collection *Fanūn Shaʿbiya lil-Aṭfāl* (Folklore Arts for Children), where he writes: “Reviving folktales and reading them anew to the young generation is a way of reviving the image of the nation and lodging it in their memory” (5). He also expressed his aim to bring the life experiences of the Palestinian people closer to children through these stories in a way that did not interfere with folklore structures. Sirhan reworked 17 Palestinian folktales, from which I have chosen “Al- Bāṭiya” to discuss. This tells the story of a poor woodcutter named Abu Sharkh who goes to the forest every day to chop down trees to sell in the city for a pittance. He uses this money to buy food for his wife and ten children. One day, while the woodcutter is chopping down a dry, old tree, a black slave with a frightening mien emerges out of the parched timber and curses the trouble the woodcutter’s actions have brought upon him. The dialogue that follows between the woodcutter and the slave culminates with the former marrying off his daughter to the son of the latter in return for the slave giving the woodcutter a wooden receptacle called a *bāṭiya*. The woodcutter stops chopping wood because the *bāṭiya* has magical powers: Whenever he asks it for meat and rice, the *bāṭiya* fills itself up with them. However, the chief of the tribe tricks the woodcutter by stealing the magic *bāṭiya* and replacing it with one similar in appearance that has no such powers. With a heavy heart, Abu Sharkh, the woodcutter, returns to chopping wood in the forest to support his children. He seeks out the slave once again and tells him what has happened. They agree that the woodcutter will marry a second daughter of his to another of the slave’s sons in exchange for a magic turkey that lays golden eggs. As before, the chief steals the bird from the woodcutter, who returns to working in the forest yet again. The slave appears once more and a new agreement between the two sees the woodcutter obligated to marry his third daughter off to a third son of the slave in return for the slave giving the woodcutter a magic wand. As the *dénouement* begins, the woodcutter goes to the chief and makes him to return his *bāṭiya* and bird, threatening to use the magic wand against the chief if he refuses. The story ends with the woodcutter gathering his family together to serve them a delicious feast while burying the wand in the ground in front of the house.

The author of this story is interested in rewording it, but only in a few respects. He begins with the traditional style of opening, given that child readers/listeners are psychologically receptive to such things, as it both attracts and holds their attention. He also places the expression *yā mā kāna* (“once upon a time”) between parentheses in folktale fashion (see bracketed transliteration below) as if, through this phrase, he will take the child reader back to his own past, through a flashback technique characteristic of this narrative style:

Once—Once upon a time—you who hear these words [*Kāna*—*yā mā kāna—yā mustamaʿī al-kalām*], once there was a very poor woodcutter named Abu Sharkh, who took his ax each day to the forest to chop down wood and carry it off on his back to then sell it, buying with his earnings a morsel of bread and a few radishes and olives for his children to eat.

(*Mawsūʿāt* 35)

Sirhan also retains the traditional ending to the tale, which is seen in the bracketed transliteration below. This ending also summons up the past.

The wand began to beat them wherever it could wound. They began to cry for help and their screams grew louder until Abu Sharkh demanded they return the turkey and the *bāṭiya* or he would command the wand to beat them again; so they returned the turkey and the *bāṭiya* to him and he returned home. And off flew the bird and may God bless all those present with His goodness [*Wa-ṭāra al-ṭayru wa-Allahu yumassī al-ḥādirīna bil-khayr*].

(*Mawsūʿāt* 36)

Thus, Sirhan clearly preserves the external framework of the narrative without interference by employing the opening and closing styles of folk tales.

Writer ʿAbdullah ʿAyshan reformulated the folktale “al-Ṭayr al-Akhḍar” (The Green Bird) in the same consistent spirit he adopted throughout his anthology of folktale reworkings entitled *al-Ṭayr al-Akhḍar wa-Qiṣaṣ Ukhrā* (The Green Bird and Other Stories). ʿAyshan’s introduction to the collection emphasizes that, due to his deep interest in children’s literature, he had reformulated the folktales that he collected orally from storytellers and shaykhs to preserve them as part of the heritage and protect them from extinction, piracy, or falsification (*al-Ṭayr* 3).

“Al-Ṭayr al-Akhḍar” relates the story of a man whose wife dies, leaving him with a son and daughter to fend for. Near the man’s house lives a wicked widow who dreams of marrying him. Exploiting his two children’s good natures, she accomplishes this through deception and guile. After the marriage takes place, the life of the house changes. The kindness and tenderness that was supposedly in the widow’s heart turns into open malice and loathing, especially after she gives birth to her own son and daughter. The man owns a yellow cow that keeps them fed with cheese and milk, but the evil widow wants to get rid of it, so she asks her husband to slaughter the cow, claiming it is diseased. The widow’s scheming does not end with the slaughter of the cow, however; she also wants to rid herself of her husband’s son. One day, she puts poison in the meal she cooks for the family. Her own son returns home unexpectedly, eats the poisoned food, and dies. The widow’s hatred for her husband’s firstborn son grows ever stronger and she contrives another way to kill him, this time by putting him into a large cauldron of boiling water under which she has lit a fire. The boy’s sister carries off his bones and buries them in a grave she has dug, thereafter defying her stepmother by going every day to where her brother’s bones are buried to shed tears over them. One day she sees a green bird which she recognizes as her brother. Whenever she comes across the bird, the bird tosses her gold and silver coins. The stepmother hears about this bird and asks her stepdaughter to bring her to meet it so that she can also acquire some gold and silver. When they arrive at the usual location, the bird instructs the evil wife to open her mouth. She does so, but this time, the bird drops only needles and pins into down her throat. The story ends with the wife’s agonizing, tortuous death.

Here, we see how the writer-narrator uses the traditional style of beginning of *yuḥkī anna…* (“the story goes…” or, more literally, “it is recounted that…”). The writer uses this expression in most of the anthology’s tales as a narrative indicator, symbolizing the past. The expression is in the passive form (*ṣīghat al-majhūl*) that possesses an aesthetically enchanting quality. Thus, the tale begins:

It is recounted that [*yuḥkī anna*], long ago, there was a man who was married to a righteous woman who had borne a son and a daughter by him. They lived in the finest way blessed with prosperity. However, it came to pass that the wife fell gravely ill and died, leaving their two children motherless.

(*al-Ṭayr* 11)

Despite the tale having a happy ending, the writer does not use the traditional ending in his narrative:

For lo and behold the needles and pins tumbled into her mouth, so she swallowed them, and her blood did flow. Then, after severe torment and mortal pain, she died and, thus, the green bird took his sister’s and his own revenge on this evil woman.

(*al-Ṭayr* 11)

Rawda al-Hudhud is another writer who has reworked the form of Palestinian folktales to make them suitable for children. In the story “Laylā wal-Kanz” (“Layla and the Treasure”) from *Silsilat Ḥikāyāt al-Ghūl* (Collected Tales of al-Ghul), she draws on a folk tale originally collected by Fayiz al-Ghul and published in a book entitled *al-Dunyā Ḥikāyāt* (The World Is Stories). Al-Huhud’s version of “Laylā wal-Kanz” differs from its predecessor in that she attempts to remove its predominantly traditional structure. The title of the story creates considerable thrilling anticipation in children right from the outset. They are eager to understand who Layla is and what the secret association between her and the treasure is. The story begins with Layla strolling through the forest with her father. Since he warns her to keep away from him as he is busy chopping wood, she goes deeper into the forest. There she meets a lion, an elephant, a wolf, a rabbit, a dog, and other animals. While the lion, elephant, wolf, and some of the other animals are keen to look after Layla and keep her safe, the fox, known for his cunning and deviousness, attempts to trick her. Layla is able to escape from the fox, after which she encounters a child called Shujaʿ—a name that means “bravery” in Arabic—and his father, Salim. They both try to calm her by looking for her father for her. A wizard who is aware of Layla’s talent for finding treasure learns that she is in the woodcutter Salim’s log cabin. The wizard initially implores the woodcutter and his son to help him obtain the treasure, threatening to turn them into inanimate objects if they do not. They refuse, and the wizard resorts to practicing deception on Layla. He pretends he is a humble and goodhearted man and not a wizard at all, despite what many say about him. He claims to have lost his own daughter, but that Layla can come to his rescue. Layla and Shujaʿ together find the treasure, though by pure coincidence. A cut to Layla’s hand causes drops of blood to fall on a rock, splitting it in two. Emerging from the rock, a genie, who is the resident guardian, saves her from the magician by thwarting the magician’s powers to do evil. The genie then hands back the treasure to her so that all the forest’s inhabitants can share it and enjoy it together within the forest. Thus, Layla’s mission to return to her father is successful.

In this text, the author introduces only a few minor modifications while incorporating some of her own narrative techniques. She begins with the verb *kāna* (“to be”) in the past tense, third-person singular rather than using the traditional opening. This enables the writer to intervene, via her narrator, setting the stage for the events to come and then introducing them gradually. This all the while commenting on the various scenes that arise in the tale, as we see in this passage:

One of the tribal shaykhs had a very beautiful daughter [*Kāna li-aḥad shuyūkh al-qabāʾil bint jamīla jaddan*] with a good heart and pure intentions who knew nothing of cunning, malice, falsehood, or deceit. Her name was Layla.

(*Silsilat* 3)

The Use of Popular Expressions

During this period, writers began using popular expressions in their stories, lending the tales a vernacular, folkish air and a greater narrative realism. This was especially fitting since the stories were adaptations of folktales. These expressions also help the child to interact with the text. Once again, Nimr Sirhan was significant in this regard in trying as much as he could to incorporate popular Palestinian expressions and thus distinguishing them from other such stories in the Arab world. He did so while bearing in mind that many such tales were common currency in the wider region. Whoever reads the story “Al- Bāṭiya” will observe the author’s keen interest in highlighting the local Palestinian character of his stories and retaining Palestinian vernacular terms, as we see in the expressions I highlight, for example, in this passage:

Abu Sharkh replied: “Good, may God increase your wellbeing [*Ṭayyib, kaththir Allah khayr-ak*]. And he walked on. On the way, he said to himself: “I will try it.” So, he stopped in front of a tree and said to it: Oh *bāṭiya*! our mother and our father [*ummunā wa-abīnā*], fill yourself up with meat and rice for me. The *bāṭiya* became full, so he sat down to eat like one bereft [*ka-l-mafjūʿ*]. In his haste, he ate himself a bellyfull [*akala wa-kabba*] and walked home with a swagger.

(Sirhan, *Mawsūʿāt* 36)

Other examples of his use of popular expressions are to be found in the following passage:

And the next day, the woodcutter picked up his ax and went to the tree: knock… knock… [*ṭaq…ṭaq*] and with the first knock [*khabṭa*], the spirit appeared and said to him: “Why did you come here when I have already given you something that makes you rich?”

(*Al-Ghalṭa* 37)

ʿAyshan, however, consistently tries to use high-level Classical Arabic (*al-Fuṣḥā*, or CA) in “al-Ṭayr al-Akhḍar” and, more than occasionally, metaphors, though he does introduce some popular expressions while placing them within double quotation marks. An example can be found in the following from “al-Ṭayr al-Akhḍar”:

And when his sister summoned him, she was crying and shouting: “Hey, come and don’t stir things up. Your aunt sharpened the knives and brought the barbers before you.” [“*Hayya khayyan taʿāl wa-mā tajīsh..khālat-uk wannat lak al-sakākīn, wa-ʿālat lak al-khallaqīn*.”]

(13)

The Use of Repetition Techniques

In the short story “Al-Bāṭiya”, Sirhan uses repetition techniques, which are a distinctive feature of folktales’ aesthetic structures. Examining a sample extract already cited, we can see how the writer is keen to deploy repetition techniques, whether in repetition of present tense verbs or in repeated sequences of threes (highlighted in bold below):

***yuqaṭṭaʿ*** *al-ḥaṭab wa-****yaḥmil****-uh ʿalā ẓahr-ih wa-****yarūḥ yabīʿ****-uh, fa-****yashtarī*** *bi-thaman-ih li-awlād-ih shayʾan min al-khubz wal-fujl wal-zayt.*

[to chop down wood and carry it off on his back to then and sell it, buying with his earnings a morsel of bread and a few radishes and olives for his children.]

(35)

The repetition of verb form is not an addition to the artistic structure of folktales. It is, in fact, a phonetic, enunciatory, and syntactical feature in that it performs its role by embodying the action. We observe their deployment in the present tense form, indicative of continuity, so that it lodges itself indelibly in the memory. It serves a not inconsequential purpose for the writer in that, in most cases, repetition serves to provide emphasis and focus reader attention. It is not surprising that repetition has these meanings for this writer, Nimr Sirhan, as he lives outside of his own homeland, having migrated from his village in 1948. The writer thus reflects on his own personality and psychological realities through such repetition of certain words.

In his Encyclopedia of Palestinian Folklore, *Mawsūʿat al-Fulklūr al-Filasṭīnī*, Sirhan explains that repetition is a peculiar characteristic of popular stories. If the hero embarks upon an adventure, he does so three times. The number 40 is also be repeated in such stories. (For more on the importance of numbers in folk heritage, see *Mawsūʿāt* 360–72.) Kinaʿina and Mahawwi consider the role of numbers in stories to be significant since there are magic numbers in many civilizations. The use of repetition in such narratives eliminates any sense of realism about the events and instead imbues them with an irrealistic ambience. Kinaʿina and Mahawwi add that the use of repetition is not limited to numbers but encompasses the structure of sentences as well, with many authors using verbs or characters for these purposes (*Dirāsāt* 12–13). Nabila Ibrahim explains that this use of numbers in folktale endows them with a secret quality that distinguishes their beginnings, middles, and ends, as well as their pasts, presents, and futures (43).

The feature of repetition appears in al-Hudhud’s short story “Laylā wal-Kanz” in relation to both events and the description of characters. Al-Hudhud’s work confirms this use of repetition in stories as a linguistic feature that children enjoy. An example of this is shown below (repetitive features highlighted in bold):

And when he **finished** doing that, he **lay down** for about an hour, he **turned** to Shujaʿ and said: “If you do not accept my preconditions, I will **go away** and leave you as you are forever, until you die of **hunger, thirst, and fatigue**, with no one who can save you.

(*Silsilat* 13)

The Use of Descriptive Techniques

Rawda al-Hudhud is a prominent figure whose powers of description in her story “*Layla wal-Kanz*” are widely considered excellent. The way she depicts certain exterior appearances, as well as implicitly moral features of certain characters that reflect the battle between good and evil, is also lauded. She also describes locations in a way that illuminates their value and aesthetic role in the piece. Qurayna stresses that most folktales lack descriptive qualities, yet some writers who rework children’s stories are preoccupied with description. She adds that description draws one’s attention primarily to visual delights and then the rest of the emotions it engenders in short stories. It therefore prioritizes visual aesthetics related to nature over character descriptions and external appearances (147–49).

Some archetypal folktale characters are described definitively, such as the wizard and his evil, Layla’s good-natured beauty, and Shujaʿ’s strength and bravery, as his name suggests. The description of the characters in the stories thus artistically correlates with the narrative structure, archetypal folk characters, and the struggle between good and evil, an essential element in the short story.

Al-Hudhud deliberately employs descriptive techniques to optimize human values of sympathy toward Layla. This makes sense in children’s literature because the description in itself correlates with certain specific details. Thus, al-Hudhud seeks to bring objective aspects of description closer to artistic realism, as can be seen in this passage: “One year, the country became parched, with no rainfall, so crops dwindled, wells dried up…milk became scarce…sheep grew skinny, and the tribe found it tough to make a living” (*Laylā* 4).

Another key feature of the short story is the internal conflict within the characters themselves. Layla is courageous, as can be seen in her resilience while alone in the forest, but she also longs to be rescued and return to her lost father. Likewise, Shujaʿ wants to overcome his fear of the forest by proving his courage. External conflict is manifest between Layla and the wizard, as well as between Shujaʿ and his father on the one hand and between Shujaʿ and the wizard again on the other. These represent the conflict between good and evil, the most important theme in folktales that we have already mentioned.

The Use of Dialogue Stylings

Dialogue is an important aspect of folktale stylistics that can stand in for narrators. Critics have differed over whether CA or vernacular dialect is suitable for folktale dialogue. They tend to concur that CA is appropriate for narration. Some people believe that using CA for dialogue is more expressive and better at conveying thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as it is capable of representing human inner worlds. Some people argue that using CA fosters a sense of Arab unity and protects the “language of *ḍād*” (sometimes called that because of the claim that this phoneme is unique to CA) from any threat to its existence, any chance of its neglect, or even its disappearance. Writing in CA, therefore, achieves both artistic and national goals. Some children’s writers support this conclusion, seeing the call of certain writers and critics to eschew the “standard language” as unjust and irresponsible because it steers children away their mother tongue and national sentiments, and forces them to use registers that range between simple and complex. Those who urge the use of vernacular dialect believe that it lends texts more realism, vivacity, and honesty than CA does, because it is the language of daily life that short stories depict (see Kanaʿinna, *Dirāsāt* 259–64).

Al-Hudhud pays close attention to dialogue for artistic reasons. This is because dialogue brings out the nature of characters, their way of thinking, and their awareness of the jeopardy the writer has placed them in. These are the subjects she seeks to convey to the child reader. The register of the language used in the story’s dialogue varies notably. In the following example, some of the language is written in a high register, similar to that of adults:

The wizard said: I want to buy your wife for a thousand dinars! This is a sum you will never amass in your lifetime, though you live 100 years. Shujaʿ said, w**hile his anger at him reached a mighty pitch** [*wa-qadd balagha al-ghayẓ min-hu mablaghan ʿaẓīman*]: “Is a wife to be sold like chattel? Repent wayward one! [*khasant yā khāsir*!]”

(*Laylā* 12)

Sometimes, however, the writer seeks to make the narrative dialogue simpler, rendering it closer to the spoken language. This is not just to strengthen the sense of realism, but also to make it more credible and expressive. It also helps convey the situation that they are in and to lend a realistic air to it, as in this example:

And when she took the **things** [*al-ḥājāt*] from him, she said: “What is this? Is that an invitation? Well… I will perform the role of your guests as well. He was choked up by the thought and said to her: “No, I do not have guests. All that matters is that **I earned a penny or two** [*innī laqayt dīnāran*], so I bought these **things** [*ḥājāt*] so that we can eat our fill together even if it for once in a lifetime. I don’t plan on working and will stay here, close to you.

(*Laylā* 15)

Al-Hudhud also uses interior monologues, conversations speakers have with themselves. Qurayna states that this type of dialogue is less frequently found in folktales because their audience needs open dialogue (159). It is often preceded by the phrase “he said to himself,” as in the following:

He bought meat, vegetables, fruit, and a chicken with a dinar, kept the rest and **said to himself** [*qāl li-nafsi-h*]: “She has lived with me for three months, watching over my comfort and trying to cheer me, but I have not found how to make her happy at all, and this is the last day of her life, for her to cook, eat, and be happy.

(*Laylā* 14)

The short story also features another type of dialogue: the soliloquy form that one uses to communicate with one’s Creator. This is a form of communication with a holy dimension (Qurayna 160). It takes on the form of a monologue, as al-Hudhud demonstrates in this example: “Layla said: ‘Oh God, I ask you to provide him with means to earn his livelihood, that he may find treasure and live a rich, carefree, abundant life’” (*Laylā* 15).

Al-Hudhud’s use of dialogue techniques in her story lends nuance to it, endearing it to the child reader, and avoiding any dullness and monotony in the narrative.

Evoking Traditional Characters in Children’s Stories

We will examine Muhammad Al-Zahir’s 1973 short story “*Shamaʿdān al-Dhahab*” (The Golden Candlestick) to explore this topic. The story features a *ghūl* as a character. We found no traditional characters from Palestinian folklore in the works of writers from the first period, indicating that they did not recognize the importance of using such characters in their stories.

The Conception of the Folklore Character in Children’s Tales

The character is a crucial element in narrative texts, especially in children’s stories. In fact, characters are the most important aspect of these stories. According to Greimas, “character” refers to the central character around whom the story revolves, whether they are real or fictitious (52). However, Barthes argues that character depends primarily on the writer’s imagination, with no one specific character having a real-world correlative (72). Barthes believes that traditional characters draw on traditional narrative forebears, but writers imbue them with contemporary features through symbolic projection and suggestion (79).

Evoking Ghūls as Characters

The character of the *ghūl* has great importance in folk memory as a supernatural being vacillating between good and evil. Al-Khalili adds that at times the character of the *ghūl* more unusually takes on a third form of manipulating, belittling, and intimidating people (37). The *ghūl* is a very familiar type of unseen power that appears in short stories more often than any other. Tales of *ghūl*s are prominent in folktales too, capturing the imagination of readers and listeners, especially if they are children, due to the mythical, strange, and magical dynamic it brings to the narrative. Al-Khalili defines a *ghūl* as a mythical creature that is sentient and states that such creatures are expressive of both real and symbolic processes of transformation. He attributes the creation of these beings to the subconscious, which reflects the mysterious aspects of existence. Because these beings are lodged in the subconscious, this type of story character represents an intimate aspect of ordinary people’s experience (87).

Al-Zahir uses the character of the *ghūl* in “*Shamaʿdān al-Dhahab*” to present us with an unadulteratedly terrifying image. He uses this traditional character to both revive folk memories and introduce aspects of that character to the reader:

“Oh vessel of patience, have patience with me!” Then she opened Hana’s box and said: “Oh vessel of happiness, save me! He devoured my siblings, and you said nothing. He devoured my mother, and you said nothing. He devoured my father, and you said nothing. He destroyed the whole caravan, and you said nothing. He took my children, and you said nothing. Oh, vessel of patience, have patience with me! Oh, vessel of happiness, save me!” Moments later, the *ghūl* appears at the golden candlestick with the two children, the first six the second five years old. And he says to her: “Oh, golden candlestick! you have witnessed a wonder!” She says: “I saw him praying, fasting, and worshipping the Eternal, Everlasting One.” The *ghūl* then gives the children the golden candlestick as a reward, while keeping the secret of what happened to it.

(*Shamaʿdān* 34)

Al-Zahir understands that the *ghūl* has a symbolic role in the story that is possibly beyond a child’s comprehension. Thus, as the end of the tale, he explains: “The *ghūl* in this tale is not mere symbolism; it furthermore speaks to real evil and destruction. Ignorance is a *ghūl*, disease is a *ghūl*, poverty is a *ghūl*, and injustice is a *ghūl*: each of these things exist in every society.”

The Use of Folktales in the 1988–2015 Period

The use of folktales in children’s stories took a new path in the 1988–2015 period in the ways writers drew on them for inspiration and deployed them in their works. Some reformulated them without fundamentally changing them, while others retold them through changing their basic content. Still others developed their own stories with fairytale elements incorporated, while some simply provided guidance about similar narrative techniques. Here, we focus on the most significant techniques writers used in reworking folktales, including the various ways in which they used them for inspiration and their deployment as models for form and content, as well as the significance of certain characters and events, communicative techniques, and the lines drawn between them and the source tales. Key questions that arise from this discussion relate to how new tales have used traditional methods in the use of contemporary forms and content, how they have deconstructed traditional narrative structures, and to what extent they have challenged traditional techniques. Or have they rather simply rehearsed and rehashed them through dreary repetition of stereotypes? Below, we review three ways in which folktales were used for inspiration and/or as exemplars.

Reformulating Folktales

Some writers in this period tried to revive folktales and reformulate them to match the spirit of the times. They also attempted to “create” stories that emulated such tales but presented them in a new written format for children that replaced the oral folktales that their parents would tell them.

In a March 12, 2013, interview, Rawda al-Hudhud argued that reformulating Palestinian folk tales is necessary to re-present themes of national duty and education to Palestinian children. Kanaʾina, in an April 23, 2012, interview, endorsed those writers who rework these stories within a new framework, not simply due to the mental and educational benefit these stories can have when told to children, but also because they have long been lodged in the depths of popular experience across time and throughout the places that formed the Ancient World. Kanaʾina points out that these stories are not uniform in character. They are preserved in the popular memory and transmitted orally in a way that makes them amenable to flexibility and modification. This is more compatible with the spirit of the societies and cultures of the times and adapted to contemporary educational and psychological aims. This applies to Arab culture, particularly Palestinian culture, but also to others. This period saw a surge of social, political, and cultural changes that prompted a shift in the way popular stories were told and reimagined to align with these new realities. However, this is not the appropriate place to provide a detailed explanation of these changes.

We can divide the works of writers of this period into three types. The first is the traditional inclination, which continued, as in the previous period, to represent the folktale in the unchanged colloquial language of their ancestry. Kanaʾina is one such writer, reproducing Palestinian folk tales as they were and in the vernacular dialect in his short story anthology of 45 Palestinian folktales *Qawwil Yā Ṭayr* (Say, Oh Bird!), considered an important reference work for Palestinian folktales in the oral tradition. The second group, Zakaria Muhammad and Fatima Dhiab notable among them, adopted CA as its linguistic medium. They were keen to rewrite Palestinian folk tales, as in the previous period, with some modification to their verbiage and content. The third group is most relevant to our concerns here and perhaps features some of the most strikingly new elements of the short story. This is particularly evident in its new narrative forms, specifically in relation to its sense of spatiality that was unknown to classical forms. These writers—among them Sonya Nimr and Mahmud ʿAbbasi—interwove their storytelling with folktale narrative structures and stylistics.

The example we will look at in this regard is Sonya Nimr’s 2001-published “*Qiṣṣa Awwalu-hā Khayāl wa-Ākhiru-hā Khayāl*” (The Story that Begins with a Fantasy and Ends with a Fantasy), which was inspired by the folktale documented by Nimr Sirhan called “*Qiṣṣa Awwalu-Hā Khadhab wa-Ākhiru-Hā Khadhab*” (The Story that Begins with a Lie and Ends with a Lie; *Mawsūʿāt* 122–27).

The tale is one of a great, very powerful, and munificent king, whom God has blessed with a handsome and intelligent though obstinate son who loves reading and telling stories. One day the king summons his son to tell him he wants to arrange a marriage from him. The prince responds that he seeks neither a beautiful nor a rich wife, but a sweetly articulate and clever girl. He asks his father to host a feast to which he can invite all the girls around, both high-born and commoner. The one who tells the most imaginative tales will be chosen for his wife. Girls from far and wide, each dreaming of being chosen, recount tale after tale that do not please the prince. But then, one emerges from the crowd, walking resolutely and confidently but without conceit. Without so much as uttering a greeting, she begins to tell her tale, leading the prince and the rest of the audience through a story of fairytale events, times, and people. The prince married her, the girl of his dreams, and they lived happily ever after as soulmates.

Nimr indicated that he made many modifications to the story at the behest of the Education Ministry, in conjunction with the Tamer Foundation in Ramallah which published it. They wanted her to rework “*Qiṣṣa Awwalu-Hā Khadhab wa-Ākhiru-Hā Khadhab*” in a contemporary style according to modern educative principles to be circulated in schools (*Munawwira* 8). This meant that she had to rewrite it in CA rather than the spoken dialect, and incorporate hypertextual features that began with a play on the original title, where “fantasy” replaced “lie” to make it more pedagogically appropriate. Passages from the original were also removed and much of what remained was significantly modified. The result was a reconceptualization of the source tale. While critics have differed over the validity of making such changes (Kanaʿina, *Dirāsāt* 259–64), our aim here is to explain the motivation for them rather than justify the rationale. We will also examine the relationship between the new tale and its source to demonstrate how the former functions as a hypertext. Genette, among others, calls this type of interaction hypertextuality, with a hypertext relating and being influenced by a preceding hypotext (Yaqtin). Nimr’s tale is a recreation of the original story, with a similar structure, plot, and narrative. It is not simply a copy of the source text, but instead a fresh creation. While the protagonist of the original story is a poor fisherman, the heroine of the new one is an intelligent young girl. This means that certain events in the original narrative have to be replaced by new ones. Nimr also removes any subplots present in the original to focus attention on the heroine in her version. The original story does not provide information about the characters’ personalities, while the new version foregrounds the girl’s personality traits from the beginning to the end of the story. What is most striking is that Nimr retains the traditional folktale opening:

*Kān yā kān fī qadīm al-zamān*

*Wa-sālif al-ʿasr wal-awān*

*Malik ʿaẓīm kabīr al-shaʾn*

*Kathīr al-mulk wal-khayr wal-aṭyān*

(“Once upon a time, long ago,

In a far-off time indeed,

There was a mighty king of great import

Abounding in estate, goodness, and wealth.”

Munawwira 2)

Nimr uses a variety of narrative styles, including the imaginary and the fantastic, and often relies on digressions to achieve this. Folktales are frequently replete with the miraculous and strange, where realism is interwoven with imagination, the rational with the superrational, and the conscious with the subconscious. Through the heroine’s tales of imagination, the writer seeks to convince the child reader to believe in them. The use of the miraculous and imaginary serves to validate the strange and the absurd, as we see in the following passage:

*Duʿaytu ilā zafāf jaddī wa-jadditī*

*Ghanaytu wa-rakaṣtu kathīran min farḥatī*

*Ahdawnī bayḍa kabirat al-masāʾ*

*Ḥajmu-hā taqrīban kubbat al-samāʾ*

*Ḥamaltu-hā bi-khiffa wa-rakaḍtu naḥwa al-dār*

*Aqdhifu-hā marratan bi-yamīnī wa-marratan bil-yisār*

(“I was invited to my grandfather and grandmother’s wedding.

I sang and danced constantly; much to my joy,

They gave me a huge, shiny egg

Nearly the size of the sky’s dome.

I picked it up daintily and ran to my home,

Tossing it up first with my right hand and then with my left.”

Munawwira 2–9)

The final narrative section of the original tale, which tells of the sultan’s son’s death after he became sultan himself, was also removed, showcasing the folktale trope of the triumph of good over evil. The original dark ending was replaced with a happy one in which the girl wins the prince’s heart, and he announces their engagement. This can be seen in the following comparative passage:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sirhan, “*Qiṣṣa Awwalu-Hā Khadhab wa-Ākhiru-Hā Khadhab*” (hypotext) | Nimr, “*Awwalu-Hā Khayāl wa-Ākhiru-Hā Khayāl*” (hypertext) |
| *Rawwaḥa al-ṣayyād li-marati-h wal-nās taḥkī wa-taqūl: Illī Allah maʿā-h kull al-nās maʿā-h.**Wa-ibn al-sulṭān ṭaqqa wa-māt min al-qahr. Wa-ṭār al-ṭayr tuṣbuḥū ʿalā khayr* (*Mawsūʿāt* 32). | *Fariḥa al-amīr wa-ʿallat ḍaḥkātu-h faqadd wajada akhīran sharikat ḥayāti-h* (*Munawwira* 34). |
| The fisherman returned to his wife, while the people all said: “God is with him, and the people are with him!” The sultan’s son dropped down and died in agony and the bird flew away. Sleep well tonight! | The prince was happy and his laughter rose up, as at last he had found his partner for life! |

Comparing Sirhan’s hypotext to Nimr’s hypertext, it is clear that they follow similar patterns of emotion. However, Nimr’s hypertext structurally exploits the tropes of folktales while simultaneously distancing itself from the source by adding, deleting, and reworking elements.

Deploying Narrative Structures in Folktales

Forms of Narrator Presence in Children’s Tales

The narrator, as the unseen voice, is a particularly important feature of folktales. Every tale needs a narrator that draws the audience in; without one, there is no story. The narrator mediates between the narrative and the reader to govern what the latter will be exposed to (Miqdadi *Al-Bunā* 62). The narrator also advances the plot of the story. Genette defines the roles of narrators by reference to various narrative phenomena. The first role is narration, which involves the narrator leading the narrative. The text is the second role, and the third is the narrative situation that the narrator inhabits. The fourth role is the narrator’s standpoint on the text, which is the distinctiveness of the narrative. This is evident when the narrator indicates the source of the tale. The narrator’s standpoint toward the narrative is the fifth role, which is an ideological matter. The narrator intervenes directly or indirectly to comment on the narrative, as stated in (692–93). As numerous studies have dealt with defining what narrators are and what their significance is, we need not dwell too much on those debates here. Instead, we will focus on narrators’ perspectives; that is, how they manifest themselves in children’s tales. This will also help determine the extent to which children’s writers have mastered the use of the narrator as a device to serve the audience in any given case. How does one quantify narrators’ interventions in their stories? By what criteria? To what degree do narrative styles differ in this context? To what extent have children’s writers incorporated modern theories of the narrator?

Deploying Narrative Styles in Children’s Tales

Catering to the age-related and psychological characteristics of the anticipated reader is crucial when writing for children or adults. The boundaries of writing for children are circumscribed in ways that do not apply to writing for adults. Writing for adults is only limited by the laws of creativity. Thus, writers of children’s literature are governed by the need to define their role in the narrative from the outset in a way that creators of adult fiction are not. If narrators in adult literature are omniscient, they are considered poor specimens of the type because an all-knowing narrator is a writer who has failed to appear either in a non-interventional guise or in the mediatory guise of one narrating about others.

Narrators in children’s literature are usually omniscient ones because their child readers often need the narrator’s explanation, interpretation, and commentary instances to understand the narrative intention. Thus, a simpler, more direct approach to narration is more appropriate. The narrator may use techniques that the reader is already anticipating will be in the tale, such as narrative devices and standard opening phrases like “once upon a time.” These distance the narrator from the narrative entirely but also foreshadow the type of content to come in the tale. The narrator is, thus, content to be the story’s simple medium (Miqdadi *Al-Bunā* 57).

The narrator sometimes resorts to addressing the child directly, having otherwise been concealed behind the text. It’s possible that these techniques are a vestige of the oral tradition that gave birth to folktales. Maryam Hamad uses this narrator style in *Asrār Ṣandūq al-Azrār* (The Secrets of the Button Box), an important element in this folktale. In it, a grandmother tells her granddaughter a story through flashback that, by drawing on her memory, effectively returns the grandmother to the past and another story. Thus, the grandmother becomes a narrator herself distinct from the tale’s narrator, who here simply relays the narrative without participating in the events:

I liked their shapes, colors, and textures, but I collected them in this box for the memories that each button carries! Eagerly, I said: “Tell me, grandmother, What are their stories?” My grandmother bent over slightly, picked out a shiny white button, and said: “This fell off your Aunt Hanan’s wedding dress and got lodged in my scarf when I kissed and hugged her.”

(*Asrār?)*

The narrator in some texts for children are guides to the story’s content or ideas whereby the writer creates the illusion that there is a narrator telling a story recounted in the past. In this case, the goal of this technique is realized in both form and content. In *Al-Miftāḥ al-Ḍāʾiʿ* (The Lost Key), Mahmud ʿAbbasi uses a grandmother narrator’s past tense recollection as a technique:

The grandmother sat her two granddaughters on her knees and began telling them an amusing little tale about when she was a little girl. Grandma Safiya said: “Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a little girl named Khayzaran. Her grandpa gave her a bracelet, a dress, and a talking doll as a gift. Khayzaran stowed her gifts away in the closet, but she lost the key to it. Her grandfather searched for it in the drawers and all over the place.”

(*Al-Miftāḥ?*)

The narrator remains neutral here and does not intervene in the narrative directly, simply conveying what another says. The writer has projected the narrator’s role onto the grandmother, as grandmothers often play such roles in folktales. A folktale-like story emerges within a story. This tale is of the relationship between Safiya and her granddaughters, ʿUrayn and Safiya. The grandfather, not finding the key anywhere, goes to the carpenter who made the closet. However, the carpenter tells him that the key is at the blacksmith’s. The blacksmith asks the grandfather to pay him for it with a hen’s egg, which the grandfather duly does. When he returns home, he uses the key to open the closet and remove the gifts once again.

Abbasi employs the technique of the tale within the frame tale to create a contemporary style of story that evokes folk heritage by reshaping it for contemporary audiences in a way that allows past and present to interact. He interrupts the narrative to tell another story and then returns to the main tale, as demonstrated in the previous example. The writer’s tendency to insert the traditional opening into the middle of the tale, using past tense verbs, shows his attachment to his past. It also highlights his desire to comprehend the past and to acknowledge the limited resemblance between the era of the grandmother and that of the children. This piques the curiosity of child readers and engages them in the story. From the point of view of technique, the third-person narrative was and is the only formula for narrating folktales. The grandmother therefore takes on an external role in the story, as though a neutral commentator. She does not find it necessary to insert herself into the text that supposedly takes place before the present, as illustrated in the passage: “Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a little girl named Khayzaran.”

This new version of the story also takes into account children’s needs, containing an element of suspense that stimulates imagination and curiosity. He uses themes of adventure to introduce the element of suspense—adventure being a familiar folktale *leitmotif*—but ʿAbbasi does not do so directly. Rather, he takes the folktale and builds narrative modules on top of it, layering adventure symbolically not concretely. The search for the lost key, from this perspective, is equivalent to the search for the truth. The lost key is symbolic of what the Palestinian people lost during their displacement in 1948. All of this emphasizes ʿAbbasi’s conscious curation of popular heritage, transforming it from the fantastical to the real. He does not sever all ties with folk heritage, but seeks to bridge past and present, heritage and modernity.

Mustafa Murrar is another writer who exploits such narrator-related techniques, as we see in his short story “Al-Wuqūd” (Fuel) from the anthology *Al-Mashrūʿ.* Here, Safiya asks her father to tell her a story, to which he replies:

My beloved, my story tonight is the story of this land of goodness, this benevolent and generous land. As for you, with your love and smiling faces, I will overcome all obstacles. Once upon a time, once long ago, an old peasant man…

(*Al-Mashrūʿ* 17)

The story narrated by the grandfather is secondary to the main narrative and separate in terms of characters, times, and places. The grandfather narrates the story but does not participate in the events. At the end of the story, the narrator returns to the child, bringing the reader back to the main story.

Conjuring Up Traditional Characters in the 1988–2015 Period

The examples above suggest that during the 1988–2015 period, writers pursued diverse approaches rather than a single one when conjuring up traditional characters in their stories. Many children’s storywriters use characters as expressive tools for contemporary reality. They seek to convey their view of it and to express their own ideas through traditional characters. The writers’ approach to the deployment of traditional characters in this period differed according to their creative abilities and awareness of folk heritage. The writers were careful not to simply place traditional characters onto their narratives as unchanging icons, as had been done in the past. Instead, they aimed to modernize the characters, giving them attributes that matched the authors’ contemporary experiences.

Invoking the Traditional Characters of Hasan al-Shatir and the *Ghūl* in Stories for Children

As our examples indicate, many writers in this period were keen to introduce the youthful character of Hasan al-Shatir into their stories. They did not all use the same strategies or characters to accomplish this. Some use the character to retell traditional events in a new way, while others reformulate the character itself, transplanting it from the past to the present to interact with contemporary characters while simultaneously drawing on their traditional associations to make new and unique characters out of them. This allows writers to express their ideas about modern times while also facilitating communion between past and present. We will focus here on how the writers of this period dealt with the characters of Hasan al-Shatir and the *ghūl*, examining what techniques they use and what function the characters play in their tales.

The first story we raise here is Mahmud Shuqayr’s “Awlād Al-Ḥayy al-ʿAjīb” (The Children of the Wondrous Neighborhood). It places Hasan al-Shatir directly in the narrative, with all the folkish allusiveness involved in doing so. The writer is fully aware of the symbolism he invokes through this character and has a specific idea to convey thereby. Shuqayr aims to broaden the symbolic meanings of the character by relying heavily on the implicit folktale connotations, thereby artistically crystallizing a new personality for the character. The relationship between Hasan al-Shatir, who is portrayed as both a child character and a folk hero, and the character of Mahir is one of resemblance. Mahir dreams of transforming his neighborhood into one inhabited by many kings and queens:

Mahir and only Mahir takes it upon himself to transform the neighborhood into a wondrous one full of kings and queens. This happened after his grandmother told him the story of the smart lad Hasan, who could turn mountains into gold after opening his amazing book, reading a little of it and then asking it to turn mountains turn into gold. And lo and behold! The mountains do turn into gold.

(*Awlād Al-Ḥayy al-ʿAjīb*?)

The traditional character here has two faces: an ancient one that conjures up the past and a modern one inspired by how we see our own times. However, Shuqayr does not create the character of Hasan as one divided between past and present, but as one of inhabiting elements of antiquity and modernity simultaneously. He has the past and present communicate, as we see in this passage:

That night, clever young Hasan visit Mahir without his grandmother being aware of it. Nor did Mahir’s mother and father see clever young Hasan arrive while their son was getting ready for bed.

Mahir said to quick-witted Hassan: “Would you lend me your book for a day?”

Smart little Hasan smiled and said: “I’ll lend you it on one condition: That you do not use it to cause any harm to anyone.”

Mahir replied: “I can’t harm anyone. I want to turn the men of the neighborhood into kings and the women into queens.” Hasan liked that idea, so he lent the book to Mahir.

(*Awlād Al-Ḥayy al-ʿAjīb?*)

Here we see Shuqayr using the character of Hasan al-Shatir to symbolically express the desire to do away with the negative aspects of Mahir’s neighborhood.

The second story we examine in this context is Taghrid ʿArif al-Najjar’s “Ḥaṣan wal-Ghūl” (Hasan and the *Ghūl*). The title of this story can be interpreted in many ways and may be associated with another text, which can signal specific ideas to the reader. The title relates the present tale to its source, making the present the interacting context. Genette suggests that the functions of titles are seduction, definition, description, and/or suggestion and that the aim of a title is to enchant readers and direct their attention to it, thus encouraging them to read the tale itself (Yaqtin 111). The writer here uses highly suggestive symbolism by having Hasan in the title of his story. After that, incidents in the text reveal the supernatural dimensions of this character, alluding to a journey, adventure, and the hunt for the terrifying *ghūl*. The title’s association with folktale heritage may lead readers to expect an unreal story.

Despite his parents’ efforts to comfort him, Hasan was still consumed by fear:

“Not a single one of you have ever seen a *ghūl* before,

and not once heard its voice!

Yet you’re sure it exists and dread it indeed!

I will fear no more this *ghūl*, as you call it.

I will play and yell and laugh and clamber up the mountain too.

Tomorrow morning, I’ll begin my journey.

Don’t try to thwart my resolve!”

Hasan’s mother cried, begging him:

“Please! Please, my son!

Don’t go! I fear the *ghūl* will eat you up!”

(Al-Najjar?)

Al-Najjar also features the character of the *ghūl* in her story, but in a way contrary to traditional depictions. The *ghūl* in al-Najjar’s tale, in contrast to the conventional symbolism of ghūl characters, comes to fear humans.

The *ghūl* was as the villagers described it:

“It looks terrifying with thick hair and long and pointy claws, with one eye only in the middle of its forehead!”

Hasan’s blood froze with fear!

He wished he had believed what the villagers had told him and had never left his village.

The *ghūl* drew closer and closer to Hasan, then encircled him cautiously, and then suddenly ran away roaring!

Hassan followed the *ghūl* to his cave, crying out: “Oh *ghūūūūl*!”

Al-Najjar also draws on devices of the weird and supernatural through the character of young Hasan, who traps the terrifying *ghūl* after journeying in search of it:

Early in the morning, Hasan gathered up his supplies,

said goodbye to his parents and left the house.

The villagers gazed upon him with great interest.

Then someone whispered: “What a brave boy he is!

He will save us from the *ghūl*.”

But another replied: “I don’t think he will.

The *ghūl* will eat him up without a doubt!”

Hasan walked until he reached the mountain foot,

then began to climb, chanting over and over:

“I’m Hasan al-Shatir, the good and the brave!

I’m never afraid of *ghūls* for a minute!

I will never, ever, ever be afraid of a *ghūl*.” (Al-Najjar?)

Employing Folktale Features in Children’s Stories

Employing Traditional Opening Styles

Some writers are influenced by the formal structures of folktales in their own works, lending a folklore character to them. One example is Dima Sahwil’s 2006-published tale *Al-Amīr wal-ʿAjūz al-Ḥakīm* (The Prince and the Wise Old Man). Although the story is not directly inspired by folktales, the writer seeks to imitate their familiar narrative stylings, thus suggesting oral narration and summoning up the past for the reader. For example, “Once upon a time, in the ancient times of long ago [*Kān yā mā kān, fī sālif al-ʿasr wal-zamān*], there a greedy prince gulped down all kinds of food, leaving no room in his stomach” (Sahwil?). The beginning of Sonya Nimr’s 2011-published tale “Mukhtār Abu Dunayn Kibār” (2011) also mimics the familiar opening of folk tales: “Once upon a time, at a certain time [*Kān yā mā kān wa-fī zaman min al-azmān*], there was a boy named Mukhtar. He was intelligent, active, and full of ideas. He was kind, gentle, artistic, and talented with music and melody” (*Mukhtār?*). In similar vein, Muhammad Bidarna’s 1997-published “Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr” (Little Ahmad) begins in traditional style: “Oh honored gentlemen, oh woken ones and sleeping ones, after greetings and wishes for your tranquility [*Yā sāda yā kirām, yā ṣuḥā yā niyām, baʿd al-taḥayya wal-salām*] being carried on the wings of doves, I tell you the story of a brown-skinned child named Ahmad” (*Aḥmad?*).

Deploying Repetition in Tales for Children

Most writers used repetition as a technique in their stories in this period. The use of repetition in children’s stories in our corpus ranges from simple repetition—the most common being the simple reiteration of a word or phrase—to other, more complex forms. Repetition is a rhythmic element that suggests the importance of the words’ or phrases’ connotations. Repetition can play a highly expressive role in stories, which suggests the persistent governance of the idea expressed in it of the writer’s thought. In contemporary literary texts, repetition has both enhanced and degraded the aesthetic value of creative work. It possesses the same expressive potential as any other feature of literary texts, such as semantics, imagery, and so on. Maryam Hamad uses repetition in her 2011-published story “*Bābunj wa-Zaʿtar wa-Marmiya*” (Chamomile, and Thyme and Sage):

She is there in the **meadow** [*al-maraj*], and the **meadow** [*al-maraj*] is **far**, **far** away [*baʿīd baʿīd*] … and the road is rough and dangerous and surrounded by thorns, so who dares go there? The grandmother returns, saying over and over: “**Chamomile and thyme and sage, chamomile and thyme and sage, chamomile and thyme and sage** [*bābunj wa-zaʿtar, wa-marmiya bābunj wa-zaʿtar wa-marmiya, bābunj wa-zaʿtar wa-marmiya*].”

(*Bābunj*?)

The repetition here lends a rhythmic dimension to the text, as the reiteration of words constructs tuneful and expressive constructs that form an impression of the general scenario and crystallize the ideas within it. It achieves cohesion between the sentences and conveys the larger-than-life picture that the writer seeks to convey about the grandmother’s obsession with eating these herbs. Repetition serves both the meaning and the artistic structure, imbuing it with a particularly resonant elegance. Elsewhere, Bidarna uses repetition of numbers in “Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr”:

…But love is sown upon it, and goodness prevails among its people and Ahmad…has **four in years of age and seven in brothers and sisters** [*la-hu min al-ʿamr arbaʿa wa-min al-ikhwa wal-akhawāt sabaʿa*]. They lived in a small warm house and slept on a mattress on top of a mat.

(*Aḥmad?*)

The writer here uses numbers repetitively to consciously lodge “four” and “seven” in the child reader’s mind by emphasizing them in this way, as they have an import for the story.

The writers of this period tried to employ various features of folktales in their stories to imitate the traditional narrative structures, but in a somewhat different manner. For example, Nabiha Jabarin, in her 2007-published tale “*Al-Muhandisa al-Ṣaghīra Yārā*” (Yara, The Little Engineer Girl), tries to take the child back to olden days through stories told then. Such allusion embodies the benefits of drawing on popular heritage in form and content alike, as in the following passage:

My father said: “Gather round me and sit down and **I will tell you a lovely story about our childhood games** [*anā sa-aḥkī la-kum ḥikaya jamīla ʿan alʿābi-nā fil-ṭufūla*]. We sat around our father **and he told us a story that entertained us** [*fa-ḥakā la-nā ḥikayatusallī-nā*]. He said: ‘We, the neighborhood kids, met up one time to play together, and I loved the idea of construction as a profession…’

(*Al-Muhandisa?*)

Zada Salama also uses certain features of the folktale in her 2001-published story “*Jaddī wa-Ḥimār-uh*” (My Grandfather and His Donkey):

My father Fares named me after my grandfather because he loved and respected him. After the celebration ended and as was my custom when I visited my grandfather and grandmother, I refused to go home with my parents because I wanted to sleep next to my grandmother so that **one of them could tell me one of their enjoyable stories** [*li-yaḥkī lī aḥad-humā ḥikaya min ḥikayāti-h al-mumtiʿa*].

Another example comes from Muhammad Bidarna’s 1996-published “*Al-Shaykh wa-Ḥafīd-uh*” (The Sheikh and His Grandson): “Then Hassan tells the elephant **all the stories** [*kull al-ḥikayāt*] he heard from his grandfather during the day, and the elephant dances for her in joy” (*Al-Shaykh* 8).

Note that in these examples, the grandfather or grandmother is the one who tells the entertaining stories to their grandchildren. The recounting of folktales is a communication between grandparent and grandchild that echoes the past and sounds in the present.

Summary

We have seen that Palestinian children’s stories based on folktales from 1967 to 1988, while not changing the events and characters, mostly reformulated them in CA. It seems that conservative writing traditions demanded the use of a high-level, formal style of language. However, we found many echoes of the spoken vernacular represented in the popular phrases and vocabulary that remained in these texts.

Of the period that followed up to 2015, we observed that using folktales in this way was driven by the content and that the new and original texts were linked in order to make them compatible with the spirit of the times. The initial basic attempts were followed by more complex ones that went beyond a simple relationship with popular heritage in children’s stories, as we saw in the works of Muhammad Bidarna and Mahmud Shuqayr. Some writers tried to reflect the values and culture of their era in their stories. They modified the source texts to introduce concepts that were driven by modern education methods and to match the spirit of their own times.

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