

Full Length Research Paper

Children's literature in the new millennium: A review of research

Huda Al-Matrafi

Department of Foreign Languages, College of Arts, Taif University, P. O. Box 11099, Taif 21944, Saudi Arabia.

Received 3 February, 2023; Accepted 16 March, 2023

Children's literature is an indispensable educational tool that helps children develop essential competencies. It provides new knowledge about various life issues, enriches children's vocabulary, offers emotional support, and enhances communication skills. Traditional children's literature exposes children to circumstances they may face, such as stories of morality, education, ethics, and other realistic circumstances. However, current research shows a significant shift in children's literature in the new millennium. This shift has been occasioned by changes in social conditions and beliefs, technological advancements, and globalization. The effective changes in children's literature in the new millennium are evident in the emphasis on bold themes that are introduced through fantasy stories, realistic fiction, and classic stories. This review establishes how children's literature in the new millennium introduces new revolutionary themes that put emphasis on issues such as gender equality and sex education, including transgender education. Hence this review is crucial because it assesses the literature in global and the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) children's literature and provides recommendations for further research in the Arab context. It highlights the importance of how children's literature in the new millennium should enable children to understand new social realities and promote moral values, and to tie them to modern educational needs.

Key words: Arab children's literature, children's literature, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the new millennium, revolutionary themes.

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature provides new knowledge about various life issues, enriches children's vocabulary, offers emotional support, and enhances communication skills. Simpson and Cremin (2022) assert that children literature is vital in literacy development for children and assists young learners to enhance their learning abilities in their primary education and later in life. It creates significant

learning experiences capable of reversing patterns of failure in literacy achievement for young learners. It aids children's imagination in a spontaneous, interesting, and genuine manner, while boosting their cognitive and linguistic capabilities (Jailani et al., 2022). Moreover, children's literature, as Xin explains, "plays a significant role in shaping and representing cultural and national

E-mail: huda.m@tu.edu.sa. Tel: 00966555660393.

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identities" (Xin, 2022:359). It is an important avenue through which children assimilate society's values. It also instills an ideological foundation in young children. The ideologies attained at a young age are introduced and manifested from childhood to adulthood. Thus, it is vital to ensure that children get relevant literature that considers social and cultural values and knowledge acquisition. According to Attar (2017), there has been extensive debate on how children's literature should be changed to adapt to current trends, such as changing cultural phenomena, family relationships, and debates about morality and values. Children are also prepared to apply the issues they learn in literary works to their daily life (Pulimeno et al., 2020). These conflicting issues have taken center stage in children's literature. It is on these conflicting issues that there is a debate about content that is relevant for children worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving debate on gender roles has permeated children's literature in the 21st century. There has also been debate about the equality of the male and female gender. Most educationists, activists, and government agencies advocate for the education of these roles while young. However, they deviate from the traditional views. In the 20th century, most literary works targeting children were laden with inequalities in gender roles (Riman and Stojanović, 2018). For example, the men were portrayed as being more popular, powerful, and heroic than their female counterparts. Modern children's literature seeks to remedy this perception by preparing children with an intellectual disposition to deal with emerging phenomena and apply concepts learned in literature (Kersten et al., 2007). Notably, most literary works such as comics are aimed to portray a situation of equality between men and women. This is aimed to instill this mentality in children, which works to support equity among the genders.

There was a significant difference across gender in the children's literature works published between 1900 and 2000. Mermelstein (2018) indicates that out of the 6000 books assessed, 59% of the leading characters were male and 31% female. Also, the study found that 100% of the books contained male characters, while only 33% contained female characters. The implication was that female roles in literature were skewed in favor of men. The portrayal of females as lesser or weaker characters limits the goals of attaining equality. Instilling this mentality in children is dangerous, limits their thinking, and helps perpetuate gender stereotyping. The 21st century literature has highlighted these challenges. It is possible to find female superheroes in comics, fiction, and fantasy works. This enhances the role of women from a children's perspective and readies them to accept gender equity as a pillar of modern society.

Another significant issue that has attracted researchers

of children's literature is sex education. For a long time, sex education has been limited, especially for young children. However, the growth of gender and sexual activism has raised the need to educate children on these matters (Kurtuncu et al., 2015). For example, children are exposed to sexual materials early through online sources, television, and films. As such, they become curious early enough so that traditional literature cannot support it. Modern literature seeks to introduce children to sexual issues while maintaining sensitivity to age. Sex education, as illustrated in literary works, enables children to understand their gender at a young age and appreciate gender differences related to sex. With this information, children can understand their development and enhance their sexual health as they grow.

The issues of sex education are closely related to sexual orientation. The debate about sexual orientation has permeated society widely in the 21st century (Stephens, 2013). Children are exposed to the debate and read various literary works with such themes. A critical debate has been on same-sex relationships. Some societies and governments have portrayed same-sex relationships as a matter of human rights and basic liberties (Stephens, 2013). Such matter is particularly dangerous to children's minds; nevertheless, research shows that these issues have found their way into children's literature in various ways. Several comics and films target children and portray same-sex relationships. Another important example is the debate in the United States on the inclusion of transgender education or concepts in formal education. It is a matter of time before these issues are widely accepted and implemented in children's literature. With the rise of sales of children's books, the themes have introduced diversity in the conceptions of our world.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE ARAB WORLD

Arab children's literature is well developed. It portrays Arabic culture, values, and traditions. These literary works often consider Arabs as individuals who are bound by tradition and cultural tenets. The major aspects of culture include traditions and ways of life, such as clothing, family relationships, and gender (Thomure et al., 2020). Scholars indicate that Arab children's literature is also loaded with bias, stereotypic views, and ideological conflicts. The objective of literature is to mould children according to the needs of society and to motivate and boost children's cognitive functions.

Scholars depict Arabic literature as being deeply rooted in religion. Most literary works are targeted at glorifying and supporting Islam as the only true religion. The children are taught to indulge their Islamic values when facing serious issues that require decision making. Values such as obedience, respect, and support for the poor are emphasized (Riman and Stojanović, 2018). The

values represented in such works emanate from religious teachings—mainly from the Quran. Such literature indicates that children should be raised religiously and guided by the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Notably, most Arab children's books will refer to religious teachings or use a theme related to a religious story. The implication is that children become grounded in religion at a young age and are expected to carry on with these teachings into adulthood.

Another aspect of research on Arab children's literature relates to culture. Arabic culture comprises family values, role relationships, and gender issues (Aisawi and Addhafeeri, 2017). Most Arab children's literature focuses on the family as the basic unit of society. They consider the specific role of each member of the family. Arabic culture has a rigid family structure with clearly defined roles. The children are taught that the father is the head of the family and takes care of all family needs, and the mother is the assistant and supports all household functions. The children are required to obey and respect their parents and elders. Such teaching is acceptable and advised, but children's literature should also be up to date, and there needs to be more effort to change or adapt to modern realities and equality, such as the image of the working professional mother.

Arabic literature has undergone limited research in the 21st century. Society is portrayed as rigid, and needs to help to adapt children's education to match the emerging needs of society. Countries in the Arab world mainly focus on ensuring children are not infiltrated with western values brought about by globalization (Thomure et al., 2020). There is an obvious lack of enthusiasm for teaching children about fundamental and emerging issues such as human rights, sexual orientation, and gender equality. This is due to society's traditional and religious background; thus, it fears that such literary work would corrupt their children and they might abandon their faith and cultural beliefs. These considerations may limit Arab children's chances of integrating with global communities of different cultures.

Hence, the limitations in the development of children's literature in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) result from society's deliberately protective measures. These Arab societies have determined that modern children's literature especially that propagated by the west, is detrimental to their culture and religion. They contend that adopting foreign cultures may erode their Islamic beliefs and entrench their children in a secular way of life. According to Mdallel (2003), development in Arab children's literature is limited by some protective measures. The argument for such protection is that Arabs consider any changes to children's literature as emanating from cultures that do not have commonality with their own. As such, they consider it an intrusion that may lead to the corruption of their culture followed by assimilation into a foreign culture. This perspective needs more efforts to revamp children's literature in the Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC) countries— however, with some degree of caution, particularly that related sexual matters.

Arab children's literature needs to catch up in creativity, messaging, and relevance. According to Thomure et al. (2020), Arab children's literature is complex and full of information that children may need help with to decipher. Such literature is laden with teachings and religious and cultural connotations that children at a young age may not be able to understand. Also, the lack of entertainment value makes the literature "boring" for children. Overemphasis on morality and prescriptive text and religion complicate learning for children, and their enthusiasm for study may wane. This is in contrast to western cultures where children's literature aims at entertainment, and educational information is presented to children so that they can relate to such comics and animated films.

SUGGESTION TO THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) ON CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

As noted, the children's literature in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is laden with cultural issues, religion, and morality. These issues are presented in a complex manner that may be hard to interpret among young children. A key recommendation to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is to research how the content can be eased into simpler forms attractive to children (Thomure et al., 2020). Some forms of content that children may be exposed to include short films containing both entertainment and educational elements. Examples include using cartoons or animated films to showcase various scenarios that educators want to expose children to, and offering simpler explanations. Such methods interest children, heighten their enthusiasm for reading, and communicate the intended message.

Another research recommendation for the Gulf Cooperation Council's children's literature is to compare the literary works of the Arab countries with those of the rest of the world. With globalization, it is paramount to assess and align children's literature with that of the rest of the world. For instance, the west aims at the holistic development of the child.

Comparing such literary works may demonstrate the enlightenment of the culture of the other, and therefore the child would have some kind of vision of new issues circulating in this globalized world, but in a manner that is moralistic and that does not conflict with their religion. With sufficient authorization, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries can translate and edit popular literary materials such as comic books (Riman and Stojanović, 2018). An important aspect to note is that research should assess the impact of implementing multicultural issues and themes in Arab children's literature. In other words, it is important to bring awareness to young children

through art in this part of the world; however, it should not clash with religious teachings and values.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has demonstrated the evolution of children's literature in the 21st century. The century has witnessed significant cultural, technological, and social developments affecting children's education. This review has assessed global and the Gulf Cooperation Council's children's literature and provided important recommendations for further research in the Arab context. The world has responded to such developments by changing and adapting new children's literature so that it resonates with emerging realities. For example, the rise of activism on human rights, gender, and sexual orientation has manifested in children's literature. Modern literature is awash with content depicting human rights, equality between genders, and same-sex relationships which may threaten to violate religious teachings. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries should emphasize religion, culture, and morality through new issues in children's literature; issues that are bold and keep up with the changing world. These issues should be considered seriously and discussed openly with the children of these societies so that they can be conscious of the world around them. Unfortunately, the Arab world has desisted from changing children's literature to adapt to the changing situations. With globalization, countries need to invest more in research on children's literature to encompass the new global realities in their teachings. The discussion offers recommendations for research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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