

A Critique of the Cultural Authenticity of Arabic Young Adult Literature

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Abstract :

This paper is the first in its kind as it declares the emergence of Arabic Young Adult Literature (in English) as an independent genre - literature texts written about Arab children ages 12-20. More importantly, this study establishes, for the first time, a teacher-friendly criterion of the key characteristics of “culturally authentic” Arabic young adult texts. Additionally, the study highlights the value of integrating Arabic Young Adult Literature (AYAL) texts (in English) into the English language arts curriculum in Arabic and non-Arabic speaking countries.

المُلخَص :

لعل هذه الدراسة هي الأولى من نوعها لأنها تعلن ظهور الأدب العربي الخاص بالمراهقين العرب (باللغة الانجليزية) - نصوص أدبية موجهة الى الاطفال الذين تتراوح أعمارهم 12-20 سنة. الأهم من ذلك , تُحدد هذه الدراسة ولأول مرة معايير و خصائص النصوص الادبية " الاصلية ثقافياً". و بالاضافة الى ذلك, فإن الدراسة تسلط الضوء على قيمة دمج هذه النصوص الادبية في مناهج اللغة الانجليزية في البلدان الناطقة باللغة العربية وغير الناطقة بالعربية.

In this paper, I will focus on the study of Arabic young adult literature (in English). Since English language is widely considered the lingua franca of today's world, the availability of Arabic Young Adult Literature (AYAL) texts in English is essential. Additionally, the availability of the texts in the English version may facilitate the use of such novels in classroom settings in Arabic and non-Arabic speaking courtiers. For the purposes of the present study I define Arabic young adult literature (AYAL) as any literary piece that has been written in English or has been made available in English translation about Arab adolescents and young adults. Whether written by Arab or non-Arab authors.

Historically, Arabic literature has long been a rich source of knowledge and entertainment in the Arab world. Perhaps the most well-known example is *One Thousand and One Nights*. However, there appears to be a shortage of readily available contemporary Arabic literature for modern readers of any age, including young adults, particularly in the genre of fictional prose. Traditionally, Arabs relied heavily on retelling the entertaining parts of more educational works or one of the many Arabic fables or folktales which were not usually transcribed. In the past, there have been only a few fictional stories set down in writing for Arab readers. On the other hand, the status of Arabic writing has changed dramatically during the 20th century; a revival took place in the Arab world, with a growing interest in writing and translating Arabic works into European languages. In an increasingly globalized world, literature in translation has an especially important role. Increasingly, writers, readers and publishers are turning to literature as a bridge between cultures, particularly estranged Western and Arab societies. This growing interest is, in turn, driving a boom in translation as well as a revival in writing books about Arabs and Muslims in English and European languages.

The idea of examining and classifying literary pieces as Arabic young adult literature began to emerge after I have encountered frequent difficulties in finding literature books about Arab young adults and adolescents either written in English or made available in English translation. This interest, however, was accompanied by considerable frustration because of the lack of necessary resources for

the study of Arabic literature in general and YA in particular. I became very determined to search for the currently available AYAL. As my search began, I scanned information in what seemed like endless numbers of databases, websites, journals, magazines, and public and university libraries. Painfully, it was very obvious that there are relatively few books written that might be categorized as young adult literature for Arab young adults. In total, I found fewer than a hundred books about Arab young adults, and these were primarily written by non-Arab authors. Furthermore, I was unable to locate any studies or attempts to define or examine the main characteristics and categories of culturally authentic Arabic young adult literature. As I discovered that non-Arab authors were writing most of the novels, I became concerned with the textual authenticity of the books that were available. Was the available AYAL accurately representing the concerns and values of real Arab teens? Were these books avoiding common stereotypes of Arab people? Or were they just reinforcing simplified and discriminatory notions of Arabs as “camel riders” and terrorists?

Therefore, in addition to simply seeking out texts, my project took on a second, perhaps more important, goal: to critique the cultural authenticity of available AYAL and through wide reading and content analysis, establish a teacher-friendly criterion of the key characteristics of “culturally authentic” texts. Additionally, I resolved to provide suggestions for teachers are concerning the integration of Arabic young adult literature into the English language arts curriculum in Arabic and non-Arabic speaking countries.

Characteristics of Authentic Arabic Literature

Although significant efforts were directed towards writing literature books about Arabs particularly about Arab children and young adults, they are not seen by many critics as authentic representations of the Arabic culture. In a 2004 interviews, Hachem Moawiya, head of Avicenne in Paris, one of Europe’s biggest bookstores devoted to Arab authors, claimed that “Since 9/11, books that deal with Arabic and Islamic issues have abounded. But they are often written by European experts and present a false image of the Arab world” (Pommereau, de, Isabelle, 2004). In a similar interview, educator Mr. Ripken noted, “there is not only very latent but also very manifest racism when it comes to Arabic literature,” he added, “That’s why it’s

so important to read books by Arabic authors, because they have a different perspective than the Arab ‘experts’ who explain the Arab world to us” (Pommereau, de, Isabelle, 2004). One might infer that it is a necessity to read and examine literary works written by authors from the Arabic culture.

According to Landt (2006) “Cultural authenticity_ the accuracy of the language, customs, values, and history of the culture can be difficult, if not impossible, to determine if one is not familiar with the culture depicted” (p. 38). In fact, there is a debate over whether only authors from a culture are qualified to write about their culture. This question seems simple, but its answer is too controversial especially when Arabic culture is the core of discussion. The Arab world consists of 24 countries with diverse political, geographical, historical, economical, social, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Henderson challenged us more in his essay *Authenticity and Accuracy: The Continuing Debate*, when he asked “...are the writer’s cultural origin and perspective the only elements that make a good story? Can a story be authentic if the writer does not recognize and relate to those cultural traditions that make multidimensional characters?” (Henderson & May, 2005, p. 267). Henderson responded to these questions by stating that “authors who write outside their own cultural experiences often cite artistic freedom among their decisions to write such stories” (p. 267). He added, “Some authors further defend their right to produce such texts by suggesting that if writers were only allowed to write from their own cultural experiences, their productivity and imaginative freedoms would be limited” (p. 267). Woodson, an award-winning African American writer, addressed this topic of people writing outside of their experiences, stating, “My hope is that those who write about the tears and the laughter and the language in my grandmother’s house have first sat down at the table with us and dipped the bread of their own experiences into our stew.”(Landt, 2006, p.38)

Then, who decides the authenticity of a book? Some critics argue that “A culturally authentic book is one in which the details truthfully represent the culture as determined by a member of that culture” (Loh, 2006, p. 40). I have found that, even when living within a culture, people have differences of opinion about authenticity and cultural sensitivity when their culture is portrayed in a book. I have found that even when a book is culturally authentic there can be

disagreements as to its sensitivity both by people of the culture and outside the culture.

As a researcher and a member of the Arabic culture who read and examined many of the available books written for and about Arab young adults, I assume that most of the young adult books written by non-Arab authors only report observable details with relatively low sensitivity to the lived experiences and complex cultural matrices of Arabic history, values, beliefs, and traditions. The authors of such books sometimes do not make the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit the Arabic culture. *A Stone in My Hand* by Clinton is a story about Palestinian adolescents who seek for their freedom; Clinton reports observable details only with no sensitivity to the lived experiences and cultural matrix of the Palestinian history, values, beliefs, and traditions. No single Arabic word was spelled in the entire story, an essential element of authentic multicultural literature. While some other texts, written by non-Arab authors, spell some Arabic words incorrectly, (e.g., Mahshi instead of MaHshi, with emphatic sound of 'h', in *Figs and Fate* by Marston). Ideally, the Arabic YA book should be one that is of interest to Arab children and is written by "talented" people from that cultural designation. (e.g., *Habibi*, the awards winner novel about an Arab teenager Liyana by the Arab-American writer and poet Naomi Shihab Nye. *All that left to You*, is a fascinating short story by the immigrant Arab novelist Ghasan Kanafani). Unfortunately, very few of the authors of the available Arabic YA books are from the Arabic culture, and the list of YA books will dwindle to almost nothing if this standard was enforced. Therefore, until there is an abundance of YA books created by Arab artists and authors that can be available for Arab children, we must look for those that are the best of those available.

In order for teachers to distinguish among texts that misrepresent and romanticize versus those that are more culturally "authentic", it is helpful to consult Arab authors themselves. Indeed, the perspectives of Arab critics and theorists can enrich our appreciation of such literature. Furthermore, Horning and Kruse suggest that "adults who select and share books for children set goals beyond accumulating multicultural books and search diligently for outstanding literature" (as cited in Henderson & May, 2005, p. 284). I believe these guidelines apply to the Arabic YA books. Moreover, Woodson (1998) suggested a number of factors to think about when

selecting multicultural books for students. Many of these are the same as with any Arabic young adult book:

- The accurate portrayal of the culture or cultures depicted in the book includes not only physical characteristics such as clothing and food, but relationships among people within the culture and with people of different cultures.
- There is diversity within the culture; characters are unique individuals, not stereotypical representatives.
- Dialogue is culturally authentic with characters using speech that accurately represents their oral traditions. Non-English words are spelled and used correctly.
- Realistic social issues and problems are depicted frankly and accurately without oversimplification.
- Minority characters are shown as leaders within their community able to solve their own problems. Cultural minorities do not play a supporting or subservient role while whites are seen as possessing all the power (Landt, 2006, p. 695).

Paying attention to these factors of “good” multicultural literature would facilitate the best selection of “authentic” Arabic young adult books. Furthermore, the availability of some or most of the following themes and characteristics in a literary work would add to its sensitivity to the Arabic culture and people.

Common Themes in Arabic YA Literature

I developed a set of characteristics and themes that I found typical in most of the existing Arabic young adult texts. This criterion has mainly emerged after I have thoroughly read, examined, and critiqued several acclaimed Arabic young adult books written by Arab or non-Arab authors. Some of the major themes in classical Arabic literature would deal with family togetherness, Heroism, and Supernatural elements. However, the Western-Eastern conflicts post 9/11, and the Middle Eastern struggles (e.g., Palestinian cause, Iraq wars...) become the dominant themes in Modern Arabic literature. I have found that the availability of some or most of the following characteristics and themes in a text would add to the sensitivity and the authenticity of the Arabic young adult literature. The list includes, but is not limited to the following distinguishing features:

➤ The Middle Eastern conflicts: wars in the Middle East form the backdrop for the majority of literature written since 1950s till today. The war of 1948 in Palestine, as a result of which the state of Israel emerged, created a sense of shock and consequent unity which has maintained the plight of the Palestinian people as the major topic of Arab litterateurs throughout the Arabic-speaking region. The Palestinian cause became “the primary motivating factor for the emergence in the Arab World of literary rallying cry known as *Iltizam/commitment* since 1950s” (Allen, Roger, 2004, p.ix). Even today, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict forms the backdrop for a number of children’s novels. Shihab Nye’s *Habib*, 1997 is one among tens of books as a result of this movement (e.g., *Samir and Yonatan*, 2000 by Daniella Carmi; *A little Piece of Ground* 2006, by Elizabeth Laird...). While the wars in Iraq become the major topic in some young adult novels like *Gulf*, 1992 by Westall; *Kiss the Dust*, 1991 by Elizabeth Laird. Whilst *The bullet collection: A novel*, 2003, by Patricia Sarrafian Ward reflects the life in the war-torn Beirut.

➤ Coming of age and discovering ones’ identity: immigrant children who live outside their home countries struggle to fit in the new culture at this changing age. (e.g., *Figs and Fate: Stories about growing up in the Arab world today*, 2005, by Elesa Marston; *Learning English*, 2007, by Rachid al-Daif; *Habibi*, Naomi Shihab Nye, 1997).

➤ Family and community are stressed: togetherness and brotherhood among family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors, leading towards mutual help, communal support, and collective wisdom (e.g., *Seven Daughters and Seven Sons*, 1994, by Barbara Cohen; *Habibi*, 1997, by Naomi Shihab Nye; *Figs and Fate: Stories About Growing up in the Arab World Today*, 2005, by Elsa Marston).

➤ Novels mirror contemporary family structures: although reverence for parents and the elderly is highly encouraged, some modern novels reflect conflicts between tradition and pop or contemporary culture which may result in rebellion against parental and/or cultural constraints (e.g., *Habibi*, 1997, by Naomi Shihab Nye; *Figs and Fate*, 2004, by Elesa Marstom; *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*, 2007, by Susan Muaddi Darraj ...).

➤ Modern novels include stories of adjustment: homesickness, adjustment and assimilation to a new life encountering feelings of isolation, loneliness, and poverty. For the stereotypes that describe Arabs as “terrorists” specifically after 9/11 attack, a number of

modern novels emerged to address the problems that face Arab/Muslim adolescents who live outside their home countries (e.g., *The Woman that I left Behind*, 2006, by Kim Jensen; *Muslim teens in pitfalls and pranks*, 2008 by Maryam Mahmoodian; *The Road to Chlifa*, 1995, by Michele Marineau; *The Bullet Collection: A novel*, 2003, by Patricia Sarrafian Ward; *Arab in America*, 2007, by Toufic El Rassi).

➤ Westren-Eastren conflicts: the tension between town and country is parallel to, and often connected with, that between East and West or Arab and European, for the town is a modern town that has seen a measure of westernization both topographically and socially (e.g., Sayyid Qutb's *autobiography, A child from the village*, 2004). The attempt to define one's self in relation to the other covers a wide spectrum, ranging from a critical stance towards the ridiculous blind imitation of the outward forms and trappings of Western manners, to a deeply concerned involvement with profound foreign intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic influences. Young adults struggle to modernize and retain their identity. (e.g., *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds*, 2002, by Safi Abdi; *Man from the East*, 2001, by Mohsen El-Guindy; *The Bbullet Cllection: A novel*, 2003, by Patricia Sarrafian Ward; *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly*, 2007, by Susan Muaddi Darraj).

➤ Stories contain religious beliefs and behaviors: an Arab's faith in Allah is strongly reflected in children's and YA stories passed down throughout the generations. In a large number of these stories, the hero is said to act according to Alla's will. For instance, a poor child accepts his poverty because it is his destiny decided by God. In addition, God also punishes the evil characters that cause trouble for the main protagonists. All Islamic fiction stories contain this theme (e.g., *Does My Head look Big in This?* 2007, by Randa; Taha Husain's autobiography, *An Egyptian childhood*, 1992; *The Army of Lions*, 1998, by Qasim Najar; *Ahmed Deen And The Jinn At Shaolin*, 1998, Yahya John Emerick).

➤ The ruler of the country is regarded an oppressive figure: in most stories, he is the ultimate ruler whose will is never questioned by the public. The authority possesses army and has total power over anyone in its country. Imprisonment and torture and even political assassination became important topics in the Arab novel. Noble prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz addresses the tragedy of the absence of

freedom and the devastating effects that the deprivation of the Egyptian individual's basic rights had on the entire nation in his novel *Al-Karnak*. At the same time many Syrian and Lebanese novels address their oppressive authorities (e.g., *A hand full of stars*, 1992 by Schami, Rafik; *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, 2007, by Sinan Antoon.

➤ Call for national liberation from colonizers (Western occupation): For many nations the struggle for independence, revolution, social change, economic development and confrontations with former colonizers and new world powers have all provided vehicle for literary work. Arabic literature is perhaps one of very few literary traditions that have a distinct literary genre known as the "prison novel". This is not only because a great majority of writers have themselves lived the experience of arrest, imprisonment, and even torture, but also because the history of the contemporary Arab intellectual is one of constant struggle with the authorities. Many autobiographies were also subjected to censorship and confiscation, and this persecution forced many to migrate by making it difficult for them to live a decent life in their own country; most of their rights had been violated and destroyed. Thus, one of the most recurrent and haunting themes is the authors' passionate cry for freedom under authoritarian rule. Many African (Moroccan, Algerian, Sudanese...) novels address the colonizer's imposition of their French language rather than Arabic. Forcing the use of French language was the means of the spiritual subjugation. (e.g., *The Year of the Elephant* is one of the few Moroccan rebellious books that was written in Arabic). There are indeed many works, by the best Modern Arab authors, which incorporate several of these recurrent themes together. One may mention as examples, although they were not shelved in young adult section, *Season of Migration to the North* by the Sudanese al-Tayyib Salih (1967) or more recently the novels *Qadar al-Ghuraf al-Muq'bida* (The Fate of Depressing Rooms, 1982) by the late Egyptian 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim (1935-90), or the 5-volume *Cities of Salt* (1984-89) by the Saudi 'Abd al-Rahman Munif (b. 1933). Two important Syrian novelists, Khayri al-Dhahabi and Nabil Suleyman, link these issues of freedom, prison, and political oppression with the social and political history of Syria and with the many cultural changes that took place over half a century through the fight for independence and the contradictory tribulations following independence.

➤ Supernatural elements shape human behavior: supernatural element is a very important aspect especially in classical Arabic YA literature. Jinn, Jinniyeh, Ifreet, Ghouls, Ghouleh, Giants, and Angels are some of the supernatural creatures that appear frequently. There are two kinds of forces that control human beings: good forces, including Alla and angels, and evil forces, such as Jinn and Ghouls. Good forces are thought to be more powerful than evil forces. In addition to supernatural elements, Arabic folktales include magical elements that, most of the time, help the hero achieve his goals. Examples of such elements include a ring, three hairs of a horse, a crystal ball, slippers, and a flying carpet. (e.g., *Kalil and Dimnah: Stories for Young Adults*, by Anonymous author, 2000; *Rumi Stories for Young Adults*, by Rumi, Jalal al-Din, 2000 ; *Attar Stories for Young Adults*, by Attar, Farid al-din, 2000; *Saadi stories for young adults*, by Saadi, Muslih al-Din, & Azaryazdi, Mehdi, 2000. The tales of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad in the *Thousand and One Nights* are very good examples that contains supernatural elements (e.g., *Aladdin and the lamp*, 1995, by Denys Johnson-Davies and Walid Taher). Other good examples are *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt*, 2002, by Sir Gaston Maspero; *Arab Folk Tales From Palestine and Lebanon: Abu Jameela's Daughter and Other Stories*, 2002, by Jamal Sleem Nuweihed.

➤ Heroism fits within Arabic history: since the tribal structure was the nucleus of social and political life for a very long period in Arabic history, the values of such a culture influenced the Arabic novels in general. Very often, hospitality and kindness to guests and strangers is essential for being respectful adolescents. Values such as courage, honesty, honor, hospitality, generosity, and loyalty are emphasized. Moreover, the hero is defined by characteristics such as pride, bravery in war, protecting the weak, and helping the poor. Even in Modern young adult literature these cultural values are emphasized (e.g., *Figs and Fate*, by Elesya Marston, 2004; *Sanat Claus in Baghdad and Other Short Stories*, by Elesya Marston, 2008; *In the Name of God*, 2007, by Paula Jolin.

➤ Males and females maintain gender specific relationships within Arabic society: the stories display the social values that the Arabs have in common and discuss the position and roles of men and women in society. A woman is portrayed in traditional Arabic YA novels as a dependent person who needs protection by her man, such as her

father, brother, son, husband, or uncle. The female adolescents, for example, are expected to prepare a variety of Arabic dishes and deserts to honor their relatives, and guests. The female adolescent's honor is in her virginity before getting married and in her loyalty to her husband afterwards. A good example of this unique Islamic marital relationship is expressed through the true story of *Shah Jahan & The Story of Taj Mahal*, by Marshall, Julia, & Ullathorne, Joan, 1996.

➤ Cultural morals that preserve Arabic culture are included: most of the children's and YA stories have morals, mostly taken from the Qura'n and Sunnah that teach the reader right from wrong. Some of the common morals are "patience is the key for success," "satisfaction and contentment keep you out of trouble," "loyalty is always rewarded," and "stealing is usually discovered and punished." These lessons are meant to enhance and preserve the set of values that comprise Arab culture and make it unique. (e.g., *The Fabulous Adventures of Nasruddin Hoja* (The Arabs call Hoja, Joha) edited by Abdassamad Clarke; *Tales of Juha: Classic Arab folk Humor*, 2007, by Salma Khadra Jayyusi; *Yemeni Folk Tales: From the Land of Sheba*, 2005, by Carolyn Han. Also the stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad in the *Thousand and One Nights* contain morals and life lessons...; 'Truth' is one of the major themes in the Nobel Prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz's *Fountain and Tomb*, 1998).

The Place of YA Literature in Classroom Instruction

Educational studies have shown that children's literature has long been used by "good" teachers to augment classroom instruction (Monseau, 2000). I believe that the inclusion of culturally authentic Arabic young adult literature in the secondary classroom, whether that classroom be in the US (or other Western nation) or in an Arab country, can have positive effects on teen readers, ranging from increasing their eagerness to read, to building critical thinking skills, to fostering mutual understanding and respect across countries and cultures. In a time when many movies and books stereotype Arab people as backward, violent fanatics, culturally authentic texts which portray the complete range of Arab life with all its beauty and human compassion, even during a time of warfare and aggressive political struggles, might just open the eyes and minds of contemporary teens.

Conclusion

In order for students and teachers to encounter high-quality Arabic young adult literature with a range of perspectives, it must be made available to them in a way that matches their needs and interests. Therefore this paper presented criteria and guidelines for selecting culturally authentic Arabic young adult literature texts. And most importantly, examined the major themes and distinguishing characteristics of authentic AYAL texts. For example, some of the typical themes in classical Arabic literature include family togetherness, heroism, and supernatural elements. However, Western-Eastern conflicts and contemporary Middle Eastern struggles (e.g., the Palestinian cause and Iraq wars) have become dominant themes in contemporary Arabic literature.

In conclusion, although there will continually be controversy concerning the ability of authors from outside the culture to authentically characterize the Arabs, we must make good choices from the books that are currently available. My ideal definition of cultural integrity cannot always be met because there are not many Arabic YA books created by an author from the culture. We must develop sensitivity when choosing Arabic YA books by developing an understanding of the culture. According to Mahurt, “adults choosing books must read widely within the culture’s literature and be more selective” (Henderson & May, 2005, p. 284) She added by quoting Bishop who suggested that evaluators of ethnic literature must be familiar with a body of work about a people. They should read a wide range of books to develop an awareness of that culture. Furthermore, Bishop (1991) believes that “authors and illustrators from a community will help those outside develop a deeper understanding of life experiences, beliefs, and values of the culture” (as cited in Henderson & May, 2005, p. 284). Though the wheels of producing authentic Arabic young adult literature turn slowly, they do continue to turn, thanks to authors and educators who are willing to work to effect change.

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