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## **Reconstructing Childhood: Children's Literature in the New Millennium**

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### **Abstract**

Children's literature is an important educational tool that enables children to learn important skills. It exposes children to new information about many challenging situations, enhances their vocabulary, gives emotional support, and improves their communication skills. Traditional children's literature exposes children to situations they may encounter, such as morality, education, ethics, and other practical situations. The present study, however, indicates a dramatic shift in children's literature in the new century. As a result, changes in social conditions and attitudes, technical improvements, and globalization have all contributed to the transition. The emphasis on daring ideas brought through fantasy novels, realistic fiction, and classic stories exemplifies the effective improvements in children's literature in this new millennium. This study discusses how new-century children's literature introduces new revolutionary themes that lay a strong emphasis on subjects such as gender equality, sex education and even transgender education. Hence, this work is crucial because it assesses the literature on global and GCC (The Gulf Cooperation Council) levels. Children's literature 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, promote moral values and tie them to modern educational needs.

**Keywords:** *Arab children's literature, Children's literature, the Gulf Cooperation Council, The new millennium, Revolutionary themes*

### **Introduction**

Children's literature is an important avenue through which children assimilate societal values. It also builds an ideological foundation in young children. The ideologies acquired at a young age are dispersed and manifested from childhood to adulthood. Thus, it is vital to ensure 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 shaped 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. These conflicting issues have formed the center stage of children's literature. It is upon these conflicting issues that there is a debate about the content that is relevant for children worldwide.

The evolving debate on gender roles has permeated children's literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides, there has 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, most literary works targeting children were laden with inequalities in gender roles (Kersten et al., 2007). For example, the men were portrayed as more popular, powerful, and heroic than their female counterparts. Modern children's literature seeks to absolve this situation 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 geared towards posing a situation of equality between men and women. This is aimed at instilling 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. Janice McCabe indicates that out of the 6000 books assessed, 575 of the leading characters were male and 31 females. Also, the study found that 100% of the books contained male characters, while only 33% contained female characters (McCabe, 2011). The implication was that female roles in literature were dwarfed in favor of men. Also, the portrayal of females as lesser or weaker characters limits the goals of attaining equality. Instilling this mentality in children is dangerous as it limits their thinking and helps perpetuate gender stereotyping. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature has highlighted these challenges. It is possible to seek female superheroes in comics, fiction, and fantasy works. This enhances the role of women in 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, sexual 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 gain curiosity early enough that traditional literature cannot support it. Modern literature seeks to introduce children to sexual issues while maintaining sensitivity to age. Sexual 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. Hence, the debate about sexual orientation has permeated society widely in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Stephens, 2013). Children are exposed to the debate and watch various literary works with such themes. A critical debate has been on same-sex relationships. Societies and governments have portrayed same-sex relationships as a matter of human rights and basic liberties (Stephens, 2013). Such matter is significantly dangerous to young 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 pose same-sex relationships. Another crucial example is the debate in the United States on including 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 the sales of children's books, the themes have introduced diversity in the conceptions of our world.

### **Children's Literature in the Arab World**

Children's literature in the Arab world is highly developed. It portrays Arab culture, values, and traditions. The works often consider Arabs as individuals who are bound to tradition and cultural tenets. Besides, the major aspects of culture include traditions and ways of life, such as clothing, family relationships, and gender (Kreidieh et al., 2015). Scholars indicate that Arab children's literature is also loaded with bias, stereotypic views, and ideological conflicts. The objective of literature is to motivate, and mold children according to the needs of society and boost children's cognitive functions.

Scholars reflect that Arab literature is deeply rooted in religion. Most of the 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 situations that require decision-making. Also, the values such as obedience, respect, and support for the poor are emphasized (Kersten et al., 2007). The values represented in such works emanate from religious teachings mainly 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 make a theme related to a religious story. The implication is that children get grounded in religion at a young age and are expected to carry on with the teachings into adulthood.

Another aspect of research on Arab children's literature relates to culture. Arab culture comprises family values, role relationships, and gender issues (Aisawi & Addhafeeri, 2017). Hence, most Arab children's literature focuses on the family as a basic unit of society. They consider the basic roles of each member of the family. The Arab culture has a rigid family structure with 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 chores. The children are required to obey and respect their parents and elders, such teaching is acceptable and rather advised, however, 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.

Arab literature has undergone limited research in the 21st century. Society is portrayed as rigid and needs help to adapt children's education to match the emerging needs of society. The countries in the Arab world mainly focus on ensuring children are not infiltrated by Western values brought about by globalization (Kreidieh et al. 2015). There is a clear lack of enthusiasm to teach children about fundamental and emerging issues such as human rights, sexual orientation, and gender equality. This is due to the society's traditional and religious background; thus, it fears that such literary work would corrupt the children into abandoning their faith and cultural beliefs. However, these considerations may limit Arab children the chances to integrate with global communities in forums of different cultures.

Hence, the limitations of the development of children's literature in GCC result from the societal deliberate protective measures. These Arab societies have determined that modern children's literature, especially those propagated by the West, is detrimental to their culture and religion. They contend that adopting foreign cultures may erode their Islamic beliefs and root their children in a secular way of life. According to Mdalle (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 a commonality with their culture. As such, they consider it an intrusion that may lead to the corruption of their culture and later assimilation into a foreign culture. This perspective needs more efforts to revamp children's literature in the GCC countries, however with caution.

Arabic children's literature needs to catch up in creativity, messaging, and relevance. According to Kreidieh et al. (2015), Arabic children's literature is complex and full of information that children may need help decipher. Such literature is laden with teachings and religious and cultural connotations that children at a young age may not decipher. Also, the lack of entertaining aspects makes the literature "boring" for children. Overemphasis on morality and descriptive text and religions complicate learning for children, and their enthusiasm to study may fall. This is contrasted with the Western cultures where children's literature aims at entertainment, and educational information is presented so children can relate to such comics and animated films.

**Suggestion to GCC on Children's Literature**

As noted, the children's literature in the 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 GCC is to research how the content can be eased and separated into simpler forms attractive to children (Kreidieh, 2015). Some forms of content that may be exposed to children include short films with 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, raise their enthusiasm to read, and communicate the intended message.

Another research recommendation on the GCC children's literature is to compare the literary works of the Arab countries with the rest of the world. With globalization, it is paramount to assess and align children's literature with the rest of the world. For instance, the West considers the holistic development of a child. Comparing such literature works may allow improvements and enlightenment to the culture of the other and therefore the child would have some kind of vision towards new issues circulating in this globalized world, however, in a manner that is moralistic and that does not conflict with religion. With sufficient licensing, the GCC countries can translate and edit popular literature materials such as comic books. An important aspect to note is that research should assess the implication of implementing multicultural issues and themes in Arab children's literature. In other words, it is significant 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**

The discussion has shown the evolution of children's literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The century has witnessed significant cultural, technological, and social developments affecting children's education. This review has assessed the literature on global and GCC children's literature and provided vital recommendations for further research in the Arab context. Besides, the world has responded to such developments by changing and adapting new children's literature that 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 gender, and also same-sex relationships, which might threaten to violate religious teachings. Hence, the GCC countries should emphasize religion, culture, and morality through new issues in children's literature; issues that are bold and keeps 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 with 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.

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