



The Palestinian Children Literature in Israel: an Anxious Voice of a Minority

Rafia Yahia

Children's Literature Center Al-Qasemi College (Israel)

(rafia15@hotmail.com)

Abstract: With the inception of the state of Israel, a national Arab minority remained, yet the Palestinian cultural life in the country was paralyzed. Considering a variety of subjects in the Palestinian children's literature in Israel, we encounter the absence of both the national and the pan-Arab dimensions, until the turn of last century. In this historical preview, we've painted a representation of an actuality, within the political context of which the Palestinian culture arose and Palestinian children's literature grew and developed. In this paper, we shall attempt to give a brief overview of the history of the Arab minority in Israel's Palestinian children's literature. We will also list some of the main currents and tributaries that contributed to its formulation as a literature of a minority.

Key words: Palestinian, minority, Israel, children, literature.

Historical Background

A national Arab minority remained within the new state, after large numbers of native Arabs residing in the country were displaced and scattered in refugee camps in neighboring Arab countries. Among them were a number of cultured writers, who had been prominent in Palestinian culture before 1948. Emil Touma (1919-1985), who is a prominent Palestinian critic in the 1950s and 1960s, mentions that by the time the state of Israel was founded, the status of the Arab cultural life could be described as a beginning not a continuity, and believes that this was due to two main reasons:

1. Cultured Arabs living in the country were displaced by the 1948 war;
2. The general Arab culture present in the Arab countries was severed from the Arab minority inside Israel (Ghanaim, 1995: 37-38).

The Development of the Palestinian Children's Literature in Israel

The development of the Palestinian Children literature in Israel was hostage to a factor that existed outside the literary system, namely the political situation that prevailed after 1948. The difficult social situation of the Arabs that accompanied the migration of a significant number of Arab literary figures, who authored works for both adults and young readers, was not far removed from the political situation (Fa'iaadh, 1985; Kanafani, 1985; Za'eem, 1994: 99-115). These two political and social factors had an immense impact on the course of Palestinian children's literature. One of the outcomes of such a condition was the absence of institutions that



supported Palestinian children's literature and its evolution, and consequently the lack of publications for the children age group. This situation led to the absence of a literary flourishing of writing for children. Conversely, narrated Palestinian folk tales and school books (Musaigheet, 1968; Abdulazeez et al., 1970) constituted the most important story productions that were familiar to children (Kana'aneh et al., 1984: 213-227), yet they were important oral literary sources since they inspired some writers of Palestinian children's literature (Abbasi, 1977: 91; Boolus, 1987; (Abbasi, 1998; Ghanaim, 1995; Hamza, 1999). We also ought not to forget that the cost of publication of children's books was steep, and that the economical situation of the parents did not allow writers to engage in such an experience especially that government subsidies were lacking. As a result of this actuality (Mara'e, 1992: 78-103; Kana'aneh et al., 1984: 17-42; Haddad, 1985: 111-126; Labb'ss, 2002), the cultural conditions of Palestinian children in Israel continued to suffer a vast shortage in various fields, such as: journalism, theatre, television, publication of books as well as institutions that were concerned with childhood and publication of magazines and newspapers that introduced literature to children. All of these were key factors that had to exist to effect a development in children's literature.

Although there were large numbers of imported books from the Arab world, some specialists in children's literature considered them inappropriate for school children. Concerning this, Abdullateef Nassir, a writer from the Arab minority in Israel, says:

Some of the stories that arrived from the neighboring Arab countries did not meet the needs since most were stories full of fantasies and did not address reality and even if such stories existed, they were distant from the reality of Arab citizens in Israel as a national minority in the country with its own issues, suffering, and requirements. Also, the fantasies in some of the stories were distressing to children since they were frightening in their topics, in addition to other stories that were traditional in their addressing children's behavior, such as being clean, not talkative, and loving of others, together with other admonishments (Nassir, 1987: 16).

The second phase that caused a significant transformation in the course and development of the Palestinian children's literature in Israel is linked to the establishment of the Arab Academic College for Education in Haifa in 1995. The date of the establishment of the children's literature center in Haifa is considered a milestone for the Palestinian children's literature movement in Israel, since until 1995,



writing in this field was restricted to a very insufficient number of writers, such as: Jamal Q'uwar, Saleem Khouri (1934-1991), Abdullah Eishan (1935-2010), and Abdullateef Nasser (1944-1990). These writers are considered pioneers who initiated writing for children among the Arab minority in Israel. Since its inception, the institute has persisted in encouraging authors to write for children and shouldered the burdens of the costs of publication of these books, which were characterized by a high level of artistic production and many beautiful colored illustrations. The center has so far published over 200 books, all of which were written by local writers has also translated many children's books from Hebrew to Arabic, and sponsored various activities in the fields of childhood and children's literature.

If the June 1967 war had drowned the local libraries with Arabic and Egyptian books in particular, this institute has drowned them also with a large number of local books, and local writers started to compete in publishing children's books. Two factors contributed to the excessiveness in publications for children:

1. Is linked to the evolution of the cultural and social awareness among the Palestinian minority in Israel, which caused children to occupy a major role in its cultural and social life. This propelled parents to search for books that were appropriate for their children's generations, dreams, and sentiments.

2. Is parallel, or rather came as a result of the first, since interest in children's books lead to a lively purchasing activity, which caused distributors to focus on such books. One interesting phenomenon was that most book fairs were concerned with dedicating significant space for children's books, which attracted the attention of many parents and writers from all walks of life, causing some to delve into this important literary art through reading and writing. Another interesting fact is that most of those who wrote for adults turned to writing for children, which is the opposite of what we had mentioned before, concerning the embarrassment of some writers to write for children. This was due to parents and educational institutions flocking towards children's books, which encouraged writers to take the initiative of entering the world of writing for children.

Sources of Heritage in the Palestinian Children's Literature

Religious heritage



We can find some religious stories in local children's literature which were presented in an easy and smooth style. These stories aimed to present the lives of prophets so that children could learn lessons from them, like "Noah's Ark" (Aishan, 1991: 5-16), and "Adam and Eve" (*ibid*: 17-26). Mahmood Abbasi (born in 1935) was inspired his historical and religious play "The Forefather of Prophets" (Abbasi, 1975) from the biography of the prophet *Ibraheem* (peace be upon him), and it was performed on various stages in the country. This was not his only experience in presenting the lives of prophets to children and youths, since he, in collaboration with Jamal Qu'war, published a series of books that talk about the lives of the prophets such as: "Kaleem Allah" (Abbasi, 1963), which talks about the life of the prophet Moses (peace be upon him), the "Peace Messenger", which narrates the life of Jesus Christ, and "The Trustworthy One" (Abbasi, 1963), which talks about the life of the prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). As for Najeeb Nabawani (born in 1935), in his story "The Lamb of the Feast" (Nabawani, 2001), he is inspired by the story of the sacrifice which were bestowed upon Abraham by God. In this story, the family prepares the lamb to be slaughtered, but the child refuses his parents behavior towards the lamb, and he persuades them to change their position. Jihad Iraqi, on the other hand, chose the flood at the time of the prophet Noah and presented it to children in the story "Noah's Ark" in simplified style and language that were suitable for children.

The Political Current in the Palestinian Minority Literature in Israel

The absence of national and pan-Arab dimensions persisted until the end of the 1990s, except for the politically-colored writings of Abdullateef Nassir, such as the story "Sous Fadi" (Nassir, 1981); a symbolic story which talks about a conflict between chickens, which results in the occupation of the territory of Fadi's chick by a strong and arrogant rooster:

Yearning for the old days (Nostalgia): In the story "Haifa Wal-Nawras" by Tawfeeq -Fai'aad, republished in 2003, after it was difficult to find a copy since it was first published in the year 1980, he talks about the return of a refugee to the city of Haifa through the traveling of the grandfather to Haifa by sea, so the girl, whose name



is also Haifa thinks that her grandfather loves another young girl, and a conversation between her and the seagull ensues:

When the boat disappeared behind the waves, Haifa sat on the sands and started crying. A white seagull which was flying above the waves heard her crying from a distance. The bird rushed to her and started to circle her and to flap his wings. "Why are you sad like so, Haifa?" Said the bird and rose again. She raised her head and looked at the gull while wiping away her tears and said: "Because my grandfather loves another girl whose name is Haifa, so he left me and went to her". The seagull laughed a lot and flapped its wings above her head. Haifa got angry and said: "Why are you mocking me?". "Because the other Haifa is not a girl, Haifa; it is a city there over the sea and I love it too" (Fa'iaadh, 2009).

The nostalgia for displaced villages can be sensed in the "Nawras and the Sea" by Aubaida Balaha, who describes the sad view of the city of *Yafa* after it was deserted by some of its inhabitants. The story goes like this:

He came from a distant land looking for a place to live. He stole our land and sea. A strong wind blew, the waves crashed, and all the creatures in the sea, on the land and in the sky cried. Can you see those deserted houses near the beach? They were deserted by their inhabitants. They were fishermen. They migrated and the birds deserted their nests as well and never came back. A lot of fish has left too and I, your grandmother, and some friends and neighbors stayed and refused to leave because this is our sea. Our life continued and we finished the journey without losing hope (Balaha, 2001).

We also find the dream of return recur in the story "The Happiest Child in the World," (Yahia, 2009) which describes the dream of a Palestinian family of returning to their deserted village.

Struggle Over Land

In the story, "Al-Korkos Wal-Doori," struggle over land is evident between the Korkos (wagtail) and the Doori (house sparrow), since each of them claims ownership of the land.

The house sparrow wondered and said: "So this is it? This is my country and this is my home and you will not stay in them at all". The wagtail said: "you are wrong, finch. I have told you that this is our land, and I have the right to live in it and enjoy its warmth and fruits". The house sparrow got angry and replied: "And you say it's your right? What kind of right? This is my parents' and grandparents' land, but I will forgive you for breaking into my house and for eating my food. Eat your food, and then go back to where you came from" (Jbareen, 2001).



This story ends with a paragraph in which the writer talks about the Utopist dream through which the writer expresses the dream of both sides to attain peace: “The two parties, the vulture and the finch looked down, then their eyes met, then they shook their heads, and started approaching each other, while some of them were seen holding peace slogans...!!” (*ibid.*)

In light of the bond of identity which connects the Palestinian minority in Israel with the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, Ahmad Hussein wrote the story “Sami and the Tank”, which recounted the story of a child who resists a tank after his father was arrested:

Sami took off his shoes and hit the tank before it escaped. The shoe went inside the barrel of the tank, and it started to cough violently, and as a result of the violent coughing, the door of the tank opened and Sami's father got out unharmed. The tank escaped towards the sea” (Hussain, 2009).

Conclusion

The exclusion of the national concern from the books of the Palestinian children’s literature in Israel is due to three main reasons:

1. Writers believed that national and political issues were not suitable for children.
2. Attempting to include national, pan-Arab and political content in children’s literature might lead writers to produce a direct, discourse-like literature similar to what occurred to Palestinian literature in one of its phases.
3. Most books are printed in establishments that receive financial support from the Ministry of Culture in Israel, and as a result, the writers and institutions avoided writing about these issues in advance, so that obstacles are not created for publishing books. This was in contrast with Hebrew children’s literature in Israel, since we can see prominent political features in such Literature (Adeer Cohen, 1988).

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