



## Voices of the Minorities: Children's Literature and Disability

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**Abstract:** Children suffering from different forms of physical or intellectual problems can be viewed as representing a double minority group –both for their age and disability. As a result of these two factors, this minority group cannot speak for itself and needs an outside mediator to speak for it. Writers of children's literature featuring disability can be seen to fulfill this role with the aim of promoting acceptance and greater understanding of difference and disability. The focus of the present paper is to investigate disability children's fiction in Arabic as part of world minority literature. Critical studies of fictional representations of disability in English are consulted. A key element in deciding how vocal writers are in speaking for this marginalized group of children is through looking at the roles given in the stories to characters with disability, the treatment of the disabled child's inner world, the point of view and tone in the stories and the messages they convey.

**Keywords:** minority children's literature, disability, acceptance, Arabic children's literature.

### Disabled as a Minority

The current situation of individuals with disablement in different parts of the world emphasises their being regarded as a minority. Starting with the term 'disability' given to this group, "it is seen to be negatively tagging an abjectness of being; an 'other' to the 'good and proper' social and physical body" (Muller, 2006: 2). As for the attitude towards disability, Michael Devenney in his dissertation, "The Social Representations of Disability" (2005) argues that it "has always been explained and understood in a psychological context in terms of difference and prejudice" (15). Similarly, "Rosemary Garland Thompson (1997) contends that disability is another 'culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality'" (Muller, 2006: 1).

The paper attempts to consider views towards disability in children's fiction with special focus on stories written in Arabic. Fictional representations of disability is quite recent in Arabic children's literature which itself is a new form of literature compared to its equivalents in First and Second World countries. Thus, the present study aims at examining how disability is treated in children's books and to what extent it can help in building healthy attitudes among able-bodied children towards individuals with physical,



sensory or intellectual impairments. Since the stories can also be read by (or to) disabled children, so my second objective is to investigate how the stories can be used to help those children have a better view of their identity and learn strategies for coping with their impairments. For both categories of readers, fictional representation of disability has to teach acceptance of difference, diversity and inclusion which are integral values in today's societies. For lack of critical studies of disability literature in Arabic, I have considered available studies in English as the basis of my study using an eclectic approach of the critical schema of fictional representations of disability I collected.

### **Disability in Children's Literature**

Disability can be a vital topic in children's literature which is a means of teaching young readers healthy attitudes (Crow, 1990: 1; Butler, 2004: 4). Writers and critics who have written on disability have their own views of the how disability can be approached in children's books; they have also given their appraisal of the fictional representations of disability and their opinion of whether available books have answered the need for such literature. Though she acknowledges that negative attitudes towards disability are changing 'in real life and in literature', yet according to Butler – who is herself disabled – “the progress is often less significant than the world imagines, and that important work still remains to be done before disabled people can be regarded in books and in life as citizens like everyone else” (10).

Though disability features in classical children's literature in English, yet the representations in those works and some of the more recent ones have been subject to long-going criticism (Quicke, 1985; Crow, 1990; Saunders, 2000; Keith, 2001; Butler, 2004). Some found the depiction of disabled character as either angelic and saintly or sinister and threatening disturbingly misinforming (Quicke, 1985: 156-7). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Crow (1990) expresses her dissatisfaction with both 'the content and use' of children's books about disability commenting that the issue “is not simply under-represented in children's literature, it is consistently *mis*-represented, and that misrepresentation goes largely unquestioned” (1) She finds the themes tackled very



limited and repeated; as for characters, Crow believes “disabled people in books are almost never real – never whole people with varied lifestyles and personalities” (1). To support her view, Crow gives examples of the ‘menacing and dangerous’ Captain Hook, the ‘innocent and saintly’ Tiny Tim, and the inspirational biographies of Helen Keller and Douglas Bader (1).

Such critical works on disability literature can help formulate a basis for the criticism of texts in other languages that deal with this issue since it is, as stated earlier, a ‘human’ diversity shared by people in different part of the world especially when critical material on disability literature is scarce or non-existent. Two works have been instrumental in understanding the elements of disability literature reaching some guidelines about disability children’s literature: Quicke (1985) and Crow (1990).

### **Representations of Disability in Arabic Children’s Literature**

Using these critical guidelines, I will now look at the works written for Arab children about disability in their first language. To decide first the number of books in the area is a hard task due to the fact that Arabic children’s literature is quite recent and it lacks a systematic method of documentation which makes it difficult for researchers to get a clear idea about the books published and the topics dealt with. The case is even more difficult with critical books. In preparing the paper, I could only find one article on the topic by Ali Ashour Al-Jafar (2007) which is totally an annotated bibliography of both literature on disability addressed to children and educational books on the subject for adults. Though I came across Al-Jafar’s list (which includes 27 stories) at the final stages of writing my paper, it has been useful in bringing to my attention some titles I was not aware of and hence I have been able to make a good quantitative, though by no means exhaustive, idea about the stories on disability available for children in Arabic. The table below helps give an overview of the representation of disability in the stories.

Author	Title & Publisher	Disability	Main Theme	Depiction of Disabled Character
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Yusif Al-Muhaimed	<i>The Amazing Crutch</i> (2005) Riyadh: Al-Mufrada	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled- inner world of the disabled	Highly talented -romanticized- no solution for anger and frustration
---	<i>Laila and the Red Rug</i> (2005) Riyadh: Al-Mufrada	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled	Highly talented-romanticized
---	<i>Ahmad's Golden Letters</i> (2005) Riyadh: Al-Mufrada	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled	Highly talented-romanticized
Majdi Sabir	<i>The Skillful Swimmer</i> (2000) Cairo: Dar El-Jil	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled- social exclusion	Highly talented-romanticized
Fairouz Al-Ba'lbaki	<i>Disabled but Outstanding</i> (2003) Beirut: Dar ElIlm Lilmalain	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled- supportive parents and friends	talented-romanticized- disability as punishment for misdeeds
Abdel Mutalib El-Sih	<i>A Disabled Boy Riding the Wind</i> (2001) AsSharqa: Bureau of Media and Culture	Paralysis	Achievement of the disabled- inner world of a disabled child- science as offering a solution	talented-romanticized- too optimistic-unrealistic views of disability- misinforming
Nabiha Meheidli	<i>Two Tales</i> (2006) Beirut: Dar Al-Hadaek Award-winner	Sensory (blindness- deafness)	Achievement of the disabled	Realistic- inspiring- Indirect, subtle message
Omayma El-Isa	<i>Saving Nesrin from the Gang</i> (nd) Kuwait: General Foundation for Awqaf	Paralysis	Will- power of the disabled- acquired disablement- inclusion	Realistic- inspiring
Abdel Tawwab Yusif	<i>Helen Keller: The Deaf, Mute and Blind Woman</i> (1990) Cairo: Egyptian Book Council	Sensory	Biographies of famous disabled persons	Inspiring



Translated, n.t	<i>A Girl Calld Helen Keller</i> (1999) Beirut: Dar AlIlm Lil-Malayien	Sensory	Biographies of famous disabled persons	Inspiring
Ali A. Al-Jafar	<i>The Scent of Colours</i> (2004) (Kuwait: City Graphic)	Blindness	Coping with disability-normal life of the disabled	Somewhat romanticized- super ability of recognizing colours through scent.
Abir Mizhir	<i>My Best Friend</i> (2002) Beirut: Dar Al-Hadaek	Blindness	Friendship between able-bodied and disabled	Coping with disability - joyful- realistic
Nabiha Meheidli	<i>Bilal and Amer</i> (2001) Beirut: Dar El-Hadaeq	Paralysis	Friendship between able-bodied and disabled	Coping with disability- Joyful- realistic
Fatma Al-Ma'doul	<i>Basma's Eyes</i> (2005) Cairo: Nahdat Misr	Blindness	Problems of the disabled-enforced dependency	Realistic-optimistic
Sa'd AdDosary	<i>The Mermaid and the Chair</i> (1994) Riyadh, n.p.	Paralysis	Friendship between able-bodied and disabled- social exclusion	Angelic disabled child-sympathetic tone- medical view of disability
Nayif Al-Mutawa	<i>Bounce or Not to Bounce?</i> (1998) Damman: Atterky Unesco's Award-winner	Physical deformity	Difference and the necessity for inclusion-determination	Metaphoric representation-strength of character
Lamia Al-Sahib	<i>Adnan Doesn't Like My Story</i> (2003) Beirut: Dar Al-Hadaek	Sensory: hard hearing	Dealing with disability- social inclusion	Managing with the right aid
Dina Sharara	<i>My Aunt is Big</i> (2003) Beirut: Dar Al-Hadaek	Physical: obesity	Acceptance of a different physical appearance	Realistic



Hasan Abdullah	<i>The Bald</i> (2001) Beirut: Dar Al-Hadaek	Acquired change of physical appearance	Exclusion- name calling- importance of personal attributes	Realistic- coping with difference
Reem Khalifa	<i>The Hunch-Backed</i> (1987) Beirut: Kuwaiti Society for the Development of Arab Childhood	Permenant physical deformity	Exclusion- name calling- importance of personal attributes	Coping with difference
Adel Al-Ghadban	Pinocchio Beirut: Dar El-Maa'rif	Small stature	importance of personal attributes - acceptance	Adopting folktale narratives
Isam Hamza (translator)	Pinocchio is 2006 Cairo: Dar EL-Shurouq	Small stature	importance of personal attributes - acceptance.	Adopting folktale narratives
Samira AsSa'ad (translator)	<i>My Brother Is Different</i> (1999) Kuwait: General Foundation for Awqaf	Autism	Inclusion- autistic behaviour	Realistic-informing
---	<i>Captain Salim</i> (1999) Kuwait: General Foundation for Awqaf	Autism	Inclusion- autistic behaviour	Realistic-informing
Nancy Abu-Abdu (translator)	<i>Wael's Outing</i> (2006) Beirut: Dar El-Ilm	Autism	Inclusion- autistic behaviour	Realistic-informing
Translated (n.t)	<i>Oh! My Brother</i> (2005) Cairo: Nahdat Misr	Autism	Inclusion- coping with an autistic sibling	Realistic-informing



Sa'd AdDosary	"The Pigeon" in <i>The Souvenir and Other Stories</i> (2005) Riyadh: King AbdelAziz Public Library	Disability-	Inner world of the disabled- loss	Realistic-intense emotions
Nouf El-Hazani	<i>My Mom Can See Even When She Does not See</i> (2005) Riyadh: King AbdelAziz Public Library	Blindness	disabled parent-acquired disablement	Realistic-social stereotypes-solution not well-managed-passive role of child

The above review of the stories that deal with disability in Arabic children's literature reveals several interesting observations. Disability has featured as a noticeable topic in children's literature written in Arabic from 1999 to 2005. Different types of disablement, usually ones the child is born with, feature in the stories: physical, sensory and – though in a lesser degree – intellectual. Themes of inclusion, friendship, acceptance of difference, appreciation of personal traits and talents of disabled individuals are dealt with. The books are usually well-produced; illustrations are artistically done and disability is presented visually in a way that does not bring too much attention to it.

The disabled usually feature as major characters and writers vary in how realistic and authentic the portrayal is. However, they tend to focus on talents of disabled protagonists giving a romanticized picture of disability and stereotyping characters into misrepresentations that are not helpful in today's society. Disabled characters may appear as exemplary, angelic, well-behaved or happy and content characters; and in many cases one dimensional. Ages of characters vary from toddlers to young adults. Both male and female characters feature in the stories.

Messages usually revolve around acceptance, and the ability to cope with disability and lead a normal happy life though in some stories this is exaggerated. The stories fail to tackle the inner world of the disabled child leaving his anxieties, fears and anger untreated. Writers are conscious of addressing the problem of society's negative attitude towards disability; this features clearly in the stories in the form of subjecting



disabled children to ridicule, pity, exclusion. A strong attempt at teaching inclusion is also felt: touching friendships and instances of acceptance make the major themes of several stories. There is an emphasis on the role friends and parents (and to a lesser degree siblings and grandmothers) play in helping the disabled character lead a normal life.

The analysis of available fictional representations of disability in Arabic children's literature reveals that though there seems to be a growing sense of the importance of discussing disability as a minority issue, yet more literature and thorough critical works are still in great demand. While some writers succeeded in tackling the issue well through stories that enjoy literary merit as well as educational value, others need to weave messages of acceptance and inclusion, realistic representations of disability with more subtlety and in a more artistic way so their works would be effective.

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