

## Translating Children's Literature in the Arab World The State of the Art

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Résumé de l'article

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# Translating Children's Literature in the Arab World: The State of the Art

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## RÉSUMÉ

La littérature pour enfants dans le monde arabe est imprégnée de moralité, de didactique et d'idéologie, bien qu'on témoigne d'une réelle volonté de changement. La traduction pour enfants est gouvernée par les mêmes lois qui gouvernent l'écriture pour eux. La traduction n'est pas seulement un transfert lexical mais aussi culturel. L'adoption de mesures visant la préservation de la spécificité culturelle de chaque pays lors de la traduction pour enfants devient inévitable surtout si la culture source et la culture cible ont peu de choses en commun.

Le premier livre pour enfants dans le monde arabe, les *Mille et Une Nuits* a été traduit dans plusieurs langues et est un classique pour enfants.

## ABSTRACT

Children's literature in the Arab World is impregnated with morality, didactics and a heavy ideological bias, in spite of some attempts for change. Translating for children is, in its turn, governed by the same rules that govern writing for them. Translation is not only a lexical but also a cultural transfer. Adopting some protective cultural measures, while translating for children, becomes inevitable especially if the source and target cultures have little in common.

The Arabian Nights is the first book for children in the Arab world, though not initially meant for them, to be translated into many languages and has become part of international Children's Classics.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

children's literature, ideology, cultural entity, manipulation

While the article is basically concerned with translating children's literature in the Arab World, I find it necessary to provide a general overview of what has been written for children in this area of the world. This is due to two main reasons. The first is that little is known to Western scholars and specialists about writing for children in the Arab world, let alone ordinary Westerners. The second is my sound belief that the way we write for children, in a given cultural group, governs to a great extent the way we translate for them.

Thanks to translation, the international children's bookshelf comprises a panoply of books from various cultural horizons (Jobe 1996: 519). This is mainly due to a deeply rooted tradition of story-telling shared by all cultures. Instances of these classics are *the Arabian Nights*, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, the stories of the Grimm Brothers, Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, Charles Perrault's fables, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and many others. In most countries with a fair amount of publishing, children are brought up

with these classic stories and they are not even aware of the fact that they are translations.

However, though the tradition of story-telling is age-old, writing for children was not even been recognized in the Arab world until the late nineteenth century (Abu Nasr 1996: 789). Just like its Western peer, though almost a century later, it took Arab-speaking children a long time to be considered as a target audience.

As Peter Hunt points out, childhood was scarcely recognised before the eighteenth century (1994: 27). No wonder if the establishment of children's literature as such coincided with the great impetus child education received in the nineteenth century in the Western world (Ellis 1963: 1). "The concentration of working people in the new industrial towns in the early 19th (sic) century made it imperative that if they were not to threaten the security of the Establishment as in France, they must receive some form of education" (ibid. 1). At first Sunday schools were a partial answer to children's educational needs. Later, Sunday schools were extended into a national day school system in Great Britain. The proliferation of schools brought along an urgent need for school books and other books for children (see Ellis 1963). All the European countries have in their turn had their industrial revolutions and have gone through almost the same social upheavals and metamorphoses, including education. Along with the growing number of literate children, market potentials for publishers expanded, while paper prices were going down and binding and printing techniques were developing. This made children's books affordable for a wider readership, even though not always accessible to working class children (see Ellis 1963).

A similar itinerary was followed by the Arab countries though with some delay. The contact with the West through colonisation resulted in building an educational system after the European model thus replacing the old Koranic schools where children learnt the Koran and the Arabic language. The first books for children were to appear by the end of the nineteenth century in Egypt (Abu-Nasr 1996: 789), which was followed by other children's authors in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

### **The sociology of children's literature in the Arab world**

The only bibliographical guide available on children's literature in the Arab World is al-Hajji's book entitled: *Bibliographical Guide to Arab Children's Books* published in three volumes (Al-Hajji 1990, 1995, and 1999). The book serves as a basis for the present paper for it presents figures on the different genres of children's literature. Consider the following table:

Before reaching any conclusions about the above figures, it is worth drawing attention to the following. Although the first volume covers the period between 1950 and 1990, we only find eleven publications before 1979. One of the reasons for this might be that the author of the bibliographical guide failed to find all the titles published between 1950 and 1978. Another reason for the missing information is the fact that almost one third of the bibliographical entries have no date of publication. This phenomenon, however, is less noticeable in the second and third volumes.

Moreover, in the first volume, published in 1990 and covering the period from 1950 to 1990, the author chose to cite series as a single entry and he mentioned the number of issues he found with the title. Relying on this data, I tried to calculate, as exactly as I could, the total number of books published taking into account the fact

Genres	1950-1990	1990-1995	1995-1999	Total
Prophet's biography	192	45*	294	531
Biographies	240	126*	590	956
Religious fiction	444	141	341	926
Scientific/Science Fiction	82	82*	128	292
Translated Fiction	686	219*	454	1359
Children's Lit. of all genres	2366	545*	1412	4323
Plays	116	23*	65	204
Historical Fiction	205	24*	237	466
Poetry	118	32*	40	190
Rediscoveries	1	10*	42	53
Total Fiction	4450	1247	3603	9300
Non-Fiction	1550	494	979	3023
Total	6000*	1741*	4582*	12323

Table according to al-Hajji, 1990, 1995, 1999<sup>1</sup>

that the first volume contains only 1,051 entries whereas the total number of books published is 6,000. In addition, The bibliographical guide does not include all the Arab countries because their publications are scarce or non-existent or the author has not been able to find the titles they published. Iraq was strongly present in the first volume with 9 publishing houses and a great number of publications but is absent in the two other volumes.

### **Islam and Arab nationalism: the constituents of an identity**

Islam as a religion is a major theme in the Arab literature for children. The figures show that 1,457 publications (11.80%) of the 12,323 books published have explicit religious themes like the prophet Muhammad's life, tradition, and deeds. Other publications relate to other prophets acknowledged by Islam like Moses and Jesus. In the category of non-fiction, we find other publications about Islam that teach Arab children how ideal Muslims should behave. Of the publications, 956 (7.75%) are historical fiction and have generally religious or national themes as they tell about outstanding Islamic figures, such as the prophet Muhammad's companions and the Islam conquest heroes like Khalid ibn al-Walid, Ubeida ibn al-Jarrah, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and many others. Nine biographies tell about Saladdin and his war against the crusaders. There are also other characters, such as Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second of the Caliphs under whose reign Islam was taken to faraway countries and the Islamic empire was larger than ever after, and Umar al-Mokhtar, the brave Libyan leader who won many wars against the Italians.

Historical fiction is another genre which is directly linked to religious and national themes. Titles, such as *The Champions of October* celebrating the October war of 1973, *Days in the Life of the Leader Saddam*, *Arab Days*, *Arab Tales*,<sup>2</sup> are very common.

As I see it, this concern with celebrating the glorious Arab past, heroic Arab figures and the moralising tone impregnating most of the Arab children's literature is a reaction to the frustration in the Arab world due to the Middle East conflict and the marginal role the Arabs play on the international scene.

### **Morality and didacticism: major themes of Arab children's literature**

Maria Nikolajeva argues that "children's literature has from the very beginning been related to pedagogics" and that children's literature has always been considered as "a powerful means for educating children" (Nikolajeva 1996: 3). This tendency, which is decreasing in the Western societies, is still very much alive in the Arab societies, where children's literature is basically meant to teach children, to remind them of the dichotomy between good and evil. When the famous Egyptian children's author Abdel Tawab Youssef was asked why most of his writings were dealing with the prophet Muhammad, he replied: "I want him to be a guide... an ideal... for all Arab children... We want to follow his pace... and take the way he took" (Youssef 1985: 13). Far from questioning the relevance of the prophet Muhammad as a guide for Muslim children, I find Youssef's words showing that children's literature in the Arab world is basically meant to teach and to guide. It is worth mentioning that the Sunday story genre which was popular in Great Britain in the nineteenth century and which is the equivalent of religious fiction in the Arab world has almost totally disappeared from the British Isles and most of the Western countries.

In a study published in 2001, the Arab scholar Aziza Manaa set the spreading of Islamic moral values as the main aim of children's literature (Manaa 2001: 202). In line with this view, the ideological bias and the didactic tendency is clearly expressed in the following titles: *The Beneficial Stories*, *Stories Loved by Everyone*, *Moral Stories*, *Morality Tales*, and *The Best stories* (see also Inani 1999 for further details about children's literature and didacticism in the Arab world).

Yet there are also those who defend children's right to read for mere pleasure. Faiza Nawar in her article "Imagination in children's Fiction" (published in Arabic, Nawar 2001), brings to the fore the role of imagination in the development of child psychology. As an illustrator of children's literature, who has been working in various Arab countries, she laments the lack of imagination, which is due to "the multiple taboos and the traditional educational and religious concerns" governing the process of writing for children in the Arab World (ibid. 24). The corpus for her study was the Arabic translation of *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. She was highly critical of Abdel Tawab Youssef's comments in the introduction to the translation of Sendak's book: "who bought for that child the wolf disguise? Who allowed him to commit such mistakes? How come that a mother pronounces a word like 'wild'? How can a writer have a child tell his mother 'I'll eat you up,' and then the word 'Wild' should never have been mentioned" (Nawar 2001, 25). Youssef also argues that such fiction for children is behind the violence experienced in the United States. In the same vein, a great many books have been written for children for mere pleasure like the various stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, such as Sindbad's travels, where the focus is rather on adventure and imagination. The Arab bookshelf for children contains series like *The entertaining stories*, whose main aim is, as the title shows, to entertain. As a whole, we can find a great deal of adventure books among

the literature written for the Arab children. This is shown in the third volume of al-Hajji's *Bibliographical Guide*: there are, for example, more than twelve series of adventure books.

### **Translating children's literature from and into Arabic**

My starting point is that translation is but rewriting the original and that the translator is but a reader who imposes on the translated text his or her own reading experience. Just like the original author for children, the translator is subject to various constraints starting with her or his own child image and the societal views about children and childhood, parents' tastes, publishers' demands, etc. In short, the translator is part of a certain dialogics without which words are void of meaning (see Oittinen 2000: 29-32). These constraints tend to be even more binding when the source and target languages belong to two different semiospheres<sup>3</sup> (see Nikolajeva 1996) and two different cultural entities whose relation has not always been friendly. It has at moments been antagonistic, like during the Crusades, the colonialising period of the West, which started in the late nineteenth century and included most of the Arab and Islamic countries, or the current Middle East war and all its repercussions. All these factors make that any translation of Western children's literature into Arabic will be carefully thought of before being undertaken, if it is not categorically rejected.

### **Translating Arab children's literature into Western languages**

*The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* is known all over the world and translated into innumerable languages. Some of the translations were made directly from the Arabic original; some others were made on the basis of the first French translation by Antoine Galland (1646-1715), whose translation appeared in twelve volumes in 1704-1717 (see Fandrich 2001). It is also worth mentioning that much doubt has been cast on the origin of *the Arabian Nights*, as François de la Croix published his first translation of the Sindbad tales in 1701, three years before Galland's translation, and asserted in the introduction that *the Arabian Nights* have a Persian origin. The original text he was using was given to him by a dervish who had himself translated it from Indian (ibid., 206). These ideas put forward by de la Croix remained valid until negated by Joseph von Hammer, the Austrian orientalist, and Richard Burton, the translator of the Arabic version of *The Thousand and One Nights*. They both affirmed that de La Croix's allegations were groundless and lacked any historical or scientific evidence (ibid., 206). Fandrich asserts that, in translating *The Thousand and One Nights*, de La Croix was seeking recognition from Western audiences by recreating stories about the East that fitted the literary tastes and views of the target-language audience of that time: the stories met with the Western image about the wonderful East. Indeed, the translations of Galland and de la Croix are, to a great extent, responsible for the clichéd views about the East (ibid.)

*The Arabian Nights* are a series of tales told by Scheherazade to Shahryar, the king, who had been deceived by his wife and swore to marry a new bride every day and kill her by dawn, till he married Scheherazade, who decided to save herself and the other women of the kingdom by telling stories to Shahryar. As she left her story unfinished every night, the king was compelled to preserve her life to hear the end of

the story. When all the tales were finished, after a thousand and one nights, Shahryar had come to love Scheherazade and decided to save her life.

Like the characters in the stories by H. C. Andersen and the Grimm brothers, the characters in *The Arabian Nights*, such as Sindbad, Aladdin, and Ali Baba, are well-known to children all over the world. Nowadays, *the Arabian Nights* is seldom published in its integrity. Instead, such stories that appeal to Western readers are selected and published. The Walt Disney cartoons have served to present these tales to world-wide audiences.

*The Arabian Nights* have become so deeply anchored in the Western literary tradition that the French writer Théophile Gautier wrote them into a parody, *La Mille et Deuxième Nuit*, published at the end of the first half of the nineteenth Century (Marzouki 2001: 115). Yet the influence of *the Arabian Nights* has been the greatest on German writers, such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Christoph Martin Wieland, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (see Fandrich 2001).

### **Translating international children's literature into Arabic**

As has been stated earlier, children's literature in the Arab world is impregnated with ideological and didactic concerns. Subversive books for children in the Arab world are rare or non-existent. Major genres published for children in the Arab world can be classified as moral tales or fairy tales and some other writings can be classified under the genre animal realism (see Lukens 1999 for further details about the various genres of children's literature).

It follows from this that the choice of international books to be translated into Arabic will be limited to those that do not in any way infringe the taboos and the rituals of writing for children in Arabic. The table given above shows that translated fiction represents a good proportion of the children's books published in Arabic: 14.7% of the total of fiction and 11% of the total number of the books published are translations. Many Arab scholars in the field of children's literature find that the amount of translations presented to Arab children is too high and, as such, alarming, as they have a bad influence on the Arab child (Manaa 2001: 201). According to Manaa, 75% of the children's books translated into Arabic have "harmful" themes. In the same vein, Youssef (1985: 20) warns that Arab children are threatened by a cultural invasion from the West and that the waves of translated books filling the markets in the Arab world prevent the spread of local children's literature. As I see it, Youssef's fears may be quite justifiable: while every nation has the right to choose the literature to be translated for its children, censorship could be looked at as a normal reaction if the literature to be translated contains elements or themes encouraging violence, racism, sexism or moral values not accepted by the target culture. Censorship is sometimes a means to preserve one's own cultural identity and avoid being just a copy of the other. The same fear is expressed by Bernard Epin, the French critic of children's literature (1987: 42), who says about translations into French: "De plus en plus obsédant quant à l'avenir de la création en France" (an increasing threat to the future of creation in France). Censorship was also part of a normal procedure in the former USSR where only a small portion of Western children's literature was translated into Russian (See Nikolajeva 1996 for further details). Some West European countries have voiced a clear opposition to the spread of American cartoons

and children's literature in Europe. However, the above figures concerning the Arab world are not alarming at all compared with those of some other countries. For example, in Finland "around 80 percent of the 1,099 titles (1997) published yearly for children in Finland are translations" (Oittinen 2000: xiii).

In the Arab world, despite the worry voiced by critics and educationalists, the number of children's books translated into Arabic is steadily increasing. Indeed the bookshelf of Arabic children's literature comprises books that are labelled as international children's classics, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, most Andersen's stories, some of Gianni Rodari's tales, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, Tove Jansson's Moomin tales, all The Grimm brothers' stories, some of Edith Nesbit's tales and many other books which belong to the same genres.

Some Russian and Chinese publication houses have specialised in translating Russian and Chinese literature into Arabic. Indeed Russian publication houses published 63 translations of Russian writers like Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin. The figures of the Chinese publication houses are as high. Yet, quite surprisingly, we hardly find any books published by these two houses in the third volume of al-Hajji's *Bibliographical Guide* covering the period 1995-1999. This might be partly explained by the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, governmental interest in communist propaganda faded away.

However, translating for children has not always been a success story. Some publishers with certain economic interests and lack of serious interest in children's literature have published many low-quality translations (Manaa 2001). According to Manaa's research, 8 translations out of 60 were word-for-word translations and clearly difficult to understand. 27 books out of 60 were published with neither the name of the author nor that of the translator, which is why no copyrights could be paid to any of them. In many cases the publisher either translates the book him- or herself or assigns the translation to some people who feel capable of doing the job and have some money in return.

The situation shows a low status of children's literature as well as the incompetence of many Arab translators of children's stories. It is also worth mentioning that the figures given in the table above are partly misleading due to the fact that some books which were published by different publishing houses are repeated several times as individual entries in al-Hajji's *Bibliographical Guide*. For instance, the story of *Cinderella* is published by many publishing houses and mentioned 15 times as an independent entry. The same applies to *Snow White* (5 entries), *Little Red Riding Hood* (2 entries), *The Sleeping Beauty* (4 entries), and *Beauty and the Beast* (4 entries).

The major part of what has been translated for children in the Arab world belongs to the genres of adventure, fairy tales, major international children's classics, and some fables. Such books show no elements of subversion and their general frame corresponds to the tradition of story-telling in the Arab world including stories about powerful kings, ghouls, witches, bad step-mothers and ungrateful friends or relatives.

Indeed, modern literature for children in the West is rarely translated into Arabic. Problem solving literature for children dealing mainly with drug addiction and juvenile pregnancy, topics so popular in the United States (Nikolajeva, 1996) is never translated into Arabic. Yet the reason for this situation is not that these problems are



alien to Arab societies; quite the contrary, many countries in the Arab world exert a lot of efforts to combat such problems. Rather, behind the publishers' decisions lie the moralising and educating role assigned to children's literature in the Arab world as well as the general belief that children should be spared such problems. Carnavalesque literature where the image of the teacher is mocked, as in Morris Gleitzman's *Sticky Beak* (1993) (see Pinsent 1997: 31-32), has little chance of being translated into Arabic. It even seems that there is a general tendency, though not specific to Arab societies, to overestimate the power of books on children. "In Sweden, where sex education begins in nursery school and where masturbation and homosexuality are frequent topics in the magazine *Kamratposten* read by elementary school children, there is nothing extraordinary or controversial in similar books" (Nikolajeva 1996: 31). Such a magazine would never be published in Arab Islamic societies, which is shown in al-Hajji's *Bibliographical Guide*, which does not include one such book.

Similarly, books like Aidan Chamber's *Dance on My Grave* or Lesléa Norman's *Heather Has Two Mommies* dealing with taboo subjects like homosexuality have not been and will probably never be translated into Arabic. The same thing applies to fictitious diaries like Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr Henshaw* or Barbro Lindgren's *Top Secret*: such books are likely to include subjects which are judged not fit for children in the Arab World, such as masturbation, menstruation, secret love (see Nikolajeva 1996).

To conclude, children's literature in the Arab Islamic world is a true reflection of the values and child images governing this part of the world. Though literature written for adults in the Arab world is coping with similar changes and problems as literatures in other parts of the world, Arabic children's literature is still impregnated with morality, didactics, and a heavy ideological bias, despite some attempts for change. Translating for children is, in its turn, governed by the same rules that govern writing for them. Translation is a cross-cultural communication in a world made up of heterogeneous cultural entities some of which see in translation a potential threat to their cultural specificity: hence the recourse to ideological manipulation.

#### NOTES

1. The figures marked with an asterisk are quoted from Al-Hajji's. Other figures not marked with an asterisk are based on my own calculations of bibliographical entries and subject indexes.
2. All translations mine unless stated otherwise.
3. This concept was originally developed by Yuri Lotman to designate the semiotic space necessary for languages in the broader sense of the word to exist and function. When source and target semiospheres share many common traits, the zone of translatability would be large. When, on the contrary, both semiospheres have little in common, the zone of non-translatability would be greater which might lead to the rejection of the source text by the recipient culture (for more details, see Nikolajeva 1996)

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