



Palestinian Children's Literature: An Overview

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Introduction

This essay offers a general historical overview of Palestinian children's literature since 1948, the year when the whole Palestinian people ceased living in Palestine. After the establishment of the State of Israel, many Palestinians were either evacuated and driven from their homeland or chose to leave. Critics have divided Palestinian literature since that time into three categories: Palestinian literature in the diaspora, Palestinian literature in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Palestinian literature inside Israel. Children's literature is a part of each of these Palestinian literatures, and I discuss its development in what follows.

Palestinian Children's Literature in the Diaspora Since 1948

After the Catastrophe (*Nakba*) in 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, the great majority of Palestinian writers were driven out of their homeland or chose to leave, often to neighbouring Arab countries. One result of their relocation was that these writers were adopted by the teaching, educational, and intellectual curricula of those countries (Ahmad 123). Muwaffaq Miqdadi confirms that diasporic Palestinian writers continued to write and publish from their new locations. Thus, as a new generation of Palestinians grew up in the diaspora, writers in the Palestinian diaspora who wrote for them became associated with the countries in which they lived. For example, despite her birth in Jaffa, Rawda al-Hudhud lived and worked in Jordan, and her works are considered part of Jordanian literature (Ahmad 34).

Writers of children's literature in the Palestinian diaspora continued writing poems and songs that were learned and memorized at schools. The books in which these poems and songs were collected constituted a continuation of the teaching curriculum that prevailed in Palestine before 1948. Although this literature was child-oriented, direct and easy to understand, and suited to children in terms of artistic structure and content, much of it, such as the writings of Abd

al-Karim al-Karmi (1909-1980) and Khalil al-Sakakini (1878-1953), exceeded the lexicon and cognitive level of a child.

Other writers documented Palestinian life before 1948 and after to “revive Palestine” literarily. Such writers as Radi Abd al-Hadi (1910-1982) and Abd al-Ra’uf al-Masri (1896-1960) excelled in describing and conveying a yearning for their homeland. Fayez al-Ghoul (1910-1972) is especially noteworthy in this regard too, having collected, between 1955 and 1966, stories that were inspired by Palestinian popular life in such volumes as *al-Dunia Hikayat* (*Life’s Stories*), *Asatir min Biladi* (*Legends From My Homeland*), and *Sawalif al-Salaf* (*Tales of the Ancestors*). Miqdadi argues that writers in the Palestinian diaspora sought to maintain the essence of the artistic experience of popular folkloric traditions and to preserve the message and original events of those stories, not making any changes that would affect their narratives or the sequences of their components (45). These writers wanted to make children in the diaspora aware of their popular heritage.

There are several pieces of evidence that confirm that the 1967 Six Day War and defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan had a strong and clear impact on the Arab literary movement. A large number of the Palestinian writers who lived abroad in the diaspora stopped writing for children for a long time due to the political circumstances and, consequently, their writings were directed at adults. At the end of the 1970s, diasporic Palestinian writers renewed their interest in children’s literature. The appearance of *Majallat Samer li al-Atfal* (*Samer’s Magazine for Children*; 1977) probably assisted in attracting some writers and poets, such as Muhammad al-Qaysi (1944-2003), Mahmoud Shukair (1941-), Ali al-Batiri (1944-), to engage in children’s writing. In this context, Palestinian intellectuals and writers began to reassess the themes and concepts present in their writing. Some paid more attention to the theme of “childhood” and to “children’s literature.” Some of these writers engaged with the national values of the Palestinian people, and some tried to introduce into their stories new concepts, such as the racism undergirding Israeli occupation and the value of homeland. They stressed everything that is required to deepen the feelings of belonging, on the one hand, and reinforced the elements of heroism and the will for liberation, on the other. Mahmoud Shukair and Mufid Nakhleh (1939-) are prominent writers in this regard (Miqdadi 34).

In poetry, there was an attempt to introduce new themes through new artistic forms. The poems were varied and dealt with children's national expectations and their aspirations for freedom. They also emphasized "love of land" and "optimism about the future." Among the poets who introduced such themes were Ali al-Batiri and Mahmoud al-Shalabi (1943-).

In 1974, Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi Publishing House was established in Beirut, and it reinvigorated the production of Palestinian children's literature. This publishing house was interested in publishing stories for children and in supporting literary productions that dealt with issues of freedom and nationality. Most of the children's books published by Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi appeared in one of the following three series: Qaws Quzah (Rainbow), al-Mustaqbal li al-Atfal' (The Future is for the Children), and al-Ofq al-Jadeed (The New Horizon). For the most part, books in these series introduced the Palestinian cause and military struggle in a symbolic rather than direct style. Among the books that Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi published were two for children by the writer Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972): *Atfal Ghassan Kanafani (Ghassan Kanafani's Children)*, which was posthumously published in 1979, and *al-Qindeel al-Sahir (The Watchful Lamp)*, published in 1985. In addition, a number of writers published *Hikayat Sha'biyya min Falastin (Popular Tales from Palestine)* in 1987, through which they intended to add the dimension of "originality" to their world of values.

In the early 1980s, as a result of the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 and the political and military changes, Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi lost its economic and professional resources, especially after the movement of its centre and administration to Cairo and Amman. These changes resulted in a dwindling number of publications until they stopped publishing completely in the middle of the 1990s. In 1979, Tawfiq Fayyad (1938-) established a Palestinian publishing house in Beirut called al-Nawaras Association. Its goal was to acquaint Arab children with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Muhannad Muhammad al-Sha'bi notes that this publishing house was an extension of Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi, but it too stopped its activity after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (30).

Both Dar al-Fata al-'Arabi and al-Nawaras Association encouraged writers to produce more children's literature. Among those who wrote for children was Shihada al-Natour (1939-), who chose to convey concerns about homeland and the need to defend it through the world of

animals, writing stories with animal characters to indirectly communicate the idea of home to children. Poet Mahmoud al-Shalabi introduced the issue of “homeland” as a poetic concern, helping children to deepen their sense of affiliation and belonging, their feelings of national identity.

After the Palestinian cultural movement relocated to Amman, new initiatives emerged that were concerned with Palestinian children’s literature. Most of these new children’s initiatives were published by Dar al-Karmel and Dar Ibn Rushd in Amman. Among those writers who took the initiative to write for children were Muhammad al-Dhaheer (1951-), Yusuf Hamdan (1944-), and Rashad Abu Shawar (1942-). What characterizes these writers is that they wrote in a direct way about the suffering of the Palestinian people under the Israeli occupation. A national identity and its implantation in children’s minds was a deliberate and conscious mission that all the writers expressed through their stories.

Researcher Muwaffaq Miqdadi argues that Palestinian national identity occupies a large space in the stories and poems that were directed at children by Palestinian writers and poets who lived in the diaspora (33). These writers worked on conveying the events experienced by Palestinian people through narrative to acquaint children with the past of their parents and grandparents. An analysis of children’s stories written from the diaspora reveals that Palestinian writers, in addition to communicating their love of the homeland and desire to return to it, also described the suffering in refugee camps.

In the early 1980s, Palestinian diaspora writers began to document Palestinian history. Among these writers is Rawda al-Hudhud (1948-), who wrote a large collection of stories called *Hikayat Butooliyya li al-Atfal (Heroic Stories for Children)*. The first story was published in 1979 under the title of *Fi Ahraj Ya’bad (In the Forests of Ya’bad)*. This collection dealt with Palestine’s history in a direct style of writing, telling stories about factual heroic deeds and documenting the stories with historical material at the end of each story.

In 1985, a collection of stories collected by the writer Fayeze al-Ghoul in 1966 was published under the title of *Hikayat al-Ghoul (Stories of the Ghoul)*. The writer Rawda al-Hudhud made use of the popular folkloric stories and introduced them to the children as separate stories after making some modifications and adding some suitable illustrations.

According to researcher Rashed Issa, the First Intifada/Uprising encouraged the writers of the diaspora to continue documenting Palestinian suffering in children's stories (76). Resistance figured prominently in different children's stories, such as the *Ghabat Haifa (Haifa Forest; 1991)* by Hani al-Titti (1959-). Through these stories, the writer wanted to establish the values of the struggle and its principles and to ensure a continuity of children's awareness of the Palestinian cause and the continuous struggle for it.

It is notable that some writers who live in the diaspora do not mention the Intifada by name in their poetic or prose works, preferring instead to continue writing, directly or symbolically, about the Palestinian cause and the movement to liberate Palestine. Among these writers were Shahla al-Kilani (1942-), Ali al-Batiri, Rashed Issa (1951-), and Munir al-Hur (1950-).

In the 1990s, some writers in the diaspora devoted all their literary production to children, whether in fiction, poetry, theatrical works, or novels. In the field of poetry, poets continued writing for children through both printed collections and songs recorded on tape. This group included Muhammad al-dāher, Ali al-Batiri, Mahmoud Shalabi, and Rashed Issa. The poetry produced by these four constituted nearly half of all the poetry products that appeared in the 1990s. Palestinian diaspora writers' obsession with and yearning for a return to their homeland is quite clear in their writings. There were, however, some new themes in their writings as a result of their cultural awareness and their attempt to create an independent image of the child. Among the subjects that can be considered new or introduced in a new style are those that deal with the environment, ecology, nature preservation, and human rights. For example, we see that some of the works of Muhammad al-dāher, such as *Kasaeed Latfal RPG (Poems for Children of the RPG; 1985)* focus entirely on the issue of children's human rights.

Inspired by historical events and characters, some writers continued to document Palestine's history in their stories. Rawda al-Hudhud, for instance, wrote a series of stories called *Hikayat al-Ardh al-Tayyiba (Stories of This Good Earth; 1997)*. The stories were intended to acquaint children with the heroism of their grandfathers. Al-Hudhud deals with Palestine's history in her stories because she believes that it is necessary to introduce ideas about Palestinian history, heroism, and homeland to children. She adds that such writing should be introduced in a style that children would likely find appealing; heroic deeds should not be

reduced to pompous slogans or aim to plant hatred in the souls of children. On the contrary, children's stories should aim to connect children with their homeland and their rights and acquaint them with their grandparents' generation, who defended their land, so that they become models for them.

Palestinian Children's Literature in the West Bank and Gaza Strip After 1967

Israeli authorities imposed a siege on the West Bank and Gaza Strip after their occupation of these territories in 1967. One aspect of the overall siege was a cultural siege, which, consequently, led to an absence of a cultural climate, and this affected the process of writing in a negative way. The creative production of some writers dwindled, either because of the exceptional circumstances that they had to confront or because of their involvement in the direct political struggle against the occupation. Some of them stopped writing altogether. Moreover, a number of writers, such as Mahmoud Shukair, were deported to countries outside their homeland.

At the end of the 1970s, the literary movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip managed to bridge over the stage of suffering that prevailed after the *Naksa*, the further displacement of the Palestinian people following the 1967 Six Day War. Writers resumed their literary activity without a significant change in style from the 1960s. In this period, writers focused on documenting the lived experiences of Palestinian people. The writers who adopted this approach were Ibrahim al-'Alam (1941-), Samia al-Khalili (1953-), and Ali al-Khalili (1943-2013). The stories of these writers are characterized by their daring in dealing with reality and revealing it to children, inciting them directly or symbolically to contribute to changing living conditions for Palestinians. Their realistic stories enjoyed increasing interest among Palestinians, for whom the subject of a Palestinian homeland loomed large in the era following the tragedy of the *Naksa*. Consequently, these stories carried messages about "war," "killing the enemy," and conducting "jihad" against that enemy. In general, these stories dealt with the subject of "homeland" from various angles, including the historical aspect and the image of homeland in the past.

At the end of 1987, the First Intifada began, which increased the suffering of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Consequently, it is no wonder to see the First

Intifada reflected in children's stories. Children's stories that were published in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during that period have two main features: "childhood" and "conflict with the Israeli occupier." These stories focused on the issues in a clear way and in a context characterized by violence.

Writers producing stories for children in this period poured their political thinking into their ideas about "childhood," using many words related to the Intifada, such as "martyr," "occupation," "arrests," and "resistance." These stories also depicted children's confrontations with Israeli occupying troops. In addition, they juxtaposed the image of the "violent" Israeli with that of the Palestinian "victim," "hero," and "resister." In this context, characters fitting these images appeared in the collection of *al-Makhadh (Labor)* (1989) by Jameel al-Salhut (1949-), which consists of stories about child-heroes. The stories described another aspect of the suffering of the Palestinian people and its impact on the life of the child, including arrest of the father and his subsequent absence from his family.

During this period, new writers showed interest in preserving the collective Palestinian memory through children's literature, including Abd al-Rahman Abbad (1945-), in his Memory collection: *Dhakerat al-Burtuqal (Memory of Orange)* (1988); *Dhakerat al-Zaytoun (Memory of Olive)* (1990); *Dhakerat al-Nakhil (Memory of Palm Trees)* (1991); and *Dhakerat al-Asafir (Memory of Birds)* (1996). The events of these stories were derived from the national, social, and religious realities of Palestinian life. In Abbad's writings, the image of the "land" symbolized the affiliation, belonging, and completion of Palestinian national identity.

If we check the works of the writers who lived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the Oslo Accords (1993), we find different responses to the accords among those writers according to their political affiliation. Their opinions are reflected in their productions, and the "Other" started to impose his presence on the agenda of many stories, especially among the local Palestinians and those who returned to Palestine after the Oslo Agreement. For example, in his story *Qalat Miriam Qala al-Fata (Miriam Said the Boy Said)* (1996) by Mahmoud Shukair, who returned to his homeland in May 1993, the conflict appears to be between Eastern and Western culture rather than between the Israeli, who represents the powerful side, and the Palestinian, who represents the weak side. The writer also reflects in his story some of the new

values in children's literature, such as "freedom of thought" and "freedom of expression." And if we compare the works of Abd al-Rahman Abbad published before the Oslo Accords to those published after, we find a greater emphasis on education and information. For instance, the stories in his collection *Dhakerat al-'Asafir (Memory of Birds; 1996)*, which was published after the Oslo Accords, include scientific and intellectual information. Thus, I conclude that the writer intended to draw a new image of the Palestinian child, a child who is no longer merely a resistant, fighting, and sacrificing being but a child who is clever, questioning, tolerant, open-minded, and a lover of nature.

This new image of the Palestinian child also appears clearly in *Mosiqqa al-Arghifa (Music of the Loaves; 1998)* by the writer Ali al-Khalili, who tries, through the heroes of his story, Ahmad and his family, to observe the changes that took place in Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the Oslo Accords. The writer continues to emphasize the necessity of ending the Israeli occupation and at the same time, as a peace lover, he builds an image of the Palestinian state that is based on pluralism and the possibility of tolerance and forgiveness as a result of inevitable developments.

In 1989, the institute of Mu'asasat Tamer li al-Ta'lim al-Mujtama'i (Tamer's Institute for Social Teaching) was established in Jerusalem, though its centre was moved to Ramallah in 1990. This institute worked on developing children's literature on all levels. It published books on different subjects, but the realistic approach overwhelmed them. The institute also took the initiative to guarantee books for children in occupied areas through the Department of Publishing that was established in 1992. Moreover, the institute encouraged children to write poems and stories on different subjects to have them printed in the magazine that it published under the title of *Yara'at (Pens)* in 1992.

In this period, a group of institutions, centres, and projects emerged, including Ogarit li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi' (Ogarit for Publishing and Distribution; 1997), Markiz Badil (Alternative Center; 1998), al-Mashrou' al-Watani al-Tanmawi li Adab al-Tifl a-Falastini (The National Developmental Project for Palestinian Children's Literature; 1997), and Markiz al-Bireh li Tanmiyyat al-Tufula (al-Bireh's Center for Development of Childhood), which was initiated by the Swedish Institute DIAKONIA. Through studies, conferences, writing, and publishing,

all these institutes tried to crystallize the character of the Palestinian child, deepening their education, encouraging them to be creative, and instilling reading habits in them. In addition, they intended to reinforce the status of the book and make it available to every Palestinian child.

Children's stories that were written after al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) conveyed messages of peace and emphasized the right to the struggle for freedom. *Sha'nounat al-Eid (The Palm Sunday Bunch*; 2004) by Najla' Bashour (1947-) tells the story of the siege of the Nativity Church during the Israeli invasion in 2002 and points out the Islamic-Christian coexistence inside the church.

In this period, too, there was increase in the writers' willingness to write to children. Thus, Jameel al-Salhut published the novel *'Ish al-Dababir (The Wasp Nest*; 2007), and Mahmoud Shukair published the novel *Kawkab Ba'id li Ukhti al-Malaka (A Faraway Planet for My Sister Queen*; 2007). In both novels, there is an attempt to broaden children's horizons and to reinforce the value of "citizenship" and love for homeland through expositions of all aspects of the Palestinian cause.

It is possible here to point out that national values are not absent from children's stories in the period after the al-Aqsa Intifada. They are accompanied, however, by the appearance of new values such as openness, tolerance, acceptance of the other and understanding him, and care for the environment, as if it were a kind of struggle to keep what remained of the land. It is clear that reconciliation and peacefulness are reflected clearly in the children's stories from this period.

Reflection of the Image of Borders in Mahmoud Shukair's Stories

Mahmoud Shukair was born in Jerusalem, but he was driven away from his homeland by Israeli occupation troops and lived in exile for seventeen years. In 1993, the writer returned to his homeland through "Gibrils's Agreement." His stories for children are characterized by their direct statements against the Israeli occupation. The following section deals with three of Shukair's stories that reflect the theme of "borders" and show the suffering of the Palestinians in relation to them.

The first story, titled *al-Hajiz (The Barrier; 1994)*, introduces the image of a Palestinian girl exposed to torture and abuse on the border by Israeli occupation troops:

Basima left school and walked along the street that leads to her home, and there she found a barrier of barbed wires surrounded by a number of enemy soldiers watching people.

Basima stopped close to the barrier and asked one of the soldiers to let her pass through to her home and said: "Raise these wires so that I can pass."

The soldier said: "I will not raise them."

Basima wondered: How can I return to my home?

The soldier said: "Bend your head and pass through the wires."

Basima thought a little and felt that she will be humiliated if she bends her head; she withdrew a few steps with determination and fortitude in her eyes.

The soldier asked her wondering: "What will you do?"

Basima did not reply; she held her bag under her armpit, moved in quick steps and jumped over the barrier.

But one of the wires caught her shirt and she fell onto the ground.

The soldiers gathered and chuckled rejoicing at her failure and looked at Basima, lying on the ground.

Basima stood up and walked with a raised head to her home, catching with her hand the ends of her torn shirt; the soldiers continued looking at her silently till she disappeared behind the street corner.¹

Through this story, the writer Mahmoud Shukair shows how borders constitute a psychological and social obstacle for every Palestinian. Passing through the Israeli border on a daily basis is not easy. Palestinians are made to feel very ashamed when asked, for example, to raise their clothes for inspection. The experience often leaves them feeling dehumanized and humiliated before the eyes of others. The Israeli borders do not only affect adults but Palestinian children as well. The childhood experienced by the children of Palestine is unlike that of other children

¹ This quotation and those below were originally written in Arabic. All translations here are my own.

of the world. Palestinian children are born, grow up, and open their eyes to the borders and barriers of occupation. Shukair portrays this reality, encouraging in a Palestinian child audience a love of land and a determination to demand freedom and dignity.

In the second story, titled *al-jundi wa-al-louba* (*The Soldier and the Doll*; 1986), the narrator describes an encounter between a mother and her daughter and a soldier that happens during the mother's return from Jordan to her homeland of Palestine:

Amina came to Amman with her mother and stayed with her relatives for a few days during which she got acquainted with a lot of children and told them stories about the demonstrations that took place in the streets of Jerusalem against the enemies.

Amina left Amman carrying a bride doll that one of her relatives bought for her; when the car approached the Center of the Borders on the Jordan River, the mother started inspecting the luggage and gifts that she carried and asked Amina to be careful that her doll would not be lost.

The mother came close to an Israeli soldier who searched the coming travellers. The soldier smiled to Amina and then he offered her a sweet. Amina hesitated and then she took it when she noticed that her mother kept silent.

The soldier started searching through the luggage and gifts and then he extended his hand to the doll and snatched it out of Amina's hands. The mother said: "This is a doll for the girl. Leave it!"

The soldier said as he was shaking the doll. "It is heavy. What did you hide in it?"

Amina stretched her hand to take the doll back but the soldier kept her away, and said: "You hide arms and explosives everywhere. I have to search it well."

The soldier seized the doll with his two hands and split its head from its body. Amina cried but the soldier continued tearing its abdomen looking for explosives but when he did not find anything, he threw it on the ground.

Amina bent down and started collecting the parts of the torn doll. Then, she noticed the piece of sweet in her hand. She gazed at the soldier's face and threw the piece of sweet under her feet and walked with her mother away.

As we see in this dialogue between Amina and the soldier, the writer describes the daily suffering of the Palestinian people, highlighting the prevalence of humiliation as they move through check points.

The third story is titled *Tufula 'ala al-Hudud (Childhood on the Border; 2002)*, and its hero is a young man named Ahmad, a vendor on the Palestinian-Israeli border:

Ahmad went with his friend to the barrier. His friend had told him that he sold refreshments at the border to the people who are forced by the Israeli police to wait in the sun before they pass.

He said: "Come with me, and you will earn ten shekels a day. Come."

In the morning, Ahmad went with his friend to the barrier without telling his mother, and there, a taxi driver came to him and said: "Get on with me till the other side of the borders and I will give you a shekel." No car was allowed to pass the borders unless it had another passenger with the driver. Those who were travelling alone in their cars were taking children with them in order to be able to pass.

Ahmad got on the car and sat next to the driver and passed the borders. Ahmad got off on the other side of the border after the driver gave him a shekel. That was the first shekel that he earned in his life.

Ahmad wanted to return on foot to where his friend was, but he discovered that there were other children waiting for cars that needed a "second passenger," "the Shekel's passenger" in order to pass to the other side. Ahmad stood with them and earned another shekel. In this way, Ahmad became one of the Shekel-Children. He came to the border in the morning and waited for the drivers.

One day, Ahmad got on a truck. The driver asked him to sit next to him and he did. The truck was big and high. Ahmad stared at the strong muscles of the driver while he was driving and thought to be a driver of a car like this one day. He took out the shekels from his pocket and counted them for the twentieth time. They were five small silver shekels. He thought they would become six in a few minutes. He wished they would become ten shekels that day.

Then he heard a sound of gun shooting. He was afraid but thought that the shooting was far. Suddenly, he saw the hands of the driver of the strong muscles leave the steering wheel. He wanted to say to him: “Be careful!” He caught the steering wheel, but he discovered that the bullets had already made holes in the front windshields of the car and the chest of the driver was bleeding.

Ahmad was afraid and did not know what to do. His hand was stretched to the door and opened it and, unawares, he jumped, but the truck overturned on him that moment. The heavy truck overturned on his body. After a few minutes, the people came to know what happened. The truck was over Ahmad’s body and Ahmad’s hand was closed. One of them people opened Ahmad’s hand to find five white shekels in it, but Ahmad did not get the sixth shekel. The Shekel-Child died with his hand gripping on five shekels.

Here, Shukair highlights the reality of the childish view of the martyrs of their homeland and their attempt to distinguish it either by their appetite for martyrdom or by martyrdom in order to make a living. It is through representations of the daily events and the repeated killings that punctuate daily life for the children of Palestine that they will be most able to make sense of their reality, because they are fighting for freedom and survival on their land.

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian borders have constantly constituted points of humiliation to the Palestinian people. Each border point or barrier has a different story and all of them stream into the pot of Palestinian pain and suffering. The suffering of the Palestinians at the Israeli borders and barriers in the West Bank and the violations, in all their forms, that occupation troops commit against Palestinians have become a rich source of material for Palestinian writers, who repeatedly describe the daily suffering of Palestinians through realistic stories written for children in a direct way. These are expositions of painful situations affecting Palestinian children. Palestinian writers have realized that the future of their community and nation lies with children and the way in which children are raised. Children’s literature is one of the most important forms of education, because it can bring about change.

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