

Stories Told by and for Palestinian Children

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Abstract

The main topic of this article is the writing of stories for children, those between the ages of three or four up to the age of nine or ten. This paper presents various genres of narratives for or by children. Prior to this research no work had been done on what aspects of folktales are inherently suitable for the mind of the child. The experiences which led me to what I consider the insights reached in this paper stem from three lines of research conducted in the last forty or more years of observing Palestinian society. The first of these three lines of research began in 1978 with the collection of traditional oral Palestinian folktales. The second line of research was the study of children's Intifada narratives, and the third line of research was the study of what I call literary folktales. Starting with the last years of the intifada more and more Palestinian writers, poets and intellectuals began to pay increasingly more attention to children and to write for and about them. In these literary folktales the authors took some of the best known Palestinian traditional oral folktales and modified them in order, supposedly, to "improve" them, "refine" them and "update" them. The result is less likely to fit the needs of the children for whom they are written. Indications of the suitability of traditional folktales for children are found in the shared features found in both traditional folktales and stories invented and told by Palestinian children during the first Intifada. Examples of children's narratives and suggestions for making use of these insights are given.

Key words: Oral folktales, Intifada, narratives, Palestinian children.

Introduction

The main topic of this article is the writing of stories for children. The children I am concerned with here are those between the ages of three or four up to the age of nine or ten, that is, before the age where they start to show any physical, emotional or cognitive signs of puberty. However, I would like to start by discussing the experiences which led me to what I consider the insights reached in this paper.

These experiences consisted of three different research interests that I have been involved in for the last forty years or so, after I came to work at a Palestinian university after studying and teaching at American universities for about fifteen years.

The first of these three lines of research began in 1978 with the collection of traditional oral Palestinian folktales. This research still continues today and has recently expanded and become quite intensive due to the recognition granted by the UNESCO in 2005 to the Palestinian folktale as one of the World Masterpieces of Intangible Heritage which must be preserved. Out of this work came a book entitled "Speak Bird, Speak Again" published by the University of California Press.

The second line of research was the study of children's Intifada narratives. This started in late 1987 shortly after the beginning of the 1st Intifada, or uprising, which later became known among Palestinians as "The Children's Intifada," or "The Stone Intifada." This uprising was started and maintained, at least for the first two years, by children between the ages of seven and thirteen or fourteen.

Aims and Scope

This paper presents various genres of narratives for or by children. The study considered the first of its kind, to the author knowledge, and one of the leading studies in the Palestinian society that demonstrated various genres of narratives for or by children. Prior to this research no work had been done on what aspects of folktales are inherently suitable for the mind of the child. The experiences which led me to what I consider the insights reached in this paper stem from three lines of research conducted in the last forty or more years of observing Palestinian society.

Background

The stone throwing children engaged the Israeli soldiers in a confrontation which usually lasted for only a few minutes during which some children were killed, some were injured, and the rest ran away. Like many adults, I usually stood on the sidewalk at a safe distance from the confrontations and watched. After a while, I realized that the children who ran away regrouped at some distance from the soldiers and seemed to be carrying out lively discussions accompanied by a lot of laughter. Later I found out that in these sessions they were actually

bragging about their or their friends' heroism and exploits against the soldiers during the confrontations and that they accepted each other's stories as factual and found them highly amusing. These narratives can be formally classified by those in the field of folklore as 'humorous contemporary legends.

I started collecting and studying these legends a few weeks after the beginning of the Intifada. This again turned into a larger project on Palestinian political humor in general, which has produced two books and several articles and is still going strong.

Going back to our main topic, children's narratives, what I found most fascinating about Palestinian children's intifada narratives was the similarities between the hero in these narratives and the hero in many of the folktales I had collected among Palestinians and folktales in general.

Suffice it here to mention that, like the hero of the traditional oral folktale, the hero, as portrayed in the children's narratives, is very young, often the youngest in the family, and physically small, deformed, or handicapped. The hero overcomes much more powerful opponents, often with assistance from a human or a supernatural agent. Another noticeable similarity is the presence of the child-hero and mother in these narratives.

Here are few Illustrations:

1. One time when the town [Gaza] was under curfew, a pregnant woman started to have labor pains. The soldiers took her to a military hospital to give birth there. It turned out that she was pregnant with twin boys. The head of one of the babies came out, he looked around and saw all these [Israeli] military uniforms, turned back to his brother and shouted, "Ahmed! Ahmed! We are surrounded, get some rocks!"

2. A child keeps coming out of the door of a house, throwing rocks at the soldiers and running back in, and the soldiers cannot find him. Finally, a foreign news correspondent goes into the house and begs the mother to tell him how the child manages to avoid the soldiers. At first, the woman refuses to tell him. Finally, he assures her that he will not tell anybody about it, and she lifts up the edge of her long flowing dress and says, "Mahmoud, come out, habeebi [my love]," and the boy comes out from under her dress.

3. One day the Israeli soldiers arrested a child in the Ramallah market. A woman who was doing her shopping close by saw what happened. She threw herself at the soldiers, crying and screaming that her son had not done anything; he was simply walking with her while she did her shopping. She kept screaming, tugging and pulling at the boy, and a big crowd gathered around, until she succeeded in pulling the child away from the soldiers. As she was walking away holding the child's hand, a person passing by heard her asking the child, "Whose son are you, Darling?"

4. Khaled el - Iraqi, a boy from Jenin was nicknamed "El-qujjeh," "the piggy bank." He gave the Israeli authorities a lot of trouble, and the soldiers were always looking for him. He was injured several times, but they were not able to catch him. One time he was injured, and the other boys took him to the hospital, where his liver had to be taken out, but when they removed the liver they found a small liver underneath the first liver. He survived the operation, healed and went home, and within a few days he was back throwing stones at the soldiers.

5. In the Al-Amaari refugee camp everybody is talking about a young boy of 13 years of age. No one knows his real name, but his nickname is "Hoboover-reeh," "the wind storm," and whomever you may ask about him in the refugee camp would know him because he has carried out many heroic deeds, and he is driving the soldiers crazy. People of the camp say that Shamir [Israeli prime minister at the time] once said that he was ready to release all detainees from Amaari Refugee camp and to remove the Israeli observation tower from the camp in return for capturing "The Wind Storm" because he does things no other person could do. For example, he has already injured over one hundred soldiers, all by himself.

6. A young man one time found himself surrounded by soldiers who were trying to capture him. He looked at them and selected the smallest one of them although he was very small and short himself. He picked up the small-sized soldier and threw him at another soldier and escaped fast like lightning. They tried to catch him but couldn't, and he managed to escape.

7. A young man from the village of Ithna in the Hebron district was arrested and charged with possessing firearms. During the interrogation he decided to carry out a plan. He admitted to the secret servicemen that he actually had some firearms and volunteered to take them to the place where he had hidden them. He took the men to a cave in the Hebron area and entered the cave to get the weapons. They waited all day long for him to come out, but he did not

come out. The soldiers blew up the cave, but there was no sign of the young man. Later they realized that the cave had another entrance at quite a distance from the first one. And they never caught the young man.

8. One time the soldiers came and occupied the school building. They raised an Israeli flag on top of the school. Then a young man climbed up to the roof, took the Israeli flag down, and placed a Palestinian flag in its place although the soldiers were all over the place. The young man said that when he came down he threw dirt in the eyes of the soldiers, and God must have blinded their eyes. They did not see him, and he was able to carry out his mission and left as if nothing had happened.

The third line of research was the study of what I call literary folktales. This began after the mid-nineties as a result of the significant role played by children during the intifada. Starting with the last years of the intifada more and more Palestinian writers, poets and intellectuals began to pay increasingly more attention to children and to write for and about them. What attracted my attention most was a number of literary folktales, where the authors took some of the best known Palestinian traditional oral folktales and modified them in order, supposedly, to “improve” them, “refine” them and “update” them. Such efforts are not actually new or invented by Palestinian story writers. They are best known from the second edition of the Grimm Brothers’ collection in 1819, and at least a couple of centuries earlier among the French and the Italians.

Findings

Comparing and contrasting all three types of stories: the traditional oral folktales, the literary fairytales, and the intifada narratives; it became clear to me that the first and the third were much more similar to each other than either of them to the second. The similarity came due to the fact that intifada narratives were invented by children and the traditional folktales have been told to children, preserved, and transmitted orally for several thousands of years. Both of them are well suited to the existential needs, worries, and mental abilities of children. Literary stories on the other hand are written by adults and seem to represent what adults want children to become and how they want them to think and behave in order to fit properly into the modern, literate, upper and middle classes of their societies. They actually seem to be written to children rather than for children; i.e., these are messages from adults to children to tell them what they want them to be in order to better serve the needs and interests of adults,

rather than being written for the children to serve the children's needs, hopes, and interests and address their worries, fears, and anxieties. They live in much less than perfect societies but prepare children to expect to live in a perfect society – perfect by the standards of the literate, well to do, upper classes of the society. In other words, these messages are hypocritical and self-centered on the part of the adults.

Had our societies continued to be illiterate, tradition oriented, village societies, where tales are transmitted and told to children orally, then I would have advocated that traditional folktales should not be modified intentionally and consciously because oral stories would evolve automatically to suit new circumstances. But since now we read to our children from books rather than tell the stories from memory, which prevents tales from evolving, then I agree that they should be modified and updated. And here is where the problem lies. The way the nervous system of our human species (*Homo Sapiens Sapiens*) is wired has not changed for over a hundred thousand years, and the traditional tales have been transmitted orally and told to children from memory for several thousand years. Thus, they have evolved in ways suitable for different cultures across time and space. But they have also evolved to suit the unchangeable mind of the human child; they have become quite adept at catering to the universal needs of the human child everywhere. Points of coincidence with the nature of the mind of the human child have become an inherent part of the traditional oral folktale. It is these points of coincidence between the mental, emotional and developmental needs of the human child, on the one hand, and some aspects of the folktale, on the other, which should not be omitted from literary tales written for children, whether such tales are based on existing folktales or composed from scratch. The following are ten points that, I believe, qualify under this category. These ten points are just a start and do not necessarily exhaust all the lessons a writer of children's stories could learn from the traditional oral folktale:

1. A child, unlike a literary critic or any other adult, does not analyze a story logically and try to find the message behind it. A child rather lives out the story by identifying with one of its characters, usually the hero, assuming the child finds in it a character with similar existential problems and needs as his/her own.
2. As far as the child is concerned, what matters is not the moral lesson at the end; not who wins and who loses, nor fear of punishment, shame, or guilt. The child wants to feel adequate, important, and loved and to have hope and to find meaning in his or her life. The

issue is not a specific lesson; it is rather a general orientation to life, to humans, or to the world.

3. Do not send a message to the children. Rather, give them a form, a structure which they can adopt or assume that could get the youngsters from where they feel they are to where they want to be.

4. The child perceives and understands the world in analogic rather than digital mode. Give the child images and metaphors of life and the world rather than abstract quantifications; "very, very, very big" is more understandable than "three times as big as ...".

5. A child perceives and understands the world in black and white and not shades of gray. The world should be described in binary divisions and polarized images. Characters have to be either all bad or all good, not a mixture of good and bad.

6. Humor or what is funny for the child consists of breaking the rules and the taboos of the adult society. Mentioning sexual parts of the body or body products, which is prohibited by prudish adults, is very funny to the child simply because it is prohibited by adults, not because they understand other implications which adults do. Thus, using such "crude" terms, as story tellers from illiterate, traditional, oral societies do, to entertain and amuse children should be deemed quite legitimate.

7. The hero of children's stories should not start out tall, big, strong and handsome. That is not how the child feels; therefore, the child cannot identify from the beginning with such a hero. A child feels powerless, overwhelmed, and oppressed by adults and older children. The heroes should have similar characteristics and then conquer and overpower their oppressors and take the child with them in a process of mastering the people and the world around them.

8. The existential problems of the child spring from conflicts with his own parents and siblings, i.e. within his own family and not from the outside society. Many authors of literary tales try to improve and beautify folktales by moving the conflict and struggle to other members of the community outside the immediate family. That, of course, takes all the fun out of the tale for the child who cannot identify with the hero's adventures and exploits because children do not have any accounts to settle with people outside their own immediate family.

9. Another point related to the previous one is that it is clear to scholars of the traditional folktale that a stepmother is the bad side of the real mother. Having a dead real mother and bringing in the stepmother simply hinder the child from coming to terms with the facts of life, namely, that a mother is not always kind and loving, but can get angry, even cruel and nasty. Ultimately, the child has to come to terms with that and accept the mother as is.

10. Finally, we come to illustrations. The use of illustrations clearly came in with literary fairytales, and like writing, it is ideological and intended to brain-wash or socialize the child into the social system. Illustrations can be helpful in guiding the children's imagination and giving them forms in which to project and give shape to their feelings and hopes and aspirations. Illustrators, however, should be careful not to restrict and inhibit the child's imagination and impose on the child images with which the child does not feel comfortable. One way to avoid that is to make illustrations as vague and undefined as possible. Illustrations should come as close as possible to being Rorschach ink blots.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, the main point in this paper is that the traditional folktales of the illiterate societies and stories told by children are similar to each other and that they are more suitable to the mind of a child than are literary fairytales. Children are more likely to identify with the hero of stories written in the style of the former two and come away from the story with a feeling of hope in their own ability to solve their day-to-day conflicts. Therefore, it is hoped that writers of children's books will keep these points in mind. The work of many of those who try to modify the traditional folktales reminds me of the Arabic saying, "He wanted to put kohl on her eyes but in the process blinded her."

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER:

Kanaana, S. (2017). Stories Told by and for Palestinian Children. *International Humanities Studies*, 4(1), 36-43.

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