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Children's Literature in Algeria: Reality and Themes

1 Khaldi rebha *, univ-setif2 (algeria) ,

r.khaldi@univ-setif2.dz<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1983-8290>

Abstract:

Children's literature is considered a literature characterized by a specificity that distinguishes it from adult literature. It requires a sufficient and important amount of care given its great importance in forming the child's personality and directing him properly. It relies primarily on high ideals and derives its intellectual components from the teachings of Islam, to achieve various goals, including psychological, social, and mental

*** Khaldi rebha**

Introduction:

The intellectual production directed at children differs from that intended for adults, both in form and content. This distinction highlights the difference between adult literature and children's literature.

Interest in children's literature is not new, but it has developed significantly in recent times, especially in the Arab world. This growth is due to increasing awareness within society, the impact of scientific and technological advancements, and the expansion of children's literature in newspapers and magazines specifically dedicated to children. Even adult-targeted magazines have allocated substantial sections for children's content. Furthermore, children's literature has gained prominence in audiovisual, broadcast, and electronic media, expanding its usage across multiple fields.

This interest in children's literature stems from its crucial role in guiding and educating children in an ethical and educational manner to build a generation that aspires to knowledge and learning. Therefore, children's literature in Algeria has received particular attention. This research examines the reality of children's literature in Algeria, exploring its origins and development, analyzing the different stages it has gone through, and recognizing key Algerian pioneers who played a significant role in its evolution. Additionally, a practical study focuses on the major poetic themes addressed by children's poets, which have positively influenced the intellectual and aesthetic development of young readers, fostering their literary appreciation and creative talents.

Does the positive impact on children lie in the diversity of themes? Or is it found in the variety of literary forms, including songs, stories, plays, and other genres?

1. Definition of Children's Literature:

One of the earliest writers for children was the French poet ¹

Charles Perrault, who introduced his first children's story, Mother Goose Tales. In 1697, he published a collection titled Stories and Tales from Past Times, which included tales such as Bluebeard, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Puss in Boots. These stories achieved unexpected success, prompting him to publish a second collection².

a. Among Western Pioneers:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated for a reconsideration of childhood and for modifying the perception of children in society. He emphasized the necessity of understanding childhood and allowing children to mature naturally without external interference³. Rousseau argued that imposing certain readings on children could

obscure their ability to comprehend reality. His studies focused on children as independent human beings with unique personalities.

Rousseau emphasized non-interference in children's preferences and encouraged self-discovery as a means for intellectual maturation. He believed that children should have the freedom to choose activities that entertain them.

Charlotte Huck defines children's literature as "everything that children read or hear, whether in the form of poetry, fictional or realistic stories, plays, books, or magazines, provided that these materials suit their level of comprehension, experiences, and emotions."⁴ Huck highlights the importance of selecting content that aligns with a child's cognitive abilities and interests, ensuring engagement and proper guidance.

b. Among Arab Pioneers:

Ahmed Zallat defines children's literature as "a dynamic literary genre created to engage a specific age group with unique cognitive abilities. It fosters education through poetry and prose."⁵ He stresses the importance of addressing children's emotional needs, moral development, language skills, and artistic appreciation.

Zallat notes that children's literature is distinct from adult literature, mainly in linguistic simplicity. While adult literature often contains complex and layered narratives, children's literature must be accessible and engaging.

Children's literature relies on simple, fluent, and eloquent language that matches a child's vocabulary. It also features transparent imagination, diverse and meaningful content, and themes that resonate with children's intellect and comprehension. Zallat emphasizes that, aside from language complexity, children's literature does not significantly differ from adult literature.

The history of children's literature in Arabic culture dates back to traditional practices, such as lullabies and songs sung to children to soothe them to sleep. Historians have recorded that children's literary roots are found in Arabic heritage, including cradle songs, nursery rhymes, short poetic compositions, and storytelling traditions. Storytelling has played a vital role in stimulating children's imagination and emotions.

As Ahmed Zallat explains, nannies used to narrate simplified tales to children, a practice reminiscent of the folk stories passed down by grandmothers. Some of these narratives, including ghost and demon stories, remain prevalent in certain communities. Early examples of Arabic children's literature include *The Epistles of Followers* and *Jinn* by Ibn Shahid Al-Andalusi, *Kalila wa Dimna* translated by Ibn

Al-Muqaffa, and major literary works such as *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, which have served as essential sources of children's storytelling.⁶

Ahmed Naguib distinguishes between two definitions of children's literature:

A broad definition, which refers to any intellectual content documented in books and directed toward children across various fields of knowledge.

A specific definition, which focuses on "high-quality writing that provides artistic enjoyment to children, whether in poetry or prose, oral storytelling, or written literature."⁷

Hadi Al-Hiti defines children's literature as "a collection of literary productions designed for children, considering their characteristics, needs, and developmental levels. This includes stories, poetry, theatrical plays, essays, songs, and other literary forms."⁸

Similarly, Abu Maal defines children's literature as "any linguistic content that embodies literary elements, including the beauty of expression and the depth of meaning, while also maintaining suitability for children's cognitive abilities, interests, and developmental stages. This balance makes children's literature distinct from adult literature, though both share aesthetic and thematic"⁹

qualities."c. Children's Literature in Algeria:

Educational efforts in Algeria intensified with the establishment of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars in 1931. Schools focused on religious, moral, and educational instruction, though children's literature was initially limited to patriotic and religious songs aimed at instilling faith and nationalism¹⁰.

2 c. In Algeria:

The focus on education in Algeria began with the establishment of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars in 1931. This led to the creation of Quranic schools and an emphasis on educational, religious, and moral aspects. At that time, there was no distinct literary genre called children's literature, except for some literary attempts in the form of nasheeds (chants). These were mainly aimed at instilling a love for faith, patriotism, and resistance against the French colonizer in the minds of young people.

2. The Reality of Children's Literature in Algeria:

1. Before Independence:

Children's literature, particularly children's poetry, gained considerable attention in its early stages. The prevailing conditions at the time facilitated its emergence and appreciation as an effective means of mobilizing the nation. Children's poetry played a significant role during this critical period in Algerian history¹¹, reflecting the readiness for revolution. Many of the early pioneers of this literary movement were both poets and social reformers.

Poems were introduced into schools to fulfill educational, ethical, and religious objectives. Among the most notable pioneers was Mohamed Al-Abed Al-Jilali, who published his poetry collection in 1939 under the title *School Nasheeds for Algerian Boys and Girls*. Some of his notable poems include *The Boy and The Rope*.¹² Al-Jilali is considered the first poet to dedicate a poetry collection specifically for children, earning him the title of *The Ideal Teacher*.

Following him, Mohamed Al-Aid Al-Khalifa emerged as a significant figure in Algerian children's literature. Scholars regard him as the true pioneer of Algerian children's literature. He published several works, including:

Scout of Hope (1936),
 Youth Anthem (1937),
 Scout of Progress (1937),
 Scout of the Morning (1937),
 The Child (1938),
 The Brothers (1939).

Additionally, Mohamed Al-Saleh Ramadan published a collection titled *Tunes of Youth*, which contained scouting nasheeds with nationalistic and educational themes. The collection was printed at Ibn Khaldun Press in 1953¹³. Other notable contributors to children's poetry include:

Sheikh Ahmed Sahnoun,
 Mohamed Al-Luqani bin Al-Sayeh,
 Abu Bakr bin Rahmoun,
 Abdul Rahman Belakoun,
 Mohamed Al-Hadi Al-Sanousi Al-Zahari,

and many others who contributed reformist, moral, and religious poetry aimed at guiding children toward values of freedom and justice.

Prominent newspapers that published children's poetry during this period included *Al-Shehab*, *Al-Basaer*, *Al-Islah*, *Al-Najah*, *Al-Umma*, *Huna Al-Jazair*, *Al-Manar*, and *Al-Mirsad*.

2. After Independence:

The post-independence era marked a transformative period characterized by profound changes. Colonial rule had significantly undermined Algeria's cultural and educational infrastructure, and the newly independent state sought to rebuild these sectors.

One of the major shifts was the establishment of publishing houses dedicated to printing books and magazines. The school textbook became the primary literary resource available to children, incorporating nasheeds and other themes that aimed to nurture young minds and guide them toward the right path.

Some of the most prominent publishing houses specializing in children's literature included:

The National Institution for Books,
Dar Al-Shorouk,
The Green Library,
Dar Al-Huda,
Dar Al-Shehab, among others.

During this period, Mohamed Al-Akhdar Al-Saihi emerged as one of the leading poets of children's literature. His collection, *Whispers and Cries*, contained a wide range of poems for children, such as:

Ya Muna,
My Little Girl,
My Flag,
Be Safe, Algeria,
The Children's Anthem,¹⁴
The Afforestation Song, and others.

Other notable poets of this period included Abu Al-Qasim Saadallah, Omar Al-Barnawi, and others.

One of the most significant contributions was the launch of *Umqadeesh* magazine in 1969, a general illustrated magazine published by the National Publishing and Distribution Company in Algeria. The Ministry of Culture and Communication also initiated a national competition dedicated to children's literature every two years starting in 1969, but this initiative was eventually discontinued.¹⁵

3. The 1970s and 1980s:

The magazine *Hamzat Wasl*, published by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, played a vital role in promoting children's literature by dedicating a section to it. Many Algerian and Arab poets published works in this magazine.

Notably, the magazine's third issue in 1975 featured:

The Algerian Flag by Abdelkader bin Mohamed,
The Morning Anthem by Ali Abdulwahid,

Traffic Etiquette, among other educational and moral themes.

In 1979¹⁶, which was designated the International Year of the Child, Algerian publishing houses and cultural institutions intensified their focus on children's literature. As a result, many poets released poetry collections specifically targeted at children.

Some of the most notable poetry collections from this period include:

Mohamed Al-Akhdar Al-Saihi's Children's Collection (1983), later republished by The Green Library in Algeria in 2000 under the title Children's Songs and Anthems. Songs of Victory (1983), published by the National Institution for Books as part of the Candles Series – Songs and Poems for Youth.

Other notable poetry collections from the same series include:

The Green Joy by Mustafa Al-Ghamari (1983),
The Tender Buds by Mohamed Nasser (1984),
Spring is Coming by Slimane Jawadi (1984),
The Cubs' Anthems (1985),
The Seasons' Conversations by Bouzeid Harzallah (1986),
Breezes by Yahia Masoudi (1986),
We Are the Children by Mohamed Al-Akhdar Abdelkader Al-Saihi.¹⁷

4. Children's Storytelling:

During this period, many children's stories were published. One of the most prominent writers was Bouzeid Harzallah, who produced several poetic stories, including:

Adlan and the Gazelles (1989), published by Dar Al-Sanaa Publishing.

The Breeze Plane (1992).

He also adapted La Fontaine's Tales into poetry, publishing them as part of a global literature series, including:

The Crow and the Fox,
The Hen with the Golden Eggs (1992).

Among his other works is Lost Love and Pink Dreams, a poetic story for young girls published by The National Institution for Books in 1985.

3. Literary Genres in Algerian Children's Literature:

1. Themes in Poetic Works:

The development and proper nurturing of childhood are fundamental to achieving a prosperous future and the progress of any nation¹⁸. This necessitates responding to children's essential needs through scientific planning and the allocation of necessary human and material resources for their upbringing at various stages of development.

To guide children during that period, many poetic works were written, addressing various values, including:

a. National Values:

The homeland represents belonging and identity. A person is born in it, lives in it, and belongs to it, and even when they leave, they long to return. One of the key symbols of the homeland is the flag, which embodies the history of nations and civilizations. Mohamed Nasser expresses this sentiment in his poetry collection *The Tender Buds*:

"I sacrifice for your green, for it symbolizes my journey
I protect your red, for it represents my revolution
Your bright crescent is the emblem of my Arab identity
And your shining star is the symbol of my faith
We will defend you, oh symbol of Algeria, oh flag."¹⁹

This poem highlights the colors of the Algerian flag, each carrying a specific meaning:

Red represents the revolution and the blood of martyrs who sacrificed for the nation, The crescent and star symbolize Arab identity and the faith that unites the Algerian people.

True love for this cherished homeland and its defense by all means require unity to repel oppressors. Al-Shafi'i Al-Sanousi, in his collection *The Cubs' Anthems*, calls on the youth:²⁰

"We are the cubs, the sons of lions, creators of glory and pride
We have pledged to God to be diligent and loyal to this homeland
We will honor and protect our Arabic language
We will build and elevate our nation's foundation
The envious enemy shall perish, and we shall oppose those who incite discord
We are the supporters of our faith, we are the heroes of our nation
We build glory with our determination and achieve the nation's aspirations."²¹

Through these verses, the poet addresses young people, igniting their love for the homeland and instilling in them a sense of pride and belonging, inspiring them to defend their country by all means.

Similarly, Slimane Jawadi, in his poem *Spring is Coming*, reinforces patriotism:

"I believed in my love for you, my homeland, I believed, I believed
Even if all people betray, I swear by the revolution, I will never betray

If they ask me to choose another land, I would rather revolt and object
Your beauty has inspired me, and I, in turn, have been inspired."²²

Here, the poet emphasizes his unwavering allegiance to his homeland, urging sincerity in its love, loyalty to its cause, and commitment to its defense.

Children need such poetry to engage their emotions, helping them build a strong, inspiring connection with their homeland. Mohamed Al-Akhdar Al-Saihi in his collection *Anthems of Victory* writes:

"Oh my beloved homeland, the paradise of nations
From your fertile gardens and your captivating beauty
Your vibrant hues have inspired awe
And your melodies have enchanted my heart."

For children, their homeland represents a paradise where they find security, peace, and a fulfilling life. Therefore, they deserve care, guidance, and an enduring imprint of national pride.

b. Scientific Values:

Schools play a fundamental role in a child's development. They provide essential learning experiences in reading, writing, drawing, memorization, arithmetic, and more. Nations prioritize the construction of schools to ensure the success of the educational process, shaping children into well-rounded individuals.

It is our duty to instill a love for school in children, making them eager to return and learn more. Mohamed Nasser, in *The Tender Buds*, expresses this idea:

"At dawn, I embrace its breeze,
I mimic the flower's smile,
I imitate the bird's flutter,
Longing for your pure knowledge, my school." ²³

Emphasizing school and making it appealing to children is crucial for achieving educational goals and fostering a well-rounded upbringing.

At school, children learn to overcome ignorance, acquire literacy skills, and pursue success. Al-Shafi'i Al-Sanousi, in *The Cubs' Anthems*, writes:

"Through knowledge, light prevails,
And noble values shine bright,

Knowledge leads to a better life,
And to noble aspirations,
Indeed, knowledge is the path,
To greatness, young ones."²⁴

The poet encourages the youth to embrace education and diligence as the means to success and advancement.

One of the most important tools aiding children's learning is the book, which accompanies them at home, school, and the library. Reading enhances knowledge and expands their intellectual horizons. Al-Sanousi writes:

"You are the faithful companion,
The wise and prudent book,
You are the nurturing teacher,
You are the comforting friend."²⁵

Similarly, many poems have been written to instill a love for the Arabic language in children. Mohamed Al-Akhdar Al-Saihi, in *Anthem of Victory*, declares:

"We are an Arab people,
Since time immemorial,
We accept no language but Arabic,
We challenge time with it."²⁶

Encouraging children to love and learn Arabic is an essential educational goal. Slimane Al-Issa compares language to a tree:

"My language is a tree,
That grows eternally,
I recite it,
With a melodious tone,
My language is knowledge,
My language is poetry,
From it comes the sword,
And from it, the rain."²⁷

The poet likens language to a tree that flourishes with care and attention, yielding rich rewards. Language embodies identity, history, revolution, and faith. It is both a weapon for defense and a wellspring of wisdom and eloquence.

c. Religious Values:

One of the core values that must be instilled in children from an early age is faith, ensuring the preservation of religious identity and morality. Religion provides ethical guidelines, a sense of duty, and a comprehensive worldview on life and humanity.

Religious values focus on belief in God, the Prophets, Islamic teachings, prayer, faith, supplication, and all aspects that shape a child's spiritual relationship with the divine.

Recognizing that children represent the future of the nation, it is essential to raise them according to Islamic principles. Al-Shafi'i Al-Sanousi writes:

"Blessed are You, my Lord, for this creation,
Your majesty is beyond compare,
You are the Almighty, the Kind,
You are the Merciful, the Loving,
You created all beings from nothing,
No one can match Your greatness."²⁸

Children should be taught the greatness of God, fostering love and obedience to divine teachings while avoiding what is forbidden. This nurtures moral integrity and uprightness.

Expressing gratitude for God's blessings is another important lesson. Hussein Abrous, in his collection *Dew of Childhood*, writes:

"Oh my Lord, oh my Creator,
The Glorious One of the heavens,
You are my hope, my refuge,
To You belongs the dominion, my Lord,
Praise and thanks to You always,
Your favor is abundant, O Sustainer."²⁹

Children should always be reminded to express gratitude for God's blessings, acknowledging His greatness and sovereignty. This reinforces the idea that God's mercy and guidance are ever-present.

2. Prose Works:

For now, we will define and categorize prose literature, leaving further discussion on themes in prose works for future research.

a. Stories:

Children's stories in Algeria have deep roots in folklore and oral traditions, passed down through generations. These stories have evolved into diverse categories, including³⁰:

Realistic Stories: Centered on real-life experiences and the child's immediate environment.

Social Stories: Addressing societal issues and human relations, promoting moral and ethical values.

Mythical Stories: Featuring legends, fantasy creatures, and magical adventures that stimulate imagination.

Folk Tales: Narratives about prophets and historical figures, highlighting their virtues and bravery.

Historical Stories: Depicting past events, victories, and national heroes.

Humorous Stories: Designed to entertain and provide joy.

Adventure Stories: Following daring heroes and their exciting escapades.

Science Fiction Stories³¹: Exploring scientific discoveries, space travel, and futuristic concepts.

Conclusion:

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping future generations. Although its development in Algeria started late, it has made significant strides, driven by reformist efforts and educational initiatives. The diversity in children's literary content—spanning poetry, prose, and various thematic elements—has enriched children's intellectual, emotional, and cultural growth. This ongoing expansion continues to foster creativity and a deeper connection to heritage and global narratives. Moreover, the increasing accessibility of children's literature, supported by digital platforms and educational reforms, further enhances its impact, ensuring that future generations benefit from a rich and evolving literary landscape.

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