

A VOICE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST: POLITICAL CONTENT IN ARABIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract: This research paper explores the trends of presenting political and social realities in Arabic children's literature through a content analysis of 26 award-winning Arabic children's books published between 2011 and 2018 — after the Arab Spring. The origins of Arabic children's books are first investigated from a number of different standpoints, and are shown to have traditional, religious, and global ties. I also explore the recent rise of interest in creating Arabic literary works for young children. I deduce that the causes of this increase are a cultural reawakening, globalization, and government support and funding. Finally, the 26 children's books studied show links between the ethnicity of their authors, their dates of publication, and the illustrations and themes that appear in them. This provides support for the idea that Arabic political reality is often reflected in Arabic children's literature.

Keywords: Middle Eastern literature, Arabic children's literature, Arab Spring, political content

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The Arab Spring erupted in 2010, following a brewing storm of economic, political, civil, and social problems in the region. It consisted of a number of uprisings that were “inspired by the success of the protests in Tunisia” (Jamshidi, 2014, p. 9) on December 17, 2010, and quickly ignited in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and finally in Syria on March 15, 2011 (Jamshidi, 2014, pp. 8–14). The current study, which aims to shed light on the fast-growing yet under evaluated field of Arabic children’s literature, is the first of its kind. Through the exploration of the political reality of 26 award-winning Arabic picture books, I hope to focus the attention of children, parents, teachers, and literary critics on the value and significance of the implicit messages in many of the popular Arabic children’s books that have recently been published, and on their relationship to the current political status of the Arab world. Thus, this paper aims to be a pioneer in paving the way for critical thinking, valuable discussions, and additional, insightful research studies in this neglected area. It also hopes to serve as an avenue for the discovery of parallels between the lives of the young fictional protagonists of Arabic children’s books and those of children in the war-torn Arab world. Furthermore, I highlight the factors that may have influenced the appearance of certain major, recurring themes in recently published Arabic children’s books. I also describe the manner and mode of presenting political reality in books written for young Arab readers during or after the Arab Spring, whether that be through symbolism, pictures, or direct narration of the harsh reality many Arabs lived through as a result of the uprisings and political disorder during those years. The paper explores the following research questions:

- What are the reasons for the rise in the number of Arabic picture books in the past decade?
- What are the manner and mode of presenting political reality in Arabic picture books?
- In what ways do Arabic children’s picture books portray political events related to the Arab Spring uprisings?

Origins of Arabic Children’s Literature

There are varying ideas on how, why, and when Arabic children’s literature first came to exist. Some researchers, like Biqa’ei (2003), have argued that the initial production of Arabic children’s literature is a direct outcome of outside — specifically European — influences. Children’s literature was ubiquitous in Europe in the 17th century, a period during which Arab scholars studied in France, Russia, and other European countries, then brought their knowledge and discoveries back to their homelands. Additionally, the colonization of Middle Eastern countries in this period may have promoted the transfer of ideologies and knowledge to Arab countries. Mdallel (2004) affirmed that the Arab world followed the footsteps of European educational systems after getting in touch with the West through colonization. Biqa’ei (2003) acknowledged the Egyptian poet, Ahmed Shawqi (1868–1932), as the earliest writer to compose books for Arab youngsters.

On the other hand, according to Arab writer Al Kilani (1998), the concept of “children’s literature” was not clearly defined until 1920, and only began to really develop between 1970 and 1990. He claimed that much of today’s morally driven Arabic children’s literature emerged through Islam; oral literature proliferated with families orally transmitting the lessons and stories of the Qur’an to their children and young relatives.

In contrast, Arab literary critic Al Faisal (2001) argued that Arabic children’s literature originated in the form of rhyming poetry rather than as short stories and novels. Al Faisal also contended that classic short stories such as *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (McCaughrean & Fowler, 1999) and *Kalila wa Dimna: Fables from a Fourteenth-Century Arabic Manuscript* (Atil, 1981) were originally written in Arabic before their conversion to French, and that these literary pieces eventually reverted to Arabic through cultural exchange and globalization.

Generally, classical Arabic children’s literature is characterized by didacticism and moralization. Although it is undeniable that there has been a growth in the number of Arab books produced purely for entertainment purposes, such as *Aladdin* and *Sinbad the Sailor*, it is notable that there also is a trend towards the production of Arabic children’s books that are reflective of the Arab political reality. In his article, “The Sociology of Children’s Literature in the Arab World”, Sabour Mdallel (2004) stated, “There is a tendency to make children aware of the political and military challenges that face the Arab Nation” (para. 18). More specifically, he noted that historical fiction is seen as a major part of the literature written for Arab children. This genre covers “political themes like honoring the glorious Arab past with stories about heroic Arab figures, just caliphs, major Islamic conquests and, more recently, victorious Arab wars” (para. 18). He also claimed that “children’s literature about local political leaders like presidents and kings can also be found” (para. 18). This strong political trend in Arabic children’s literature can be explained through the political changes, events, and challenges the region has faced in recent decades. Since 2010, the presentation of political realities in Arabic children’s literature has shifted; the new style better suits the young audience towards whom these books are directed.

Factors Influencing the Increased Interest in Arabic Children’s Literature

Regardless of origins, it is clear, through multiple studies (e.g., Anati, 2017; Holland, 2011; Lindsey, 2014; Mdallel, 2004; Qualey, 2010; Staton, 2015) that there has been a heightened interest in the production of Arabic children’s literature in the past few years, both in Arabic and in translation. Different theories have been advanced regarding the reasons for this growth.

One theory is that a reawakening is taking place in the Arab world, particularly in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf states such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, and that it is inspiring Arabs to return to their roots and connect more with their traditions, origins, and distinctive cultural traits (Anati, 2017; Holland, 2011; Lindsey, 2014; Qualey, 2010). This reawakening stems from an inner Arabic cultural influence; in other words, Arab scholars and linguists are increasingly emphasizing the need to return to one’s Arabic roots, Arabic authenticity, and pride in the Arabic language. In the words of the pioneer of Arabic children’s

literature, author and publisher Taghreed Al Najjar, “In the last 10 years, the [book publishing] industry has experienced a dramatic burst of energy — so much so that insiders are talking of a renaissance, or *Nahda*” (Staton, 2015, para. 3).

Another factor influencing the increased focus on the creation of Arabic children’s literature is the unprecedented support, funding, and encouragement many Arab governments and organizations are providing to Arab authors. Since 2007, several administrative initiatives have been launched to accelerate the production of high-quality Arabic children’s literature. Several Arabic regions have announced generous book prizes, created new literary translation programs, established new publishing houses, organized literary festivals and book fairs, and facilitated writing workshops. For example, in 2012, the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development founded the Translation and Interpreting Institute¹ in order to enable the production of a larger quantity of Arabic children’s books. Similarly, in Abu Dhabi, the creation of an initiative called *Kalima* in 2007 has led to the translation of 900 books to Arabic (as of December 2016; *Kalima*, n.d.). More translation efforts are being made with the aid of governments and organizations, which seems to have contributed greatly to the rise in Arabs’ interest in Arabic literature in general, and literature aimed towards children in particular. Moreover, a number of distinguished prizes have been created solely to recognize Arabic literature for children and young adults. In 2010, the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation² announced a prestigious book competition called *Reading Here, There, and Everywhere*, inviting writers from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine to produce high-quality children’s literature in Arabic. Similarly, *The Etisalat Prize*, announced in 2010 by the UAE National Chapter of the International Board on Books for Young People (UAEBBY)³, provides an additional incentive for creators of children’s books in the Arab world. A variety of literary prizes have been created under the UAEBBY to further promote interest in Arabic children’s literature, including the Arab Thought Foundation’s *Kitabi/My book Prize*; the *Sharjah Children’s Book Award*, declared every year during the Sharjah Children’s Reading Festival; and the *Sheikh Zayed Award* for creative writing and children’s literature, which was first established in 2007. All these competitions, prizes, incentives, and awards act as additional catalysts in encouraging the production of original Arabic children’s literature and increasing public interest in this field.

Another reason for the notable boom in Arabic children’s literature may be the recent globalization phenomenon that has taken over the world, the Arab world included. The recent translation movement has enabled translators worldwide to encounter books from all different cultures. For example, the *Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing* organization, established in 2008 and renamed the *Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press*⁴ in 2015, has published all its books

¹ <https://tii.qa/en/who-we-are>

² <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/>

³ <http://uaebby.org.ae/en/>

⁴ <https://hbkupress.com/en>

in both Arabic and English. Correspondingly, the British magazine *Banipal*⁵ has been producing Arabic literary books since 1998. Additionally, the *Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize*⁶ for Arabic Literary Translation, that was launched in 2006, honors high-quality Arabic literature in English translation. As a result of the translation movement and such initiatives that have come with it, Arabic literary books have become more accessible than ever. Journalist Ursula Lindsey (2013), who has written on the topic of Arabic translation, noted the increase in translations to and from Arabic: “Certainly the interest in Arabic literature in translation — which I have seen grow in the 10 years I’ve lived in Cairo — is heartening to those of us who know how much great writing there is in Arabic” (Lindsey, 2013, para. 1). Additionally, she states that, “We ought to celebrate the fact that we have greater access to more literary works from the Arabic world than ever before, a time when the region’s literature is proliferating with new approaches, genres, and voices.” (Lindsey, 2014, para. 7). Thus, globalization has clearly allowed more children’s books to be translated to and from Arabic, both by widening the range and diversity of the audience and by increasing interest in Arabic books.

Although the quality and quantity of Arabic children’s literature is clearly increasing, research studies examining the content of contemporary children’s books are scarce. It is challenging to find legitimate scholarly studies analyzing the thematic content of Arabic children’s books in general, much less the reflection of Arab political reality in them. The available studies on this genre are limited to posts or articles published in local newspapers or online websites. The present study hopes to reduce the research gap and contribute to the existing limited body of qualitative research by concentrating on a content analysis of the manner and mode of presenting political realities in award-winning Arabic children’s books, specifically picture books.

Methodology

Method of Sample Selection

When considering what books to use for this study, I chose to look at 30 books that either won or were shortlisted for a recognized award. Eight had won the Etisalat Award for Children’s Literature (see Appendix A), with one book representing each year from 2011 to 2018; the remaining 22 books had been shortlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Award during the same period (see Appendix B). Of these 30 books originally considered, only four had to be excluded because they did not meet the study criteria. This study is therefore based on 26 picture books intended for children between the ages of 4 and 12, all written in Arabic.

This time period was chosen to ensure that the analysis and observations discussed in this paper are of relevance to the Arab Spring uprisings, since that political outburst began in December

⁵ <http://www.banipal.co.uk/>

⁶ <https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/award.cfm?y=2019>

of 2010 and is still going on today. The Etisalat Award and the Sheikh Zayed Award are among the most notable prizes for children’s literature in the Arab world; they are commonly acknowledged by teachers, educators, librarians, and other cultural critics as being valid, dependable books (e.g., Abdullah, 2012; “Etisalat for the children’s book”, 2018; Sataton, 2015; “UAEBBY at ND”, 2019). The chosen books were selected based on their discussion of Arabic cultural subjects, age-appropriateness, and availability. The four books that did not meet these criteria will not be discussed in this paper. They include: Mheidly’s (2014) *The Girl Who Traced the Characters of Ibn Al Muqaffa*, an adaptation of the classical tales of *Kalila wa Dimna*; Fakhr Eldine’s (2013) *Thirty Poems for Children*, a book of poetry; Abdullah’s (2012) *Fanoun’s Tales*, an art-like book for teaching drawing; and Al Hassan’s (2016) *Umm Kaseb, the She-Wolf*, a story of imagination. The 26 titles selected all had a positive reception from Banipal Magazine of Modern Arab Literature (“The Shaikh Zayed Book Award”, 2018), the Revolvly website (“Arabic literary awards”, 2019), the Qatar Foundation (“Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation”, 2015), and many electronic educational sites supported by Etisalat (“Ministry of Education”, 2018), which are recognized by instructors, teachers, and librarians.

Data Collection and Analysis

The texts were examined through an exploratory content analysis, which is commonly “used to interpret meaning from the content of text data and, hence, adhere to the naturalistic paradigm” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). In the context of this study, this paradigm refers to the Arabic stories that reflect the realities of Arab youngsters who live in areas of conflict. In addition, content analysis is a flexible research method for analyzing texts and describing and interpreting the written artifacts of a society (White & Marsh, 2006). Content analysis also offers a subjective, methodical procedure for developing an understanding of content, and it “provides new insights, increases researcher’s understanding of particular phenomena, and informs practical actions” (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24).

The data analysis procedure involved an initialization stage followed by a reflection stage. During initialization, the researcher closely read sections of the books and annotated and highlighted information from which authors’ perspectives could be derived, explored, and interpreted. Generally, the search for answers to the following questions then guided the reflection phase:

- How do the illustrations aid in understanding the underlying messages in the texts?
- What are some of the themes that appear in the texts?
- Can connections be drawn between the nationalities of the authors and the content or settings of the stories?
- Do the dates of publication of the books support the conclusions, drawn from the content of the stories, about the ties to Arab political events?

Findings and Discussion

The 26 children’s literary pieces investigated in this study can be categorized according to the major themes presented in them. These themes are notably tied to the subjects of war, oppression, and loss of freedom that are characteristic of the Arab Spring and the revolutions and uprisings that accompanied it. Five central themes emerged from the content analysis of the picture books: family; coping mechanisms for dealing with loss and depression; death, illness, and injury; identity; and conflict resolution. The following sections provide details and examples of each theme found in the books investigated.

Family

The theme of “family” is presented in a number of books written by authors of different backgrounds and published in a range of years that, overall, covers the time period from 2011 to 2018. For instance, Ebtihaj Al Harthi’s *Me and Mah* (2015) is a very explicit tale in terms of the message it aims to convey to its young audience. The young protagonist Azzan’s relationship with his family is highlighted in the book’s description of his close relationship with his grandmother, Mah, and his mother. Azzan is portrayed as being extremely open and vulnerable when talking to these two characters, and the detailed illustrations of his facial expressions show he is often happy and at peace when around them. This story focuses on the idea of family and the importance of it in the lives of young children who are suffering from loss or hardship. *Me and Mah* was published in 2015, just a few years after the dawn of the Arab Spring, which makes it possible to infer a connection between this seemingly innocent children’s book and the horrifying political reality in the Arab world with the start of the Arab Spring. It is important to note that the author of this tale is from Oman, a country untouched by the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, the Arab world is very connected as all Arabs are “bound by a common identity grounded in language and history” (Rogan, 2017, p. 12) and have all been affected to some degree by the Arab Spring. In his article, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring”, F. Gregory Gause III (2011), a professor of political science at the University of Vermont, stated, “If any doubts remain that the Arabs retain a sense of common political identity despite living in 20 different states, the events of this year should put them to rest.... All Arabs share a common political identity and fate.” (p. 88). He also said that, “the Arab revolts have shown that what happens in one Arab state can affect others” (p. 89). It is thus plausible that *Me and Mah* was inspired, at least to some degree, by the political reality of the Arab world, especially since one of the major themes — family — is very easily tied to the by-products of the modern-day Arab political reality. As exemplified in this collection of books, during times of difficulty family togetherness and communal support are essential to maintaining quality of life; this especially applies during the current hardships in the Arab countries.

Similarly, *My Mom Loves Fattoush*, written by Lebanese author Eva Kosma (2014), focuses on the theme of family. The heart-wrenching story is narrated by a little girl living in poverty and observing her mother’s actions. The young narrator explains that she always thought

her mother did not like fattoush since her plate was always empty while everyone else thoroughly enjoyed the dish. However, the narrator later discovers that her mother actually loves fattoush but refrains from eating it in order to allow her loved ones to enjoy more of it: “Surprisingly, my mother loves fattoush.” The author presents all the details of this agonizing tale in a positive light by using bright, friendly colors when depicting the fattoush and the clothes worn by the characters in the book. This stylistic technique balances the depressing reality of the content so it is more age appropriate for its young, impressionable audience. Thus, *My Mom Loves Fattoush* focuses on the importance of loving families, especially during tough times. The story was published only two years after the beginning of the Arab Spring and the author is Lebanese, and thus was presumably greatly influenced by the pain and suffering in the countries neighboring her homeland. The protagonist’s mother shares her fattoush dish with relatives and neighbors, symbolizing the deprivation that many selflessly endured during the famine that engulfed Syria, Yemen, and other neighboring countries. The story presented in *My Mom Loves Fattoush* focuses on the theme of family in relation to the modern political reality of the Arab world.

The theme of family is prevalent in a number of the other books under study. For instance, Sbeity’s story, *Two Homes Instead of One* (2017), follows the experience of young Adam after the divorce of his parents as he learns how to deal with the situation and realizes that family is still an important, constant factor he can depend on in difficult situations. In like manner, Lina Al Hassan Hawyan’s *Looking for Ghannam, the Falcon* (2015) focuses on details of the emotions young Sabah experiences after being separated from his grandmother and uncle on a desert trip, as he recounts how much his family means to him and how much his displacement from them hurts his emotional well-being. In Al-Harhi’s *Nostalgia* (2018), the importance of one’s connection and respect for elders and traditions is highlighted through the experiences of a group of young Omani children learning about their ancestry. Also the longing for one’s home and family is presented in Makawi’s (2013) book *The Garbage Galaxy*. After arriving on another planet, Rasheed, a young boy, felt homesick. He missed his grandmother and his friends badly and realized that family is a source of security. Finally, in Al Najjar’s *Against the Tide* (2013), the theme of family is clearly conveyed through the story of a young girl named Yosra, who decides to challenge social norms, with her family’s unyielding support, to become a fisher and provide for her family. Clearly, the theme of family is pervasive in the books studied and the tie between the Arab Spring and this theme in the stories is clear: these tales encourage young children to be sure to maintain strong relationships with their relatives in the midst of the chaos, treachery, and corruption that accompanied the dawn of the Arab Spring.

Coping Mechanisms for Dealing with Loss and Depression

The theme of “coping mechanisms for dealing with loss and depression” is also prevalent in the books explored. Amani Al Ashmawi’s *Fly O Kite* (2011), an Etisalat award winner published in Egypt in the first year of the Arab Spring, directly addresses different coping mechanisms for children suffering feelings of depression as a result of loss. Such loss from war and conflict has become all too familiar in recent times. Several studies consider the loss of loved ones a reason for

depression and suggest a strong positive correlation between loss and depression rates (Clements et al., 2004; Dardas et al., 2019; Hickman, 1994). The main character of the story, 9-year-old Zahraa, loses her parents and moves to live with her father's cousin and his wife in Alexandria, Egypt. Zahraa experiences depression and sadness and struggles to cope with her losses. These emotions are made clear in the detailed illustrations, especially those of the characters' faces, used throughout the story. After making a friend, who is also an orphan, Zahraa learns to relieve her pain and stress by journaling on a kite and then flying it — releasing all her pain. This story touches explicitly on coping mechanisms for orphans and is most likely directed towards children who have lost parents through war and violence. According to critic and writer Raneem Hassan (2016), “This book helps children who have lost loved ones understand that our thoughts control our feelings and only through them can grief be ended” (para. 9). As this book was published only a year after the start of the Arab Spring in Egypt, it seems reasonable to assume that the story was created in order to help children — especially Egyptian children — cope with the violence surrounding them, and to give them characters to relate to so they would not feel alone in the midst of the crisis in the Arab world.

Another excellent story that illustrates the theme of coping mechanisms for dealing with loss and depression is Palestinian author Duniyad Al Sa'di's *When You Get Angry* (2013). This story follows little Hady on his quest to find ways to cope with his anxiety and his extreme mood swings that make him act violently. Hady's depressed, angry nature at the start of the book is reflected through the illustrations, which are all in black and white. Throughout the book, however, Hady tries a variety of coping mechanisms in an effort to reduce his stress and eventually discovers that singing, drawing, and journaling uplift him and change his mood for the better. This book was published in 2013, only one year after the Gaza war first broke out. In her review, critic Sahar Abdullah (2014) commented that *When You Get Angry* is a children's book that sheds much light on the theme of coping mechanisms for children who may have suffered post-traumatic stress as a result of the ongoing conflict in the Arab world since 2011. It is thus probable that this book was produced in order to help young Palestinian children cope in a healthy manner with the chaos and suffering surrounding them.

This theme was also present in a number of other books in the sample including Mheidly's *Creatures on the Ceiling* (2012), in which 8-year old Kareem, alone and sad at night, discovers that he can use his imagination to make friendly creatures out of the peeling ceiling of his room. Also, in Al Harthi's *Me and Mah* (2015), the young protagonist learns that he can overcome his grief by doing activities that remind him of the good times he spent with his late grandmother. Additionally, in Al Najjar's *Against the Tide* (2013), the female character Yosra becomes a fisher to provide for her family after her father is severely injured during the Gaza war and discovers that finding a purpose and working hard to achieve her goals help her to overcome hardship and deal with life's challenges. In like manner, in Al Sharouni's *Miracle in the Desert* (2013), the young Egyptian protagonist, Hamza, who lives in Aljara oasis, develops problem-solving skills that help him overcome the hardship faced when his community is dangerously close to running out of

water. Lastly, in Al Najjar's *Raghda's Hat* (2012) and in Abdo's *The Boy Who Saw the Color of the Wind* (2012) the respective young protagonists, Raghda and Bassem, both afflicted with terminal illnesses, discover coping mechanisms that enable them to find their purposes and their worth despite their deadly diseases. Coping mechanisms for dealing with loss and depression was a major theme in many of the books explored for this study; presumably, this theme has been presented to help children deal with the stress and issues that they face as a result of the political reality many Arab children now experience.

Death, Illness, and Injury

Another theme that was present in the books studied was death, illness, and injury, which is highly reflective of the modern political reality of the Arab world. In Al Harthi's *Me and Mah* (2015), Mah dies shortly after the bond between her and her grandson, Azzan, has been established. The detailed illustrations show the sadness and confusion the young protagonist experiences as a result. Azzan begins to ask his mother questions: "Is Mah asleep?" and "Is Mah in the sky?" This is a transition into the rest of the book, which consists of a dialogue between Azzan and his mother, who tries to answer his questions honestly and sensitively. She comforts her son and tells him that "Mah will always reside in our hearts" (p. 8). Rather than avoiding the difficult questions asked by young children who have experienced loss, Al Harthi tackles these inquiries directly and honestly. The parallels between the emotions Azzan experiences and those of the Syrian children documented by the Save the Children organization (as reported by Lynch & Brand, 2017) show the reach and the benefits such a literary piece can have for many Arab children. The organization documented the heart-wrenching trauma Syrian children have experienced as a result of the ongoing war in the country: "Hundreds of thousands of these children have known nothing but war, death, dispossession and loss" (Lynch & Brand, 2017, para. 1). As death, loss, and injury are far too common for many Arab children because of the Arab Spring, this book's representativeness of Arab political reality is clear. The date of publication is supportive of this, and although the fact that Al Harthi is from Oman does not indicate direct ties to the current issue, the entirety of the Arab world was affected to some degree by the movement.

In like manner, Taghreed Al Najjar's award-winning tale, *Raghda's Hat* (2012), explicitly touches on the idea of death and disease. Raghda is a young girl who gets cancer. After going through chemotherapy, she is left completely bald and wears a hat while in public, leading to stares and bullying at school. The change in her confidence and mood over the course of the story are highlighted through illustrations that focus on Raghda's emotions. Al Najjar is a Palestinian author who has written several books that are tied to the current state of Palestine, such as *The Mystery of the Falcon's Eye* (2014) and *Who Hid the Eid Lamb?* (2012). *Raghda's Hat* was published in the year that the Gaza war first broke out, giving credence to the idea that it was written in order to help young victims of the war cope with death and loss that they wouldn't usually have been exposed to at such a young age (Hamouda, 2013). Thus, this heart-warming book exposes young children to the concept of life-threatening disease and death, which is in line with the theme of death, illness, and injury that occurs in seven of other titles in the sample.

Other books in the sample that clearly present the theme of death, illness, and injury. In Hassan's *The Bee-Eater* (2015) illness is presented in the severe injury a bird experiences due to being terrorized by a group of boys. Similarly, in Alosaimi's *Fest in a Jug* (2014) and Al Ashmawi's *Fly O Kite* (2011), death is represented through the loss of parents. In Al Najjar's *Against the Tide* (2013), illness is presented through the injury of Yosra's father in the Gaza war. In Tabballah's *The House and the Palm Tree* (2011), the illness of the grandson Faris during his family's migration journey is another example of the theme of illness. In both Abdo's *The Boy Who Saw the Color of the Wind* (2012) and Al Najjar's *Raghda's Hat* (2012), illness is represented through the dangerous diseases of the main characters — blindness and cancer, respectively. In the context of the Arab Spring uprising, which has led to casualties throughout the Arab world, the recurrence of the death, illness, and injury theme in many of these books is representative of the political reality of many children today.

Identity

Another theme that was found in 11 of the books studied was the theme of “identity”. Lebanese author Lorca Sbeity's *Two Homes Instead of One* (2017) focused on this theme. Six-year-old Adam witnesses countless fights between his parents that lead to their eventual divorce. Adam is forced to move from one house to another in order to spend time with both of his parents. The story ends on a happy note when Adam accepts his situation and cheerfully states, “I have two homes instead of one!” (p. 10). The colorful illustrations lighten the story's heavy mood, as seen on the book's cover, where little Adam is beaming as he stands between the two houses. This story indirectly addresses immigrant children who must reside in a home away from their homeland. Adam was driven out of his original home because of the ongoing conflict surrounding him at all times — just as is the case with millions of immigrant children all over the Arab world. Adam then faces an identity crisis as he struggles to figure out to which home he truly belongs, which parallels the inner conflicts many immigrant youth face after being driven out of their war-torn countries. Lorca Sbeity is a Lebanese poet, author, and journalist who, like many other Lebanese people, has witnessed countless Arabs being forced out of their homelands into foreign countries, particularly Palestinians who, having migrated to Lebanon, reside in overcrowded, underserviced camps. This background information provides further support for the idea that this children's tale was created to be reflective of the current political state of the Arab world.

In the story, *Hatless*, by Lateefa Buti (2015), the protagonist is born with a cap on her head just like everyone else around her. The illustrations show that the characters of the story are all lacking in distinguishing features, a representation of how societal constraints strip people of their individuality. The main character's curiosity leads her to remove her hat and she discovers that life is much better without it. The protagonist is ostracized by her community for being different, so she makes a new hat for herself, a hat that fits her lifestyle and makes her stand out as an individual. The book ends with, “Never again was a baby born with a hat on his/her head” (p. 15). This story teaches children to think outside the box and also to find themselves and hold on to their identities regardless of what others may think (Mohammed, 2017). This corresponds with the realities of

many young Arabs nowadays who are deprived of their individuality and identity; their cultures have been taken from them by the war and violence characteristic of the Arab Spring. However, in Egypt, the Arab Spring brought people together and gave them a stronger sense of identity and culture. It is possible here to establish a relationship between the Arab Spring and this book for multiple reasons, including the fact that the book was published in 2015 — only a few years after the start of the Arab Spring. This suggests that this story could have been inspired by that event or might even be a subtle reflection of it. The nationality of the author in this case cannot be seen as a source of inspiration for writing about the chaos in the Arab world, as Kuwait did not play a major role in the Arab Spring. However, the illustrator, Duha El Khateeb, is from Syria, a country that witnessed great deprivation of identity and individuality due to war and violence. Once again, the connectedness of the Arab world makes it easy to conclude that Buti may have chosen to write about the Arab Spring in support of children whose origins may be slightly different from her own. Given the connections highlighted here, the theme of identity in *Hatless* can be seen as a reflection of the current Arab political reality.

Other stories from the collection that also consciously focus on the theme of identity include Al Harthi's *Nostalgia* (2018), in which a group of Omani friends are taught about their cultural identity and ancestry. Al Mutawaa's *I Dream of Being a Cement Mixer* (2018) presents the life of a young boy who follows his dreams and passions regardless of outsiders' opinions. Similarly, Ezzat's *The Blue House* (2016) is a story about how a group of preteens first identify themselves on social media platforms like Facebook. Al Najjar's *Against the Tide* (2013) follows Yosra's adventure in challenging societal gender norms and constraints that stand in the way of her helping her family. In Al Sharouni's *Miracle in the Desert* (2013), the deep connection and desire the Egyptian protagonist Hamza has for his land shows his strong sense of identification with the place he grew up in. Suleiman's book (2011) *Hanji Banji Local Foreigner* is another Egyptian story that represents the theme of identity while celebrating our differences. The author and artist Ahmed Suleiman draws the purple *Hanji* cabbage to symbolize anything that is local, patriotic, or national, and the green *Banji* cabbage to symbolize anything that is foreign. The dialogue between the cabbages unfolds the concept of identity and encourages young readers to accept their differences in a logical way through asking funny or paradoxical yes-or-no questions, such as "Local or foreigner?", "Red or green?", "For cooking or for salad?", "Speaks Arabic or Latin?". Finally, Abdallah's *The Thinking Fish* (2013), Al Najjar's *Raghda's Hat* (2012), Abdo's *The Boy Who Saw the Color of the Wind* (2012), and Bamyia's *Where is My Beak?* (2018) are all stories that focus on diversity and the importance of individuality in all communities and societies. The large proportion of books from the sample that focus on the theme of identity shows the importance and relevance of this issue in many modern-day Arab children's lives. It signifies that the authors may have had a deeper meaning in mind when they included in their books the theme of identity: how to maintain one's identity in the midst of the current political state of the Arab world.

Conflict Resolution

The final theme that was often found in the literary pieces investigated is conflict resolution. In the book, *I Am Not You* (2017), written by Syrian author Jekar Khourchid, the story focuses on conflict resolution for young children after the start of the Arab Spring. In the story, a rhinoceros is manipulated by a sly hyena who tries to force all the animals around him to act, think, and talk like he does. Unlike the other animals though, the rhinoceros stands up for himself and confidently confronts the malicious hyena by saying, “I am not you.” This story shows young Arab children how to stand up to bullies in a peaceful, direct manner, which may be helpful to young Arabs who are compelled to deal with the violent conflict in their countries due to the Arab Spring. I make this deduction because of the ethnicity of the author and the date of publication of the book. The author is Syrian and is thus well-placed to relate to the conflict resolution theme; he may even feel so connected to it that he feels obliged to write about it. Also, the date of publication is only a few years after the start of the Arab Spring in Syria where many Syrian children are suffering from the ongoing conflict around them because they cannot fight back, and may lack viable strategies for dealing with the issue peacefully. As for the illustrations, all the animal characters in the story are drawn whimsically. Clearly, the contrasting size, color, and shape of the rhinoceros and the hyena illustrates that one can not be the other. Using animal characters is a common device even in adult literature — for example, *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991) and *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945/1996) — in order to disguise controversial themes and to deliver difficult lessons to young children in an unthreatening way. Under closer inspection, *I Am Not You* can be regarded as representative of the political issues of the Arab world following the dawn of the Arab Spring, particularly in relation to different ways in which children can resolve conflicts.

Fatima Sharaf Eldin’s *Whose Olives Are These?* (2012) also focuses on conflict resolution for young children. In the book, Rana and Jad’s families are neighbors whose houses share a single, ancient olive tree. One day, when the tree is ready for harvest, the two families fight over who owns the olives. The families continue to fight while little Jad and Rana watch their elders. The adults become so absorbed in their fight that they do not notice a flock of birds collecting the olives and taking them away. So, in the end, because of the violent way in which the two families approached the issue, they both missed out on the harvest. This story parallels the current political situation in Palestine, where the olive tree is often seen as a symbol of peace. Palestine and Israel, represented by Jad and Rana’s families, have been violently fighting over land for almost a century, and thus neither party has been able to truly enjoy the land. Therefore, Sharaf Eldin may be making a statement through this seemingly innocent children’s book about the situation in Palestine and the problematic ways in which people are dealing with the conflict there. This conclusion is supported by the fact that this book was published in 2012 when the Palestinian–Israeli conflict was at a peak. However, as with the Omani author Al Harthi’s *Me and Mah* (2015), Sharaf Eldin’s Lebanese nationality is seemingly in conflict with the tie between the book and the Arab political reality it presents. Despite this, however, it is arguable that all Arab nations are close knit and share each other’s hardships, which may be why Sharaf Eldin chose to write about a Palestinian political issue despite being Lebanese. Another book of hers, *Habbat Rayahon Qawayaton* [A Strong Wind

Blew] (2013), is a clear example of Sharaf Eldin’s tendency to write books for children of other Arab nations, as she has stated that *A Strong Wind Blew* is dedicated “to Egypt, to the children of Egypt, to the children of all Arab revolutions” (Qualey, 2012). In *Whose Olives Are These?* (2012), Sharaf Eldin shows children that much is lost when people cannot share resources or find solutions that benefit all parties involved in a conflict.

A number of other books in the collection also touch on the theme of conflict resolution. Sbeity’s *Two Homes Instead of One* (2017), for instance, displays the way in which divorced parents set their differences aside in order to ease the emotional stress of their young son, Adam. Mheidly’s *Excuse Me! Give Me Way* (2016) is a story about a monkey who has to develop the necessary social skills to enable him to deal with his neighbors, who are unknowingly interrupting his daily activities. In Buti’s *Hatless* (2015), the protagonist learns how to deal with the backlash she receives for being different, in a way that satisfies her and advances the thinking of her community. The protagonist, Yosra, from Al Najjar’s *Against the Tide* (2013) learns how to deal with society’s criticism in a peaceful manner that allows her to achieve her goals at the same time. In Al Sharouni’s *Miracle in the Desert* (2013), the young protagonist has to find a way to deal with the conflict surrounding the fast-disappearing water in his village in order to save the oasis. In *Raghda’s Hat* (2012), Raghda has to deal with the bullying she is subjected to after losing her hair due to chemotherapy, which forces her to develop useful skills for conflict resolution. Finally, the story by Huda Al Qaddoumi, *Animals’ Case Against Humans* (2010), revolves around the conflict between a group of animals and the humans who are harming them with their irresponsible and selfish behavior. The animals calmly and civilly deal with the conflict so that both parties are satisfied with the outcome. Thus, all of these stories provide excellent ideas for how children can resolve conflicts in their personal lives, and how they might resolve conflicts in the future when they have more control over larger domains. Perhaps the inculcation of such methods will, in time, result in reduced conflict throughout the Arab world.

Conclusion

Literature written for contemporary children mirrors the diversity of the society in which it is created, as Stover (1996) reminded us in stating that the themes presented in children’s literature are of high significance to youthful readers, and “the issues with which the characters wrestle are of significance in our ever-changing world” (p. 5).

The 26 books investigated in this study all have some major connection to at least one of the five themes of family; coping mechanisms for dealing with loss and depression; death, illness, and injury; identity; and conflict resolution. Each theme can be seen as relating to some aspect of the Arab Spring, or other conflicts in the Arab world, and what many children experienced as a result. The themes are all conveyed through the settings, illustrations, and storylines presented in these literary works. Through this study, it has become evident that, since the Arab Spring, Arab political reality has been presented more frequently in Arabic children’s literature. Such books

have become a way of helping Arab children cope with the impact of political crises and of teaching them how to avoid violent resolutions in their own lives. Although the deeper meanings behind these simple children's books may be difficult for young children to root out, they will learn the embedded lessons and morals of the stories simply by being able to relate to the characters — a phenomenon that is relatively new in the Arabic literary realm. On the other hand, older children, teachers, parents, and literary academics may recognize these deeper meanings, and thus work at furthering this movement of creating books current generations can learn and benefit from, which will both enhance Arab children's mental and emotional well-being and better the future of the Arab world. Miller (2009) argued that books about war are not an escape from violence. Rather, such books “reestablish the place of embattled individuals within the unstable social and political circumstances of a nation at war” (p. 272). Arab critic and researcher, Sabour Mdallel (2004) confirmed that Arabic children's literature should be a true reflection of the conflicts that face the Arab world and that children should not be spared such challenges since they will be the future decision-makers. Therefore, these types of messages embedded in children's literature are a step towards the advancement of the Arab world and its children.

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Appendix A

Etisalat's Winning Books

- Al Ashmawi, Amani. (2011). Teari ya tayara طيري يا طيارة [Fly O Kite]. Cairo: Nahdet Misr.
- Al Harthi, Ebtihaj. (2015). Ana w amah أنا و ماه [Me and Mah]. Al Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation.
- Al Sa'di, Duniyazad. (2013). Endamah taghdab عندما تغضب [When You Get Angry; Illustrator: Thareefa Haidar]. Beirut: Asala Publishing House.
- Al Harthi, Aisha. (2018). *Nostalgia* الحنين. Al Aalm Al Arabi Publishers, UAE.
- Kosma, Eva. (2014). Umi tuhb al fattoosh امي تحب الفتوش [My Mom Loves Fattoush; Illustrator: Azza Hussein]. Beirut: Academia International.
- Mheidly, Nabiha. (2012). Ka'naat saqf al ghurfah كائنات سقف الغرفة [Creatures on the Ceiling; Illustraror: Hassan Zahreldin]. Beirut: Dar Al Hadaek.
- Mheidly, Nabiha. (2016). Ihm Ihm! marirni min fadlik احم احم مررني من فضلك [Excuse me! Give me way; Illustrator: Waleed Taher]. Beirut: Dar Al Hadaek.
- Sbeity, Lorca. (2017). Badal albayet baytan بدل البيت بيتان [Two Homes Instead of One]. Beirut: Dar Al Saqi.

Appendix B

Sheikh Zayed's Shortlisted Books: 2018

Al Mutawaa, Husain. (2018). Ahlun an akoun hjalat ismant اهلن ان اكون خلط اسمنت [I Dream of Being a Cement Mixer]. Syria: Dar Al Hada'q.

Bamya, Yarah. (2018). Aina menqari؟ أين منقاري؟ [Where is my Beak?]. Jordan: The Palestinian Workshop for Writing.

Khourchid, Jekar. (2018). Ana lastu anta انا لست انت [I Am Not You]. Syria: Dar Al Hada'q.

Sheikh Zayed's Shortlisted Books: 2017

Al Hassan, Lina. (2016). الذئبة ام كاسب Al Zi'ba Um Kaseb [Umm Kaseb, the She-Wolf]. Lebanon: Hekaya.

Buti, Lateefa. (2015). بلا قبعة. Bila Quba'a [Hatless]. Kuwait: Sedan Media. Illustrator: Duha Al Khateeb.

Ezzat, Samah. (2016). المنزل الازرق Al Manzel al Azraq [The Blue House]. Lebanon: Dar Lubnan Publishing. Illustrator: Tanya Al Kayal.

Sheikh Zayed's Shortlisted Books: 2016

Abdallah, Hassan. (2015). طائر الوروار Ta'er Al Warwar [The Bee-Eater]. Beirut: Academia International. Laila Hamzzah.

Alosaimi, Nouf. (2014). Eed fi Ibreeq عيد في ابريق [Fest in a Jug]. Jeddah: Dar Kadi wa Ramadi.

Al Hassan Hawyan, Lina. (2015). البحث عن الصقر غنام Al bahth 'an al saqer Ghannam [Looking for Ghannam, the Falcon]. Beirut: Dar Al Adab lil-Nashr wa Al Tawzi.

Sheikh Zayed's Shortlisted Books: 2015

Al Najjar, Taghreed. (2013). ست الكل Sitt el Koll [Against the Tide]. Amman: Al Salwa Books.

Abdallah, Hassan. (2013). السمكة المفكرة Al Samaka Al Mufakkira [The Thinking Fish]. Beirut: Dar Al Adab.

Mheidly, Nabiha. (2014). الفناه التي اقتفت 'الفاتات اللاتي ايقطفت اثار شخصيات ابن ابن الموقف Al fatat allati iqtafat aathar shakhsyyat Ibn Al Muqaffa' [The Girl Who Traced the Characters of Ibn Al Muqaffa']. Beirut: Dar Al Hadaek.

