

Disability in Arabic Children's Literature: Inclusion, Participation and Belonging

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As I was preparing this paper, I would continuously come back to the title of the conference, 'Belonging is...'. It served as a constant reminder that disabled characters in children's books were being portrayed not simply as individuals but as social beings. As a result, the main concern of my paper was to examine what children's books on disability, specifically Arabic children's books, say, more implicitly than explicitly, about the social position of disabled people.

Using a perspective informed by disability studies, I will attempt to answer these questions in relation to Arabic children's book on disability, a body of work that includes at least 100 picture books, short stories and novels of which I am aware. I base my analysis on a close reading of more than 50 books and stories. But my intention is to raise general questions about the choices made in the portrayal of disability in both Arabic and non-Arabic children's literature and what they imply about the place of disabled people in society. More specifically, I will scrutinise the trope of the 'supercrip'¹ and present two books that depart from this trope in illuminating ways.

If one were to sum up the main message of most Arabic children's books on disability, it would be one of inclusion. These books seek to promote the idea that a disability does not condemn the disabled person and that it is possible to live successfully with an impairment. In these books, disabled characters are cherished by their family and close friends; they participate in the same social rituals as their able-bodied peers; they are talented; and, many times, they excel. It would be safe to argue that all these books were written with the intention of combating negative perceptions of disability and the exclusion disabled people suffer in Arab societies.

In certain cases, this positive message comes at the expense of facts as one finds the occasional omissions and misleading information. In this respect, Arabic children's books on disability are hardly unique. Other books present an inclusive world that is very far from the reality: disabled characters have little trouble in moving around; services that target disabled people seem readily available; and the social environment is accepting. I would not be so quick to dismiss these books, but would rather propose to read (the best of) these books as fantasies. In their own way, these authors practice a form of advocacy through helping the reader to imagine an inclusive world that does not yet exist.

In *Risala Min Nour (A Message from Nour/A Message from Light)*² the story portrays how the school administration, teachers and students in Nour's school come together to support and accommodate the young boy when he acquires a visual impairment. In her preface, the author, who is a medical doctor who had clearly dealt with many children with Nour's same impairment, clearly states that in actuality the community around a child with Nour's disability would have been more likely to reject rather than embrace him (al-Bayyoumi, 2011: 5). Her positive portrayal of his society's reaction to Nour's disability is not a result of naivety or a lack of awareness of the reality of disabled children, but a well-thought strategy.³

It is perhaps with the same intention of promoting a positive image of disability that many Arabic children's books resort to the trope of the disabled achiever. This is a pattern that recurs in no less than 17 books in which the disabled character comes first in his/her class, wins competitions and saves the day in one form or another. According to sociologist Albert Robillard, the 'human spirit triumphs over physical limitations' trope is 'one of the most common and powerful ideologies that surrounds disability' (Titchkosky, 1991: 211), and it has made its way into children's literature. It is also a



deeply problematic ideology in that it treats disability as a personal affliction that is overcome through individual solutions and overlooks the many socially produced obstacles that stand in the way of disabled people where a positive attitude would only get one so far.

This trope also poses particular problems in terms of its assumption about the place of disabled people in society. For when do these fictional achievements stop being inspirational and become a burden on the disabled characters? Furthermore, when one examines the non-disabled peers of these disabled characters, they are for the most part unremarkable. This raises the further question of when does achievement become a tax to be paid exclusively by the disabled characters to be part of the community, whereas the belongingness of their able-bodied peers is never in question?

I will end this paper with a look at two books that stand out from other Arabic children's books on disability for their social treatment of disability. Furthermore, they both trouble the trope of the disabled achiever in important ways. The first of these books, *Heya Huma Hunna (She, The Two of Them, They)* is written by Nahla Ghandour, who herself is physically disabled, and makes the reader think of disability and achievement in new ways. The second book is *Moghanni al-Matar (The Rain Singer)*⁴ written by Zakariyya Mohamed, which extends the trope of the disabled achiever in thought-provoking ways.



In 'Where Do I Stand', one of the two stories in *She, The Two of Them, They*, the narrator presents the attempts of Nadia, who is physically disabled, to figure out how to take part in one of the many daily social rituals of school life: lining up to go to class every day. Because of her disability, she walks slower than the other girls. If she lines up at the front, she will make everyone late; if she lines up in the middle, those walking behind her will be late; if she stands at the end of the line, she will be late. This dilemma has clear metaphorical implications as the narrator states, 'there is no place for her, not at the beginning of the line, not in the middle of the line and not at the end of the line' (Ghandour, 2010: n.p.). In the end, she finds a solution: she starts to walk to class three minutes before the bell rings and arrives with the last of the stragglers. *She, The Two of Them, They* presents a rare social treatment of the challenges and achievements of people with disabilities. Without overlooking the physical challenges posed by the disability, the stories also reveal the psychic energy required for achievements that might seem mundane at first sight: making a friend (dealt with in the first story in the book) and figuring out how to get to class on time (the second story, discussed above). However, at a deeper level, Nadia is figuring out how to exist and participate in a society that has not taken her into account in its social planning.



From a book that addresses the lived reality of disability, I move to a book that is not even ostensibly about disability but that through the use of metaphor raises important questions about difference and inclusion. *The Rain Singer* can best be classified as an etiological fable; it is set in a mythical time and its characters are anthropomorphised animals and human beings. The main character of the story is a donkey foal, an animal that in Arabic culture carries many negative associations related to stupidity, drudgery, brusqueness and hard-headedness. In being symbolic of a marginalised and denigrated character, he can also be read as disabled.

At the beginning of the book, we find out that the young donkey did not sing when all the other creatures did because he felt that he had an ugly voice. For a reader who is familiar with the cultural associations related to donkeys and donkey foals, there is nothing surprising about the donkey foal's negative image of himself or his internalised sense of inferiority. However, the day comes when he decides to end his silence. The rain stops falling, and the earth becomes thirsty. The creatures all come out to ask God for the rain to fall, and the donkey foal decides to sing. Eventually, the rain falls.

At first glance, *The Rain Singer* has all the hallmark features of the 'disabled person saves the day' pattern, but there is a significant variation. A closer reading of the story reveals that it is not specifically the donkey foal's song that leads to the rain. After he starts to sing, he is joined first by the roosters, then by the children and adults, and finally by other animals. It is after this communal song that the rain actually falls. If the lack of rainfall at the beginning of the story denotes a dysfunction in the body politic, the young donkey foal's contribution was to lead his community on the path of healing and wholeness. With his participation, he closed the circle that was incomplete without him. Perhaps, the book's message could be read that without the participation of all its members, a society can never be fully functional or complete. The trope of the disabled achiever is used towards emancipatory ends.

In *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder write that 'people with disabilities [exist] in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the cultures and stories they inhabit' (2000: 47). In other words, when one possesses a body that is marked by otherness, belonging is complicated and seems to primarily get discussed in relation to difference. As a result, those of us who work for more inclusion in children's literature do not seek only to encourage more realistic and positive portrayals of disability, but to promote a new imagining of the social space itself that acknowledges the existence of disabled people within it and respects their right to be there.

Notes

- 1 'Supercrip' (super-cripple) is a term used by critics who examine the representation of disabled people in cultural products to refer to one of the most common stereotypical presentation of disabled people, mainly that of the disabled individual who 'overcomes' his/her disability to realise both mundane and great achievements.
- 2 The title of this book contains a play on the word 'Nour'. It is not only the proper name of the main character but is also the Arabic word for 'light'.
- 3 A preview in Arabic that includes two illustrations can be downloaded at www.nahdetmisr.com/A-Message-from-Nour.
- 4 On the publisher's website the English translation of this title is *The Rain's Song*. However, for the purposes of this paper, I opt for *The Rain Singer* as it is a much more accurate translation of the title. Another possible but less literal translation of the title would be *The Rainmaker*.

Works Cited

Primary Texts

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- Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder (2000) *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
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