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## Challenging and Subverting Girlhood and Motherhood in Contemporary Egyptian Children's Literature

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Challenging and Subverting Girlhood and Motherhood in Contemporary Egyptian Children's  
Literature

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

Historically, literature has always existed simultaneously within and outside of society. Literature, well as other arts, has an instinctive and natural propensity to both reflect and criticize the times. Arabic Children's Literature today plays this same role. Children's literature, as we recognize it, started in the mid-eighteenth century in Britain. This origin continues to be debated because there is still disagreement as to what children's literature is exactly. Children's Literature Scholar, Matthew Grenby recounts this history and progression in his piece, "The Origins of Children's Literature". Generally, there are three qualities upon which children's literature is defined against. Firstly, by its intended audience and readership; whether children's literature is texts written specifically for children and not for a mixed audience. But this definition proves impossible because there is no plausible way to know who reads and responds to a book. Secondly, by the characteristics of the texts; for example, texts that include heroes, or that speak directly to and address the children. But again, this definition fails as there is no one characteristic that is present in every piece of children's literature. And lastly, as a commercial commodity; children's literature becoming a commodity in the commercial realm was one of the single most significant developments in the field. This last definition seems to be the most ubiquitous and encompassing. To define children's literature as something that can be purchased and possessed is most fitting to our modern circumstances. Agreement on the above time period and location as origins relies on this definition of children's literature as a commodity.

Since this time period, the field of children's literature has transformed significantly. Today, children's literature can be virtually anything or any topic. Children's Literature was built and reproduced on certain expectations of children, what they need, and what they should or should not be exposed to. Generally, there were a number of topics which were agreed that were

just were not fitting for children. It is largely the ideologies of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that fueled these distinctions. Their 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophies created a conception of children as pure, our collective place of origin, and as innocent of all flaws and contradictions (Rose 63). These conceptions have materialized in children's literature as images of children who are blissfully naïve, otherworldly, and largely impervious and ignorant to any realistic issues or discord. But today, this standard is largely antiquated. There are an excess of books about difficult or once taboo issues, such as sex, drugs, divorce, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, war, genocide, etc.

Arabic Children's Literature today is a rich and diverse field, but it has not always been such. What was once a field focused on proselytizing and didacticism is now a sophisticated and varied field. The Arab World today produces an enormous amount of works geared toward Arabic-speaking children. Some of which are translations from other languages, but the majority which are original and creative in their own right. Sabeur Mdallel studies Arabic Children's Literature and writes on its significance and sociology in the Arabic world. In Mdallel's estimation, Arabic Children's Literature evolved naturally from the prominent storytelling culture common in the Arab world. These stories were often tales recounting the relationship between humans, nature, animals and the world. Essentially, these stories provided its listeners with a shared knowledge from which to pull their expectations of humanity, morality and behavior, "a reflection of the collective consciousness" (Mdallel 2).

In its beginnings in the late nineteenth century Arabic Children's Literature was overwhelmingly moralist and didactic. It aggressively replicated the emphasis that was found in oral stories whose purpose was to socialize and indoctrinate. One of the first known pieces of Arabic Children's Literature is the 1870 work *Al-Murshid Al-Amin lil-Banāti wal-Banin* (The

Faithful Guide for Girls and Boys) by Riffaa Tahtaoui. As indicated by its title, this book was didactic in nature, as it sought to teach boys and girls how they should behave.

Yet, still today the popularity and regularity of casual reading is low. This is due in great parts to low literacy levels throughout the Arab world. There is extensive funding and programming in place to produce quality children's literature that is also seeking to emphasize and make casual reading a part of the culture. There are numerous publishing houses such as Dar El-Shorouk, Elias Modern Publishing and Nahdet Misr who specialize in children's literature as well as support libraries, sponsor book fairs, award shows, and establish international literary collaborations. All in an effort to promote children's literature

Not unlike the European conception of a child, the Arab child is generally perceived as a human being whose capacity is yet not realized and thus needs to be nurtured. Mdallel argues that because the Arab world is overwhelmingly populated by Muslims and Islam is the dominant religion, this has permeated most aspects of each country's culture. This has extended into the way in which Arab children are perceived and addressed in the literature. Islam upholds that there is always a place for promoting morality and forbidding immorality, and thus this morality is dominant in Arabic children's literature (Mdallel 4).

The importance of the "instruction and delight" that Scholar Peter Hunt has coined still prevails in most pieces of Arabic children's literature. Today, the didacticism, as will be shown in this thesis, still prevails but generally plays less of a governing role in the text. Creating texts that are both informative and instructive, but also enjoyable and pleasurable has been the formula for children's literature for centuries. I argue that even when texts are not aggressively didactic or moralist, it is in the nature of stories to have a lesson or moral to it. Even if this lesson is not explicitly tied to a defined moral system, it exists.



While childhood is also bound to constructions, girlhood too is replete with its own expectations and constructions. In the European world, the distinction of girlhood arose around the mid-Victorian period. In this context, this became a distinction separate from “young women” and instead signified the time before womanhood. Similar to childhood, girlhood became recognized as a distinct period which demanded its own necessities. Along this line, girlhood was soon commodified, and literature and products were produced to appeal just to this market (Lerer 232). In the literary tradition, girlhood has historically been tied to issues of victimization, public versus private, vulnerability and fears of violation, balancing decorum and desire, sexuality, hygiene, boundaries, and performance. These ideas have thus shaped social understandings of girlhood and by extension, femininity. These ideas about girlhood and femininity seem to appear in many traditional societies, and thus also play out in many pieces of Arabic Children’s Literature also. Additionally, because many pieces of Arabic Children’s Literature are translation from English and other European languages, many of these conceptions were subsequently imported. These ideas are based on understandings and conceptions of females as potential bearers of offspring and tradition thus their need for protection and for their fulfillment of certain expectations.

Samia Mehrez is an Egyptian scholar who focuses on culture in Egypt. In her 2008 work, *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, Mehrez writes about the polarized cultural environment in Egypt. The six pieces of children’s literature under study were produced within and working in Egypt’s intricate cultural production scene in the early 2000’s. In that moment there was a strong and growing divide between cultural producers, the government and religious fundamentalists. Her book deconstructs the complicated relationships between the actors who affect Egypt’s cultural scene. President Anwar Sadat’s rule was marked by disapproval of cultural productions; his 1970s

policies marginalized and delegitimized cultural producers. But this government disapproval only pushed more individuals to conservative Islam as it was a group who were able to organize against the government. Subsequently, this strengthened the religious groups' presence and numbers, and allowed them to garner more support. These growing factions continued to gain in numbers and win influence in society. The Muslim Brotherhood and similar fundamentalist groups fought to gain influence in society. By the early 2000s, the organization had garnered considerable popular support which allowed them to win seats in Parliament in 2005. But on the other hand, religious conservatives threaten the cultural scene because they are restrictive concerning what art is acceptable and not offensive to Islamic sensitivities. In contrast, in the beginning years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hosni Mubarak's government took a page from former President Abdul-Nasser's book and enacted limitations and censorship on artistic productions (Mehrez 3). The government did not suppress directly, rather they chose to make art production a part of the government under the Ministry of Culture (Mehrez 14). This undermined the scene by making it so that artistic productions had to conform to government standards. So while the scene did not disappear per se, it was significantly limited through authorized censorship. This newly created government branch made the cultural into the political by owning, and thus controlling, it. The government understood art: literature, poetry, theater and images as embodiments of modernity, as well as potential incubators of dissonance and resistance. In this vein, the government used their support and control of cultural productions to uphold a modern image of themselves; because they embraced creativity and art, they purported that they were modern. Still, the religious conservatives continued to be a threat to cultural production, they persisted in accusing the arts of being religiously unacceptable, indecent and culturally offensive.

Despite these difficulties in the cultural production scene, the texts prevail in communicating their subversive stories.

In their own ways, these six texts attempt to challenge and subvert the images and norm of girlhood and motherhood prevalent in Egyptian children's literature. These particular books offer alternate conceptions of the Arab girl. The authors use their voices to impart new ideals to their readers. Literature and art has long been regarded as potential incubators and carriers of change and resistance. Children's Literature has the special distinction of being geared toward and having access to the youth. This opens the possibility to transmit new and challenging ideas to the next generation. Children's Literature has often been used by countries and governments to indoctrinate their population from an early age. Likewise, small organizations and individuals have used it to talk back to and reject imposed ideologies. Reading into the literature of a time and place allows a look inside the socio-political reality. Literature often provides an intimate view into a moment that may otherwise be overlooked. The historical moment that art is produced in is inevitably reflected in the work, either in opposition to or conforming with. We see these aspects in the books.

Each chapter in this project attempts to deconstruct the piece of children's literature from every angle. This project attempts to utilize a number of approaches to analyze said literature. Each of the stories construct and communicate messages. Each chapter explores the background of the publisher and author in order to understand the orientation of the text. Because Children's Literature is still a relatively new field in the Arab world, authors do not have many avenues for success. As such, many of the authors work with whatever publishers are available. This relationship sometimes manifests and appears in the book itself. For example, Amin's *Hekāyāt Farhana* (Adventures of Farhana) is intertwined in a web of actors and her series ends up being

subordinate to them as we will see in chapter 2. Nevertheless, the publisher-author relationship is one that cannot be understated. All three of the institutions undertook publishing these works that challenge the status quo and offer a new alternative, and that is significant.

Details on readership and reception are one of the best ways to gauge how a book is received. Unfortunately, this data is not available for any of the books. So in the absence of this information, this paper looks at other factors, such as the capabilities and reach of the publisher. As well as looking at the author's, illustrator's or publisher's previous recognitions or successes, such as if they have received awards or international acknowledgment.

Parsing out the themes from each book allows for the texts to be deconstructed. From this we are able to read into the author's mind. Some aspects and messages from the text come through clear, others are up to interpretation. These themes show the subverting and presenting of new possibilities for the female characters and by extension, girlhood and motherhood.

Children's Literature has always utilized visual representations and imagery to support its text. Every aspect is a decision that was made about the book's appearance and appeal. Everything from the book size to the font, to the title page to the images can be read as intentional. These visual aspects ultimately help dictate the appeal and reception of the book. These three authors use these elements to create and support their stories. Often, imagery can be subversive in ways that words cannot. For example, while the text in *Hekāyāt Farhana* is short and sweet, it is really the images that bring meaning to the book. The images of Farhana at play allows us to see this defiant little girl for who she is; a smiling, ambitious and adventurous person.

I have relied on the transliteration system adopted by the Journal of Arabic Literature. I decided to use diacritics to fulfill my expectation of what is the best way to reflect the Arabic in

the English language. With this system, I translated all Arabic names and terms that are not otherwise known or recognized in other spellings or forms. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. Translating these pieces of children's literature was a rich experience. With the guidance of scholar Gillian Lathey through her text *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature: Invisible Storytellers*, I made deliberate decisions to translate the texts in a way that was sincere to the originals. Translators have a rich history and intimate connection to children's literature. Historically, they have been primarily "invisible" and female. Previously, there was no interest in knowing the translator; instead the role was one marked by anonymity. Unfortunately, translation is often regarded as a lowly task; it has been compared to high-jacking or jobbing. On the contrary, I found translation, especially of the two longer books, to be challenging, empowering and satisfying. Inevitably, translation is intertwined with interpretation. In translation, there is significant room for personal preferences and bias. The role of the translators is of "as mediators of texts for inexperienced readers" (7). Specifically, the role of translators of children's literature is as mediators between the adult and child, and this is a substantial responsibility. I remain aware of my role in this communication and sought to do justice to the books.

In my translations of the text, I chose to stay as close to the spirit and tone of the text while finding a way to express it in English-reader sensibilities. This meant adding punctuation: commas, periods and quotation marks where they may not appear in the Arabic but would necessarily in English. Because these texts are written in Modern Standard Arabic and not Colloquial Arabic, I was careful to retain the formal tone of the works.

By looking at these aspects, this paper will show how these contemporary pieces of Arabic Children's Literature challenge the norms of expectations of Arab girlhood and motherhood, and offer alternatives for the reader and society.

Books of Study:

*Wazīfa li Māmā* (A Job for Mama) by Fāṭima al-Mʿadūl

*Hekāyāt Farhana* (Adventures of Farhana) by Rania Hussein Amin

*Farhana wa ʿid Mīlād Baba* (Farhana and Dad's Birthday)

*Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān* (Farhana Enters Gauguin's Panels)

*Farhana Tujarribul Tayrān* (Farhana Tries to Fly)

*Sirr Ikhtifāʾ al-Dhiʾ b al-shahīr Bilmuḥtār* (The Mystery of the Disappearance of the Famous Confused Wolf) by Abdel-Wahab Al-Messiri

**Chapter 1: *Wazīfa li Māmā* and Female Empowerment/ *Wazīfa Li Māmā* and Family  
Realities and Non-Idealizing of Childhood**

*Wazīfa li Māmā* (A Job for Mama) by Fāṭima al-M‘adūl

My father used to work in a distant country and he used to send money to my mom every month. My mom pays the rent for the house and she buys all that we need. Then she gives me and my sister, Samīra, lots of spending money for us to buy candy and all the things we love and want! But unfortunately, the amount that my father sent decreased every month and so did our spending money. Until the amount and the spending money cut off completely.

So my mother became worried and confused. So she decided to work so she looked for a job so she can buy food and other thing that we need. We were happy and hoped for her success!

Every day, we asked her: “did you find a job, oh mama?” She responded: “no, I am still looking.”

Many days passed and we stopped asking her about it because she became silent and inattentive. So we too began to feel worried and anxious. We no longer laughed and were joyful like before.

Then one day, my sister, Samīra said: “Mama is no longer looking for a job and the amount that father sends is not enough. Why don’t we help her and look for a job for her?”

I asked her: “How, Samīra? Should we walk in the streets and say ‘we need a job for our mama?’

She replied laughing: “No, Ṭariq, we look for advertisements in the newspapers...”

I felt that it was a great idea.

We began reading the newspapers and when my mother was gone or asleep and we began to call advertisers. The first advertisement was from a grand hotel that was looking for a chef specializing in Italian cooking. We called the listed number and told them that our mother is the best cook and she cooks rice, mulukhiyya, pasta with Béchamel sauce and spaghetti. And our mother’s cooking is so delicious! The man we were talking to laughed and told us that they wanted a man, not a woman.



Samīra said: “Why a man? Why can’t it be a woman? Surely my mother, my grandmother and my mother’s friends are skilled cooks...”

The man laughed and said to her: “Oh sweet girl, restaurants and hotels work is hard and strenuous work, especially cooking. I am sorry, but we refuse women, we need a man.”

Samīra and I were not convinced but instead we began to look for other jobs.

After that, we read an advertisement from a pharmacy looking for a male or female pharmacist. The pharmacy was in the same neighborhood that we lived in, so we went to it but before that, Samīra asked: “Do you want a man or a woman?”

He laughed and answered: “there is no difference, dear girl, in our profession between a man or a women. The most important thing is for them to be qualified.”

Samīra said: “Surely, my mama has understanding about medicine. She is the one who buys it for us, gives it to us in the night and in the morning, and she is not able to sleep until we take the medicine. And if we were injured, she put cotton and gauze on the wound and she also gives us injections.

Surely, my mom knows everything about the medicine.

The owner of the pharmacy asked her “Does your mother have a degree in Pharmacy?”

Samīra and I responded: No, actually, she is a graduate of the Arts.

The owner laughed and said to Samīra: “Surely your mother is a hard-working and skilled mother, but she is not a pharmacist. This is an important task and this is a vast science, one must have a degree in it.”

We were reading advertisements every day. Then a listing about a nanny for children drew our attention. We called the owner of the ad and the women of the house answered. We told her that our mother is looking for a job and she is a wonderful nanny. And that she cares and maintains everything for us, she feeds, cleans and cooks for us. She was happy and said tell her to come today so she can come live with us. We have an infant, she’ll get one vacation day a week

Samīra cried! Will my mom mama leave us?! Who will care for us?!

We apologized to the women that we would not be able to do without our mother.

And one day we read a listing about a school looking for a math teacher, we spoke with the secretary of the school and we told him that she was good at computation, counting,

subtraction, division and multiplication and she teaches us this at home and. We don't get private lessons.

The secretary was interested and asked us: Does mama hold a degree in Education? Because the school needs a high school teacher specializing in secondary Math.

We apologized to him, saying that our mother is a graduate of the Arts.

On our way to school we read a sign on the front of a shop that read: Looking for a skilled tailor. We did not understand so we went into the shop. It was almost empty. There was nothing there but an empty table, a new suit hanging in the front window and an old machine. And there was an elderly man sitting, he smiled when we entered and he asked us: "What do you need, my children?"

I asked him: "Did you write the sign looking for a tailor?"

The grandpa said: "Yes, my boy."

Samīra said: "Surely, my mother is a skilled tailor, she makes clothes for my brother, Ṭariq, and I."

The man laughed and said: "But, dear girl, I need a man. I am a tailor for men and I only make suits and pants. This is a man's profession. I have become old in age and all of my young workers who I taught and who have mastered the profession have left me to work in large factories."

Samīra asked him: "Really, grandpa? The suits are sold ready-made. Why don't you go with them, grandpa?"

The elder asks himself with sorrow: "Should I leave the shop I founded and toiled over? And leave my friends and customers who I make tailored suits for? They want more than mass-produced suits. Indeed, I really love this place and I could never part with it ever."

Samīra said: "So as of now, you cannot find any workers?"

He said: "yes, my daughter."

I asked him: "So why don't you give my mother a chance, grandpa? She needs a job and you need a worker."

He laughed then he said to us: "So bring her tomorrow, surely God is the Facilitator."

When we presented our mother with the idea she laughed she was amazed that we were able to find her a job.

In the morning we went to Uncle Malījī the tailor. We left mama there and went to school. After school we returned to meet mama at the shop. She and the man were working together on a project. The man was laughing and my mother, too, was happy.

On the street on the way home Mama bought fruit, chicken, and vegetables because Malījī paid her in cash...At work, Mama introduced a line of clothes for women. The shop gained new customers – both men and women.

After a short time, Baba resumed sending money to mama because he had found more work. But Mama did not quit working. She would always tell us about Malījī and the customers that loved her. They preferred the pants and suits that she made for them. Malījī was happy and so was Mama.

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*Wazīfa Li Māmā, Female Empowerment, Family Realities and the Non-Idealizing of Childhood*

*Wazīfa li Māmā* is not your ordinary book of children's literature. It offers an intimate look inside domestic aspect of Egypt's society and Egyptian life. This text is rich in implications, it can be read as a critique or as a simple narration. This chapter will look at a number of aspects: this text's relationship to its historical and societal context, how it constructs children and how it writes for and addresses said children, its choice of imagery, intentionality on the part of the author, illustrator and publisher, the intended audience, the book's reception, its challenging nature, and Egyptian childhood generally.

Faṭīma al-M'adūl is a successful writer throughout the Arab World. She has written over 10 children's books. Of them, she has written on religious matters (*Allāh fi Kul Makān/God is Everywhere, 2005*), nationalist and cultural matters (*Al-Waṭn/The Country, 2003*), but most of her books fall under the category of fantasy. It is important to explore the production of this work, and the publisher is a key player in this process. Nahdet Misr is a massive publishing house that was started in 1938 by Aḥmed Ibrahim. Today, it has published over 10,000 books for adults, children and for education and curriculum. They not only do publishing, but they execute "the entire cycle needed for completing large-scale cultural, and educational programs, commencing from conceptualization, writing and translation, all the way through to publishing in print and digital forms, and ending with distribution and training." That is to say, Nahdet Misr is a significant contributor in Egypt's cultural scene, they are able to produce works from the beginning to the end without need for outside assistance. This affords them a considerable amount of influence, and they use it to their advantage. Their books range drastically in topics and messages.

The story of *Wazīfa Li Māmā* is 19 pages long, but within this short amount of pages there is a telling amount of information. Because there is no preface, unlike many children's book, it leaves the reader to make their own conclusions about the intention of the text. The lack of preface or authorial framing inevitably opens up the text to more interpretations. Given the sensitive nature of the spousal abandonment issue, this was probably intentional on al-M'adul's part. There is no framing which makes it unclear whether this text is offering a critique or simply writing about it (the difference between describing and prescribing). This allows the text to exist on its own, without any air of judgment or criticism attached to it. On the other hand, the text itself is subtle but clear that it is a hardship and painful to the abandoned spouse and the abandoned children, but stops short of saying that it is *bad*.

*Wazīfa* opens with the son, Ṭariq, as the narrator. He is facing the reader and appears to be gesturing toward the palms trees, sand dunes, buildings and airplane in the foreground, a modernized Egypt with its natural aesthetic intact. The choice to have the boy, rather than the girl, to narrate the story is a telling one. It can be read as al-M'adul using a male to communicate her, a female's, thoughts. It can be assumed that a message, especially a critical one, is more easily accepted from a young man, than from a young girl.

Published in 2005, *Wazīfa Li Māmā* exist in the same cultural environment and context as Amin's *Farḥana* (2003) and Al-Messiri's *al-Dhi'b* (2000). There still exists government regulation and censorship on cultural production. Despite this, this text manages to make an unmistakable critique on this unfavorable occurrence in Egyptian society: spousal abandonment/desertion. But different from Amin's *Farhana* and Al-Messiri's *al-Dhi'b*, this text is making commentary on aspects of Egyptian society. Its approach is less implicit, as its characters explicitly challenge stances that they disagree with. The daughter, Samīra, repeatedly

makes comments about the difficulty of finding a job for her mother and the absurdity of her not being hired on account of her being female. The son, Ṭariq, is less vocal in this way; instead, he keeps narrating and goes along with Samīra's plans.

The question of who this book is written for is not exactly clear. This can be read as a strategy to broaden its appeal. Because this text addresses a significant and difficult issue that sometimes happens in families, it can be for the adult reader as much as it is for the child reader/listener. The book itself is relatively large for a children's book. It is not a handheld book, like *Farhana*, and holding it and turning its pages could be cumbersome for a smaller child. The title page is appealing and communicates that it is a children's book. It features main characters, Samīra and Ṭariq against a larger white background, and immediately in front of a yellow and green plaid background. Al-M'adul's and Hālām's use of textile and prints will prove to be intentional and significant. Additionally, the typeface is standard and of easy readability. The size of the font is typical, large enough to read, but not too large as to off put the reader. Most pages feature a considerable amount of text. Al-M'adul breaks up the text on the page with punctuation (mostly periods, and some ellipsis) and paragraph spacing. The level of Arabic vocabulary used is appropriate for a child who is at least 6 or 7 years old. On one hand, the language is Modern Standard Arabic (*Fuṣḥā*) which immediately limits its readership to a more educated group, one that at least has been taught to be. Unfortunately, this excludes a portion of the population as Egypt has high illiteracy rates. Also, notable, the text is fully vowelized, which is a choice that is made with *Fuṣḥā* texts. This is an indication of its attempt to educate the reader. Even for the adult reader and the child listener, this book is likely read to older children who are able to conceptually and emotionally deal with the sensitive and difficult topic.

This text as a problem novel, one that does not idealize childhood or reality, is significant in its regional context. Education Scholar, Masha Kabakow Rudman discusses bibliotherapy in *Children's Literature: An Issues Approach*, the idea that books can serve as a form of therapy when individuals see their own challenges reflected and resolved in the book (3). Bibliotherapy works by constructing a setting in which “children will be attracted to reading about their concerns”. *Wazīfa* does just this. According to children's literature scholar, M.O. Grenby, a problem novel features a young character that has to deal with issues in their personal lives, ranging from social, physical, emotional and family challenges. Problem novels are typically considered a subgenre to Young Adult Novels. What we see in this text is a dismissal of the idea of a child as fragile and helpless. Al-M'adul creates a story where two children deal with the difficult facts of their family reality, and overcome it by their own will and perseverance. The storyline itself contains powerful messages.

*Wazīfa* departs from typical children's books in that it does not idealize or romanticize childhood. As opposed to *Farhana* or *Al-Dhi'b*, or immortalized and popular Western children's books such as *Peter Pan* or other fairy tales, there is no “ideal child” in this story. In Western children's literature, and as in Arabic Children's Literature, the books are often constructed on the concept of the child and childhood as the “pure origin” or the ideal. As children's literature scholar, Jacqueline Rose writes, there is this blatant “glorification of the child [...] a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood” (63). That those who write and those who read children's books so often look to find innocence, to recall their own childhoods, to reproduce and perpetuate a naive idea of a beautiful and carefree childhood. Europeans philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke have a great part in this. As discussed in the introduction, children's literature as we recognize it now formed in the mid-to

late-eighteenth century in England, alongside the conceptions of childhoods espoused by Locke and Rousseau. Their philosophies defined children and childhood as our origin and embodying inherent purity; these two themes were a necessary binary and cause to each other. Childhood is the inherent origin of every human being, as such it is pure. Purity is found in children, which is our origin. From these notions of purity and origin, came the tendency to create childhood and children as ideal, innocent, and thus fragile. It is Jacqueline Rose's work deconstructing *Peter Pan* that challenges and underlines the inherent problematic nature of our conceptions of and our writings about childhood. In a brave and subversive way, *al-M'adul* and *Wazīfa* fundamentally undermine and upend this. *Ṭariḳ* and *Samīra* confront the difficulty of life, and they show that childhood often is not ideal, that it does sometimes require work and effort. But also, it shows that children are strong, resilient and can help solve difficult problems.

The book's imagery is clear and useful to the story. Reading the story through its images is inviting and encourages one to actually read the book. Illustrator, Rabāb Ḥālām, captures the most important actions or discussions happening in the text and translates it into pictures. Some of the images are subtly subversive, for example we see *Ṭariḳ* acting as the comforter to his mother as he peers over her chair and communicates their pain to the reader (5). In both, Eastern and Western cultures, women and girls are typically expected to be comforting and nurturing. But, this comforting appears to be an extension of his role as narrator. As he is the one narrating, he also is the one who is communicating feelings, which in this situation is pain, frustration and confusion.

This book utilizes and integrates tapestry and textiles as a part of its imagery which adds to the aesthetic of the book. Initially this seems arbitrary and for aesthetics purposes only, but textile is an integral part of Egypt's success as a country. According to the Industrial



Development Authority, Egypt is the world's largest producer of cotton, which accounted for 50 percent of world production in 2008. In addition, in 2008 the textile and apparel industry contributed 5.6% of the Egyptian GDP, 27% of industrial production, and 18% of total commodity non-oil exports. The profit of this industry is based on exports, mainly to Europe then the US. Needless to say, textiles are majorly important to Egypt as a country. Al-M'adul's integration of this is unique and also adds interest and texture to the story.

The use of textiles as imagery also lends a sort of authenticity to the text. Immediately after the cover page, the book opens up to an image of a jacket made up of patchworks of paisley print, floral print, stripes, muslin and tweed. The jacket is halfway zipped, with the zipper prominent on the center of the two pages, aligned along the binding of the book. The book ends with this same image of the halfway zipped jacket. In the opening image where Ṭariḳ begins narrating the story, the leaves of the palm trees carry leaves from a book, the leaves themselves have Arabic typescript copied on them. Because the Arabic is broken up between leaves, it is unclear the source or the meaning of the text. But it is beautifully evokes the importance of Arabic to Egypt and to the story itself. Throughout we see this same expression in the imagery as well as other references to textiles, a spool of thread on the title/copyright page, Arabic text on buildings and on the flooring. The integration of textiles comes to read as a sort of foretelling. By the end of the story, we see how it is full circle as Māmā finally finds a job working with fabrics as a tailor.

Al-M'adul's story constructs an interesting relationship between the siblings, Samīra and Ṭariḳ. Rudman focuses on how children's literature can aid children in their own lives. In the section under Siblings, she writes on how one's birth order is often a determining factor for what kind of role one assumes in a story. For example, the only child as spoiled and maladjusted,

middle child as unvalued and resentful, the youngest child as coddled and demanding, etc. Though it is never made clear, Samīra appears older than Ṭariḳ because she assumes more responsibility and takes a lead in the story. For Rudman, another purpose of said literature is to show and assure children that “they and their family are normal” (16). According to her, the most effective bibliotherapy texts are those that include realistic, thought-out solutions and whose lessons are unobtrusive. *Wazīfa* fulfills this, it recounts a story that rests on two siblings challenging the status quo and taking matters into their own hands.

Within the story, there is a balance that is created by having the young boy narrating, but having the young girl performing and leading the key actions in the story. Ṭariḳ is shown taking direction from his sister, sitting beside her as she calls around to businesses, asking her a lot of questions, and sitting off to the side while she talks to people, among other peripheral actions. Typically, the helping or sidekick role is played by a female, so this switch is disruptive. Additionally, Samīra is considerably expressive. She does a lot of talking to her brother, but also does the majority of the talking and communicating with the people they encounter. This is in contrary to what is typical and expected of Egyptian females (Gender-Role Attitudes). Upon puberty and adolescence, young Egyptian women typically experience a drastic reduction in autonomy and freedom and are expected to stay home (ibid). Thus in Egypt’s cultural environment there is still stigma attached to young women in the public domain and asserting themselves, but *Wazīfa* does not conform to this. Despite being repeatedly turned down and laughed at for trying to find work for a woman, Samīra is relentless and perseveres.

The distinction between the two siblings is more pronounced in the images than in the text itself. This is a choice on the part of al-M’adūl and Ḥālām. To have the images communicate a stronger message than the text is to open up a potentially larger audience. Images are more

universal than words, so even for the person who cannot or will not read the book, they can read the images, which in this case, carry their own messages. The images communicate a strong and determined girl, a supportive boy, both strong images for an Egyptian audience. *Wazīfa* is attempting to challenge and redefine what an Egyptian girl, an Egyptian boy, and an Egyptian mother can be. In their own way, each character pushes the boundaries of what is typically expected. Samīra is strong and outspoken, Ṭarīk is reserved and supportive, and Mama is a working mother.

*Wazīfa* carries a strong message of female empowerment and self-reliance. Even the two young children support and further this. Interestingly, the children's conception of their mother is based on her achievements as a mother. Their perception of her is carried and oriented around all the things she does and has done for them. Her responsibilities and successes in the domestic sphere allow them to believe that she is capable of doing almost anything, especially in the public sphere. According to them, because she cooks delicious food for them, she can be a chef at the hotel; because she takes care of them when they are sick she can be a pharmacist; because she takes care of them she can be a nanny; because she teaches them at home she can be a school teacher; because she makes and alters their clothes, she can be a tailor. Through the eyes and mouths of children, this highlights the role, capability and advantage of motherhood. It seems that mothering is the only role they have ever seen her in, but they hold no reservations about what roles she is capable and qualified for. This is a different orientation and point of view that al-M'adūl makes us privy to. Often in writing about motherhood, it is either regarded as a limitation to one's life as mothers are often only depicted in their roles as mothers, or overestimated as the solution to a family's, and by extension society's, issues. Rudman writes that "working mothers generally have to put up with much criticism in fiction", to be a working

mother is often depicted as negatively affecting the children and home life. But in this story, the children are determined, undiscouraged and confident searching for the job they know their mother will succeed in.

According to Egypt's UN Country Profile, the percentage of adult working women in Egypt in 2005 was 20.2%, approximately 5 million women, which itself is an enormous number but still considerably low in comparison to the population of working age women in society. Further, this is dramatically lower than the 48.6% that is the average labor force participation for the world's female population (International Labor Organization). That is to say that female employment is low in Egypt; the majority of Egyptian women do not participate in the labor force. Mothers, especially, often do not work outside of the home as they are expected to tend to the children. In an article, Mahā Swais, Social media manager for World Bank MENA, highlights that despite that many Arab women are educated and qualified, there still exists a disconnect between these women and their ability for employment.

In our post-modern era, female empowerment is often connected to women's employment and their participation in the economic system. This text seems to further this idea as it is only when Māmā is employed that she is able to have control on her and her children's lives. After finding a job, she also finds joy. *Wazīfa* appears to be taking a stance and sending a message about female employment in Egypt; employment as the solution to Mama's problems and the book not even entertaining the question of whether she should or not work. The story challenges these impositions and pushes the conversation, because in this instance, employment is necessary for Māmā.

It is clear that *Wazīfa* is trying to challenge and redefine social norms and expectations. As Professor Barbara Winckler expresses, transgressions expressed in literature have inherent

social currency. But the difficulty is in quantifying and tracing this social worth and currency. This can be mapped a couple of ways, by accolades or awards given, book pricing, copies printed and purchased, and dialogue around the book. Al-Mʿadul has written other children’s book that have won awards, but unfortunately, there is no such recognition for *Wazīfa*. Additionally, data on copies printed or purchased is not available. Arabic Children’s Literature Scholar and Translator, Petra Dünge wrote “Arabic Children’s Literature Today: Determining Factors and Tendencies”, in which she provides a comprehensive look at said literature and its nuances. In it, she writes that the price of imported non-Arabic books is considerably higher than the price for Arabic books and parents are willing to pay more for them. All books of study were purchased at Diwan Bookstore in Cairo. It is possible to speculate about what the ranges of prices communicate about each book. As for the books under study, the *Farhana* books each cost about 0.35¢-0.45¢, *Al-Dhiʿb* for about 0.90¢ and *Wazīfa* comparatively higher at about \$2. For comparison, Diwan’s website sells *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* for about \$12 and *Disney Princess Party* book for about \$14. With the knowledge that certain books are valued more and thus cost more *Wazīfa* could be considered a book of higher worth and value.

The same time that it is challenging and redefining, *Wazīfa* is still observant of cultural sensitivity. In Egypt, as in most Arabic countries, divorce is seen as a taboo. Within this, women unfairly bear the burden and stigma from a divorce (Social Stigma). Egypt’s Divorce Law gives the women the right to a court divorce for four reasons, two of which would apply in Mama’s case: non-provision of maintenance or financial support and absence or imprisonment (Divorced from Justice). But the story does not mention divorce at all. Instead, it focuses on what the family can do to remedy the situation. Possibly, Al-Mʿadul did not want to include too many challenging ideas in the book.

Having translated the book, it adds a dimension of intimacy with the book that a native likely would not encounter. There were a number of issues that arose that leads to the cultural richness of this text. The spacing in the Arabic text was unclear and inconsistent. In my translation, I decided to begin each line and new speaker as a line on its own. This makes it considerably easier to read and follow in English. Additionally, the lack of quotation marks in the Arabic makes it difficult to differentiate and distinguish between the speech and the narrator. Some aspects of the language are culturally specific, and do not translate smoothly into English. For example, the Arabic form of Repetitive descriptions, largely reads as redundant and verbose if translated directly into English. Certain vocative expressions, such as *ya* translated as “oh” appear excessive and awkward in English.

Fāṭima al- Al-M‘adūl’s *Wazīfa li Māmā* offers a challenging new conception of what an Egyptian girl, Egyptian boy and Egyptian mother can be. Her book and all its nuances challenge the notion that a culture that often limits individuals by what it expects of them. In this vein, *Wazīfa li Māmā* offers an unapologetic, intimate, but subtle, look inside Egyptian culture.

## Chapter 2: *Farhana, Girlhood and Defiance*

*Hekāyāt Farhana* (Adventures of Farhana) by Rania Hussein Amin

*Farhana wa 'id Mīlād Baba* (Farhana and Dad's Birthday)

Today is Baba's Birthday. So momma bought a necktie as a gift for him.

When they returned to the house Farhana said: "I want to give a gift to Baba also!"

Mama said: "Let's make him a birthday cake."

So Farhana preceded her mother to the kitchen. She will make a cake all by herself, and it will be a surprise for Mama and Baba!

Farhana finds herself really confused and misplaced. Where should she start?

So Farhana opened the refrigerator and took out everything that she loves: yogurt, peas, bananas, tomatoes, jam, rice and meatballs.

Then she put everything in the blender.

And then dumped everything in a pan.

Then she put it in the oven, but she forgot to turn it on!

Baba refused to eat any of Farhana's cake.

But he assured her that the best gift is her effort to make him happy and he thanks her sincerely.

Baba felt immense hunger and he was surprised that the refrigerator was empty, and nothing is left but a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese, so he asked Farhana to make him a sandwich.

So Farhana's family celebrated baba's birthday in their own special way.

*Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān* (Farhana Enters Gauguin's Panels)

Farhana loves going to the museum.

But she does not like standing in line.

Farhana loves Gauguin's paintings

So Farhana approached and touched it.

The security guard yelled: Leave the painting alone!!

Then she played with Gauguin's dog and she spoke with the ladies. The security guard screamed:

Get out of the painting!

Farhana climbed Gauguin's tree. The ladies looked at her in admiration. And the security guard yelled: Get down from the tree!

The ladies helped Farhana to try on beautiful clothes. The security guard interrupted: "Leave Farhana!"

The dog attacked the security guard and bit his leg.

Farhana said bye to her friends and she jumped out from the painting.

The security guard said: "Go to your group."

Farhana loves going to the museum.

But she does not like standing in line.

She also loves Picasso paintings...

*Farhana Tujarribul Tayrān* (Farhana Tries to Fly)

Farhana climbs the highest mountain in the world.

She was about to reach the peak, when...

"Mama...Mama! I hurt my knee. Can I put a bandage on it?"

Farhana is proud of the new bandage.

Farhana flies with the rest of the birds.

She goes with them around the world. "OUCH!"

"Mama...Mama! A second bandage...a second bandage."

"Two! How pleasing!"

Farhana, the World Champion Diver.

"OUCH"

"My head...my head. It really hurts!"

Mama takes Farhana to the hospital.

The doctor stitches up the wound.

Farhana is happy with her three bandages, but she does not want anymore.

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*Farhana, Girlhood and Defiance*

Farhana offers us a new Egyptian girl. Cultural tradition has largely dictated expectations of and norms for Arab girl. This often means girl who are reserved and respectful, . *Hekāyāt Farhana (Adventures of Farhana)* is a book series focused on the brave but defiant Farhana, a young girl creating her own reality through exploration, imagination, fearlessness, and most of all, defiance. Farhana's unapologetic character serves as provides an alternative depiction of Arab girlhood. Through the reach of children's literature, her story attempts to shift and present a new representation, and ultimately challenge and subvert the norm and expectations surrounding Arab girlhood.

The *Farhana* series is published by Elias Modern Publishing House, which is best known for its Arabic-English dictionaries. It is an established publisher with a long family history in Cairo that started in 1913 with Elias Antoun who published the First Edition of the Modern English-Arabic Dictionary and then went on to found Modern Press in 1933. Grandson, Edward Elias, changed the name to Elias Modern Publishing in 1976. Today, it remains a family business which has expanded to include Elias Modern Press and Sahara Publishing, both widely known in Egypt and across the Middle East. It is one of the few publishers in the region that has remained and thrived for decades. This is an establishment that makes its orientation clear, it is in its name, it is *modern*. This is an institution that is interested in introducing new ideas. This is communicated by the very content of the books they publish. Some of the children's books remain safe and conforming, for example, *Ḥamāri Budūn Dhīl* is about a donkey who loses his tail, *Sirr al-Hajjār al-Abyāḍ* is about a Sultan who wants to remove a kiosk that blocking his castle, and *Al-Aṭbaḳ al-Ṭa'ira* about a dog who wants an owner who will not give him orders. On the other hand there is ' *Aklet al-Samak* about a little girl who is struggling to feel that she is

important in her family, and of course, *The Adventures of Farhana*. With both conservative and subtly challenging texts, they have shown themselves to be a publisher who is willing to bring up difficult issues and introduce challenging ideas.

It is important to explore the background surrounding the book as it provides a more nuanced look into the extra textual circumstances of the book. Farhana and its publisher are entrenched in an intricate web of affiliations and actors. Elias Modern Publishing House is affiliated with The Arab Children's Literature Regional Programme. The Arab Children's Literature Regional Programme supports local libraries and bookstores and create access to and spaces for children's literature (Arab Children's Literature homepage). They have a special focus on "marginalized groups: poor children, girls, children with disabilities, etc." The Arab Children's Literature Regional Programme is led by Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (ALF). ALF's purpose is to "bring people together from across the Mediterranean to improve mutual respect between cultures and to support civil society". Anna Lindh itself is co-financed by 42 countries and governed by representatives from each country. Anna Lindh utilizes a bottom up approach to enact change, focus on civil society, based on the "shared values and aspirations of the region's citizens" (3 Anna Lindh 2005-2015 Review). Bringing it full circle is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency which provides the funding for The Arab Children's Literature Regional Programme, for the total amount of \$3.5 million. This is all a complex system with many actors. This places Elias Publishing and *Farhana* under the reign of globalization which effects and dictates the content and orientation of the work that is produced.

As for foreign funding in the cultural scene, there does not seem to be a clear resolve among those involved. Samia Mehrez is an Egyptian scholar who has written extensively on the

functions of contemporary Arabic literature, Egypt, and culture. In her 2008 work, *Egypt's Culture Wars*, Mehrez interviews popular Egyptian feminist Huda Elsadda who represents and speaks on behalf of the Egyptian gender studies field and other secular actors in Egypt. Outside funding necessarily introduces and seeks to entrench ideals in society, which are almost always in contrast to its norms. This brings up the question of whether globalization is inherently negative or harmful and how it should and should not function in societies. Mehrez explains how since the time of Mehmet Ali and his campaign to modernize and Westernize Egypt in the early 19th century, the country has experienced radical shifts in its conception of what is ideal for its political and cultural life. Elsadda herself recognizes that foreign funding is an issue and simply admits that everyone does it, and that it is unfair to criticize one group for it while other groups, notably the government, is involved in the same system. While there is stigma attached to accepting foreign funding and the foreign agendas that are inevitably attached, it seems that this is the nature of institutions and causes. As outlined by its affiliations and funding, Elias Publishing and *Farhana* are part and parcel of this system. Therefore we can expect that the ideas and ideals displayed in the book are emanating from more than one source. Sure, Rania Hussein Amin can be the key player in this production as she is both the author and the illustrator, but undeniably, there are other players. We will see this played out within and in the peritext of the pieces.

Interestingly, despite being affiliated with a number of international platforms, both *The Adventures of Farhana* and Elias Publishing are incredibly difficult to locate online. The only substantive information available online about the publisher is found on the programme's website. And *Farhana* can only be located in relation to its publisher, Elias. An English search on either only returns non-substantive information; for Elias about its history of Arabic

dictionaries and for *Farhana* about its relationship to Elias. This is telling to the book and the publisher's relationship. Its Facebook page, 'Farhana Books', one of the few things that can be found about *Farhana*, has more information and accolades about Elias in its About section than it does about itself. It is obvious the independence, or the lack thereof, that the Farhana series has from its publisher. We can only assume that this persistent affiliation with Elias also affects the content of the books. The publisher appears to have more sanction on the books than the author.

Outside of this, the publishing company has survived the dramatic shifts that occurred in Egypt throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. 2003, the year that the *Farhana* series was released was a significant year for Egypt in terms of its political and cultural life. The polarized divide between the government, artists and fundamentalists threatened cultural production. But in this context, Farhana's character and her unapologetic and brave self reads as a clear assertion against prevailing social norms, growing conservative religious ideals, and the government which suppressed such expression.

In the field of Children's Literature, there are a range of ideas as to what purpose said literature should serve and what is and is not considered appropriate for a child. Our contemporary times have seen more challenging ideas incorporated into children's literature. Not surprisingly, shifts in society and differing locales and cultures invariably affect these expectations. The Arab Children's Literature field remains relatively conservative in comparison to Western Children's Literature; topics such as casual sex, substance abuse, sexual abuse and domestic issues are largely non-existent. There are key researchers who are regarded as lead scholars in the Children's Literature field, among those are Peter Hunt and M.O. Grenby. They both hold that children's literature is a rich and developing field with sustained potential for continued growth and incubation of cultural change. In the field, there remain ongoing debates

about the very definition of children's literature. Originally, children's literature served to inform or impart an instruction or lesson (Hunt). But today, as there are a number of children's books that intentionally distance itself from this didactic function, this definition breaks down. Is it literature written for children, about children, or even by children (less common, but it happens)? Because there is no set definition, it can be difficult to decide which criteria to use to analyze the text. In addition, foreign language children's literature carries its own challenges. With *Farhana* and other texts being from a different cultural and societal origin, it can be assumptive to use imported frameworks to try to explain or understand them.

Children's literature in the Arab world has a shorter history than the broader field. Egypt was the first in the Arab world to publish literature for children in the late nineteenth century (Dunges 170). Today, Egypt, where these texts are published, as well as Lebanon are the leaders in publishing. Since its inception, Arabic children's literature has evolved and appealed to more of the population. There is a range of functions, some moral and didactic, others religious or political, and most recently and more commonly, creating alternative cultural ideals and addressing everyday issues. *Farhana*, *Ikhtifā'* and *Wazīfa* are examples of these new challenging books. Sabeur Mdallel researches Arabic Children's Literature and he points out that there was a strong culture of oral traditions for over a millennium. It is only recently that there has been a significant increase in Arabic children's literature as there was a shift to writing these and other stories down. There are notable regional challenges as illiteracy among children and adults remains high in most countries. Additionally, casual reading and reading for pleasure is not common as there is a "common perception that reading for enjoyment is a luxury and that reading should be primarily geared towards learning [and] competition from other sources of entertainment such as television and the internet. In addition, the distinction between spoken and

literary Arabic leads to reading difficulties among children in Arabic (Programme About). There are a number of programs and organization that are working to address these challenges that threaten the livelihood and popularity of children's literature. There now exists a well-funded system of publishers, events and award platforms that encourage and support the publication of quality, appealing children's literature for Arabic-speaking children.

It is in this environment that Farhana was created. Each book of *Hekayat Farhana* is a brief in length, but is rich in implications. Each book utilizes images and text to tell a simple story about this young girl and her adventures. This paper will focus on three of the fourteen books from the series. The series is tied together as the everyday, and not so every day, adventures of the young child named Farhana. There is a thread throughout them all; Farhana is a defiant child, it is not necessarily deviant or malicious, but it is defiance nonetheless. From the reading of each text individual themes emerge, the three texts of focus are *Farhana wa 'id Mīlād Baba* (Farhana and Dad's Birthday), *Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān* (Farhana Enters Gauguin's Panels) and *Farhana Tujarribul Tayrān* (Farhana Tries to Fly). Each embodies and personifies exploration, imagination and fearlessness respectively. The three individual themes appear in each of the books, but one features most prominently in each book. The name Farhana means joyful, which is indicative of what Amin wants her to embody and communicate. She is a light hearted character who even in her trials, smiles and makes the best of the circumstances and when she is down it does not last long.

The peritext of each book is telling, each includes an original message entitled 'About the Book' from the author on the recto. Also duplicated on each book, a generic message from the publisher on the inner back cover page titled 'Farhana Stories'. Both of these messages are written in Modern Standard Arabic and are obviously written for the adult reader. These books

are geared to very young children as evidenced by the small size (easy for small hands to hold and turn), the simple and welcoming illustration style, and the clear, brief and simple text content. The books themselves are only 6 ¼'' by 5 ¼'' and are illustrated using clear color choices and a wide range of colors without any off-putting brightness. The imagery is incredibly simple and almost child-like; for example, a horizontal oval for an ear, a vertical oval for a nose, crinkled lines for hair and overall, very little detail throughout. In this sense, the images do not attempt to be totally realistic, they are flat with no texture, and the lines of the graphics do not always meet. But it is through this simplicity that the child-appeal is created. It is perfectly imperfect and reminiscent of the way a child itself may draw the images. Even in its simple and unrealistic imagery, the content of the text remains largely realistic. This is not a fairy tale or a fantasy, but rather it is a story about an average little girl. Amin chooses not to include much unrealistic elements; instead she focuses on relatable occurrences. This allows the reader to see themselves in Farhana. Because of the language proficiency of the book we can expect that both adults and children age five and up are doing the work of reading. And those children who are younger are listening and receiving the reading.

Because this is a series, there is a form and layout that all the books follow. The title page always features a smiling Farhana in the top left corner with one hand hanging on the end of her name and the other hand holding a toy that resembles a jester. The title, her name: Farhana, is the largest figure on the page; written in a thick, handwritten-like font it is the focal point of the cover. From book to book, the subtitle and cover photo are the only things that changes. The subtitle is always under the title and is written in standard Arabic typeface, perfected with full vowel markings. Unlike most literature, children's or otherwise, the publisher's logo and name is featured on cover title page. This is interesting and could be read as an indication of the

publisher's role in the book and its creation and production process. Unfortunately, the details of this role or relationship are not evident through research. But it is clearly indicated by the publisher's persistent presence wherever *Farhana* is mentioned.

Within the field of children's literature, there are a range of genres that encompass it. Within these distinctions, *Hekāyāt Farhana* is generally more picture books than picturebooks; the latter being a text whose story is incomplete without the pictures. On the contrary, *Farhana* features some skillfully created illustrations and imagery which does add visual appeal, but do not send their own messages or create their meaning outside of the written texts. The exception being a few images from the *Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān* book. The images in the three books follow a very logical order. Amin has the images to reflect the text and add interest to the story. The images and the text tell the same story, but the images add interest. The images are such that a small child could understand and point out what is happening; they are simple and not very realistic so that a child could identify a refrigerator, a brush or a tree for what it is. And this makes the book beneficial in more than one way.

Many books of children's literature are keen on their ability, or even obligation, to do more than one thing. Author Rania Hussein Amin is an established Egyptian writer and illustrator. She also is keen on her role in influencing children, in an interview she says, "we must not allow our culture to limit us, or to force taboos. Write freely and offer the child different, maybe even shocking ideas. The child needs to be challenged, and is attracted to new, rebellious ideas. He has enough of the familiar stuff around him" (Read Kutub KIDS). Amin is frank about the limitations culture can impose. She is interested in writing challenging and subversive ideas. She seeks to stimulate children with ideas that are typically out of their purview. *Farhana* is the way for her to introduce these ideas. The opening message of *Farhana*



*and Dad's Birthday* reveals just how cognizant Amin is of her role and responsibility toward the children reading her book. In it she speaks of children's love of discovery and the importance of allowing them to use their own wit to explore so that they can gain confidence and make their own decisions, but also that parents still have a role to guide but that it should be subtle and not forced. We as readers are made privy to each book's intentions, thus her messages comes to frame each entire text. Her prefaces are for the children just as much as they are for the parents. They have the sense of friendly parental advice. This is an intentional act on the part of Amin, as she is eager to share her ideals. Children's literature opens up possibilities for hope and idealism that often appear scant in other realities. It allows the producers and consumers of said art to imagine and create better moments, which is key to inspiring individuals to create change in society. Amin is mindful of her position in this creation and is intentional in her packaging of this idealism.

*Farhana wa 'id Mīlād Baba* (Farhana and Dad's Birthday) tells the story of her dad's birthday. It opens up with Farhana, her mother and her infant sibling at a store purchasing a necktie for baba. Upon returning home, Farhana is excited to make her own gift for Baba, and she proceeds to the kitchen to make a surprise for mama and baba. She soon finds herself confused and out-of-place, so she goes in the refrigerator and logically, starts to take out everything she loves: milk, peas, bananas, tomatoes, jam, rice and dumplings and she mixes it all in the blender. She then pours it onto a pan, puts it in the oven but forgets to turn it on. She presents it to her father and he refuses to eat any of it but he reassures her that the best gift was her effort to make him happy and he thanks her sincerely. He then feels immense hunger, but looks in the refrigerator and sees that there's nothing but a loaf of bread and cheese! So he asks

Farhana to make him a sandwich which she proudly obliges. The family celebrates his birthday in their special way by sticking candles in the sub sandwich and lighting them!

This story communicates exploration. Farhana's parents are very supportive and encouraging of her. Even as they saw the mess she made in the kitchen, they did not become angry or discipline her. Instead her father thanks her for her effort and there is no mention of the mess or how it will be cleaned. In this way, her parents encourage her exploratory nature. Traditionally, girls in Egyptian families are raised to be dutiful, respectful and not burdensome (Gender-Role Attitudes). Farhana challenges that, as she is bold and eager to try new things.

Contemporary Egypt, on average, remains a relatively conservative environment. Within this, there is a range of sensitivities and proclivities. In some cases, Farhana is too risqué; she does not always listen to her parents or authority, she tries new things with no consideration of its effect or consequence. For others, Farhana is still too orthodox; she fulfills one too many gender expectations, she carries a doll, she wears dresses, she makes her father a sandwich. But there is no one ideal for Modern Egypt; its individuals are as diverse as their own fingerprints.

In Farhana *Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān* (Farhana Enters Gauguin's Panels), Amin prefaces the book by saying, "It is necessary that there is a relationship between our children and the arts". She goes on to emphasize parents' role in encouraging and nurturing children's interest and participation in art. This book is focused on and interacting with *Arearea/Joyousness*, the painting of late-19<sup>th</sup> century French artist, Paul Gauguin. In this piece, Farhana visits the museum with her class. The students are all uniform-clad, boys with blue shirts and gray pants, and girls with grey shirts and pink overdresses. They likely attend a secular, maybe private, school as evidenced by the Western apparel. But Farhana quickly loses interest in the guided lesson and decides to indulge her own interests. She leaves the group and comes upon Gauguin's painting,

and this is where Amin enters the world of fantasy. As Farhana reaches out to touch it, the museum security guard attempts to stop her, but the dog in the painting turns to her and there Farhana is in the frame with them! She explores the painting by climbing on the tree, trying on dresses with the ladies, and when the security guards gets in the painting to tell Farhana to leave, the dog bites his leg. She finally leaves and returns to her class, only to remember that she does not enjoy standing in line. It closes as we find her proudly smiling in Pablo Picasso's famous painting, *Jeune Fille Endormie* which we can only assume she will enter next.

Imagination is intimately tied to art. What is interesting about this book is that it is unclear whether the events are happening to Farhana, or if she is imagining it. Unlike many fantasies, there is no sense that the events are happening in the character's imagination, or while they are asleep and dreaming, or daydreaming, etc. This creates a sense of realism that is appealing to the child. There is conflation between what is possible in the life of an average child, as represented by Farhana, and what is totally impossible. It creates a world where the boundaries of possibility and impossibility intersect. There is beauty in the boundlessness of literature and art. Every single aspect has the potential to create new ideals. With Amin being both the author and the illustrator, this affords her significant determination over her books that is impossible to have when there is an author and illustrator relationship to work with.

In the conversation about globalization, it is interesting to note that Farhana is interacting not with iconic Egyptian art, or North African art, or even Arab art, but with European (French then Spanish respectively) art instead. While this serves the globalization end, it inevitably short ends the local art scene. This is an example of how their affiliations and associations with international actors becomes a deciding factor in the very content of the book.

The third book, *Farhana Tujarribul Tayrān (Farhana Tries to Fly)*, explores Fearlessness. In the opening, Amin prefaces with a message about the importance of movement and activity to children so they may burn energy, tap into their body's potential, experiment and learn dangers, risks and ultimately, safety. It opens with Farhana climbing up a ladder, known to her as "the highest mountain in the world". She reaches the peak, falls to the ground where her leg twists back. With a smirk, she approaches her mother as she is sitting on the couch reading, points out her bleeding knee and asks for a bandage. She lies on the floor and proudly admires her new bandage. And again, she is off; she is balancing on a stool on a table "flying with the birds" when she falls and injures her elbow. She runs to her mother and ask for her second bandage. More proud than before she is in the mirror feeling pleased. In her final escapade, Farhana is a talented diver so she jumps off the toilet head first into the water-filled bathtub, but she slips and hits her head on the edge of the tub. She made it in the tub but she yells, "my head! my head! this really hurts" and her mother appears with a concerned look. She takes her to the local hospital where the doctor stitches her head wound and sends them home. Finally, Farhana feels content with her three bandages and decides she does not want anymore. This story, similar to *Farhana Tadkhul Lawḥat Jūjān*, has a strong theme of imagination. Amin attempts to make a link between fearlessness and safety and risks. She writes about risky behavior, but not without including the consequences for such actions.

Although Farhana is a girl that is not her first identity, she is relatable to both genders. This is the essence of the success of her character. While she is able to show young girls new possibilities for themselves, her appeal is broad. Her actions and adventures are not gender-specific. She is a female, but this is not the crux of the story. Unlike the way we often think of gender, Farhana being a girl does not predicate any aspect of herself of her story. She is not

brave because she is a girl, or in spite of being a girl; rather she is brave because that is who she is.

Literature and art offer a bottoms-up approach to challenging and creating change. Barbara Winckler, Junior Professor of Arabic Literature and Modern Culture at the WWU Münster in Germany writes on “Gender Transgressions” in *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives* where she puts forth a number of theories about gender and culture. She writes on transgressions and how they translate into and function in social reality. For her, transgressions are not inherently negative or harmful, as the name would suggest. Rather, transgressions have significant social currency. Successful transgressions come to redefine and normalize new standards. For Amin to separate and challenge girlhood and its perceived causal characteristics is challenging and creates an alternative normal in society. Though whether this is successful is nearly impossible to quantify.

Expectations for and conceptions of traditional gender roles are markedly similar across nations and societies. Studies of American parenting show that female children are socialized differently from their male siblings in creating a child who, in comparison, is more clingy, less independent, is interested in dolls, play food and all things pink (Development of Gender Roles 72). In general, the dominant transnational expectation is that women marry, have offspring, tend to home, children and husband (ibid 54). Female children are expected to be docile and imitative of the mother in preparation for her future role as homemaker (ibid). Although, notably, Egypt in the past 50 years has experienced significant changes in the ways women and girls are accepted and perceived. Egypt’s feminist movement idealized by women such as Huda Sha‘rawi and Nawal El-Saadawi challenged many of the ideas and expectations tied to Egyptian women.

In Egypt, gender has significant functions and influence in society. Among other factors, the long and continued history of Islam has a significant effect on this. Winckler writes, “gender relations often stand for other hierarchical relations in society” (366). Egypt is a country that, for better or for worse, has deep and entrenched traditions. This extends to its family and society structures. There are clear distinctions between men and women; generally women are expected to stay in the domestic sphere taking care of the home and children, while men are expected to be the financial providers of the home, but not to occupy or domestically maintain the home. The cultural reading of the body is persistent, the expectations and socialization to fulfill those expectations are tangible. A 2003 study on gender-role attitudes among Egyptian adolescents outlines some of these differentiations below,

[Females] are expected to be generally submissive to men and are confined by social norms to roles within the family. Parents were deeply involved in conveying gender norms through shared participation in domestic tasks and monitoring of their children’s activity. Girls’ activities outside the home were increasingly monitored and restricted as they reached adolescence, much more than those of their adolescent male siblings. Furthermore, adolescent girls were expected to assume greater responsibilities in the household while their male counterparts were able to escape much of this responsibility (8-9).

Farhana’s character explicitly shirks these expectations; she does not clean up after herself, she roams and goes where she pleases, she pays no mind to authority, she does not consider consequences and generally, just does what she wants.

The success of Amin’s *Farhana* can be measured by its reception. Unfortunately, numbers on how many books were printed and purchased are unavailable. With the push to encourage and sustain quality Arabic Children’s Literature, there have been a number of awards and distinctions created. Among the most popular is the Etisalat Award for Arabic Children’s Literature with a first place prize of 1 million AED (approx. \$270,000 USD). In 2010, Amin’s *Farhana wa Sirr Jamāliha* (Farhana and the Secrets of Her Beauty) won third place behind *Ta’al’ El’ab Ma’ī*

(Come Play With Me) from Palestine's Tamer Institute, and *al-Noḳta al-Sawda* by Egyptian Author, Walid Tamer (Read Kutub). The Farhana series also previously won Suzanne Mubarak Children's Book award. This is an indication that the book was received well in its environment. These awards mean that the books become more accessible in book stores, library, etc which makes it more likely that children and families will read them.

Rania Hussein Amin, Elias Modern Publishing and *Hekāyāt Farhana* is a bold and challenging forces in the Arabic Children's Literature scene. *Hekāyāt Farhana* is an interesting conglomeration of creativity, resistance, defiance and globalization. Ultimately, this serves as a creative reimagining of girlhood in contemporary Egypt.

### Chapter 3: Fantasy and Adaptations in *Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi' b al-Shahīr Bilmuḥtār*

*Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi' b al-shahīr Bilmuḥtār* (The Mystery of the Disappearance of the Famous Confused Wolf) by Abdel-Wahab Mohammad Ahmad Al-Messiri

When Nūr returned from school, her mother asked her to take a basket of food to her grandmother's house. So she took the subway and hurried back after giving her a kiss and giving her the basket. Back at the house, she found her brothers Yāsir, Nadīm and Zārīf waiting for her. And when Hasan the Rooster showed up, they played and enjoyed themselves. And when he crowed, they went to their beds and fell asleep with big smiles on their faces.

As for the famous cunning wolf, he had been sitting alone in the forest under the tree waiting for Nūr. Little Red Riding Hood was on her way to her grandmother's house. Still he continued waiting and waiting and waiting, flipping through the pages of his old story looking around in confusion. He said to himself, "Why didn't Little Red Riding Hood show up like she did in the story? She was supposed to pass by here, isn't that right?" And when night came, he began to feel cold so he lit a fire to warm himself. But after some time, drowsiness overcame him and he fell asleep confused, depressed and sad.

After several days, Cinderella called Nūr and told her that Miss Zaynab Hanim Khatoun, who adored Nūr, had left her a gift. So Nūr asked her mother if she and her brothers could go to Cinderella's castle. She agreed and gave her the weekly food basket to bring to her grandmother. When Nūr and her brothers arrived on their magic carpet, they found Hasan the Rooster sitting with Prince Ḳamar Al-Zamān listening to Eastern music.

Nūr went with Cinderella to her room where they found the gift: a beautiful green dress. Nūr was delighted by it and she put it on over her red dress. The two began chatting for a time, when Nūr remembered her grandmother. She asked Cinderella to borrow her bike to take the basket to her grandmother. And after that she would return to continue chatting with her.

At that time, the wolf was sitting under his favorite tree waiting for Little Red Riding Hood. But he was so engrossed with reading his old book that when she passed him in her green garment, he did not notice her and he continued to eagerly read his story and meticulously look at the pictures.



Nūr arrived at her grandmother's house and gave her the food. Her grandmother thanked her and said: "You should take off the green garment, and be content with the red garment so you won't feel hot." Nūr thanked her for the advice, put the green dress in the basket, and kissed her grandmother goodbye. She got on the bike and rode back to join her brothers at Cinderella and Ҷamar Al-Zamān's castle.

While she was in the forest, the wolf appeared holding his old book and smiled his usual cunning smile, and said to her: "Where are you going, **Little Red Riding Hood**?" Nūr laughed and said: "I am not going, I am returning from my grandmother's." The smile suddenly disappeared from the wolf's face and he said: "What do you mean? I asked you, where are you going **Little Red Riding Hood**, exactly like the story and you are supposed to answer, 'I am going to my grandmother's house', not returning from there. I have been waiting for days and I did not see you pass on your way there."

Nūr understood what was happening, she smiled and said: "Have you ever heard of the subway? Did you see **Little Green Riding Hood**, Mr. Wolf? Have you read *Tales of Our Times*?" (FN: emphasis mine) The wolf looked at her in confusion and flipped through the pages of his old book, but he did not find any sign of a subway, or of this **Little Green Riding Hood**. So he asked her: "What are you talking about?" Nūr laughed and said to him: "You go ahead and continue reading your old story. As for me, I will call you the Famous Confused Wolf because this is the name that suits you best." So she left him as he was flipping through the pages of his book, muttering to himself: "What is happening in this world? What is going on in this day and age?"

Nūr returned to the castle and she found the king and queen sitting with Yāsir, Nadīm, Cinderella and Ҷamar Al-Zamān. They found Hasan the Rooster sitting by the window and Ҷarīf was next to him looking out over the neighborhood. She told them the story about **Little Green Riding Hood** on the way there and the **Little Red Riding Hood** on the way back, and she told them about the wolf's confusion. She imitated him saying: "What are you talking about?!" And everyone laughed together. Then they all sat and chatted for a while. And at that point, Hasan the Rooster crowed and they knew it was time to go home. So they thanked the king, the queen, Cinderella, and Ҷamar Al-Zamān and rode their magic carpet and returned home.

The wolf was sitting under the tree confused about what happened. He began flipping through the pages of his old story and looking carefully at the pictures with scrutiny. Because he

was engrossed with reading and memorizing by heart, he did not notice that each time he finished the book, he shrank by a few centimeters. So he continued to read and shrink. And read and shrink. And read and shrink. Until after several days, he was the size of the wolf in the book!

And when the wolf looked around him, he was surprised because everything was **HUGE**: the rocks, the flowers and the trees. He was baffled.

After a little bit of time, Nūr came riding her bike in the forest on the way to her grandmother's house. The wolf saw her far away, small like him, and was happy and began to prepare.

But as she got closer, she increased in size until she reached him and he realized she is a huge giant. He ran around in a panic between her feet and under the bike. Then he quickly jumped inside the old book and wandered in the pages where he felt most comfortable and where everything happened like it was supposed to: **Little Red Riding Hood** came at the specified time, he disguised easily in her clothes, she went to her grandmother's house before her, he sleep in her bed, etc.

Nūr looked around her, but she did not find the wolf. She found his old story below the tree and said: "Where is the Famous Confused Wolf? I am the **Little Red Riding Hood**, Mr. Wolf. I am going to my grandmother's house and not returning, I am here!" The wolf did not reply, then Nūr heard a voice coming from the old book: "I have nothing to do with what's going on outside. Here in the envelope of this book, there is no subway or **Little Green Riding Hood**. Everything happens as it is supposed to happen, and does not cause me any confusion, so here I am not the Confused Wolf!"

Nūr looked at the book, then she looked around her, but she did not see anything. So she rode her bike to her grandmother's house and told her what she had seen and heard in the forest. Her grandmother marveled at this and kissed her. On her way back, Nūr saw the old book in its place under the tree, but she did not know that the wolf was sleeping inside of it on the grandmother's bed refusing to come out. He was looking with wonderment at what was happening in the *Tales of Our Times*.

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Fantasy and Adaptations in *Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi'b al-Shahīr Bilmuhtār*

*Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi'b al-Shahīr Bilmuhtār* is especially interesting because it is in dialogue with centuries of previous versions. It is a thread in the expansive tapestry that is *Little Red Riding Hood* and all its renditions. *Red Riding Hood* itself is rich in history and messages. Abdel-Wahab El-Messiri's *Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi'b al-shahīr Bilmuhtār* is a subversive new retelling of this age-old tale. *Ikhtifā'* is an Arabic retelling that challenges what modern Arab girlhood looks like. This Little Red Riding Hood character is in control of her story and merges the past and present; she is strong, responsible and enjoys mobility.

*Little Red Riding Hood* is a part of the children's literature canon that has impacted and formed the field as we know it today. From its early beginnings, children's literature, along with formal schooling, has served to formalize and establish childhood as a delineated and identifiable period. Many texts have didactic purposes and attempt to form children into recognizable, moral human beings. *Little Red Riding Hood* is one of many texts that serve as an entry to civilized modern recognized childhood.

The tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* is one whose origins are debated. Jack Zipes is one of many scholars who have created a scholarly reputation based on extensive study of and devotion to this tale. His book, *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, traces the history and significance of the tale and how it has changed in the three hundred years ago that the West has recognized it. But the true origins of the tale are debatable and nearly impossible to define. There is strong research that indicates that the 1697 tale that we recognize today can be traced back to oral tales from the 1st century. This is a story that has traveled and traversed nations and time and has always been adapted and reimagined to new and diverse social and cultural environments. It was 17<sup>th</sup> century French Author, Charles Perrault who adopted the oral tale and

adapted it to appeal to and appease his contemporaries in French elite society. Before he put it to paper, it was a common oral tale among lower-class French peasantry. At the same time, poet Huang Zhing, a contemporary to Perrault, was also putting a Chinese *Little Red Riding Hood* down on paper in his country (*Phylogeny*, Tehrani). Because this tale's origins are unclear, it makes this a story which many people can claim and relate to. This is a tale whose ambiguity benefits it.

The summary of Perrault's version of the story is that the pretty little girl, Little Red Riding Hood, is sent by her mother to give cake to her ill grandmother. She encounters a wolf on her way there who asks her where she is going. Naively, she tells him exactly where her grandmother's house is. So the hungry wolf hurries to the house and eats the grandmother, while the girl frolics in the forests and arrives later. Upon arrival, she is alarmed by her grandmother's unusual voice but she proceeds. Her grandmother invites her in the bed with her, where she is surprised by her off-putting appearance but the grandmother maintains that everything is okay, and that is all for her. At last, the grandmother, who is actually the wolf, leaps upon her and devours her.

Arabic versions of this story, which is inscribed in a storytelling tradition, is significant and a symbolic full-circle for the tale. In an interesting way, Arabic retellings of *Red Riding Hood* are a way for Arabic Literature to connect itself to its own familiar home - oral story hood. Additionally, this Arabic retelling assumes that the audience is familiar with and has read the original. *Ikhtifā'* is building on centuries of legacy and inheritance. Today, there are at least five Arabic retellings, three of which Red Riding Hood Scholar and Enthusiast Sandra Beckett includes in her expansive anthology, *Revisioning Red Riding Hood around the World*. Sabeur Mdallel writes on the tradition of oral storytelling in Arab cultures. He outlines the beginnings of

Arabic Children's Literature as a natural progression from the practice of telling stories. He points out how said storytelling included a significant amount of ad-libbing and impromptu adjustments as the stories were being told. According to the tribe, age, location, the tale was adjusted to the audience; and this is what Mdallel describes as the magic of storytelling. The fact that stories are both set and also fluid and that the stories themselves are so tied to its place of performance. To him, this magic is lost when oral stories get put to paper. On the contrary, I hold that putting oral stories to paper, allows the magic to spread and be shared. *Ikhtifā'* is an Egyptian-Arab retelling of a popular story which allows this rich story to continue its journey as it crosses borders and languages.

*Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi' b al-shahīr Bilmuḥtār* was published by Cairo-based Dar El-Shorouk in 2000, three years before *Farhana* and five years before *Wazīfa*. During this time, the environment around cultural production is still dictated by government censorship and limitations. Dar El-Shorouk is among the most recognized name in publishing in Egypt. Like the other publishers, it is a family company that was started in 1968 and has since been passed down generationally. Dar El-Shorouk is notable because of its reach throughout the world, not just the Middle East. They are known for their numerous international collaborations that have allowed for the translation of Arabic classics into other languages, as well as translating world classics into Arabic. Thus publishing this retelling of such an international book is of no surprise.

Abdel-Wahab El-Messiri is an established author and household name in the Arab world. Messiri had a special interest in Comparative Literature, as he used it to learn about and understand other cultures. In the children's literature realm, he has published the series *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān (Tales of Our Times)* which *Ikhtifā'* is a part of and also includes another retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood* and of *Cinderella*. *Ikhtifā'* has not garnered the same

popularity and accolades as its predecessor, *Nūr wa al-Dhi'b al-Shahīr bilMakkar* (Nūr and the Not-so-Sly Wolf), which won the Suzanne Barakat Children's Literature award for Best Author in 1999. Safa' Naba' is the illustrator for all of the series and has also illustrated other well-known Egyptian books. *Ikhtifā'* with its rich inheritance is also introducing a canon to children of the Arab world. Together Messiri and Naba' create a retelling of *Red Riding Hood* that is modern, subversive and telling.

Naba's imagery is both simple and intricate. The images are in dialogue with centuries of retellings of the story, but with a Arabic take. There is more detail in the nature scenes than in the characters or the indoor scenes. This is a way to highlight an important aspect of the story. The forest, which is the key location of the story, is especially decorated. There are layers and coloring to the leaves on the trees, the trees have intricate tree rings, there are rolling hills, multicolored flowers on the ground and more. There is not much in the detail in Little Red Riding Hood or her fellow characters. They all have black circle for eyes and wear simple but conservative clothes. Their clothing appears to be more Western, such as vests and continental ties. But Naba' does include some traditionally Arab details, Nur's robes resemble a simple 'abāyah or overgarment, there is a traditional rug on the floor, the walls are adorned with arabesque arches, there's a band playing traditional Eastern music and comically, there's a pet camel. This appears to be an attempt to integrate both Arabic and Western culture into this story.

The pictures themselves do not provide meaning themselves, instead they reflect an aspect of the story from the corresponding page. Naba's imagery focuses more on the wolf and his actions than it does Nūr and hers, which reflects the general emphasis of the story. Additionally, the Famous Confused Wolf, as he is called, does not look like a Big Bad Wolf at all. Instead he looks pretty harmless and rather silly; he is shirtless with yellow and red polka dot

shorts. And instead of appearing menacing, he is usually depicted reading, or with, a book. This portrayal of the wolf is in line with the book's subversion and reworking of his character. Nūr's depictions differ from the original casting of Red Riding Hood. She is shown as a confident and dynamic character; she is pictured catching the subway, riding her bike, and talking face-to-face with the wolf.

As Rosemary Jackson writes in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, stories like Red Riding Hood open up unlimited possibilities. "Literary fantasies have appeared to be 'free' from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: doing away with chronology and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death". In fantasies and fairy tales, there are virtually no limits which make it the ideal place to introduce and challenge ideas. Messiri uses this opportunity to present a new reworking of this timeless piece. *Ikhtifā'* features a talking animal, plays on the disappearance of death without killing the wolf, and eventually has the wolf to shrink and live in a book. These are all fantasy elements that create a story that pushes possibility in a way that is otherwise impossible.

This story is subversive in what may seem like trivial ways. But in reality, these changes completely change and subvert the story. To change her dress from red to green is to remove her from the associations of all thing red. Red as a color is perceived as risqué and inherently sexual, and was often seen as justification for Red Riding Hood's demise (Zipes). Zipes says, "red was generally associated at the time with sin, sensuality and the devil". Instead, Messiri shows that the garment's color is not a deciding factor in her fate. *Ikhtifā'* is built on interesting intertextual play. Nūr's titles, Little Red Riding Hood and Little Green Riding Hood, appear in slightly bolded text and in colored typeset. This emphasis highlights the importance of color and color play in the story's plot. It is because Nūr was in her green garment, and not her red garment, that

the Famous Confused Wolf did not recognize her and thus was not able to stop her, make it to her grandmother's house before her, and play out the time-honored plot. The green garment becomes one of three subversions that drive the wolf into his final dazed retreat. Nūr wears the green dress only once in the story, but most of the time she is donning the red dress. Messiri challenges the characterization of red by allowing Nūr to operate wearing the red garment, without fulfilling or falling into the trap of the color red. Instead, she is clever, confident, outwits the wolf, and does not end up as a victim. The last image we see is on the back cover with Nūr riding away on her bike, not wearing red, but rather her green printed robe.

Messiri's adaptation differs considerably in a number of ways. Immediately, his Red Riding Hood departs from its Arabic counterparts by her being named Nūr, instead of Laila. From the start of the story, Nūr travels by subway, not by foot, to drop the basket of food to her grandmother. By doing this, she totally bypasses the wolf waiting for her in the woods. This is the first disruption that begins to unravel the wolf's confidence, as he waits for days in the forest for her. A few days later, she makes another trip to her grandmothers. This time she does go by forest, though on bike and she is wearing the green garment so she passes right by the wolf who does not even recognize her! In their one face-to-face interaction, the wolf is frustrated and confused and lists the subway, the green dress and *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān (Tales of Our Times)* as all foreign things that should not exist in this story.

Abdel-Wahab El-Messiri is well noted for his philosophies and stances on social progression and modernity. By the middle of his intellectual life, he was a critic of the one-dimensional nature of Western modernity, and instead upheld a model of modernity for Egypt and the Arab World informed by Islam. His most known and expansive work, *Jews, Judaism and Zionism: a new interpretive model* is both an analysis of the Zionism that birthed and informed



Israel, but also a critical study of Western civilization and modernity. He criticized Western modernity for its lack of humanism and its incompatibility to Arab societies, while simultaneously criticizing total traditionalism and lack of progress. He upholds that society introduces unfavorable ideas to children through the media, namely through books (Arab Philosophers). Thus, he created *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān* (*Stories of this Era*) to combat this and offer his ideals to children. *Ikhtifā'* can be read as a commentary on and critique of traditionalism and resistance to change. The wolf is incessantly attached to his “old book” as Nūr calls it. His inability to adjust or accept that there is a new story that happens instead of his leads to his demise by retreat and disappearance. In metafictional play, Nūr references *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān*; it is the new book, which allows for change and increased efficiency. From another, more sympathetic, standpoint the wolf can be seen as a victim of modernity and change, just as Messiri regards many in the East to be. Messiri critiques Western modernity for its lack of humanity, this is illustrated through Nūr not being humanistic to the wolf’s weaknesses, vulnerabilities and inability to change.

Nūr and The Famous Confused Wolf’s interactions are a meeting and intersection of the past and the present. Messiri is using the two characters to make a statement on tradition, progress and modernity. The reality is that the concepts of tradition and modernity are codependent on each other; they are complementary but opposites. It is impossible for one to exist without the other, as they exist and are defined in opposition to each other.

But this rendition is most telling because of its focus and subversion of the Wolf’s character. Red Riding Hood’s Wolf is most commonly cast as the Big Bad Wolf, a predator or a rapist, but Messiri’s recasting puts him in a comical, harmless role. According to Sandra Beckett, the reframing of the wolf is a common way to shift the story’s emphasis and meaning while

challenging the dominant perceptions of the Wolf and who he can be. In our collective memory, the Wolf's reputation precedes him, we typically only have one fairytale wolf characterization and he is always devious and guilty. Beckett writes, "wolves in contemporary retellings have to contend with a legacy of centuries of negative wolf propaganda" (120 Cross-Cultural Contexts). Messiri enters this challenge by recasting him as the Famous Confused Wolf. Additionally, allowing the wolf to be narrator privies a look into the wolf that is otherwise impossible. We see the story from the wolf's perspective, exploring his emotions and his approach. Messiri uses this approach and metafictional play to create a new wolf, who is more of a victim of a story, than he is an aggressor. We see him as something of an underdog and we are able to sympathize with his character.

We see the Wolf waiting patiently and unknowingly for days in the forest anticipating the Little Red Riding Hood that he knows so well. He sits under the tree, studying his book and talking to himself. He is sincerely confused and impotent in the story. He does not know what to make of all the changes, and eventually he retreats to the only place that makes sense to him – his "old book".

This retelling communicates a numbers of messages to both children and adults. This tale is significant in that its appeal is widespread, not only does it exist across nations and cultures but also across age groups. Adults and children read and digest children's literature differently. In the field there is an ongoing question about intentionality and audience for said literature. Scholar Peter Hunt underlines that children's literature and its popularity reveals more about the adults involved than it does the children. In the context of this fairytale, we learn about what is popular about this story, why it has lasts through time and what makes it able to translate across nations and cultures.

Intentionality arises when exploring the audience and intended readership of a text. Scholar Gillian Lathey writes extensively on this discussion. In the literary field there are marked differences between writing for adults and writing for children. Specifically, children's literature attracts a range of readers, this is partly because it is the adult that chooses, and often reads, the books to children. As well as because children's literature provides the opportunity to access and relive childhood, which adults often romanticize and consider as a more pleasant time in their lives. Lathey outlines the three distinctions of "scholar, general adult reader, or child" and some of the markers of writing for each audience (172). Writing for children often means that read-aloud and read-along qualities is privileged, with emphases on simplification, the liveliness of the text, wordplay, simple constructs and ideas. Simplification often means censorship according to the standards of the time period. Ease of readability is often achieved by use of punctuation such as commas and quotations to aid auditory flow. There is often a strong relationship between image and text. Previously, didacticism was overwhelmingly common, either moral didacticism or focus on teaching grammar. Writing for the interested adult is similar in many ways as the interested adult is often looking for an entertaining and pleasant experience while reading children's literature.

On the other hand, writing for the scholar or educated reader often means a focus on the accuracy of the story in relation to its appropriate time period and context. Often it is clear whether the piece of children's literature is positioning itself in opposition to, or in line with widespread norms and expectations of children's literature. Because the assumption of knowledge of a more educated audience, there may be instances and items that are intentionally unfamiliar or have origins in other cultures and contexts. For example, in Messiri's reworking there is a reflection of the times as represented by the subway and the bike, both things that exist

in the contemporary time period. Notably, the book is based on subversions; of Little Red Riding Hood, of the wolf's character, and of the story's outcome.

All of these above aspects are present in Messiri's version, although it is not clear that this text is written for children or adults. Unlike most pieces of literature, *Ikhtifā'* does not include a preface. This leaves the reader to frame the story on their own. Historically, the story of Red Riding Hood has appealed to both adults and children. Perrault's reworking appealed primarily to adults but the Grimms Brother reworking was instead geared to children. The Grimms Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, were German academics who specialized in folklore and storytelling. In 1812 they adapted and rewrote Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*. Their version differed primarily in that it changed the conclusion of the story; Little Red Cap, as she is called, is not devoured by the wolf, instead there is a happy ending. In the story, she encounters two predatory wolves, a hunter saves her from the first and her grandmother saves her from the second. This rewriting was in line with bourgeoisie social norms in Germany at the time. Jack Zipes writes that this rewriting that leaves the little girl unharmed and saved by others reflects popular stances on how children should be viewed and reared (32). In this context, not dissimilar to the context of Messiri's piece, children are mindful human beings with wills and choice, and thus must be molded and taught about choices, decision-making and consequences. Red Riding Hood does not go straight to her grandmother's house like her mother told her; instead she lingers in the beauty and wonder of the forest. These rewritings are lessons about this. With a didactic purpose, they are meant to teach show the reader, quite simply, what happens when you do not listen to your parents.

In discussing the origins of a book, Peter Hunt asserts that a book's origin is necessarily and inextricably tied to and present in its current manifestations. From its origins this story is

inherently about cautions, female vulnerability, and naïveté. Whereas Red Riding Hood is originally a story meant to warn children, particularly girls, of the dangers of talking to strangers, not listening to their parents, and of being naive. It is also a story of female vulnerability and rape. This explicit aspect of the story has been remarked on, deconstructed, subverted and retold dozens of times over. But the idea of female vulnerability and rape is a mainstay in every retelling of this story. Many retellings abound that attempt to sanitize or totally rewrite this aspect of the story. There are a number of rewritings that have Red Riding Hood save herself from the wolf, or have her trick the wolf, or seduce and outwit the wolf. Often, it is the sexual undertones of the story that interests and attracts adult readers. But even as the story is rewritten with a wittier girl who does not walk into her rape, or a rehabilitated and remorseful wolf, or a more able grandma who is able to fight off the wolf, this story is inevitably one whose plot deals with rape. And even in its subversive reworking, Messiri's story is taking a position on this volatile reality. Messiri's Red Riding Hood is one who does not need anyone to save her, rather she saves herself. There is never the possibility of rape, because the poor wolf never even makes it to her grandmother's house. Nūr outwits him without even trying.

The metafictional and intertextual aspect of the play is innovative given the rich textual inheritance of the story. There are references to the book within the book, which serves to connect Messiri's retellings with the broader Red Riding Hood literary legacy. The Wolf is the bearer of the old story, and Nūr is the bearer of the new story, the story that is fitting to our times. Nūr both has knowledge of this new story, and is creating and fulfilling the story by her very actions. This grants her a level of power over the story, whereas the original Red Riding Hood is a passive character in her story.

Nūr's character is one that embraces her role and personifies strength and control over her destiny. Red Riding Hood is about a young girl who is entrusted with a responsibility and task from her mother, and from this departure point, authors and storytellers create their own versions. In Messiri's version, Nūr not only has the responsibility of delivering the basket to her grandmother, but is also responsible for her three younger brothers. Even as this is a fantasy, there is an element of reality to exist within it. Nūr is the oldest sibling; as such she is entrusted with certain responsibilities. This also reflects traditional and contemporary expectations for Arab girls. There is an expectation that female children will assume more responsibility in domestic and nurturing tasks (Adolescent Study 10). On the other hand, Arab girls typically experience increased restrictions on their mobility as they age. But Messiri's Red Riding Hood does not experience this. Instead she enjoys considerable freedom and mobility as she travels between her house, her grandmother's house, and Cinderella's castle by subway and bike.

Translating *Ikhtifā'* into English is a rich experience. With the transliteration system adopted by the Journal of Arabic Literature, I rendered important Arabic words and terms into the English alphabet. Unless names or titles are established in another spelling, I have phonetically transliterated them. For example, although *dhāt al-ridā' al-'aḥmar* literally translates as One in the Red Robe, this is the well-known Arabic translation and title for Little Red Riding Hood, so I adopted it. Likewise, I adopt the translation *Tales of Our Times* for *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān*, which Sandra Beckett uses in her *Anthology*. My choices around translating this particular text were focused on reflecting the spirit and emphasis of the Arabic text. In *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature: Invisible Storytellers* Gillian Lathey writes that translators necessarily assume a socio-political position when translating, which is either to conform to or challenge the text. Messiri uses a lot of punctuation to communicate

emphasis in the story. This aids both in increasing the readability of the story. Additionally, there is intertextual play embedded in the text that is reflected in the translation. We see the words Little Red Riding Hood in slightly bolded and colored typeset; and words which embody their meaning, HUGE is in large and bolded typeset, and shrinking is in gradually diminishing typeset. This intertextual play is an important and unique aspect to the story.

Because of the grammar and syntax structure of the Arabic language, a degree of sentence restructuring was necessary to express cohesion in English. There were a number of tensions that arose from the text which I had to make a decision about in translating. Nūr and the Wolf repeatedly reference *al-kiṣa al-ḳadīma*, and though it literally translates as the old story, the old book is a more fitting translation because it better reflects its presence in the story. *Al-kiṣa al-ḳadīma* is often mentioned with and juxtaposed against *Hekāyāt Hadhāl-Zamān* (*Tales of Our Times*) which is Messiri's children's book series. Even though this is a metafictional story, Messiri's strategic use of punctuation and references ensure that this intertwining is clear and not confusing. *Ikhtifā'* is both aware of itself as a story and is creating itself as a story, and this nuance is effortlessly translated.

Abdel-Wahab Al-Messiri's *Sirr Ikhtifā' al-Dhi'b al-shahīr Bilmuḥtār* is a subversive retelling of an age-old tale. In its contemporary Arab context, this book challenges and redefines what Arab girlhood can look like. Traditional and expected norms are shifted and what is presented is a distinctly modern story with a modern Arab girl leading it.

## Conclusion

Together these texts create modern and subversive images of Arab girls and women. These new and challenging conceptions allow the Arabic-speaking reader, specifically the Arab child, to reimagine what these identities and roles can look like. By taking apart and analyzing the nuanced aspects of these books, this paper highlights the subversive power of literature. The field of children's literature will continue to produce challenging ideas, and children will continue to grapple with and negotiate these ideas. Though Arabic Children's Literature is young in its progression, these texts push the field to continue to grow and expand. Today, Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world is at a crossroads. As Messiri would uphold, there are strong pulls toward "modernity" and strong pull to "traditionalism". The cultural and political environment is prime for change. These images and conceptions that these books put forth invite future Arab writers to challenge their limitations and conceptions. This literature for children pushes the boundaries and undermines the systems that limit them. Literature invites and teaches children to think, to imagine and reimagine better spaces. Ideals come out of discontentment; in their subversions, these texts provide understanding of social woes as well as social ideals. They all reflect the historical and cultural realities of their context.

This work contributes an in-depth look at contemporary Egyptian children's literature and what types of messages are directed to Egypt's youth. This lays the ground for a range of further research. Sociological and ethnographical questions arise of how Egyptian youth, specifically Egyptian girls, orientate themselves vis-à-vis their culture and the expectations that come from it. Additionally, shifting the focus to the young boys or men, who often get overlooked in conversations about challenges of gender. As in, what does the new Egyptian boy or Egyptian father, look like?



This project is significantly limited by its sources. Arabic Children's Literature is not easily accessible in the United States, thus this study only looked at five books. Additional pieces of children's literature would have opened up the possibility for comparison across countries or across time periods. With more sources, the question of what constitutes exceptional, or not so, literature in the Arabic Children's Literature realm. Additionally, it is impossible to say whether these texts were among the first to write such subversive stories, or if they are a part of a movement that was already in place. These three texts were published in Cairo between the years of 2000 and 2005. In recent years, post-Arab Spring, Egypt has experienced tremendous shifts and changes in terms of its cultural production, government and society. Looking at children's literature produced since 2011 would have provided a rich comparison and means for analysis.

Challenging and Subverting Girlhood and Motherhood in Contemporary Egyptian Children's Literature has sought to elucidate how these five books are attempting to challenge and remold popular culture through the children and youth. With subtle and subversive ideas, these books introduce ideas of outspokenness, courage, exploration, humor, progress, employment, education, art, perseverance, independence, and responsibility as mainstays of the Arab girl and Arab woman's realities. And it is these qualities that the next generation will, hopefully, embrace and embody.

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