The Fables of Jean de La Fontaine and Ahmad Shawqi: A Chronological and Analytical Study.

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Abstract: This paper will deal with the chronological development of the children’s literature in the modern Arabic poetry with special reference to the awakening poet Ahmad Shawqi, who had spent his time in Paris and was influenced in turn by the literature French had produced, especially the fables of La Fontaine. Children’s literature generally referred to as Adab Al-Atfal in Arabic literature saw a great upsurge and advancement in the times of Shawqi. He has used many new ways as well as trailed on the traditional ways of composing fables. The paper will map the definitions of the children’s literature and the discovery of a child that make the way for the development of children’s literature and as well as the categorization of the literature through genres. Next, the fables will be taken into account for the purpose to serve as the basis of the development of Arabic Fables in the modern literature. The development of Arabic fables will be deliberated concisely, as to institute the fact that it’s not an novelty to be tried in Arabic literature. Accordingly, the last fragment of the paper will supply the particulars of the analytical study in succinctly.

Keywords: JEAN DE LA FONTAINE; AHMAD SHAWQI; CHILDREN LITERATURE; FABLES; ARABIC FABLES

1. Introduction to Fables:

The fable is an ancient form of fiction and primitive allegory in which beasts and occasionally plants behave in human ways from which a moral can be drawn. The fable tradition was influenced by other systems of animal or plant symbolism. The established genre of children’s narratives promoting the kind treatment of animals, along with an altogether warranted concern over the possibility of arrest for seditious publications, combined to make the children’s animal “fable” (again, a misnomer for the types of animal stories being published at the time) a safe venue for the middle classes to espouse their objections to upper-class privilege.

1.1 Children’s literature:

Children’s literature, the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials. Children’s literature first clearly emerged as a distinct and independent form of literature in the second half of the 18th century, before which it had been at best only in an embryonic stage. During the 20th century, however, its growth has been so luxuriant as to make defensible its claim to be regarded with the respect—though perhaps not the solemnity—that is due any other recognized branch of literature.

1.2 The Discovery of the Child:

A self-aware literature flows from a recognition of its proper subject matter. The proper subject matter of children’s literature, apart from informational or didactic works, is children. More broadly, it embraces the

2 Ibid, P 678.
whole content of the child’s imaginative world and that of his daily environment, as well as certain ideas and sentiments characteristic of it. Shifting Visions of the Child, Slow Development, The Didactic versus the Imaginative, all these play a very important role. (Montessori, 1972)

1.3 The Development of Children’s Literature

There is no single or widely used definition of children’s literature. It can be broadly defined as anything that children read or more specifically defined as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or drama intended for and used by children and young people (Chevalier, 1989). (Children’s Literature”, Library of Congress, 2013). The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature notes that “the boundaries of genre ... are not fixed but blurred” (Hunt, 1996).

2. Categorization by Genre:

A literary genre is a category of literary compositions. Genres may be determined by technique, tone, content, or length. According to Anderson, there are six categories of children’s literature (with some significant subgenres):

1) Picture books, including concept books that teach the alphabet or counting for example, pattern books, and wordless books.
2) Traditional literature, including folktales, which convey the legends, customs, superstitions, and beliefs of people in previous civilizations. This genre can be further broken into subgenres: myths, fables, legends, and fairy tales
3) Fiction, including fantasy, realistic fiction, and historical fiction
4) Non-fiction
5) Biography and autobiography
6) Poetry and verse.

3. Fable:

Fable, narrative form, usually featuring animals that behave and speak as human beings, told in order to highlight human follies and weaknesses. A moral—or lesson for behavior—is woven into the story and often explicitly formulated at the end. The fable has traditionally been of modest length, however, and the form reached its zenith in 17th-century France in the work of Jean de La Fontaine, whose theme was the folly of human vanity. His first collection of Fables in 1668 followed the Aesopian pattern, but his later ones, accumulated during the next 25 years, satirized the court and its bureaucrats, the church, the rising bourgeoisie—indeed, the whole human scene. His influence was felt throughout Europe, and in the Romantic period his outstanding successor was the Russian Ivan Andrejevich Krylov. fables, has survived only in an 8th-century Arabic translation known as the Kallilah wa Dimnah.

The most important compilation is The Fables of Bidpai, or the Panca-tantra (“Five Chapters”), a Sanskrit collection of beast fables. The original has not survived, but it has been transmitted (via a lost Pahlavi version) as the mid-8th-century Arabic Kallilah wa Dimnah. Kaiylah and Dimnah are two jackals, counselors to the lion king, and the work is a frame story containing numerous fables designed to teach political wisdom or cunning. From the Arabic this was translated into many languages, including Hebrew, which rendition John of Capua used to make a Latin version in the 13th century. This, the Directorium humanae vitae (“Guide for Human Life”), was the chief means by which Oriental fables became current in Europe. In The Fables of Bidpai, animals act as men in animal form, and little attention is paid to their supposed animal characteristics. It is in this respect that they differ most from the fables of Aesop, in which animals behave as animals.

Jean de La Fontaine, (born July 8, 1621, Château-Thierry, France—died April 13, 1695, Paris), poet whose Fables rank among the greatest masterpieces of French literature. Albeit, La Fontaine did not invent the basic material of his Fables; he took it chiefly from the Aesopic tradition. If one skips Jean de La Fontaine, whose Fables (1668; 1678–79; and 1693), though read by the young, were not meant for them, French children’s literature from one point of view begins with the classic fairy tales of Charles Perrault. These were probably intended for the salon rather than the nursery, but their narrative speed and lucidity commended them at once to children. The fairy tales of his contemporary Mme d’Aulnoy, like many others produced in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, are hardly the real thing (Montessori, 1972).

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Ibid.  
Ibid.  
8 Ibid.  
10 Ibid.
4. Development in the Arabic Fables:

Probably the most significant surge forward occurred when individuals, no longer waiting for the promptings either of the state or of foreign missionaries but directly addressing a new kind of readership, turned their hands to the translation or adaptation of texts for their literary or entertainment value alone. Muhammad Uthman Jalal (1829—1894), gave Arabs versions of at least one novel and (in verse) of the fables of La Fontaine. There are some notable approaches to European lyric poetry, such as Ahmad Shawqi’s (1868—1932) translation (now lost) of La Martine’s ‘Le Lac’, made while he was a student in France between 1887 and 1891, but this does not seem to have made a profound impression even on his own poetry.

Whereas the innovations discussed above were treated by their authors as belonging to the canon of poetry, a few other new types were also used by the neo-classicists that were viewed as less than canonical and were often excluded from the representative diwans of these poets. One such type that appealed to poets around the turn of the century is versified fables. The translation by Muhammad Uthman Jalal of La Fontaine's fables in 1870 in fusha (literary Arabic), and ammiyiah (colloquial Arabic) was probably among the factors that prompted other poets to producing their own fables composed in exemplary fusha. Shawqi was particularly fond of this genre, and a posthumous volume of his al-Shawqiyyat (vol. 4) includes some sixty short fables in verse. Thirty-six of these fables have the 'non-canonical' rajaz metre, and in most of them rhyming couplets rather than monorhymes are employed. Muhammad Uthman Jalal (1829—94), devoted the greater part of his efforts to works of literature. Not only did he translate a large number of contributions to French literature, for example the plays of Moliere and the fables of La Fontaine, but he also initiated a crucial intermediate process in the development of an indigenous tradition of modern fiction by ‘egyptianizing’ their contexts, thus paving the way for attempts at imitation and later the development of an indigenous generic tradition. Shams al-Nahar is a frankly didactic play. Thus states al-Hakim in his short introductory word in which he says he wants his play to teach a lesson as directly as did Kalliah wa Dimnah La Fontaine’s Fables and some of Brecht's plays. But in general what one witnesses in the fictions of this period is the grim combat of antagonists whose interests are opposed: power is disseminated throughout the system. One sees this in the world of La Fontaine’s Fables, where animals (and humans) endlessly exploit, subjugate, and destroy one another.

La Fontaine fuses all the genres, from pastoral to epic, and all the tones, from the comic to the pathetic; all lyric forms, from the extended epigram to the epistle and the verse tale, are mixed together. The Fables are anything but simple children’s tales, but neither can they be reduced to brilliant exercises and variations of humanist erudition under a surface of worldly badinage: even in his most humble narratives, the poet speaks as a moraliste, giving a personal, nuanced description of the depths of human nature and the perils of life in society, rather than prescribing which behavior to adopt. Fables are indeed predominantly Aesopic in inspiration: they introduce the reader to the bestiary of that tradition and to the knowing observations on human nature, offered here in true moraliste style, that their animal encounters occasion. La Fontaine’s greatest achievement: his sly reinvention of the fable as a remarkably supple and capacious poetic form, a kind of literary Trojan horse, capable of carrying within its flanks a cohort of other forms and genres.

5. Analytical Study and Conclusion:

Fables are brought into effect by the portrayal of the characters of the faunas traversing the subject of the ethical instructions. The subjects used by La Fontaine and Shawqi are perpetual and unvarying. The ‘Far al Bayt wa Far al Bayt’ is the best example which stands out among the other fables produced. Commonly cited animals to name few are cats, rats/mouse, lion, monkey, rabbit, ant, dog, fox, wolf and frog (Shawqi, 2012). Earlier work was produced by La Fontaine and followed up by the Arabic Awakening poet Shawqi; as Shawqi was at Paris and became familiar with the French literature he was greatly influenced by La Fontaine’s

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13 Ibid, P 29.
14 Ibid, Pp 63-64.
15 Ibid, P 183.
16 Ibid, P 382.
19 Ibid, P 294.
20 Ibid, P 322.
21 Ibid, P 322.
work. Some of the neo classical poets like Ahmad Shawqi; had had a certain familiarity with and interest in, French literature. Shawqi for instance, had translated a number of La Fontaine’s fables into Arabic verse. 22

Thus the poetics of Shawqi is profoundly drawn by the massive influence of what is inti the French Literature. Shawqi displays a uniform style that also is of the La Fontaine. For instance, he talks about those animals which Fontaine has made mention of. In the view of the multiple descriptions found in the collection of both the poets, it seems legitimate to interpret that the poetics of Shawqi, which was later produced was the product of the influential poetics of La Fontaine. While still the part contributed by Shawqi to the Fables was traditional in a way, relating archetypal methodology to the tradition of Arab and French fabulists, it is clear that Shawqi’s views of the Fables is original as it reflects his purposefulness and unequivocalness.

Works Cited


For More Information, See: Al Adab Al Arabi Al Ma’asir fl Misr by Shawqi Daif and Hafiz wa Shawqi by Taha Hussain.