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The Cultural Dimensions of Children Social Stories and Their Significance in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers: The Story of ‘Tota’ as a Model

Azza Shbl Mohamed Abou ElEla

Abstract

This is a study in the fields of applied linguistics and language education. It aimed to investigate the genre of children literature and its integration in language education. The study attempted to underline the significance of the cultural dimensions of children social stories in learning Arabic as a foreign language. Although the language of children social stories is literary, it possesses many linguistic features of the actual language of communication in daily life contexts. Employing the descriptive-analytical method and semiotics, this study examined the story “Tota”, written by the academic writer Abeer Anwar (2019). This story targets children at the school age, from six to eight years old, which represents the intermediate level of Arabic language education for non-native speakers. Analysis reveals the culture, customs, traditions, and values of the Arab society, in addition to the meanings of Arabic names, the functions of body language in social communication, and the implications of images, colors, and symbols in Arab culture. The study emphasized the significance of the Arab culture presented in children social stories for improving the skills of verbal and non-verbal social communication among Arabic language learners.

Keywords: Arabic language education, cultural dimensions, social children stories.

1. Introduction

This is an applied linguistics study that aims at revealing the cultural dimensions of children social stories in teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages. This helps learners improve their linguistic communication skills within the Arab society.

Children literature is an internationally recognized literary genre that possess distinctive rhetorical characteristics, making it one of the most effective educational tools in language teaching. Since language education has become closely linked to understanding the culture carried by the language, the importance of this study lies in attempting to reveal the cultural dimensions of the Arabic language through analyzing a model of children social stories. This helps learners understand the Arabic language and communicate within the Arab society.

2. Aim of the study

This study aims to introduce children literature, its purposes, and the uniqueness of its language, as well as its significance in language teaching. It explains the types of children

literature, the various mediums through which it is conveyed, the meaning of children social stories, the concept of culture, and its importance in language teaching. This is achieved by familiarizing language learners with the social values, customs, and traditions of Arabs, in addition to the significance of color usage, symbols, and body language in social communication.

3. Methodology of the Study

The study examines the story “Tota” published by Dar Nahdet Misr (2019). This story was written by the academic writer Abeer Mohamed Anwar, with images by artist Hiam Safwat. It is a children social story that targets children aging from six to eight years, which is the beginning of the school stage. This makes it suitable for the intermediate level of Arabic language learning, after the learner has passed the first level and acquired a basic linguistic repertoire that enables them to interact with the Arabic social environment. The study applied the descriptive method and semiotics to analyze the story, to demonstrate the importance of cultural dimensions in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, through a social literary work that simulates the actual use of language in Arab society.

4. Previous studies

Previous studies of children literature in the Arab world follow two directions. The first is the theoretical approach, and the second is the critical approach. Due to the increasing interest in children literature in the modern era, with conferences and seminars dedicated to it, and scientific institutions awarding prizes for this branch of literature, theoretical studies have emerged. These studies investigated the definition of children literature, its origins, types, and progression, and its role in developing children language across the different age groups. On the other hand, the critical approach explored the educational role of children literature, identifying the sources from which it derives sciences, knowledge, arts, social values, and educational foundations, besides presenting some analytical models.

Recently, a new trend has emerged aiming at utilizing literature in general, and children literature in particular, in language teaching. Among the studies that integrated literature with language teaching is the study by Saker (2018). This study justified using literature within English language lessons, highlighting the problems faced by learners of English as a foreign language in the Syrian context, and providing preliminary guidelines for addressing these problems. The study also suggested some activities that emphasize the role of literature in conveying the culture of the target language, and exercises that enhance language skills teaching.

Studies exploring the role of children literature in language teaching have flourished since the International Council for the Arabic Language held its international conference titled “Children literature and Teaching Arabic” in 2015. The conference included several research papers that discussed the impact of children literature on learning Modern Standard Arabic and learning Arabic through games. An example is Al-Momani (2015) who examined the impact of children

literature arts on teaching Modern Standard Arabic utilizing animated children pictures as a model. Another example is Ahmed's (2017) book that focuses on methods of utilizing visual children literature including series, programs, and cartoons, as well as oral and audio children literature, in teaching Modern Standard Arabic and developing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

5. Definition and Objectives of Children Literature

The early beginnings of children literature in the modern era in the Arab world dates to "the era of Muhammad Ali Pasha in Egypt through translation. The first person to translate a book for children from English was Rifaa Al-Tahtawi, who was chosen to be responsible for education at that time after returning from his mission in Paris. He translated a collection of stories under the title *Children Tales* and he included some stories in the curriculum" (Brighash, 1996, p.80).

However, the interest in children literature is ancient. Al-Hadidi (1988) reported that in the second half of the 19th century, archaeologists discovered the first recorded instance in human history of children literature and the stages of childhood development in ancient Egypt, written on papyrus and depicted on the walls of temples, palaces, and tombs three thousand years before Christ. This indicated the interest in children literature and its guiding role in developing social awareness, achieving psychological balance of members in the family, especially during childhood, which is a foundational stage where the child's personality develops and forms its perception of the self and the other in society, sustaining community health.

Despite the multiple definitions of children literature, they generally agree that it is "an artistic linguistic formation that belongs to a genre of literature, whether it is a narrative story, poetic drama, or lyric poetry, and is well presented by its author in a manner closely connected to the nature and function of literature, and deeply aligned with the world of childhood" (Al-Harfi, 1996, p.16).

The language of children literature is distinctive; it represents a valuable source for language learning. It does not only stimulate children's imagination but it provides them with information in different fields of life: science, politics, societal, and religion. Additionally, it enriches their vocabulary, enables the children to organize their thinking, and familiarizes them with the surrounding culture and civilization (Brighash, 1996) Children literature is "a form of literary expression with its own rules and methods, whether related to its language, and its compatibility with the child's vocabulary, and stylistic repertoire for a target age, or related to its content and suitability for each stage of childhood, or related to issues of taste and techniques in crafting the story, or in narrating the story as an auditory tale." (Al-Momani, 2015, p.195)

6. Childhood Stages and Language Acquisition Levels

Psychologists have provided a classification of childhood stages (Saif Al-Islam, 2019), which can cognitively parallel the levels of learning Arabic for speakers of other languages, as follows:

- a. "Early Stage": The preschool stage (3-6 years old), also known as the pre-writing stage,

the sensorimotor stage, or the stage of realism and perception of the surrounding environment. During this stage, a child's perception is growing, and their thinking is predominantly sensory, relating to tangible and perceptible objects. This stage corresponds to the beginner level of language learning, as learners need many lexical items to interact with their external social environment.

b. "Middle Stage": early-school stage (6 - 8 years old), during which the child has learned the basics of reading and writing. This stage can correspond to the intermediate level of language learning that starts after the learner has mastered the foundational stage and can independently develop their language skills.

c. "Advanced Stage": middle-school stage (8 - 12 years old), this stage is where the learner has acquired a strong command of the language and developed linguistic competence to perform comprehension, interpretation, and critique. This stage corresponds to the upper-intermediate level of language acquisition and cognitive development.

7. Types of Children literature and its Mediums

Children literature includes "everything written for children, whether it is stories, scientific material, plays, scientific knowledge, questions, inquiries in books, magazines, radio programs, television, cassettes, or other mediums. They all constitute children literature." (Dani 2019, p.13-14) Each of these mediums includes several classifications that differ according to their general characteristics. Under stories, there are animal stories, science fiction stories, adventure stories, folk tales, religious stories, and social stories. The latter, characterized by its realism, is the closest type to the lived social reality. It discusses life issues and creates narrative contexts that simulate social conditions, allowing children to understand the surrounding society, express their feelings, discuss their ideas, and convey information clearly, accurately, and easily, without complexity, avoiding fertile imagination and the world of myths and legends.

Children literary discourses are characterized by multiple systems of signs. Written literature that combines text and image appeals to the sense of sight while audio literature on the radio appeals to the sense of hearing. The literature presented on television screens, on the other hand, appeals to both sight and hearing, as elements of language, image, sound, lighting, and movement all contribute to shaping this discourse. Therefore, children literature, in general, is valuable for language learning due to its provision of linguistic and cultural contents in a catchy literary form. It encompasses a wide range of knowledge and ideas across various fields and subjects, preparing learners to integrate into the Arab society and understand its culture.

This educational role is not limited to children prose literature but is also found in poetry composed for children. Poetry features musical language that significantly facilitates memorization and recall. For example, the poetry collection *Me and My Friends*, by poet Ahmed Suwailem (2016) revolves around "a child's relationship with his personal belongings, creatures, and objects around him. It narrates his relationship with the rose, the cat, music, the library, his clothes, his bird, the ball, the computer, his bag, the road, his favorite toy, and his school." (Al-Zara 2020, p.19). All these topics form semantic fields of vocabulary that can

increase the linguistic knowledge of Arabic language learners at the basic level.

8. Written and Audio-Visual Literature and Language Education

There is a great difference between children literature and Arabic language educational books. As Issa (2019) points out, children literature has a catchy and entertaining style that involves vivid imagery and inspires imagination. This, in turn, makes it more memorable for children than the ordinary texts found in Arabic language textbooks. Issa also notes that children could be more responsive toward the content and values of children literary books than they would be towards other educational textbooks. Children literature allows children to express themselves freely through multiple forms of play, acting, drama, and singing. This stresses how the emotional aspect is more evident in children literature than it is in the educational texts in Arabic language books.

Therefore, children literature could be highly useful in language learning. It allows children to practice, repeat, imitate, memorize, interact, and converse. These all contribute to developing learners' language skills. With written and audio-visual literary texts, language learners enrich their vocabulary, learn different types of sentences and their connections, and distinguish between factual and figurative uses. The audio-visual medium allows learners to receive the text non-sequentially and recognize specific discourse segments for practicing language in use, e.g., monologues and dialogues. This develops reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and facilitates verbal communication for learners in society.

Technology has played a significant role in transforming written literary texts into audio and visual texts, integrating sound, image, and movement. With cinematic techniques, written narratives have been transformed into visual films, many of which have become recognized worldwide. Examples include the stories of *Sinbad*, *Cinderella*, *Aladdin's Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and some stories from the book *One Thousand and One Nights*, which have been translated into several languages. These stories have become popular among all peoples around the world. Thus, converting written texts into audio-visual productions for television, cinema, or theater, adds auditory and visual signs to the linguistic signs. These enhance comprehension, memorization, recall and reuse in similar communicative contexts.

9. The Concept of Culture and Building a Mental Image

Children literature is characterized by its rich content. It provides considerable knowledge and diverse cultures in the broadest sense. It reflects customs, traditions, costumes, cuisines, interactions, social occasions, religious rituals, and national celebrations or festivals, among other cultural aspects represented through the linguistic medium.

The term "culture" has been defined by numerous analysts (e.g., Abdel Razek 2004; Wasfi 1998). What is common in these definitions is that culture represents a mixture of knowledge, potential, beliefs, values, customs, and habits acquired to enhance interactions among the members of a society. Accordingly, each society has its own unique culture that distinguishes it from other societies. Therefore, the culture presented to children is "a collection of sciences,

knowledge, arts, skills, and values that a child can comprehend and assimilate at each of their three developmental stages, enabling them to properly guide their behavior within society.” (Al-Faisal 1998, p.51)

The role of children literature is no longer confined to amusement by depicting fantasy, myths, and ancient tales. It contributes to shaping intellect and conscience, enriching them with aesthetic and educational values. In general, literature has raised children’s cultural awareness through construction of mental images, that is “a relative psychological knowledge with cultural origins, based on, direct and indirect, individuals’ selective perception of the characteristics and features of a subject matter, forming (positive or negative) emotional attitudes towards it. This results in (apparent or hidden) behavioral tendencies within a specific society.” (Al-Momani 2015, p.196)

Children literature differs from adult literature as it is carefully written due to the specificity of its audience, children. This literature aims at gradually filling the child’s linguistic reservoir according to different developmental stages, each with its own vocabulary, styles, and cognitive issues. Due to its linguistic characteristics, children literature is one of the most suitable educational materials for teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. It also plays a role in understanding the cultural dimensions behind linguistic uses in various communicative contexts that simulate actual usage.

10. The Story of *Tota* and Cultural Dimensions

The use of stories in children education is an ancient habit. Ancient civilizations relied on “using stories to serve multiple purposes in child education, including religious, moral, cognitive, and entertainment purposes.” (Abdel Razek, Ibrahim 2004, P.216) Stories help children learn how to perceive themselves and interact with their families, society, and the environment around them. They instill values such as cooperation, kindness, family ties, respect for elders, compassion for the young, care for animals and plants, tolerance, and social etiquette in conversation, table manners and interacting with others. This makes children literature a good model for Arabic language learners to understand the customs and traditions of the Arab society in general.

The story of *Tota* is a social story that focuses on reflecting the child’s social environment including their family and the surrounding environment. For this, it enables language learners to understand social contexts that simulate real-life communicative situations. This story includes two types of signs: linguistic signs and visual signs. The study will attempt to analyze both types of signs and explain their role in revealing the cultural dimensions of the contexts used.

11. The Cultural Dimensions of the Linguistic Sign

11.1 Moral Values of Family Relationships

The story *Tota* reveals an important educational aspect of cultural dimensions in the Arab society, namely the role of family ties in achieving social cohesion among family members and its impact on their psychological well-being. This is illustrated through the character of Tayseer, the grandmother who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease and lives with one of her daughters.

However, her daughter has to travel to another country with her husband for two months, leading Grandma Tayseer to move in with her other daughter, who has a young daughter named "Naira". The mother informs Naira that Grandma Tayseer cannot live alone, so she stays with them and shares Naira's room.

Initially, Naira feels upset because her grandmother, whom she has not visited for a while due to her studies, is now sharing her small, cramped room. However, after her grandmother arrives, Naira realizes that her grandmother, who has lost her memory, cannot live alone as her mother mentioned. Gradually, Naira gets used to Grandma Tayseer, especially since she has always wished for a younger sister. The girl and her grandmother start having conversations and spend time together. In the morning, Grandma Tayseer sees Naira off to school; then after school, they spend all their time together, eating and sharing their adventures. Over time, Grandma Tayseer becomes like a sister and friend to Naira, who no longer feels lonely as she has been before. As the two months end, the traveling aunt returns and takes Grandma Tayseer back to live with her. Since then, Naira has become keen on visiting her grandmother, buying her mulberries and the sweets she loves, and helping her aunt take care of her.

Although the deep cultural dimension highlighted by the story is the importance of family ties and their role in building and maintaining family happiness, the text includes many moral cultural values such as love, a sense of responsibility, cooperation, helping others, self-reliance, modesty, the culture of reproach, the culture of apology, freedom of expression, and the etiquette of conversation.

The narrative fabric of the story includes many customs that reflect cultural values in Arab society, such as the etiquette of greeting a home visitor. When the grandmother arrives at the house and the child hears loud voices announcing her arrival, she instinctively goes out to greet her without being told to do so.

The value of responsibility is evident in the daughter's care for her mother after her sister, who used to take care of her, travels. The mother indirectly teaches her young daughter this responsibility by informing her that her grandmother is to live with them and share her room.

The story also portrays the culture of self-reliance and non-dependence. When the mother tells Naira about the imminent arrival of Grandma Tayseer, Naira rushes to her room to tidy it up before her grandmother arrives. She carefully arranges her belongings on her desk, puts her scattered clothes in the wardrobe, and locks the door. The author uses the word "carefully" to highlight the importance of efficiency.

The sense of responsibility towards the grandmother transfers from the mother to little Naira, which leads to a positive behavioral change. Naira's sadness and anger about sharing her room with her grandmother change into happiness about her presence and desire to take care of her. Naira starts helping her mother and her aunt in taking care of Grandma Tayseer. This positive behavior helps Naira overcome her loneliness, through engaging with others, and taking care of her grandmother, transforming their relationship into a friendship. The language used significantly reinforces this transformation by shifting from the phrase "my grandmother Tayseer" to "my friend Tota".

The story also reveals the culture of freedom of expression, the etiquette of objection, and the culture of apology. The mother allows Naira to express her opinion during their conversation. After Naira feels very upset about sharing her small room with her grandmother, the mother explains the consequences of the grandmother living alone due to her Alzheimer's disease, which poses a danger to her life. Once Naira realizes her mistake and understands that her mother is right, she approaches her mother, kisses her on the head, and says, "I'm sorry, Mom... I didn't mean to hurt you." (Anwar 2019: 7) Here, the act of kissing the head combines with the verbal sign "sorry" to express the act of apology.

The story also highlights many values, such as modesty, instilled in children from a young age in their interactions with elders. After apologizing to her mother, Naira continues her explanation shyly, stating that her room is very small. The author shows the value of politeness in the Naira's interactions with her grandmother through her kindness, gentleness, assistance, and respectful proximity, kneeling to be at her grandmother's eye level. In this context, body language contributes to expressing the act of politeness.

Additionally, the story illustrates the culture of reproach, where communication is directed from the higher authority (the mother) to the lower (the daughter) without blaming her. The context requires clarifying that their house is not smaller than the grandmother's house where they all grew up. This indicates the value of love that unites all family members of different ages.

11.2 The Significance of Body Language

Children literature generally allows non-native learners of Arabic to understand the functions of body language in human communication. The rich linguistic and visual signs in children literature reflect the actual use of body language in the real world. The importance of understanding this language and its meanings is heightened by the fact that, in many cases, speakers rely solely on body language for communication without needing linguistic symbols. Therefore, understanding the meanings of body language is crucial due to its frequent use in daily life and its potential variations across different cultures.

The story *Tota* includes many expressions indicating body language in various contexts. Some expressions convey feelings, as described by Naira when expressing her affection for her grandmother: "I approached her and gently patted her shoulder." (Anwar 2019, p.10) The close distance between the speakers, combined with the light upward and downward movement of the hand on the shoulder, signify affection and tenderness. Love and intimacy are indicated through body language. Holding hands indicates love and psychological intimacy, as shown in the description of Naira's bond with her grandmother: "We were in a deep sleep holding hands!" (Anwar 2019, p.18) In addition, the act of kissing the forehead signifies love, as Naira expresses her affection for her grandmother: "I kissed Tota several times on her forehead." (Anwar 2019, p.25)

Furthermore, other communicative functions of body language are represented in several instances. For example, the daughter's confusion is depicted through the exchange of glances

between the mother and granddaughter: "My mother stood confused. She looked at me sometimes and at her mother other times." (Anwar 2019, p.11) The type of smile and its indication of innocence is described as: "She smiled at me with a childlike smile." (p.11) The grandmother's fear upon arriving at the house is shown through her gripping her daughter's clothes: "She fearfully clutched my aunt's dress" (Anwar 2019, p.10), and through her curling up in a corner of the bed: "My grandmother curled up in the corner of the bed." (Anwar 2019, p.12) The mother's discomfort is described through her changing facial expressions: "My mother's features changed, she became distressed." (Anwar 2019, p.7)

Body language can also express agreement through nodding or disagreement by shaking the head from right to left, as Naira does when she disagreed: "I shook my head in denial." (Anwar 2019, p.16) The index finger can be used to request someone to come closer, as described by Naira: "She looked at me intently, then pointed with her finger for me to come closer." (Anwar 2019, p.14) All these gestures and movements used in the story are part of the general culture of using body language in daily life. Therefore, understanding these signs can significantly improve Arabic language learners' communicative skills within society.

11.3 The Significance of Arabic Names

Literary works often include Arabic names that distinguish characters within the text. While many authors claim that the meanings of names are coincidental and unrelated to the text's connotations, often the choice of names in a literary work is directly or indirectly connected to the writers' intentions and the discursal meanings. Arabic is a derivational language, so uncovering the lexical roots of Arabic names is an important way for learners to understand the linguistic roots and meanings of these words, enriching their vocabulary and helping them understand the naming culture in Arab society.

In the story under study, only two names are used to refer to the main characters: the grandmother (Tayseer) and the granddaughter (Naira). By tracing the main idea in the story, it can be said that the author chose the name "Tayseer" for the grandmother, derived from the root "رسي" [yusr] which signifies ease and facilitation. The grandmother has made her children lives easier by caring for them in their young age. It is now time for her children to honor her by making her life easier, just as she has done for them. The meaning of the root "Tayseer" is a continuous value passed from the grandmother to the mother and from the mother to the daughter. It is a social value not bound by time or place, transmitted from generation to generation. This value is linguistically indicated in the text when the granddaughter reassures her mother and herself after understanding the situation: "Since I understood this matter, I made it easier for myself and Mama." (Anwar 2019, p.18)

The author chose the name "Naira" for the granddaughter, derived from the root "رين" [nayr] which signifies physical light and mental enlightenment, or the light of sight and insight. This meaning aligns with Naira's emotional shift from feeling upset about sharing her room with her grandmother at the beginning of the story to feeling happy about her presence at the end. Interestingly, although the grandmother's name "Tayseer" appears from the beginning of the

story, indicating her role in making her children lives easier and the implicit expectation of reciprocation, the author delays revealing the granddaughter's name "Naira" until the end of the story. The author refers to her as "the child" until the moment of enlightenment when the child realizes her mother's wisdom. This timing aligns with the author's intention to express the child's newfound awareness and understanding. The name "Naira," in its intensive form, signifies the abundance of light, which matches the child's growing attention and care for her grandmother, her commitment to visiting and continuously caring for her.

11.4 The Symbol of the Mulberry Tree in Arab Culture

The Arab culture is rich with various social, religious, and cultural symbols that are represented linguistically, whether in everyday language, literary language, or scientific language. Therefore, it is important for learners of Arabic to understand these symbols and their meanings in different contexts. In the Arab culture, there are several symbols of various meanings. The fox, for instance, is a symbol of cunning and cleverness whereas the lion is a symbol of strength and courage. The turtle, on the other hand, is a symbol of slowness. The moon is a symbol of beauty while light is a symbol of truth. The scales symbolize justice; and the floater is a symbol of salvation. These symbols are widely accepted and used by society.

The word "Tota" (mulberry) is commonly used in Arab culture, often as a nickname for young children, both boys and girls, possibly due to the small size of both children and mulberries. Scientifically, the embryo's egg has been likened to a mulberry fruit in the first stage of development when it reaches the uterus, forming a mass of small cells. Scientists have named it the 'marula' because it resembles the mulberry fruit in its external division (Rajabi, 2023). Therefore, the word 'marula' can be considered a symbol of the beginning of life.

The mulberry tree holds significant value in popular culture. Its fruit feeds silkworms, which produce silk threads of high value compared to other threads like cotton or wool. Additionally, the large size of the mulberry tree provides shade and cover, with its soft leaves. For this, the Arabic expression "the mulberry leaf has fallen," is proverbial and metaphorically means removing the cover and exposing one's secrets. In addition, the word "Tota" is often repeated at the end of small folk tales that mothers tell their children at bedtime, saying: 'Tota Tota, the story is over, sweet or not?' This phrase might be used due to the similarity in small size between the story and the mulberry fruit. In addition, the word 'Tot' in ancient Egyptian language referred to the month September which referred to the beginning of the year and the season of agriculture. This highlights the similarity between the beginning of the year and beginning of life with all its aspects of abundance and fertility.



In the story under study, the word "Tota" is a nickname for the grandmother "Tayseer," as her mother used to call her when she was young. It is beneficial for Arabic language learners to understand the significance of this symbol in Arab culture, the naming conventions, and the use of nicknames. Parents often give their children

short, easy-to-pronounce names as a form of endearment. The grandmother explained that she was called "Tota" because there was a large mulberry tree, she passed daily on her way to her friend Fatima's house. She loved this tree and would always shake it to gather a plentiful number of mulberries, so her mother started calling her "Tota." This happy memory remained with her despite her Alzheimer's disease. The story dedicates two pages to an illustration of the grandmother with the blooming pink mulberry tree, happy with her gathered mulberries.

Thus, the author uses the name "Tota" as a symbol of the family tree's origin, the interconnectedness of its members, and their protection under the umbrella of family ties. The grandmother is likened to the large mulberry tree with its clustered fruits and broad leaves that provide shade and shelter to all who seek it.

12. The Cultural Dimensions of Visual Sign

The clarity of the story's language, the relatively short sentences, the avoidance of complexity and abstraction, and the role exchanges in the dialogue sections create mini communicative events that simulate actual daily usage. This allows learners to develop their language skills by understanding the cultural dimensions of linguistic signs and accompanying images.

Children stories contain many clusters of images that form the narrative fabric and can be read on a horizontal or vertical level. On the horizontal level, meaning is generated during the sequential reading process, its growth, and the succession of images within the story. On the vertical level, meaning is formed through comparing images and their transformations in relation to the development of events during and after the reading process.

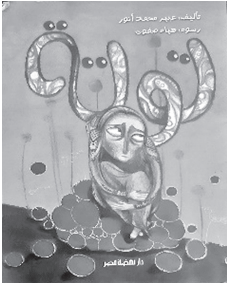
Visual signs, in conjunction with linguistic symbols, perform many functions, such as repeating or emphasizing meaning, filling text gaps, breaking expectation, narrative leaps, expressing the change of time, and embodying techniques of foreshadowing or flashbacks, among other functions that images perform within the narrative text.

The story *Tota* includes fifteen images distributed throughout the text, with each page containing an image that spans both sides of the page. This repeated formal alignment is an indicator of the organic unity in the text between the meanings of linguistic and visual symbols.

The images are positioned differently in terms of layout. After the cover image, which is the first central image attracting attention to the story and usually accompanies the story's title above it, comes the inner cover image, occupying the entire page space, making it free of any linguistic symbols. This format is limited to the introductory and concluding pages and is common in most children stories, known in artistic layout as the inner cover image or "endpaper." Following this, in order, is the icon image, which is usually one of the internal images used in the story, selected based on its central significance.

12.1 The Body language and the Significance of Colors in Arab Culture

The cover image is often considered the first visual attraction that represents the main idea of the story. The eye can recognize some of the connotations that the writer wants to convey to the readers from the collection of primary and possible meanings. Meanwhile, the realized



connotations grow during the process of reading the text until they end in interaction with the linguistic and visual stock in the recipient's mind.

A learner can perceive the connotations of the cover image through their knowledge of the use of colors in Arab culture and the significance of body language. The image uniquely depicts an old, small-sized woman with white curled-up hair, bending forward and clutching her legs close to her chest with both weak hands. This body movement reflects her desire to cling to herself, perhaps due to the feeling of loneliness, which is supported by the emptiness that surrounds her. She finds no one to care for her, generating a feeling of misery that makes her contain herself by wrapping herself in her arms.

Moreover, her eyes seem widened and appear with an upward gaze, leaving the white of the eye as a dominant color. This color is usually associated with purity and transparency. Her eyes are also topped by her eyebrows that raise in sadness. Since there are no sources of fear or anxiety threatening the woman, the connotation of fear is excluded. Instead, it confirms the feeling of sadness, with those innocent childlike facial features, the small nose, the closed mouth with pressed lips, the neat hairstyle, the elegant clothes, the simple shoes, the full face, and the rosy cheeks. All these features indicate a good social level, excluding interpretations of the stereotypical image of homeless street people. Meanwhile, the tilting of the head, the bending of the back, the innocent movement of the eyes and eyebrows, the embrace of the hands for the entire body, and the presence of the yellow color in her clothes all indicate the psychological illness of this old woman or the feeling of fear that resembles children's fear. The yellow color is used to signify illness or fear in the Arab culture.

This draws attention to the reasons behind the old woman's illness or fear, initiating a reading journey where the visual signs interact with linguistic signs to produce meaning. Notably, the title of the story "Tota" is depicted in a three-dimensional form that includes the yellow color, indicating a feeling of fear or illness. The old woman is portrayed sitting on red balls, and some other red balls fly around her in different sizes. The significance of this visual symbol is deferred until the reader joins the world of the story and understands its relation to the cluster of mulberries that the grandmother loved dearly as a child, hence her name. Then, the learner gets familiar with the significance of the red color in the Arab culture as representing love and happiness in some contexts.



The primary function of the image is to help the readers understand and remember, as it imprints on the mind. From this perspective, the image, which some consider related to the presentational form, performs semantic functions related to the specificity of the literary genre and the content of the story, while others relate to interaction with the readers.

The red color dominates the (inner cover image) repeated at the beginning and end of the story, where a happy child flies in the air. By recognizing the child's image through the repetition of facial features

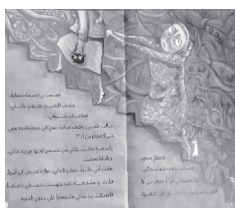
and hairstyle, the learner realizes that this image is of the grandmother at a young age. This happiness is associated with the beloved mulberry tree and its crimson clusters that she holds in one hand, while she extends her other hand in happiness, smiling, with her fingers open in the air towards the scattered berries around her, some of which have fallen on her shoes. The berries also appear as if they are printed on her dress. The red color of the mulberries, with its warm connotations, dominates the entire surface of the painting, as well as the girl's face, cheeks, hair, dress, and shoes, creating a joyful image that evokes feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and joy in innocent childlike features.



In another context, the story employs the red color to signify anger when the child learns that her grandmother will share her small, cramped room. This is evident through the contrast between the large image of the child and the small size of the room, as well as the dominance of the red color on the girl's face and clothes, which is associated with anger in the Arab culture.

The accompanying illustration reinforces the granddaughter's intense feeling of discomfort, anxiety, and deep thought through body language, stillness, and her curled-up position leaning against one of the room's walls. Her eyes are fixed in one direction, her hands and legs are drawn up to her chest, and her lips are turned downward, indicating sadness. Despite the written text presenting multiple characters, such as the mother, grandmother, aunt, and granddaughter, the visual illustration depicts only the granddaughter, who is alone in the visual scene. This solitary sitting in a still position is another visual indicator of the feeling of loneliness and isolation.

The visual depictions not only serve to represent the setting of the events but also provide a detailed presentation of the room's contents to exaggerate the child's feeling of the room's tightness. The room includes a bed, a wardrobe, a desk, a ceiling lamp, and another lamp on the desk next to some books, indicating that the child is a student. The open wardrobe contains clothes of different colors and sizes, varying in length, with a large suitcase at the top, an umbrella, and a school bag at the bottom. Another handbag for outings is placed at the top of the room's ceiling. The child sits on a carpet laid on the floor with a small ball beside her, and some small-sized paintings are hung on the wall. Everything in the room is relatively small except for the child's size, which is large, indicating the room's tightness.



In another picture, body language combines with color to indicate the grandmother's fear and sadness over the departure of her daughter, who used to take care of her. The grandmother appears like a small child clinging to her daughter's clothes as she leaves. Her face shows signs of sadness and repeated attempts to hold on, depicted through the positioning of their feet. The daughter's image only shows her moving feet as she ascends outward, holding her handbag, while the grandmother tries to grab her, kneeling like a small child in a pleading position, dressed in blue, symbolizing peace, purity, and clarity. Meanwhile, the background of the scene is dominated by red, indicating anger and

turmoil. The background appears as a tangled web of branches, suggesting tension, disorder, and mixed thoughts.

12.2 Shadow Play in Popular Culture and the expansiveness of imagination

The uniqueness of learning a language through literary texts lies in the metaphors they contain, which in turn help develop the learners' imagination skills, as one of the most important skills that enable the language learners in reception or production.



The accompanying picture for the final scene is open to interpretation, signifying the change in the relationship between the granddaughter and the grandmother, after a new bond of friendship forms between them. This main idea is the author's goal, emphasizing family ties and caring for grandparents as they age. Therefore, the last picture stands out from the rest of the story's pictures. It is the only picture that does not show the grandmother or the child. Instead, the artist uses the shadow play technique to present two characters, one large and one small, dancing happily together inside their home. This generalization and open invitation suggest that family ties should prevail in every household within society. This visual technique parallels the use of indefinite forms by writers in their literary works, where they use terms like man, woman, child, garden, and hospital without specifying names, to generalize the meaning.

Therefore, we find that the last picture depicts a house with open windows and a shadow play image of two characters without visible features, implicitly indicating the grandmother and granddaughter. They play together in love and friendship, raising their hands in a circular dancing motion, symbolizing happiness, and holding bouquets of blooming flowers. The background is filled with warm red, symbolizing love. Outside the house, there are birds perched on a tree as if singing, and the mulberry tree, which has become a symbol of happy memories in the story. There are also three small white hearts nearby, suggesting peace and purity, and a bright white lamp illuminating the house, reflecting on the open window.

This is the first time the house's window appears open and lit after being closed at night throughout the story. Previously, it carried a glimmer of hope for change through the presence of a crescent moon and a lamp illuminating the darkness, symbolizing the light of insight that made the granddaughter feel happy with her grandmother after feeling discomfort with her presence. The use of white dominates the visual composition of the page, symbolizing purity, making it the last color imprinted on the visual memory. It meets with the red color, symbolizing love and the flow of emotions, in an atmosphere of green shades, indicating prosperity and growth.

13. Conclusion

The study addressed the cultural dimensions of social stories for children and their significance in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers by analyzing the story *Tota* by the academic writer Abeer Mohamed Anwar. It explained that dividing children literature according to childhood stages can align with the levels of learning Arabic for non-native speakers.

Children social stories are among the most suitable narrative types for linguistic imitation and facilitating language learners' communication within the Arab society. This is due to the nature of constructing social contexts that parallel communicative processes in the real world and the inclusion of various dialogic segments that allow learners to perform linguistic simulations.

Moreover, social stories for children significantly enable learners to understand the Arab culture by exposing them to cultural symbols, Arabic names and their meanings, the use of body language in social communication, and color connotations that may differ from one culture to another.

The study also highlighted the social and cultural values that govern relationships within the family, which are stable and enduring values in the Arab society passed down from ancestors. These values are evident in the story, such as family ties, cooperation, responsibility, love for helping others, modesty, work perfection, freedom of expression, dialogue etiquette, and the culture of apology, among other positive values that illustrate the bonds between individuals in the Arab society. These are presented in an engaging and attractive literary language that can benefit learners through the diversity of linguistic signs and visual symbols and their impact on the mental image, enhancing comprehension, memory, and language production abilities in various communicative contexts within the Arab society.

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