

Zohreh Ghaeni

Children's Literature in Iran

From Tradition to Modernism

Barnlitteraturen i Iran sträcker sig närmare 3000 år tillbaka i tiden. Här ges en historisk överblick och ett för barnboksforskningen viktigt projekt presenteras: "The History of Children's Literature in Iran". Artikeln bygger på en föreläsning Zohreh Ghaeni höll på Internationella biblioteket i Stockholm vid sitt besök i Sverige hösten 2005.

Children's literature in Iran has a very long history, which dates back to more than 3000 years ago, when the first Persian families narrated our rich oral literature, including lullabies, folktales, rhythmic fables, generation after generation. Recently a large number of clay exercise tablets have been found as evidence that people were educated by teachers in 1500 to 2000 B.C. and they would write their exercises on these tablets. In addition to children's oral literature, the children enjoyed written stories which date back to the Sasanides period. This claim was proved when a Pahlavi manuscript of "Asurik Tree" (the story of the palm date and the goat) was found from about 2000 years ago.

The extensive research on history has proved that although there are a lot of similarities between the historical patterns in the West and the East, during the Middle Ages, children's literature in Iran was different in certain respects. For instance, one can refer to the very progressive views of the medieval Iranian philosophers towards children and the concept of childhood in the Islamic period.

In the Islamic era when the children were educated in traditional schools, which were called Maktabkhaneh. In these schools children learned some parts of the holy book, the

Quran. The modern educational system, inspired by Western countries, was established in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century (the constitutional era). But the turning point occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when new educational concepts entered the scene, thanks to Iranian intellectuals who were educated in Western countries, after which the number of modern schools gradually increased.

In the early 1920s only about 5 percent of the population were literate. At that time the most important task was finding new ways to increase the number of literate children. Children in the new educational system needed modern textbooks. The pioneer educators tried to contribute in preparing new textbooks which would respond to the special needs of children.

The modern era of children's literature began around 1930, when several pioneer writers and poets wrote stories and poems for children, and a lot of children's books from Western countries were translated and published. In spite of these activities, not only the rate of illiteracy among children remained, and the Iranian children still had too few books. By the 1960s, with the development of

modernism, everything had changed. The reform that began at this time included the educational system. A group of recruit soldiers were sent to remote villages to teach, and more than half of the children became literate. With the establishment of the first institutions for children's literature, the situation of children's literature in Iran changed. The Children's Book Council of Iran (CBCI), the first non-governmental organization, in 1963 and Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in 1965, founded and supported by Queen Farah, were both established with the aim of improving children's literature in Iran and encouraging reading among children and young adults. The Children's Book Council of Iran held seminars with the participation of children's literature experts, arranged children's books exhibition to encourage parents and children to read, reviewed children's books and trained librarians for schools. Thus the Council played a significant role in promoting children's literature and improving both the quality and the quantity of children's books. The Institute

for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults established a large number of children's libraries in most of the cities and sent bookmobiles to small villages. Thus the Institute played a very important role in motivating children to read. The Institute, by supporting and encouraging young writers and illustrators, could publish a lot of quality children's books which were accessible to the children in deprived provinces through the libraries.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, the fundamentalists begun to change the "Western cultural structure". They tried to find a new interpretation of children's literature compatible with revolutionary values. Hence, they supported the works of children's writers inspired by Islamic ideological values. This policy continued also during the Iraq-Iran war, when the government needed the young generation's support for the war. The Islamic government tried to control, not only the educational system, by restricting teachers and librarians to using certain textbooks and to be very strict with censorship in school libraries, but also presided over the "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults", which led to the expulsion of many librarians from the Institute's children's libraries and to "cleansing" the libraries from books which were designated as "harmful".

After the war, in the 1990s, a more realistic group in the governmental institutes, familiar with international attitudes, started to consider children's literature without focusing on ideological values. At this time a group of independent writers who had been isolated during the revolution, found more



Zohreh Ghaeni when she visited the Stockholm International Library on 6 October 2005.

opportunities to be active and to create literature for children. The young generation, and especially the women, started a new movement to demand their rights.

To respond to the special needs of different groups in society, NGOs were formed. Some of these NGOs are related to children's literature and encouraging children and their families to read. During this time many young people, women in particular, joined the Children's Book Council of Iran, to encourage reading in schools and families. A lot of young researchers on different subjects have contributed to The Encyclopedia for Young People which has been started as an extensive, and nationwide network project since 1978.

In the past few decades, the independent writers and young talented illustrators have published quality books and have tried to make their voices heard on the international scene. Among these individuals, some of our authors have been nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award: Hooshang Moradi Kermani in 1992, Mohammad Reza Yousefi in 2000 and most recently M. H. Mohammadi the candidate for 2006. Some young Iranian illustrators have also received recognition at the Bratislava and Bologna book fair.

So far, this movement has not succeeded in changing the situation so that Iranian children's literature has been able to flourish. The main obstacle has been the conservative and bureaucratic structure of the Iranian educational system. The educational system is an authoritarian one. No innovative method has any place in this system. The school libraries are just small warehouses of books, and most of the books in these libraries are selected by a special institute within the educational system. The structure of the educational system does not encourage the students to cooperate

actively. The children are limited to their textbooks. In this way the schools, which could be very good consumers of quality children's books actually don't buy books and the market is faced with a deep depression and stagnation, a very difficult situation. Only the publishers who are supported by the government can survive at all.

Recently, societal and cultural needs in Iran have motivated the new generation of experts in children's literature to focus on theoretical issues. Thus the process of considering children's literature as an area of expertise has begun and historical studies were considered as a basic requirement for expanding the developing amount of children's literature in Iran. So some research has been conducted, of which perhaps the most important research done during recent years is the project on "The History of Children's Literature in Iran."

This project was undertaken by The Institute for Research on the History of Children's Literature in Iran (IRHCLI). The primary mission of the Children's Literature Research Project was to identify, find, access and analyze historical documents related to children's literature and to publish them in a multi-volume series titled "The History of Children's Literature in Iran" (HCLI). The Institute has already published seven volumes and the project will be extended to ten volumes.

The HCLI project begins with oral literature and children's reading materials in ancient times followed by reading material of the Islamic period, the appearance of the first printed children's books in the mid-nineteenth century and the development of children's literature up to the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The History of Children's Literature is not a historical report of the development of children's literature in Iran. It is an analytical

study that not only surveys the changes in children's status, but also shows the evolution of the educational system that helped children's literature to emerge. The issues the HCLI has focused on include: When did Iranian society start considering children as different from adults; how have thinkers defined the child and children's special needs; when did children's literature begin; and in which historical period were the first books produced?



Volumes 1 and 5 of *The History of Children's Literature in Iran*.

Research on pre-Islamic and Islamic works makes it clear that there are very few texts addressed directly to children. However, many passages can be found in general literary works that are written for children and are clearly addressed to the young reader. This has been discussed extensively in the first two volumes of the HCLI.

The turning point occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the appearance of new educational concepts, the continuity of oral literature and folklore, development of simpler Persian prose, the increasing number of translations from the West, the start of the printing industry in Iran, the establishment of new schools, the study of child psychology, and the rise of pioneer personalities as early publishers of books for children transformed Iranian children's literature. The project will conclude with an examination of developments in children's literature during the 1960s and 70s when Iranian children's literature flourished.

The historical research and theoretical discussions on children's literature have created new perspectives for academic research. A new generation of scholars who have taken children's literature seriously and considered it as a scientific and academic subject, have started to do research on different aspects of children's literature. As a result of these attempts new criteria and standards for research works are being formed, which will develop academic work in Iran.

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This article can also be found at www.macondo.nu. Macondo is a joint project for the promotion of literature from Africa, Asia and Latin America, run by The Barnängen World Library, the Swedish publishing house Tranan and the Nordic Africa Institute.