



*Exploring the Artistry and Cultural Significance of Al-Hattab
Puppet Play*

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استكشاف الأهمية الفنية والثقافية لمسرحية الحطاب للدمى

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Abstract:

Given the significance of puppet theater and its impactful role.

This paper delves into the intricate artistry and rich cultural significance of Al-Hattab Puppet Play, examining its historical roots, artistic techniques, and societal impact. It will explore how this traditional form of puppetry reflects and preserves cultural values, narratives, and traditions, offering insights into its enduring relevance and evolving role in contemporary society.

The paper will delve into the historical origins, artistic intricacies, and cultural resonance of Al-Hattab Puppet Play, a traditional form of puppetry deeply rooted in heritage and storytelling. Through an exploration of its techniques, themes, and societal impact, this study seeks to illuminate the enduring significance and evolving artistic expressions within this cherished cultural tradition.

Keywords: *Al-Hattab, Puppet theatre, Child literature*

المخلص:

نظراً لأهمية مسرح الدمى ودوره المؤثر، تتعمق هذه الدراسة في الأهمية الفنية المعقدة والأهمية الثقافية الغنية لمسرحية الحطاب للعرائس، تبحث في جذورها التاريخية، وتقنياتها الفنية، وتأثيرها المجتمعي. وسوف يستكشف كيف يعكس هذا الشكل التقليدي لفن الدمى القيم الثقافية والروايات والتقاليد ويحافظ عليها، ويقدم نظرة ثاقبة لأهميته الدائمة ودوره المتطور في المجتمع المعاصر، وستتعمق الدراسة في الأصول التاريخية والتعقيدات الفنية والصدى الثقافي لمسرحية الحطاب للدمى، وهو شكل تقليدي من أشكال عرض الدمى متجذر بعمق في التراث وسرد القصص. من خلال استكشاف تقنياتها وموضوعاتها وتأثيرها المجتمعي، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأهمية الدائمة والتعبيرات الفنية المتطورة ضمن هذا التقليد الثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحطاب، مسرح العرائس، أدب الطفل

Child literature in the Arab Culture

Child literature plays a crucial role in shaping the minds and hearts of young readers, fostering their imagination, and instilling important values. In the Arab culture, child literature has a rich history that reflects the region's diverse traditions, heritage, and cultural identity. This section aims to explore the significance of child literature in Arab culture, its evolution over time, and its impact on children's development. Arab child literature has a long and vibrant history, dating back centuries. Traditional oral storytelling, folktales, and legends have been passed down through generations, captivating young audiences and imparting moral lessons. These stories often feature heroes, heroines, and mythical creatures, embodying cultural values such as courage, wisdom, and resilience. The interest in child literature in Arab-Muslim societies springs from the general Muslim view on childhood and child upbringing. Many verses from the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings (Hadith) emphasize the right teaching of children, their rights, and Therefore, Arab literary writers and critics took great interest in children's literature and serious efforts have been made towards the cause. The Syrian writer and critic Mohammed Hassan Brighish attributes the importance of child literature to the fact that it directly and indirectly affects the child's cognition and emotions because a child's thinking at this stage can be easily molded and their psychology is a blank page that we can instill in them what

we want.(42)

Brighish adds that Arab child literature started with the oral narrative tradition when grandparents used to narrate stories to their grandchildren. These stories narrate in simple ways the history of the Arab and Muslim nations and the old values and costumes. Arab child literature has evolved over time, incorporating new themes, styles, and genres. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of written children's literature in Arabic, influenced by Western storytelling traditions. Pioneering authors like Tawfiq al-Hakim, Mahmoud Shukair, and Fatima Sharafeddine introduced innovative narratives that addressed contemporary issues and reflected social changes. It explores a wide range of themes that resonate with young readers. Many stories revolve around family, friendship, bravery, and the importance of education. These narratives often emphasize moral values such as kindness, honesty, respect, and the pursuit of knowledge. They also celebrate the beauty of Arab culture, traditions, and the diversity of the Arab world. It serves as a powerful vehicle for preserving and promoting cultural identity. Through stories set in Arab landscapes, featuring Arabic language, and incorporating

traditional motifs, children are immersed in their cultural heritage. These narratives foster a sense of pride, belonging, and connection to their roots, instilling an appreciation for Arab customs, folklore, and history. (45)

Child literature in Arab culture contributes significantly to children's educational and emotional development. It enhances language skills, vocabulary, and comprehension. By engaging with imaginative narratives, children develop critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. Arab child literature also provides a safe space for children to explore emotions, fears, and dreams, aiding their emotional intelligence and self-expression.

Despite its rich tradition, Arab child literature faces challenges such as limited availability, inadequate representation of diverse voices, and competition from globalized media. However, there are opportunities for growth and innovation, including the incorporation of digital platforms, collaborations between Arab authors and illustrators, and the promotion of inclusive storytelling that reflects the region's multicultural reality.(46)

Child literature in Arab culture serves as a gateway to imagination, values, and cultural identity. It has the power to shape young minds, instill moral principles, and foster a love for literature and learning. By celebrating Arab traditions, addressing contemporary issues, and nurturing creativity, Arab child literature contributes to the holistic development of children and helps them navigate their world with curiosity, empathy, and a strong connection to their cultural heritage.

The Arab Puppet Theatre

The Arab puppet theatre, a vibrant and captivating art form, has a rich history that stretches back centuries. This section explores the significance of the Arab puppet theatre, its cultural roots, artistic evolution, and its role in preserving tradition while inspiring creativity. Puppet theatre has a long-standing history in Arabic culture. It is believed to have originated in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia. Puppetry served as a means of entertainment, education, and cultural expression. Over time, puppetry evolved and found its unique forms across the Arab region, including shadow puppets, hand puppets, and marionettes, and spread throughout the Arab world. According to (Karma, 2007), Ancient Egypt witnessed the world's first theatrical performance. Ancient Egyptian and Greek literature, as well as the discovery of many objects that are preserved at the Musée National Égyptien and the Louvre in Paris, have all provided evidence that puppetry existed in Ancient Egypt under the reign of the Pharaohs. However, in this context, "puppets" cannot be understood to mean manipulative items used in performances in the modern sense. In cemeteries, puppets with a sometimes-articulated, frequently funerary quality, manufactured as children's toys were discovered. Additionally found were wooden funerary figurines of mummies in coffins (Khidr, 2010)

Similar items were passed around after banquets to allow guests to think about mortality pleasantly, according to Herodotus and Plutarch (The Banquet). Additionally, moving statues were significant in religious rituals. After being carried in procession by priests, the legendary Zeus-Amon statue would give its oracle readings (in the desert in the modern-day Siwa Oasis), indicating to them by its head motions which direction to go. During ceremonies including sexual characteristics like fertility or birthing, puppets were employed. The feasts for Osiris are described by Herodotus as being attended by women carrying "articulated statues about one cubit long, which would be moved by ropes, and whose virile member, almost as long as the rest of the body, would wag about "Images, statues, puppets, and anything else with a fetishistic bent were forbidden in Egypt with the arrival of Islam. Of course, direct performances of any kind were also prohibited. These limitations, however, were loosened with the growth of the Muslim empire and the diversity of festive customs, which in the beginning benefited puppetry (with indirect theatrical presentations), as human actors were not highly valued. The Fatimids' entrance into Sunnite Egypt marked the introduction of Shi'ism. This new branch of Islam, whose rituals, feasts, and festivals were practiced in a raucous way, gained in the nation a distinctive nature inspired by Egyptian cultural history, particularly since strictness towards the plastic arts had, during this century, dramatically decreased. Most academics find that at this time, the 10th century, shadow theater first appeared in Egypt (Alsakini, 2014, p.34).

In the 12th century: Salah ad-Din al Ayyubi watched a shadow play with his vizier Al Qadi Al Fadhel after overthrowing the

Fatimids in Egypt in 1171. A religious ban on Shadow Theater was being contemplated at the time. If it is illegitimate, Salah ad Din informed the Qadi, we won't watch it. The vizier responded, "I saw a great preach, I saw states falling and others rising" when the king asked him what he thought of what he had seen after the performance(٣٦)

The works of Ibn Daniel (13th century), which are thought to be the oldest theatrical plays written in the Arabic language, are particularly notable for having influenced this kind of theater. Additionally, many manuscripts have been preserved that were uncovered by orientalists along with a significant number of puppets that are now on display in Egyptian and European museums. Four manuscripts exist for these texts: two are in Cairo, one is in Madrid, and the fourth is in Istanbul's Süleymaniye Library(p.33)

Egyptian shadow theater employed the shadow and light technique but did not use color, in contrast to Asian shadow theater. Solid camel leather was used to construct the puppets, which were about one foot (30.5 centimeters) long, had articulations, and had holes through which the puppeteer could insert a stick to make them move.

The Egyptian Aragoz is essentially the popular national image of the buffoon represented by a glove puppet of a dwarf with a pointed red bonnet and an odd voice, vaguely resembling the image of the dwarfish god Bes. His name is simply a popular variation of the Turkish word Karagöz. Even though shadow theater is no longer a part of daily life in Egypt, aragoz (glove puppet) performances can still be seen during festive occasions, both religious and secular(٣٤)

Puppet theaters in Egypt are reenacting well-known concerts that were presented at the old Opera House and other Cairo

theaters in the previous century in an effort to breathe new life into the cultural scene and to capitalize on artistic nostalgia. One such initiative is the staging of famed Egyptian vocalist Umm Kulthum's concerts by El Sakia Puppet Theatre. The theater is recreating the music of the Arab diva with impersonations of Umm Kulthum's performances concerts on the first Thursday of every month under the title "Umm Kulthum Returns." Long before the curtain is lifted and local radio makes the concert's start time announcement, the audience begins to enter the theater. At the appointed moment, the curtain is raised and a live broadcast starts. The audience finds itself clapping along with the radio audience(36)

The puppet of Umm Kulthum, dressed elegantly and seated on a chair on stage, draws the attention of the theatergoers. The first song's melodic introduction is playing while they watch her. Al-Qasabgi, the renowned lute musician and composer from Umm Kulthum, glides his fingers along the strings of his oud, as do the other members of the orchestra. Up until fantasy and reality collide, music pervades the room. It's impressive to see the orchestra. The fingers of the players follow the beat of the music. There are duets and solo performances in addition to full orchestral passages. The orchestra complies as required when the audience requests an encore of a particular section of the performance, just as it did during the first concert. A round of clapping begins when Umm Kulthum finally takes the stage. The puppet's mouth then begins to move in time with the vocal recording of Umm Kulthum. Unquestionably, artistic effort was placed into recreating Umm Kulthum's concert. The decor and mood of her concerts are meticulously recreated in the performance. The puppets are expertly manipulated and display the puppeteers' indisputable talents. The "Umm

"Kulthum Returns" project draws crowds and does a good job of bringing the legends of Arabic music to the notice of new generations, like previous puppet performances featuring towering

Al-Hattab Puppet play

The puppet show Al-Hattab is a Syrian puppet play, written and directed by Syrian director Rashad Koksh, and premiered in 2019 in Damascus, Syria. It continued to perform in Syria and abroad, visiting a number of Arab and European countries. Al-Hattab is considered one of the most successful and widespread children's theatrical shows in recent years. In 2021, it premiered at the European Theater Festival in Paris, where it won Best Children's play. Al-Hattab explores key human values, including the significance of love, compassion, and respect. It underscores how these virtues form the bedrock of positive human relationships, fostering happiness and productivity. It also highlights the importance of cooperation and teamwork, emphasizing that working together is vital for achieving shared objectives. Collaboration enhances productivity beyond individual efforts. Addressing the detrimental impact of envy and anger, the show cautions against these negative emotions, explaining their potential harm to others. Envy and anger can lead to adverse outcomes for everyone involved (Hilal, 2008, p.17.)

In essence, Al-Hattab stands out as a unique children's theatrical production that seamlessly blends entertainment with education. Through a lively and interactive approach, it imparts crucial human values, aiding children in comprehending and incorporating these principles into their lives .

The setting for a Punch and Judy performance is commonly a portable booth, often referred to as a "Punch and Judy booth" or "fit-up." This booth provides a small, enclosed space behind which the puppeteer stands, manipulating the puppets. The booth may have colorful, eye-catching designs or illustrations on its exterior to attract the audience. Inside the booth, there's a stage where the puppeteer operates the puppets, interacting with the audience in front. The writer and director of Al-hattab, Rashad Kokesh, has incorporated innovative technology, amalgamating multiple narrative presentation methods. In addition to the traditional use of puppets, electronic screen technology has been introduced as an integral element in shaping the characters within the performance, playing a pivotal role in the unfolding events. Towards the conclusion of the play, Kokesh further employed a distinctive approach by introducing the characters to the young audience and fostering interaction, imparting a unique character to the show.

Kokesh expressed his satisfaction with the experimentation involved:

"He is happy to go through this experience through which he tried to present a puppet show in a new way by presenting a new combination in which he broke the traditions of puppet theater by presenting film material using electronic screen technology and moving the play's characters from the stage to be among the audience"(Abbas,Amina,2019)

Music plays a crucial role in the Al-Hattab, being introduced through a diverse range of musical instruments such as the piano, violin, guitar, drums, and flute. These instruments are strategically employed to generate a spectrum of sounds and melodies, thereby contributing to the establishment of distinct atmospheres and emotions within the performance. This

utilization captivates the audience's attention and actively engages them in the show. Furthermore, the inclusion of spirited songs, in which children participate alongside the puppets during the performance, enhances the overall musical and participatory aspects of the play (Hilal, 2008, p.16).

It begins with a simple song related to the show and reinforces the idea of help and friendship:

We live in life

We live friends

In our big house

Green Forest

We strive hard every morning

In the evening we rest from all the pain

In our big house we live friends

Loyal... Friends.. Loyal(٢٠)

This song conveys a sense of harmony, unity, and friendship within a community living in a big house situated in a green forest. The imagery of the "Green Forest" evokes a peaceful and natural environment. The lines "We strive hard every morning" suggest a collective effort and determination towards achieving goals or overcoming challenges. The mention of resting in the evening implies a period of respite and relaxation after a day of hard work. The repetition of the phrase "In our big house we live friends" emphasizes the strong bond and loyalty among the inhabitants. It highlights the importance of friendship and support within this community. The poem paints a picture of a close-knit and supportive community living in harmony within nature. It celebrates the value of friendship and the shared experiences of working together and finding solace in each other's company.

Conclusion

The exploration of the artistry and cultural significance of Al-Hattab Puppet Play reveals a captivating blend of tradition, creativity, and cultural preservation. Through its intricate craftsmanship, compelling narratives, and profound societal impact, this traditional form of puppetry continues to enrich and enliven cultural heritage, serving as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and artistic expression across generations. As scholars and enthusiasts continue to delve into its depths, Al-Hattab Puppet Play stands as a cherished cultural treasure, inviting further appreciation and exploration for years to come. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and preserving diverse cultural forms such as Al-Hattab Puppet Play, not only for their intrinsic artistic value but also for their role in fostering intergenerational connections, promoting cultural understanding, and contributing to the vibrant tapestry of global heritage. As we continue to explore and celebrate the richness of this traditional art form, we are reminded of its capacity to transcend boundaries, bridge divides, and inspire a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of human expression.

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