

The Role of Metamorphosis in Arabic Children's Literature

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Received:

18/04/2024

Revised:

02/05/2024

Accepted:

21/05/2024

Published:

30/05/2024

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Citation: Yahya, R. S.

(2024). The Role of Metamorphosis in Arabic Children's Literature.

Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences, 8(5), 78 – 85.

<https://doi.org/10.26389/AJSRP.Y180424>

<https://doi.org/10.26389/AJSRP.Y180424>

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Research Publishing

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Abstract: This study investigates the significance of metamorphosis in Arabic children's literature, contending that it constitutes not only an extraordinary artistic expression but also warrants meticulous examination. The study's significance lies in its endeavor to unearth the implications of incorporating metamorphosis into children's literature. Through a comprehensive analysis of various examples employing symbolic and psychological methodologies, the study aims to shed light on the underlying reasons for the literary fascination with metamorphosis. Is metamorphosis utilized as a thematic element or a narrative technique? Does it serve to augment the fantastical elements within narratives or to invigorate the imagination of both children and adults? Is its primary function to disrupt established storytelling conventions and provoke intellectual inquiry? Furthermore, the study posits that metamorphosis embodies a philosophical endeavor to engage children in existential and cosmic inquiries by encapsulating the inherent conflicts of the universe. Moreover, metamorphosis encapsulates fundamental dichotomies, encompassing concepts such as reward and punishment, love, and hate. These foundational assumptions underpin the study, which aims to explore them across its various sections.

In our humble opinion, the study of literary adaptation has not received the requisite attention in scientific research, especially in children's literature. Therefore, we recommend intensifying studies on this subject and paying attention to it, given its multifaceted implications that can shed light on many fields of knowledge.

Keywords: Metamorphosis, Children Literature, Stepmother, transmutations.

دور المسخ في أدب الأطفال العربي

د. رافع سعيد يحيى

محاضر في الكلية الأكاديمية العربية للتربية | حيفا | فلسطين

المستخلص: تتناول هذه الدراسة أهمية المسخ في الأدب العربي للأطفال، مؤكداً أنه لا يشكل فقط تعبيراً فنياً استثنائياً، ولكنه يستحق أيضاً دراسة دقيقة. تكمن أهمية الدراسة في محاولتها لاستكشاف دلالات إدراج المسخ في أدب الأطفال. من خلال تحليل شامل لأمثلة مختلفة باستخدام منهجيات رمزية ونفسية، تهدف الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على الأسباب الكامنة وراء الافتتان الأدبي بالمسخ. هل يُستخدم المسخ كموضوع أم كتقنية سردية؟ هل يُستخدم لزيادة العناصر الخيالية داخل السرد أم لتنشيط خيال الأطفال والبالغين على حد سواء؟ هل وظيفته الأساسية هي إخلال بالتقاليد السردية المثبتة واستفزاز الثوابت الفكرية؟ علاوة على ذلك، تفترض الدراسة أن المسخ يجسد مسعى فلسفياً لجذب الأطفال في استفسارات وجودية وكونية من خلال تجسيد الصراعات الجوهرية للكون. علاوة على ذلك، يجسد المسخ تقاطعات أساسية، تضم مفاهيم مثل الجزاء والعقاب، الحب والكراهية. هذه الافتراضات الأساسية تشكل أساس الدراسة، التي تهدف إلى استكشافها عبر أقسامها المختلفة.

برأينا المتواضع، لم تلق دراسة المسخ تلك الأهمية المطلوبة في البحث العلمي، وخاصة في أدب الأطفال، لذا نوصي بتكثيف الدراسات حول هذا الموضوع والعناية به، لما يحمله من دلالات متشعبة من شأنها أن تلقي الضوء على حقول معرفية كثيرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسخ، أدب الأطفال، زوجة الأب، التحويلات

Introduction: The Phenomenon of Metamorphosis

As expounded by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term metamorphosis traces its etymology back to Latin via Greek, subsequently diffusing throughout all contemporary European languages. Ovid employed the plural form when he titled his comprehensive compendium of ancient transformation stories. Within *Metamorphoses*, a recurring motif involves a character undertaking a natural act, prompting a deity to enact a supernatural response. These extraordinary occurrences can be delineated into two archetypes: the truly metamorphic and the metagenetic, or simply the genetic (Rabkin, 2007, 45).

It is discernible that Eric S. Rabkin attributes the transformation to metaphysical forces vested in gods or God, aligning with our modern conceptualization of the divine. In Ovid's oeuvre, *metamorphoses*, we discern Ovid's fervent engagement with myths, suffused with ardour and gratification, divorced from logic or corporeality. Therein lies no demise, only transmutations from one form to another, starkly contrasting to the mortal realm (Ovid, 1997, 22). This succinct preamble unveils the impetus behind children's distinct, and humanity's collective, affinity for metamorphosis; it embodies pleasure and enjoyment, serving as a conduit for evading mortality and death. However, metamorphosis harbours additional connotations; in the myth of Narcissus, the gods penalized Narcissus by transfiguring him into a narcissus flower on the lake's shore due to his vanity and hubris (Ovid, 1997, 152-159), thus meting out retribution for his excessive self-love.

The multifaceted functions of metamorphosis warrant further exploration. It is imperative to briefly allude to the phenomenon of violent divine metamorphosis, as elucidated in the Qur'an: "And you had already known about those who transgressed among you concerning the Sabbath, and We said to them, 'Be apes, despised.'" (Sūrah Al-Baqarah, 65). This verse epitomizes divine retribution upon the Children of Israel for desecrating the sanctity of the Sabbath. In another passage in the Qur'an: "Say, 'Shall I inform you of [what is] worse than that as penalty from Allah? [It is that of] those whom Allah has cursed and with whom He became angry and made of them apes and pigs and slaves of Taghut. Those are worse in position and further astray from the sound way.'" (Surah al-Mā'idah, 60). This verse unequivocally denotes severe divine wrath and punishment for idolatry and disbelief. Naturally, there exists scholarly debate among Muslim scholars regarding the nature of this punishment, whether it is allegorical or literal. These verses serve as stern admonitions to those who contravene divine precepts, illustrating that metamorphosis, in all its manifestations, serves as a punitive measure.

Furthermore, metamorphosis engenders controversy; for instance, in Greek mythology, Medusa did not always bear the visage of an unsightly woman with serpentine tresses. Initially, she was a beguiling maiden, enchanting in her allure, before incurring the ire of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Medusa, progeny of Phorcys (the primordial sea deity), albeit mortal, purportedly harbored conceit regarding her beauty, asserting superiority over the goddesses and boasting of surpassing Athena in loveliness... The goddesses, incensed by such claims, transmuted the resplendent Medusa into an eternal abomination, sporting a grotesque countenance and tresses comprised of snakes. In an alternate rendition, Medusa was violated by Poseidon, the god of the sea, within Athena's sanctuary. Athena, in seeking retribution against Medusa for an offense she did not commit, meted out punishment for the transgressions of Poseidon, transmuting her into a hideous apparition. Regardless of the impetus behind the gods' wrath, the denouement remained unchanged; Medusa metamorphosed from a resplendent woman into a monstrosity dwelling on the fringes of civilization, where neither sunlight nor moonlight penetrates, endowed with supernatural prowess, capable of dispatching even the most valiant of heroes with a single gaze, as those who beheld Medusa's eyes were petrified into immobile stone. Medusa has been appropriated as a symbol on social media to emblemize the plight of those unjustly punished victims of assault and sexual harassment. Given the divergent narratives surrounding the mythical persona of Medusa, do we espouse her cause and champion her? Or do we acquiesce to the latter part of the myth and celebrate her demise in denouement? (Macquire, 2022).

In any event, the aforementioned attests to metamorphosis serving as a punitive measure within pagan and celestial religious paradigms. Metamorphosis stands as the crux of the conflict between good and evil, gods and mortals, emblematic of the struggle between authoritative dominion and emancipated humanity, or rather, a clash of religious and societal mores.

Eternal metamorphosis represents a punitive measure stemming from divine wrath towards humanity, perpetual and unrelenting. Conversely, metamorphosis induced by sorcery or occult forces is transient and reversible with assistance, as the transfigured individual endeavors to reclaim their humanity, irrespective of physical alteration (Belousif, 2016). Belief in metamorphosis persists to this day, its resonance enduring within folkloric beliefs, as exemplified in Palestinian folklore directed towards children.

The research problem exists in metamorphosis as a universal phenomenon present in both global and Arabic literary traditions; this metamorphosis earliest manifestations can be traced back to myths and religious narratives, particularly within Islamic narratives, before becoming a recurring motif in literary works. This study delves deeply into the discourse surrounding metamorphosis within children's literature. Does its origin stem from mythology, religion, or Western children's literature? We argue that Western children's literature, particularly folk tales, exerts a significant influence in shaping its representation. The core question persists: what drives the incorporation of metamorphosis in children's literature? Is it primarily utilized as an aesthetic device, or does it serve an educational function, intricately interwoven with the struggle between forces of good and evil?

Palestinian Folk Tales and Metamorphosis

Our selection of Palestinian folk tales was not arbitrary but rather deliberate, as they, akin to other global folk tales and the Arabian Nights (Abu Bakr, 1994, 239-250), encapsulate a myriad of beliefs intertwined with anthropology, mythology, and metamorphosis. Take, for example, the narrative of Abdullah ibn Fadel, the laborer from Basra, and his siblings (Al-Din, 2016, 94), wherein Abdullah stumbles upon an entire town transmuted into stones, its denizens save for a solitary girl. Another prominent tale in Palestinian folklore is that of the Green Bird (Kanaaneh, 2001, 11-22), where, in brief, the stepmother assumes the guise of an ordinary and benevolent woman, persuading her stepson and stepdaughter to wed their father. Subsequently, the stepmother, transformed into her ogre form, slays and cooks the stepson. In anguish, the stepsister interters his remains, only for the brother to reemerge as a green bird, bearing gold for his stepsister. One fateful day, he beseeches his father's wife to open her mouth to receive gold, only to be met with needles and pins, resulting in her agony and demise.

The motif of a child transitioning into a bird in the afterlife is commonplace in the oral tradition of Islamic Eastern culture. As per this narrative, upon death as a child, one metamorphoses into a bird soaring in paradise. However, religious scriptures, namely the Qur'ān and Sunnah, do not corroborate the notion that children assume avian form in paradise. Within this tale, we discern a widespread empathy towards the victimized child; notwithstanding the enormity of the tragedy, the audience finds solace in his transmutation into a green bird, as birds and the color green embody hope, consolation, and vitality for many. This delineates a distinct form of metamorphosis; it serves not as retribution for a transgression but as recompense for the child's loss, manifested in a tangible transformation into a green bird. The concept of compensation is a familiar and recurrent theme in psychology.

Partial Metamorphosis

The tale of Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi (Collodi, 2009) is a well-known narrative, illustrating how the wooden puppet's nose elongates with each lie or misdeed, representing a form of partial metamorphosis resulting from the character's chaotic actions. This theme of metamorphosis reappears in other stories, such as *The Marvelous Nose* (n.d.), where a nose named Gali undergoes excessive growth after consuming apples, only to be remedied by consuming pears. In this narrative, when the princess steals magical items from him and his brothers - a golden bag, a peculiar cloak, and a strange horn - he deceives her by selling apples, which further elongates her nose. Healing is only granted with pears upon her restitution of the stolen items. Moreover, within this context of partial metamorphosis, there exists a punitive element inherent to the metamorphic process itself.

What particularly captivates in this narrative is the fantastical and enchanting setting it portrays; palaces, magic, wonders, adventures, nature, and forests all serve to emphasize the turmoil faced by characters afflicted with the curse of partial metamorphosis. This serves as a reflection of the fluctuating nature of circumstances, a motif evident in both *Pinocchio* and *The Marvelous Nose*. Thus, metamorphosis serves as an allegory or symbol of life's impermanence, where situations may sometimes deteriorate. It imparts a lesson to the young audience of children's tales, encouraging them to confront life's challenges with resilience, understanding that happiness is transient but may eventually return. Therefore, metamorphosis serves as a didactic tool in children's literature, delivering lessons in an engaging, compelling, and poignant manner, with the aim of fostering equilibrium and empowering them to overcome constraints. This aligns with our initial supposition that the presence of metamorphosis or transformations in children's stories holds inherent value or purpose. There are no fortuities in this regard.

Transformation Due to Curiosity, Disobedience, and Familial Laws:

During our childhood, we were exposed to narratives warning protagonists against straying from the path of wisdom, lest they face dire consequences or undergo a metamorphosis. This theme is exemplified in tales where characters are prohibited from entering certain spaces yet succumb to temptation and suffer transformation into either inanimate objects or animals. An illustration of this motif is found in the narrative of the White House, where a daughter's disobedience, driven by curiosity, leads her to trespass into a forbidden chamber, only to encounter a sinister entity disguised as a small white mouse. Upon discovering her transgression, her father admonishes, "It is disobedience that brings evil, and its doer may perceive it as a minor evil, while it inflicts significant harm," revealing the true nature of the mouse as a malevolent jinni.

The complexity of the tale deepens as it unfolds, revealing the father's identity as a jinni in human guise, married to the protagonist's human mother. This revelation prompts speculation regarding whether the daughter's transformation into a mouse is literal or metaphorical, particularly as her voice remains human despite her altered form. This existential inquiry recurs with each transformation depicted in stories, where the metamorphosed character retains human traits despite their altered appearance. As the narrative progresses, the adolescent protagonist, Warda, repeatedly falls victim to the malevolent jinni's snares due to her insatiable curiosity. Ultimately, she learns to temper her inquisitiveness, eludes the jinni's grasp, and finds happiness alongside her father and the prince. The story serves as a cautionary tale for teenagers, warning them of the perils of excessive curiosity through fantastical storytelling that penetrates their subconscious with themes of magic, fantasy, and unexpected twists.

The clash between supernatural and earthly elements—such as the malevolent jinni, the jinni father, the prince, Warda, and other mortal characters—further enriches the narrative, transcending the boundaries that separate the celestial realm from the terrestrial sphere. This intersection yields myriad interpretations, underscoring the catastrophic consequences of breaching metaphysical barriers driven by human curiosity. Such themes resonate with Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," where Victor Frankenstein's unorthodox scientific experiment leads to the creation of an intelligent yet grotesque being, showcasing the perilous outcomes of transgressing natural limits in pursuit of knowledge (Shelley, 2003, 6-23).

The Malevolent Stepmother and Metamorphosis:

In children's literature, the stepmother stands as an enduring archetype, embodying malevolence, upheaval, cunning, wit, and the fracturing of familial bonds. Sympathetic portrayals of her are scarce in classic children's literature and folklore. Some argue that she symbolizes the darker aspects of motherhood. As previously observed in our analysis of the Green Bird narrative, this negative depiction extends to other tales, such as the Wild Swans (Al-Kabir, n.d.). Here, the wicked stepmother banishes the princess to the countryside and transforms her eleven brothers into wild swans, devoid of speech. Upon the princess's fifteenth birthday, the stepmother enchants her into a haggard crone, prompting the king to disown his daughter. However, upon reuniting with her brothers, the princess discovers that they revert to human form near a lake at dusk. The motif of water, prevalent in the lives of the princess and her brothers, symbolizes purity of heart, as swans typically inhabit aquatic habitats. The metamorphosis of the beautiful princess into a grotesque old woman serves as a metaphor for human development. When the brothers don shirts woven by their sister, all but the youngest brother regain their natural forms, as the magical shirt he wears is missing a thread, symbolizing enduring childhood scars. Furthermore, the tale underscores familial affection and solidarity, emphasizing the sister's pivotal role in rescuing her brothers. This theme of sibling support is evident in other stories like Hansel and Gretel and The Mountain of Marvels, where a sister embarks on arduous quests to save her stone-transformed brother. Notably, in The Mountain of Marvels, the antagonists are the princess's aunts, suggesting the tale's commentary on female roles. Should the mother or stepmother not embody villainy, alternative female characters are summoned to fulfill this role, as exemplified by the aunts in this instance (Hansel, 2009).

Metamorphosis into Birds

The motif of metamorphosis into birds recurs in many tales, as mentioned above and in other narratives. This is not merely coincidental; rather, it underscores the symbolism of birds for the soul residing within the body. The metamorphic punishment is not inflicted literally upon the body but upon the soul, suggesting that the metaphorical transformation outweighs the physical one, as evidenced in our analysis of various transformational texts. Thus, the curse befalls the souls because they are the ones directing, moving, and deciding, possessing the senses of beauty and goodness. The body, in essence, is but a vessel for this soul, hence it becomes vulnerable to the forces of evil and magic. When a child reads such texts, in addition to experiencing the fantastical, pleasure, fantasy, and catharsis from repression and sorrow, they unconsciously perceive nuances of the soul's transformation and its ramifications. It is assumed that they may not fully comprehend these nuances, yet they subconsciously absorb them, which remain stored within and accompany them through various stages of maturation. Every transformative shock is potent for a child, and does a child ever forget such a shock? It becomes suppressed in their subconscious mind, lingering as an unspoken lesson or a visible scar.

The Magical Language and Metamorphosis:

Language assumes a pivotal role within the domains of metamorphosis and magic, acting as a conduit for latent energies. Within the realm of metamorphosis, specific utterances possess the power to transmute entities, while others, once spoken, restore them to their inherent state. This phenomenon intertwines intricately with religious and mythological narratives, wherein certain words bestow blessings and fortune, while others invoke curses and misfortune upon one's existence and fate. This thematic essence resonates profoundly within the narrative of the perplexed Sultan, wherein the monarch procures precious artifacts from a merchant, notably a casket adorned with enigmatic inscriptions. Upon a scholar's endeavor to unravel its enigmas, it is revealed: "Whosoever inhales the powder contained within the casket and utters the word 'Moutabour' upon its scent, shall metamorphose into any desired creature. To revert to their primordial state, they must orient themselves towards the east, bow thrice, and chant 'Moutabour, Moutabour,' ensuring abstention from laughter or forgetfulness; lest they remain avian or bestial in perpetuity" (Al-Kabir, n.d). The narrative's religious undertones are further underscored as the sovereign and his enchanted confidant embark on a pilgrimage to Mecca, venerating the Prophet's sepulcher. The metamorphosis into avian forms, previously expounded upon, takes an unforeseen turn within this narrative, unfolding at the monarch's volition and yearning. However, his inquisitiveness precipitates the forfeiture of his realm to the malevolent sorcerer "Marza," thereby relinquishing his humanity. Amidst their odyssey, the monarch and his confidant chance upon a transfigured owl, initially a princess betrothed by her father to the sorcerer's scion. Upon her refusal, she is accursed and transmuted into an owl. Curiously, the curse and metamorphosis are rendered reversible solely upon a man's acquiescence to matrimonial union with her. This subtly implies that any maiden may perceive herself as unappealing and despondent unless sought by a suitor.

The monarch consents to matrimony, whereupon the maiden divests herself of her avian guise, metamorphosing into a youthful and resplendent damsel. Hamedreza Kohzadi elucidates this metamorphosis as a manifestation of self-alienation and estrangement from oneself and surroundings (Kohzadi, 2012, 1600-1607). Drawing upon Freud's theories of dreams and the unconscious, Kafka's adult narrative "The Metamorphosis" (Kafka, 1961), and the pervasive sense of self-discontent propelling the protagonist to self-flagellation. This self-imposed penance catalyzes her metamorphosis, particularly amidst the tumultuous throes of adolescence, hormonal imbalances, and psychological vicissitudes endemic to youth. Frequently, young women grapple with discontentment regarding their self-image and physical appearance, precipitating the girl's (the owl's) retreat into a state of metamorphosis. Within this state, the owl (bird) epitomizes a phase of serenity, wherein nocturnal vigilance and contemplation ensue.

Love, Metamorphosis, and Encryption

This discourse delves into three narratives to elucidate the profound significance of love in dispelling metamorphosis. The initial tale, "The Princess and the Frog" (Al-'Anānī, n.d.), recounts the retrieval of a golden ball from a pond by a frog for a princess. In exchange, the princess agrees to accommodate him in her father's palace, allowing him to partake of her sustenance and repose in her chambers. Upon her subsequent breach of promise, a transformative kiss from the princess renders the frog a handsome prince. The second narrative, "Beauty and the Beast" (Maqal, 2002), features a father's encounter with a palace in the forest and his plucking of a captivating red rose. Subsequently bitten by the beast and obligated to offer his daughter's presence in the palace, the girl, initially repulsed, eventually falls in love with the beast.

Ultimately, she aids his recovery from illness with a kiss, leading to his transformation into a handsome prince. In the third narrative, "The Princess and the Serpent" (Al-Abrashy, n.d.), the serpent seeks the princess's hand in marriage, with the king's consent contingent upon the fulfillment of impossible conditions.

These include the transformation of the palace garden into gold and the fulfillment of a promise made by the princess's father. Upon confidently expressing her consent to marry the serpent, the princess witnesses his transformation into a handsome young man. The sultan's wife, however, incinerates the serpent's skin, leading the prince to sorrowfully metamorphose into a white bird and vanish. Subsequently, the princess embarks on a quest to rescue him, employing counter-magic to liberate him from the curse.

These narratives underscore the central role of metamorphosis in plot development, with love serving as the sole means of emancipating the three princes from their transformative afflictions. This prompts the inquiry: are we confronted with genuine, substantive metamorphosis, or is it merely symbolic? It is discerned that the motif of metamorphosis finds expression within the contexts of opulence, wealth, and luxury, portraying metamorphosed beings as essentially princes ensnared by the machinations of malevolent forces.

In these tales, the princes find redemption through the love of princesses. Two implications emerge: firstly, the life partners, or saviours, emerge from the same social stratum, preserving class distinctions. Secondly, the idealized realms of materialism and luxury effect transformative changes upon individuals, stripping them of their emotional depth. Hence, princesses emerge as conduits for the expression of emotions and tenderness, filling existential voids.

Mürüvvet Mira Dolaykaya reinforces our understanding of relational dynamics in "The Frog Prince", wherein the frog's transformation signifies the attainment of equilibrium, while the princess's acceptance of the prince symbolizes maturity and responsibility. This elucidates the intricate interplay of complex relationships through metamorphosis (Dolaykaya, 141-149).

The aforementioned corroborates our contention that metamorphosis operates on a spiritual plane, veiling the latent messages of the author's psyche. Metamorphosis serves as a vehicle for conveying implicit messages, challenging established norms, and instilling novel ideas in these narratives. Consequently, metamorphosis emerges as a symbol or series of symbols encapsulating multifaceted facets of reality. These symbols, spiritual in essence, are exemplified by the presence of birds and water in select narratives. Such symbols transcend the material realm, epitomizing the spirit rather than the corporeal. Metamorphosis emerges as a vehicle for effecting emotional healing and restoration, with love, generosity, and loyalty serving as predominant catalysts.

The portrayal of physical metamorphosis, therefore, assumes the guise of a code, evoking pleasure, fantasy, and suspense while subtly imparting hidden and implicit messages to the receptive child psyche. While some may contest the phenomenon of metamorphosis in children's literature, we contend otherwise, aligning with Lauren Christie's assertion that "monsters in children's literature are a necessary tool as children navigate through challenging periods of their lives... However, it is important to support the positive impact that these characters can have on the child's imagination and as a therapeutic tool that children can rely on" (Christie, 2020, 1-7).

Conclusion

The research concludes that metamorphosis embodies a complex interplay between consciousness and the unconscious, earthly and celestial realms, and estrangement from reality. It manifests as a state of dissociation experienced by individuals in their earthly existence. The study suggests that metamorphosis, when approached as an artistic technique, can evoke wonder, fantasy, and delight, transcending its factual nature. However, the motif of metamorphosis has lost significance in modern literature due to its associations with magic, mythology, and anthropology, which are seen as incongruent with modernity and technological advancements. The research also highlights the theme's potential to challenge conventional gender roles, with women depicted as heroines in metamorphosis narratives, rescuing men and defying traditional portrayals of women as helpless and reliant on male support. The study recommends further exploration of metamorphosis from aesthetic perspectives rather than solely relying on psychological analyses.

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