

# A Review of the History of Children's Literature in Iran, from Pre-Islam to the Present

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## **Abstract**

*The present paper analyzes the state of children's literature in Iran from the Pre-Islamic times to the present. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that although according to the current definition, the cornerstone of children's literature in Iran has been laid during the constitutional period and has grown and flourished in recent decades, the pre-constitutional literary context was not devoid of children-related works in accordance with the socio- educational structure. Apparently in Iran, children, the main audience of folk literature, were provided with only oral literature, lullabies, songs, and adult literature. But over time, through intellectual growth of Iranian society, the child, who had been less notable in official literature, possessed his own literature which didn't utilize the concept of the child as subjective and symbolic to express various materials for adult use, but rather it was special to children independently considered their emotions, age and personality and formally produced literary works. In the meantime, it goes without saying that the developments of psychology and the change of the human attitude towards the child and the independence of his personality played a critical role in attracting the attention of the writers and poets who addressed the child and everything belongs to him, disregarding his lateral and subordinate presence which had lasted for centuries. This would be more tangible as we get closer to the contemporary era like the 60's and 70's in which a great deal of children's literary works were produced.*

**Keywords:** Children's Literature; Iran; Pre-Islam; Early Islam; Ages 1-5 AH; Constitution; Decades 1 and 2.

## **I. Introduction**

The vicissitudinous history of Iran indicates joys and bitterness, wars and peace, geographical boundaries changes, religious beliefs, social and political structures, and also literary works. What is relatively stable in this land and is not much different from other lands is the state of children and their literature. In Iran, just like other countries, there has been a noticeable child training since the ancient times; indeed an ancient and a traditional training consisting of elders' dos and don'ts, demands and thoughts. In this land also, like other lands, children didn't own their specific literature and they used to benefit from adult oral literature.

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In the Islamic period, too, despite the abundant recommendations and emphases on child training and its importance, the discussed works differ very little from the previous ones. The only discrepancy was their specific religious theme.

Since Persian has become official and produced cardinal literary works namely Shahnameh, Ghaboosnameh, Kelileh va Demneh, Golestan, Masnavi Maanavi and Mosh va Gorbeh (Mouse and Cat), trivial changes have appeared. In such works, sometimes separate chapters on children training, the criteria were based upon the past prescriptive standards. Sometimes children's pictures and concepts were taken from literary and allegorical uses. But despite producing these works, due to the hierarchal society and dedicating literature to the courts, it cannot be claimed that during this time, children's literature was literally produced, as it should have included any child in any social, economic, political, and religious situation. Education was dedicated to aristocrats. Literary works were for only nobles and not all children. Anyway, it was only after the constitution period, the entry of printing industry in Iran, the spread of liberal thoughts, revision of educational methods, establishment of public schools and prevalence of literacy among the public that literature was genuinely produced; a literature that somewhat broke the past barriers and addressed the child independently. From then on, there were copious efforts have made by authors like Sadegh Hedayat and Sobhi Mohtadi in collecting folk literature as a main source of children's literature. There were other writers namely Jabbar Baghcheban, Abbas Yamini Sharif, Samad Behrangi who have helped children's literature to retain its independent identity. Afterwards, the Iranian children's literature has developed, paved the way for a new chapter in literary studies and found its poets, authors and critics, despite the socio-political changes and their impacts.

In this study, the general state of children and their literature since the pre-Islamic times has been argued. Then we would study the early Islam and would refer to the post-Islamic era to the present.

## **II. Discussion**

### **• Children's Literature before Islam**

As mentioned earlier, in Iran, children training has been concerned since ancient times. But the child was regarded as a small version of the adults and the purpose of training was to prepare him for the future paternal and maternal duty. In ancient Iran, education would start from 5 to 7 years. The child would learn his occupation corresponding his class. He was taught manner, good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Proper names were chosen for him. He was trained to obey the commands of his parents. Avesta's advices and kings' orders would help him in this regard. It is worth mentioning that education and literacy, were uniquely for the nobles and aristocrats; since there was no need for the farmers, craftsmen or the army to be literate.

In Iran, like other hierarchal societies, people of each class were obliged to stay in their social class lacking any power to deconstruct and escape it. According to this lifestyle, the prevalent form of ancient literature was didactic literature. Advices were usually written in a plain language. Among Pahlavi's advices, there were some advices related to children and their lifestyle. Advice to children is the most famous one among them (Mohammadi & Ghaeeni, vol 1, 172, 2001).

But the oldest literary works that could draw children's attention was *Derakht Asorik*, the three-thousand-year book which represents Iranians' notable attention to children and their education. This text is a symbolic narrative which counts the benefits of palm and goat for children and depicts the battle between them (ibid). While this work is not special to children and it was not written to address them specifically, its narrative and symbolic aspect absorbs them and make themselves its audience.

Generally, in ancient Iran magicians and priests determine the life and death of children, as they would practice ethnic and patriotic legends. It was only after the advent of Zarathustra that the life of a child, the child of a particular race, obtained its human style.

- **Children's Literature in Early Islam**

In early Islamic period in Iran, education of children had adhered to the Islamic educational system; the only difference was that it gradually tended to the Iranian culture so that it could mold influence on the dominant Islamic culture. During this period, the situation of children not only didn't improve, but also it became more troublesome due to the increase in local and central taxes raised by the government. Sometimes, non-land based urban families would get involved in such a harsh situation that they couldn't send their children to schools; much less the slave families who couldn't even feed their children. With the rise of sectarianism in Islam, the difficulties increased. Sectarian battles, that thereafter became one of the main factors in socio-economic collapse in Iran, destroyed the religious integrity. The unfamiliarity of Iranians with Quran made education much more difficult than the time when children used to learn through their mother tongue" (Mohammadi & Ghaeni, vol 2, 22, 2001).

In the midst of these conditions, the literature practiced for children, was like talking about children and adults in the introduction or in the text or giving advice through an anecdote. Some works were not dedicated to children, but would address children just like the works of the previous periods. Generally, works of the Islamic period that could be thought of as being addressed to children or talked about children, have characteristics distinguishing them from literary works of other periods. The characteristics are as follows:

- Simple language, expressive and timely
- Coordination of the themes of the work with the attitude of that time toward children and adults and education
- Possessing an epic-chivalry theme
- Heroic- chivalrous theme
- Didactic theme
- Folklore-based theme
- Historical theme
- Presence of the child as the main character (ibid 8. 30-32)

Among the aforementioned themes, most of the literary works have benefited from epic and didactic themes. It should be recalled that epic works of the fourth and fifth centuries originated from the pre-Islamic oral literature. Due to obtaining simple prose, rhythmic poetry, elegant thought, exciting actions and lively events, these works would attract children's attention (ibid 56).

Beside introducing children to history and historical stories, these works meet their emotional demands. Shahnameh is of the most importance among them. Epic, plain and rhythmic language of Shahnameh, exaggerated and exciting descriptions along with its enlightening and proud thought, are factors that make this considerable work charming and gracious for children and adults. Ghaboosnameh, Siasatnameh, Nesami and Jami's Masnavis are of such works.

A prose literary work that is originally symbolic with socio-political themes, but its narrative form attracts children and adults is *Kelileh va Demneh*. This symbolic and eloquent book which was possible for children to listen orally and not to read, includes didactic stories, simple and comprehensible animal characters that absorb children while it was written for adults. The fundamental problem of this book is its story-within-story structure that sometimes makes it so complicated that the main context of the story would be forgotten. Nevertheless, the child's adventurer and fiction-loving mind enjoys it. It should be noted that this book has been used by rewriters of children's literature more than any other book and presented as a set of anecdotes or single anecdote through which Mehdi Azar Yazdi's "*Gheshey Khoob baray Bachehaye Khoob*" is one of the best examples.

- **Children's Literature in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries AH**

Ethical and didactic books and works on child training have become more prevalent since the sixth century. Khajeh Nasiraldin Toosi's books like "*Akhlagh Naseri*", and "*Akhlagh Mahtashami*", that sometimes would choose their target audience among the children and adolescents and sometimes alongside adults, would take children as their audience.

Another example of the seventh century compiled for children and taught in schools as a textbook for a long time, was "*Nesab Alsebian*" by Abu Nasr Farahi, a sightless poet whose life was during the Mongol invasion in Sistan. On that occasion, Iran had been subjected to another slaughterous man and alongside drought, floods and earthquakes, it was exposed to the devastating Mongol war. In the meantime, the Iranian child had suffered most; as already the inhuman phenomenon of child exploitation was common by the Oguz Turks and throughout their era, a child had been regarded as a sex toy. This phenomenon was so prevalent that it was widely spoken of in the books of famous poets. Thus, this Turks' mission got completed by Mongols, who intended to destroy the grave ancient foundation of Iran civilization.

At this juncture, Arabic had long been the scientific and official language in Iran and a great number of men of letter used to write their works in this language. Consequently, due to children's powerful memory and capability to recite poem, Abu Nasr Farahi also, in *Nesab Alsebian*, gathered the Arabic vocabulary which children could learn through reciting poems (ibid, 198). Indeed, *Nesab Alsebian* was a children and adults glossary that could provide the answers for most of their questions in various fields, general knowledge and even the skills of writing (ibid, 200). It

should be mentioned that Ubayd Zakani's *Mouse and Cat* (Moosh va Gorbeh) was one of the works that could attract children, due to the humorous characters and narratives, disregarding its socio-political themes. But among all the mentioned works, *Golestan* is of the most importance, however it was mainly written for adults, like *Kelileh va Demneh* and *Ghaboos Nameh*, but due to its didactic and educational themes it has been considered as a touchstone in schools appropriate for children. It has been addressed by many rewriters namely Mahdi Azar Yazdi who wrote a significant book for children entitled "*Ghesehayeh Golestan va Molestan* (Golestan and Molestan Stories)" (Ghezel Ayagh, 105, 2009).

From the ninth to the twelfth century AH, the general government of Iran, had gained more centrality and power. Consequently, the child obtained more security. The influence of religion, especially during Safavid period and the religious authority enhancement, almost diminished child sexual abuse. But then child slavery, which was widespread in the late Safavid period due to the weakness of the central government and the Afghan invasion, was introduced and it left its traces until the time of Nadershah.

In Safavid period, children's oral literature continued its past traditions. National narrative was persistent, but, due to the social circumstances, it obtained two new characteristics: "by introducing Shia as an official religion, reading religious narratives and stories became prevalent. Also because of the particular social status, chivalry stories which were formed since the Safarids, reached their peak then. The expansion of the paper industry in Europe and China, the abundance of paper in markets and the affluence of writing and copying, made books accessible to people who could afford. Books in houses provoke literate children and adolescents to read. At a glance it could be claimed that at no period of middle ages, literary materials had been that available to people as it was in the Safavid period. The proliferation of storytelling has also made the copying of stories prosperous (Mohammadi & Ghaeni, 2, 240, 2001). Some literary works namely "*Nan va Halva* (Breads and Sweets)" by Mohammad Bahai could be included in the category of children literature of this period.

Beyond these developments, the real starting point for children's literature in Iran is the constitutional period in which books that specifically targeted children, were written; books in which the child plays the main role, not an audience who could benefit from literature beside adults.

- **Children's Literature in Contemporary Period**
- **From Constitutionalism to the Sixties**

As it had a profound effect on Persian literature and gave it a realistic and people-centered view, the constitutional movement had also impressed the children's literature. Although writing for children was fancy, poems by Iraj Mirza, Eshghi, and Bahar are read enthusiastically by school children and interested teenagers.

Iraj Mirza (1912-1964) could be regarded as the first poet who wrote Persian poems for children corresponding their understanding. His most complete poem in this field is "an advice to a child". Haji Mirza Yahya Dolatabadi (1900-1939), was one of the intellectuals of the constitutional period and the founder of schools and cultural institutions. He was one of the school books writers who almost succeeded in writing poems for children.

Mehdi Gholi Khan Hedayat (Mokhber alSaltaneh), was also one of the authors of constitutional period who was elected by the education commission as a person in charge of preparing textbooks for children. He provided a 24-page-comic-book using bolded words: “Three Hazelnuts for Children”. Mohammad Tagh Khan Bahar (1887- 1951), was another poet of the mentioned period who wrote; “We all are Iranian Children, we would guard our home”. He wrote other poems for children namely: An Advice to Adults, Timid Kid, Laziness would end to Portage, Suffering and Treasure, God and Parents and Father’s Companion.

Nima Yooshij (Ali Esfandiari), is another poet who benefited from the characteristics of the world of children’s poetry. He is recognized as children’s poet.

Mahmoud Khan Mlek-ol Shoaraye Saba and Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Saber, author of “Hoop Hoop Nameh”, are also among those whose names shine in the history of Iranian children’s literature. The emergence of Jabbar Baghcheban gave a new life to the Iranian children’s literature; as he took a major step forward creating apposite children’s literary works by choosing meters and formats close to the folk songs.

In 1941, Iranian children’s literature entered a didactics-oriented era so that all children’s limited compiled works were practiced for children’s direct education and guidance. Abbas Yamini Sharif, the representative of this group, started his work in 1941. He had been involved in journals of “*Bazi Koodakan* (Children’s play)” and “*Keyhan Bacheha*”, in the development of children’s textbooks as well as authoring books. He was among the first writers who wrote on children’s literature in the journal of “*Sepide Farda* (Down of Tomorrow)”. He believed that children’s literary works should embody happiness and get free from grief (Ghezel Ayagh, 111, 2009). His devoted to children-works are; Avaz Nogolan, Golhaye Gouya, Avaz Fereshtegan, Donyagardi Jamshid and Mahshid, Fardi be Aseman Miravad, Bazi Alefba and Khane Ali Baba.

A children’s literature special issue was published in 1336 in which Dr.Hooshyar’s lecture notes on the opening ceremony of the first children’s book fair were included. This fair was held by Farhad’s school in faculty of fine arts. The important point is that Dr.Hooshyar suggested to include a children’s literature course in the faculty of literature for the first time (Hashemi Nasab, 347, 1992).

The thirties is considered as the era of rewriting old works through which Mehdi Azar Yazdi’s “*Ghesehaye Khoob baraye Bachehaye Khoob*”, Ehsan Yar Shater’s ancient Iranian stories and selected stories of *Shahnameh*, Zahra Khanlari’s pleasant Persian stories, Mehrdad Bahar’s “*Bastoor*” and “*Jamshidshah*”, Mohammad Moshref Azad’s “*Zal va Simorgh*”, “*Gordafarid*”, “*Zal va Roudabeh*”, “*Haft Khan Rostam*” and “*Kaveh Ahangar*” could be mentioned as notable works.

In the forties, well-known figures namely Ferdos Vaziri, Iraj Jahanshahi, Parvin Dolat Abadi and Mahmoud Kianoush put lots of efforts into developing children’s literature. The first textbook entitled “*Osol Adabyat Koudakan* (Principles of Children’s Literature)” was written by Dr.Ali Akbar Shoarinejad in 1961 (Ghezel Ayagh, 113, 2009). In 1341, children’s book council which included NGOs, was established by groups of teachers, librarians, authors and children’s book illustrators. In 1966, the center for intellectual development of children began its activities, through which it became close to children’s book international patterns in terms of quality of presentation, editing, image,

printing and screening. Selected writers and illustrators like Siavash Kasraee, Ahmad Reza Ahmadi, Nader Ebrahimi, Faride Farjam, Farshid Mesghali, Nouroldin Zarin Kelk, Ali Akbar Sadeghi, Bahman Dadkhah and Nikzad had significant cooperation.

Other great efforts for developing Children and adults' literature in the forties were done by Samad Behrangi who collected folk legends of Azarbaijan. He had modern approach toward the folk tales of his land. The hero of his real and semi-real narratives are the suffered labor children who were mainly from peasant community and the suburbs. Mahi Syah Koochoolo (Little Black Fish) which was published by the Center, received an award in 1968. Farshid Meghali's paintings were used in this work (Mohammadi and Ghaeeni, 40, 1, 2001). His other works are; Oldoz va Arousak Sokhangoo, Oldoz va Kalaghha, Pesarak Labou Foroush, 24 Saat dar Khan va Bidari, and Yek Holoo Hezar Holoo. After Behrangi, a generation of authors has emerged and created a stream has been continuing till now. Mansour Yaghuti, Ali Ashraf Darvishian, Morteza Rezvan and Ghodsi Ghazi Nour are from this generation.

In the fifties, the reflection of difficult social conditions could be noticed through the development of symbolic children and adult's literature. The symbolic children literature was a mean to express political slogans. It was represented in the form of unity, struggle and victory by depicting bees, ants and wild animals societies.

The fifties had other positive achievements including the attendance of children's literature experts at international forums. The children book council became a member of the international book office for the young generation and in 1979, it became the organizer of the world children's book day with a slogan by Mahmoud Kianoush as; "There is wisdom behind everything has emerged from beneath the sun/ if you want to know about the world/ you should read books" (Ghezel Ayagh, 116, 2009).

#### • **The Sixties**

Nearly seven years of this decade passed struggling with war. Most of the schools were shut in the imposed war zones and unwanted migrations caused changes in the life of immigrant families. Universities were closed and teaching children's literature was stopped for three years. After a while, children's literature, with new patterns, resumed its activities through developing principles of publishing children's book by the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance. The realistic theme was of the most interest for authors; especially in encountering issues imposed on children, adults and parents by war. Immigration, displacement, loss of father, and incompatibility with the imposed conditions became common topics of many writers, but despite the remarkable quality, there are few valuable works inspired by war. Some works are Reza Rahgozar's Mohajer Kouchak (little Immigrant), Golabdareee's Ay Ebrahim and Ismaeel Ismaeel, Ghazi Rebeihavi's Vaghti ke do Jang dar Asman Dehkade Dide Shod (When two Wars Were Seen in the Sky of the Village) and Nasim's Khaksar's Man Solh ra Doost Daram (I Love Peace).

Holding seminars and children's book illustrator's workshop are among the important events of this period. Hooshang Moeadi Kermani who published his first volume of "Ghesehay Majid (Majid's Stories)" before the revolution, published five volumes of Ghesehay Majid, GhalibafKhaneh and Nakhil in this decade. Ahmad Reza Ahmadi, Mostafa Rahman Doost, Jafar Ebrahimi, Gheysar Aminpour and Asad Allah Shabani are the prominent poets of the sixties. Among illustrators, Parviz Kalantari, Mohammad Reza Dadgar, Mohammad Ali Bani Asadi, Mehnoush

Masoumian, Nayereh Tahjavi, Firouzeh Golmohammadi, Abolfazl Hemati Ahouee. Bahram Khaef, Akbar Nikan Pour and Karim Nasr should be mentioned.

### • **The Seventies**

After war, the relief of painful emotions and entry of the society into a post-war period, a more tendency to fantasy appeared in both compilation and translation. Ahmad Reza Ahmadi, who was one the vanguards of children's fantasy, became more active in this decade. He earned a children's book council award for his book; "I found my white rabbit in the spring". Mohammad Mohammadi also wrote dramatic works such as "The Fantasy of Reason and Turnip", "Glasses for Dragon" and "Cows of Wish".

On the other hand, the proliferation of novelism for adolescents was also noticeable. Mohammad Reza Bayrami and Mohammad Reza Yousefi became famous for their works "The Mountain Called Me" and "Edge" and for "Girls of the Sun", respectively. Regarding poetry, poets like Naser Keshavarz, Afshin Alaa, Mohammad Kazem Mazinani and Afsaneh Shaban Nejad have left significant works appropriate for children usage.

Establishing a Master's degree in children's literature at Shiraz University and a scientific- research journal on the subject at the same university and publishing numerous articles in the field of child literature in various journals and defending several master's and doctoral theses on child literature are other activities in children's literature in Iran.

## **III. Conclusion**

As it happened, Iran, as any other land, is not apart from the various developments whose reflections generally in literature and particularly in children's literature are not trivial. In this ancient country, children once would appeal to folklore, lullabies, songs, legends, elders' tales and even adult literature, for entertainment and education. As the time went on and the child became better known, writers' enthusiasm was directed towards the creation of more and better child-specific works, as we have witnessed this remarkable development in the last decade in Iranian children's literature.

In the end, it could be said that although much works have been done in our country in the field of children's literature, due to the need of the young Iranian society to have more valuable works, it is hoped that more rewarding works will be created and get full-scale supports.

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