

# In the world but not of it: Disability and belonging in Arabic children's literature on disability

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the representation of disabled characters as social beings in Arabic children's books. How do these books portray the relationship of disabled people to their societies and what strategies for inclusion and accommodation do they promote? The main message to emerge in Arabic children's books on disability is inclusion, where the positive portrayals in some of these books contrast sharply with the reality of disabled people in the region. Rather than dismiss these books, I argue that they be read as fantasies, advocating for a more just reality. However, there remains inherent tension in the ideal of the inclusive society itself. When viewed through metaphors of the body, the perfectly inclusive society is, curiously, able-bodied, built on fantasies of functionality. I also examine the trope of the disabled over-achiever or 'supercrip', which recurs very frequently in Arabic children's books. This trope is problematic in that it posits achievement as a requirement for societal acceptance, a 'tax' to be paid while the belongingness of non-disabled characters is never in question. Finally, I finish with an analysis of two books that expand this trope in illuminating ways. The first of these books is *Heya, huma, hunna* (Ghandour 2009) and *The Rain Singer* (Muhammad 2010). Drawing on the lived reality of disabled people, the first offers new definitions for achievements while the second uses the trope of the disabled achiever to suggest that without the participation of all its members, society itself is dysfunctional and incomplete.

**Keywords:** Disability, Arabic Children's Literature, Inclusion, Belonging, Supercrip, Disability Studies.

It is no accident that any discussion of inclusion and belonging ‘is inextricably connected with that of “difference”’ (Pinsent 2014, p.1). While the belongingness of those with normative identities is rarely contested, the same cannot be said for individuals whose bodies are socially and culturally marked as ‘different’ or ‘other’, whether this difference is linked to gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity or ability. Rather, members of political minority groups exist within a complicated and ‘profoundly ambivalent relationship’ to their societies (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p.47) characterized by conflict, oppression and constant bargaining. It is precisely for this reason that the examination of issues of inclusion and belonging in the context of bodily difference is timely and perhaps urgent.

One of the ways that ‘disability has been made exceptional’ (Linton 2005, p.518) has been through the manner of its representation in literature, the media, film and popular culture. This paper concerns itself with one particular site of disability representation, namely Arabic children’s literature, and attempts to uncover the statements such literature makes, both directly and indirectly, about the place of disabled people within the fabric of their societies. To borrow the phrasing of Emily Russell (2011, Introduction), how do these books make ‘legible’ the encounters between ‘an anomalous physical body’ and the body politic or body social? What assumptions about the social position of disabled people guide them? What strategies for the inclusion and accommodation of disabled people do they promote?

There is a relatively substantial and diverse body of Arabic children’s books on disability, both translated and written originally in Arabic. These books deal with a wide range of disabilities from mobility and sensory impairments, to intellectual disabilities, life threatening and progressive diseases (such as cancer and Alzheimer’s) and other physical differences such as obesity and baldness; some tackle the issue of disability indirectly or in a symbolic manner. They target a range of age groups from young readers (aged 5 or above) to adolescents and belong to various genres, including biographies, plot-based narratives and concept books. In line with the current trends within Arabic children’s literature, picture books have recently come to dominate this corpus, which also includes short stories, novels and chapter books. With only a few exceptions, the authors of these books are predominantly non-disabled.

This paper is based on a close reading of more than forty-seven non-translated Arabic children’s books on disability. My intention here is not to present a detailed study of the characteristics of this literature, as other researchers and I have done so

elsewhere (Abou Ghaida 2014; Aisawi 2010; Aisawi 2011; Chkeir 2011). Rather, I will focus on certain patterns that emerge and examine their implications. I begin with an analysis of how some of these books promote inclusion before moving on to problematize a recurring trope of this literature, namely the disabled over-achiever. I will end with a close reading of two recent Arabic children's books. While the first book, *Heya huma hunna* [*She, the Two of Them, They*] (Ghandour 2011), represents a significant departure from this pattern, the second, *Moghanni al-matar* [*The Rain Singer*] (Muhammad 2009) extends this trope in illuminating ways. Ideally, the discussion of this set of books would serve as a point of departure to pose larger questions concerning not only the representation of disabled characters in children's books or literature in general, but also the manner in which we imagine and construct the relationship of disabled people to their societies.

### **Outside In: The landmines of inclusion**

If one were to sum up the main message of Arabic books on disability, it would be that of inclusion. These books promote the notion that being born with or acquiring a disability does not condemn the disabled person and that it is possible to live successfully with disability. In doing so, they attempt to combat the negative perceptions of disability that prevail in Arab societies and the social exclusion of disabled people. Within these books, disabled characters, predominantly children, are cherished by their families and close friends; they participate in the same social rituals as the non-disabled members of their entourage; they have talents; and many times, they excel. A few books follow the disabled character to adulthood, and they portraying her as productive and independent.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of a handful of books set in learning and rehabilitation facilities,<sup>2</sup> we see disabled characters interacting mainly with non-disabled peers, family members and authority figures. Arabic books on disability thus promote a vision of disabled people at the heart of their communities rather than on the fringes.

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<sup>1</sup> Such books include *Korsi al-omniyat* [*The Wheel of Wishes*] (Jrakh 2013) where the lead character grows up to become a teacher and a grandfather. In *Asabi' Zaynab* [*Zaynab's Fingers*] (Ezzeddine 2014), Zaynab, who is blind, becomes a teacher of Braille when she grows up.

<sup>2</sup> These include Abdo Wazin's *Al-Fata al-lathi absara lawn al-hawaa* [*The Boy Who Saw the Colour of Air*], which is set in a facility for blind children. Beyond my sample, there is a short story entitled "Fi markaz al-ta'heel" ["In the rehabilitation centre"] by Edvich Shayboub (1999) as well as the *Buthoor al-amal* [*Seeds of Hope*] series by Lina Kilani.

Despite the best intentions of their authors, however, Arabic children's books on disability are not exempt from factual errors and misrepresentations, whether these are due to poor research, simple oversight or deep-seated stereotypes. Even when we disregard books containing obvious errors, there continue to be what some would identify as problematic aspects in the portrayal of inclusivity in Arabic children's literature. In some books, disabled characters meet very little trouble in moving around; services that target disabled people seem readily available; and the social environment is, for the most part, accepting. The reality of disabled people is often very different. In his review of the children's book *Oyoun jameela* [*Beautiful Eyes*] (Allam 2013), disability rights activist Mohamed Al-Nabulsi highlights this discrepancy:

The positivity [in this book] carries within it an inaccurate reading of the reality of people with vision impairments. All the facilities that the protagonist Habeeba enjoys, whether in the form of societal acceptance, an accessible environment or even the existence of audible textbooks, are to a large extent not available in Arab societies or in the environment familiar to the child reader. If we wish to address this story to children with vision impairments, they would be frustrated by the portrayal of an imaginary reality that is difficult to achieve. (2014, n.p.)

Al-Nabulsi raises a valid point, as there are hardly any Arabic children's books that deal with structural inequality. However, a few books, with varying degrees of depth and sophistication, do tackle the negative attitudes, rejection and discomfort that disabled children face from non-disabled others.

However, I would argue that we should not be too quick in dismissing such overly positive books, but rather read them in a different way: as fantasies. In societies where the built environment is inaccessible and where disabled people are excluded and kept out of sight, these books are important in that they help to imagine an inclusive society that does not yet exist and that would otherwise be inconceivable to the child reader. This is the strategy in *Risala min Nour* [*A Message from Nour/A Message of Light*].<sup>3</sup> In what could serve as a concise summary of the social model of disability, the author, Boshra Al-Bayyoumi writes, 'the patient [with visual impairment] is only disabled to the extent that society does not provide him [*sic*] with the possibility to depend on himself [*sic*] and achieve what able-bodied people are able to achieve' (2011, blurb). This message is served through the manner in which Nour's (the

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<sup>3</sup> The Arabic title contains a play on the word 'nour'. It is not only the proper name of the main character but is also the Arabic word for 'light'.

protagonist) community responds when he acquires his vision impairment. Instead of excluding him, the school administration, teachers and students in his school rally to support him. They raise money to cover the expenses of the trip he takes with his parents and the school counsellor to Cairo in order to get his eyes tested; teachers help him to catch up on school work; and the stairs in his school are repainted so that he can see them clearly. His community does not forget that he is one of its own. In the book's preface, the author acknowledges that in actuality, it would have been very unlikely for a community of disabled people like Nour to respond in the positive manner it did in the book. Speaking from her experience as a physician, Al-Bayyoumi writes:

Children [like Nour] still suffer from the negligence and the boredom of their teachers because of their condition; they continue to drop out of schools, and parents continue to search for a cure for their children's visual impairment so that they can regain their vision and not be rejected by their societies (2011, p.5).

The author's deliberate choice to have events unfold in what she believes is an unlikely manner is more strategic and naïve.

In addition to the complexities of promoting inclusion, there is inherent tension within the ideal of the inclusive society itself. In the perfectly inclusive world, disabled people seem to be efficient cogs in a well-oiled machine. If we think of the inclusive society through metaphors of the body, we are faced with a healthy, fully functional body. In other words, the inclusive society, curiously enough, is (metaphorically) able-bodied. In advocating for justice for disabled people, how do we deal with the dilemma of combating the devaluation of the disabled body without engaging in fantasies of health, perfection and functionality?

For some disability studies scholars, the solution lies in abandoning the quest for disability remedies and perfect solutions, at least at the conceptual level. Tanya Titchkosky argues:

'Fixing' disability experience, either in people or in societal structures, gives only one unified meaning to disability: it is something that needs to be fixed. From things that require remedy, we often learn little beyond the fact that they are broken, and the various ways in which they are so (2003, p.29).

Rather, she advocates that we approach disability ‘as teacher’, arguing that the disability experience can illuminate ‘the dynamic interrelations between body, identity and culture’ (2003, p.23). Emily Russell issues a similar call when she argues:

The social and embodied realities of disability require that any ideological approach centred on disability must include *pain, difficulty, inconvenience, and temporary or inadequate solutions* [...] Disability studies offers a practical and conceptual methodology that acknowledges *the impossibility of total political fixes* and medical cures, instead taking its lead from the necessary incorporation of both difficulty and change [*italics mine*] (2011, Conclusion).

### **The ‘supercrip’ in Arabic children’s literature**

Once we move on to examine how disabled characters are presented, there is one pattern that recurs with great frequency and that is the figure of the disabled over-achiever, a variation of the ‘supercrip’ trope. The term ‘supercrip’ was developed by scholars studying the representation of disability in literature, media and film to refer to the figure of the disabled character who ‘overcomes’ her disability to realize both ordinary and exceptional achievements. In my own sample of forty-seven books, there are at least thirteen books where the disabled character is artistically talented, is the first in her class, wins competitions in various fields or saves the day. In her own study of forty Arabic children’s books on disability, Aisawi (2011, p.50) notes a similar trend. To illustrate this point, I will limit myself to only two examples. In *Korsi al-omniyat* [*The Wheel of Wishes*] (Jrakh 2013), Ali, the protagonist and narrator gets top marks in all his subjects, is a star player in a disabled sports team, graduates with distinction from high school and university and fires the winning shot in a basketball game which allows his team to win an international tournament. In *Hikayatan* [*Two Stories*] (Mheidly 2006/2012), Habib a blind boy and Firas a deaf boy both win competitions in art (Firas) and music (Habib).

The depiction of disabled achievement within these books often lacks nuance. While some achievements seem realistic, others are exaggerated and infeasible. There is also no or very little description of the process one assumes that the protagonists went through to realize these accomplishments. As a result, talent and success become an attribute of the disability rather than the result of training, hard work and planning; ‘disability [becomes] [...] equivalent to distinction’ (Aisawi 2011, p.50). These stories follow the pattern of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson categorizes as ‘narratives of

overcoming' where the challenges faced and met are clearly placed in the framework of 'overcoming' disability and the limitations and stigma associated with it (1997a, p.304).

Rather than being specific to Arabic children's literature, these narratives align with what Titchkosky identifies as 'one of the most common and powerful ideologies surrounding disability', an ideology built upon the denial of the fragility and precariousness of the human body (2003, p.211), as well as the illusion of the controllability of the body through the mind or the spirit (Wendell 1997, p.269-71). From a disability rights perspective, the trope of the 'supercrip' has come under heavy criticism for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it overlooks both the physical limitations associated with many disabilities (Wendell 1997) and the structural inequalities that prevent similar achievements for many disabled people (Kama 2004). As such, it creates an ideal that many disabled people cannot meet (Wendell 1997) and lays the blame of failure on disabled people's lack of will power and self-discipline (Kama 2004). Overcoming disability is prioritized over adjusting to or learning to live with it (Kama 2004) while society is absolved of the need to accommodate disabled people and create more just social environments.

I would also argue that this trope poses deeper, less obvious problems in terms of its assumptions about the place of disabled people in society. It is especially problematic when the achievements of disabled characters lead to their eventual acceptance by their peers or serve as a reward to those who have shown them acceptance. In *Yawm momayyaz [A Special Day]* (Barakat Khawaja 2009), a character with Down's Syndrome is a hero for calling the ambulance when his new friend is hurt playing football, while Mokhtar in *Mokhtar abu danayn kbar [Mokhtar of the Big Ears]* (Nimr and Naji 2011) saves his village when he hears danger coming with his large ears. In all the stories that celebrate disabled achievers, the question becomes: when do these fictional achievements stop being inspirational and become a burden? Why are disabled characters required to pay a tax whereas the belongingness of non-disabled characters is never in question? While these books exhibit a preoccupation with achievement and excellence that is quite common in Arabic children's literature, representations of disability carry their own associations, especially since the non-disabled peers of these exceptional disabled characters are for the most part unremarkable.

Fortunately, not all Arabic children's books fit within this pattern, and many feature believable characters with ordinary lives. Furthermore, in some books, the emphasis on achievement is merely a misstep in an otherwise nuanced and realistic treatment of disability. In the rest of this paper, I examine two children's books that stimulate a rethink of received notions of achievement and the place of disabled people in society.

**There is no place for her: *She, the Two of Them, They***

Written by Nahla Ghandour, who herself is disabled, *Heya, huma, hunna* [*She, the Two of Them, They*] was originally published in Arabic by Al-Khayyat Al-Saghir in 2009 and later translated to French with the title *Elle et les autres* [*She and the Others*]. In addition to departing drastically from the pattern described above, it presents the most sophisticated treatment in Arabic children's literature of what it means to live socially as a disabled person. It draws authentically on the experience of disabled people and portrays 'the more complex and banal reality of those who inhabit [disabled bodies]' (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p.60). Instead of reinforcing the dichotomy of the 'normal' and the disabled body, it exposes its workings in a sensitive and thought-provoking manner. In this manner, the book vindicates Titchkosky's observation that the disability experience has much to teach us not only about cultural constructions of disability but also the taken for granted expectations that structure 'ordinary' life (2003, p.23).

Rather than taking my cue from the more elegant French title, I have opted for a literal translation of the Arabic title as I find it a better reflection of the form and content of the book. I first need to point out that in Arabic grammar, there are three number categories. In addition to the singular and the plural, there is the dual, which is used to denote two entities. In other words, the title [*She, the Two of Them, They*] represents the three forms of the third person subjective feminine pronoun. The 'she' in this case is Nadia, a physically disabled girl, but the book is as much about her social relations with others. The book is composed of two stories. The first story 'My eyes don't do as they are told'<sup>4</sup> relates her interpersonal relationship with a classmate (the two of them) while the second 'Where do I stand?' deals with one of Nadia's very concrete attempts to fit in the social world of her class (they).

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<sup>4</sup> A literal translation of the Arabic title would be 'My eyes do not listen to the word'. 'To listen to the word' is a Lebanese colloquial expression meaning to do as one is told. The play on the concepts of seeing and hearing is lost in the translation into English.



‘My eyes don’t do as they are told’ is told from the point of view of Nadia’s classmate who narrates the development of her relationship with Nadia. When Nadia first arrives in their classroom, the narrator is discomfited and stares at her constantly:

I watch her from afar;  
I watch her as she writes, when she talks, as she sits, as she stands.  
I watch her as she walks. I try not to look at her, but I can’t stop.<sup>5</sup>

Her reaction is a testament to the visual force of the spectacle of the disabled body and betrays deeply held assumptions about the types of human bodies that have a place in the social landscape. As staring is an integral part of the everyday experience of disabled people (Garland-Thomson 1997a; Garland-Thomson 2009), the reaction of Nadia’s classmate’s to her first visual encounter with Nadia is hardly atypical. Jana Traboulsi’s skilful illustrations, many of which are focalized through the narrator, present an almost mathematical dissection of the narrator’s gaze as she watches Nadia (Chèvre 2011, pp.113-14).<sup>6</sup>

It is Nadia who takes the initiative to bridge this divide. Noticing her classmate looking at her, she approaches her to strike up a conversation. As Garland-Thomson argues, ‘[it is] disabled people [who] must learn to manage relationships from the beginning... to relieve non-disabled people of their discomfort’ (1997b, p.13). The girls bond over talk of pretty dresses, buttons and perfumed erasers, and their friendship blossoms to the point where the narrator declares at the end of the story, ‘From that day on, I no longer looked at Nadia from afar. I look at her from a close distance as I talk to her.’ What begins as curiosity carries forward into engagement (Garland-Thomson 2009, p.3). When Nadia approaches her classmate, the illustrations are, for the first time in the story, presented in the third person before reverting back to the first person perspective, with a close up of Nadia’s eyes on the last page.

While the second story ‘Where do I stand?’ is narrated in the third person, it is focalized through Nadia. It presents one of her attempts to smoothly take part in a daily ritual of school life: lining up to go to class. Because of her disability, she walks slower than the other girls. When she lines up at the front, she makes everyone late; when she lines up in the middle, those walking behind her are late; and when she stands at the end of the line, she herself is late. In her own way, she aspires to the anonymity and

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<sup>5</sup> The book is unpaginated.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the illustrations can be seen here: <http://lirelelivre.hypotheses.org/552>.

invisibility that are the privilege of the normative body. This is once again communicated through the illustrations. While Nadia's face and body is shown throughout the text, the rest of her classmates are portrayed for the most part as a faceless mass, represented by paper body cut outs, coloured tongue depressors, pastel sticks or wooden craft pegs (Chèvre 2011, p.113-14).<sup>7</sup> By not wanting to cause a disruption in the smooth running of daily school life, she tries not to be the disability that impairs the functioning of the social body. In the end, she succeeds in finding a solution: she starts to walk to class three minutes before the bell rings and arrives with the last of the stragglers.

In many ways, 'Where do I stand?' heeds Emily Russell's call to be more welcoming of difficulty and imperfect solutions (2011). The book does not shy away from the physical reality of Nadia's disabled body. It avoids a common pitfall in the literature on disability in which disabled characters are portrayed carrying out physical movements with an ease that is not possible for people with their abilities. Resulting from inadequate research or gaps in knowledge, these slips are also symptomatic of an ableist fear of disability and the difficult, messy and painful physical realities that accompany it. Nadia's solution to her practical problem represents one of the 'temporary or inadequate solutions' Russell refers to above as it involves her temporary exclusion. Yet, it is, for the most part, successful.

*She, the Two of Them, They* departs from the trope of the disabled over-achiever by forcing us to rethink our ideas of the challenges and achievements of disabled people. Without overlooking the physical challenges posed by Nadia's disability, the book portrays the social workings of disablement as well as the need by disabled people to constantly figure out how to move both physically and metaphorically through society. It portrays the psychic energy required for achievements that might seem mundane at a first glance, such as making a friend and figuring out how to get to class on time. At a deeper level, Nadia is attempting to exist and participate in a society that has not taken her into account in its social planning, where disabled people remain 'unintended persons' (Titchkosky 2003, p.119). In a statement that is heavy in metaphorical implications, the narrator observes at one point: 'there is no place for her, not at the beginning of the line, not in the middle of the line and not at the end of the line.' It is Nadia who needs to create her own place.

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<sup>7</sup> Many of these illustrations can be seen here: <http://lirelelivre.hypotheses.org/612>

### **It was as if the rain was waiting for his song to fall: *The Rain Singer***

From a book that addresses the lived reality of disability, I move on to a book that is not even ostensibly about disability but raises important questions about inclusion and social participation. Due to the manner in which the disabled body has been used and abused as an ‘opportunistic metaphorical device’, particularly as a ‘signifier of social and individual collapse’ (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p.47), there is often an unease with the use of metaphor in representations of disability. *Moghanni al-matar* [*The Rain Singer*] (2009),<sup>8</sup> however, deploys metaphor towards more emancipatory ends.

Written by Palestinian poet and author Zakariyya Muhammad, *The Rain Singer* could best be classified as a fable. It is set in an unmentioned location<sup>9</sup> and at an unclear time, while its characters are anthropomorphized animals and human beings. It might not contain a pithily expressed moral lesson at the end; yet, it communicates a clear message that the contribution of each member in a society is of importance.

The main character of the story is the donkey foal, an animal with negative associations of drudgery, brusqueness, stubbornness and stupidity in Arabic culture. In being symbolic of a marginalized and denigrated character, he can also be read as disabled, although we should be wary of portraying a disabled character as belonging to a separate non-human species. In *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder write:

[A dominant] narrative approach to difference identifies the literary object par excellence as that which has become extraordinary- a deviation from a widely accepted norm. Literary narratives begin a process of explanatory compensation wherein perceived ‘aberrancies’ can be rescued from ignorance, neglect, or misunderstanding for their readerships (2000, p.53).

In a similar way, Muhammad chooses a marginal cultural figure as his protagonist and proceeds to rescue this character from the negative perceptions associated with it.<sup>10</sup> The book opens in the following manner:

The young donkey did not sing in the beginning. He was always silent.  
Everybody else would sing: the people, the birds, the horses, the  
roosters, everything else.

<sup>8</sup> On the publisher’s website the English translation of this title is *The Rain’s Song*. However, for the purposes of this paper, I opt for *The Rain Singer* as it is a much more accurate translation of the title. Another possible but less literal translation of the title would be *The Rainmaker*.

<sup>9</sup> While the text contains no indication of the setting, the songs sung to summon the rain are in Palestinian dialect.

<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Zakariyya Mohammed places himself in a tradition of Arab writers who have presented positive depictions of donkeys and donkey foals, starting with the Egyptian writer Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s autobiographical novel *Homar Al-Hakim* [*Al-Hakim’s Donkey*].

The young donkey was the only one who would remain silent.  
 The young donkey was without a song.  
 He thought his voice was very ugly.  
 He thought people would laugh at him if he opened his mouth to sing.  
 (Muhammad 2010, pp.5-6)

The donkey foal's self-image is very revealing of the damages wrought in the socialization of members of disenfranchised groups. His internalized sense of inferiority has practical implications in the form of his silencing and exclusion from community-defining social rituals. However, the donkey foal is not without agency for the day comes when he decides to end his silence. It is the day when the rain stops falling and the earth turns dry and thirsty. The creatures all gather to implore God to send rain, and the donkey foal decides to sing: 'That day, the little donkey foal sang. He stood in front of all the people, all the animals, all the birds, all the insects. He then opened his mouth to sing' (Muhammad 2010, p.11).

This story has all the hallmarks of the 'disabled person saves the day' trope, but there are significant yet subtle differences. To begin with, it is not specifically the donkey foal's song that leads to the rain. After the donkey foal starts to sing, first the roosters, then the children, the older people and the other animals join this song. It is after this communal song ends that the rain actually falls. Instead of highlighting individual achievement as in the typical 'narrative of overcoming', the story celebrates interdependence.

*The Rain Singer* is more a narrative of communal regeneration than the redemption of a disabled or ostracized character. The lack of rainfall at the beginning of the story denotes a dysfunction in the body politic, and the falling of the rain has its associations with healing, wholeness and renewal. In a highly poetic passage, the narrator describes the communal baptism that follows the rain:

People were astonished when the rain fell.  
 They laughed and were happy.  
 And under the rain, they danced and sang.  
 Their hair became wet.  
 Their noses became wet.  
 Their clothes became wet.  
 The books and notebooks of the children became wet.  
 Yet they continued to sing and dance in celebration of the rain.  
 (Muhammad 2010, p.19)

The young donkey foal's true contribution was to lead his community on the path of healing by closing the circle that was incomplete without his participation: 'it was as if

the rain was waiting for his song to fall' (Muhammad 2010, p.17). The story concludes not only with his reintegration into the community but also with the transformation and renewal of the society itself. While it remains attached to myths of functionality and completeness, the book links the health of the body social to the participation of all its members, without exception.

At the end of the story, we learn that in the future, every time the rain was late in falling, the young foal was called upon to sing. If he and the rest of the foals or donkeys were busy working in the field, the children would put on donkey masks and sing for the rain to fall. The donkey foal's performance thus became a foundational myth of the body politic commemorated by social and political rituals, an act that brought forth a fresh more hopeful beginning: 'And when the young ones sing, the rain falls immediately!' (Muhammad 2010, p.23).

## **Conclusion**

Ever since its arrival within the humanities, disability studies has identified the critical examination of representations of disability within literature, the media, film, popular culture and other cultural forms as one of its main conceptual and political projects (Linton 2005). If as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, 'representation structures rather than reflects reality' (2005, p.523), the question that I have posed throughout this paper becomes the following: does Arabic children's literature serve to reproduce the exclusion of disabled people and their troubled relationship to their communities or does it attempt to forge a more just and inclusive social reality? My search for an answer ended up revealing the diversity within this body of work.

On the surface, Arabic children's literature on disability overwhelmingly advocates for the inclusion and belongingness of disabled people within their societies. A closer look reveals fissures within this unified message. In the particular ways they promote and imagine inclusion, some books continue to entertain fantasies of functionality that betray a discomfort with the 'difficulties' and 'otherness' of disabled bodies. Other books, in their attempt to 'redeem' disabled characters, saddle them repeatedly with the burden of achievement. In contrast to non-disabled characters, their belongingness to the communities they are born into or exist within appears to be conditional. This is not to mention other contradictions that are specific to individual books, which I was not able to explore in the scope of this paper.

Books that promote a more progressive and emancipatory vision of disability do so in ways that are equally diverse. In its portrayal of the mundane reality of a disabled character, *She, the Two of Them, They* lays bare the ‘othering’ of the disabled body, the mechanism that has been complicit in the exclusion of disabled people in both fictional and real worlds (Davis 1995). *The Rain Singer*, on the other hand, is a fable set in a clearly imaginary world. To communicate its message, it takes a representational device that has often been deployed against disabled people, namely the metaphor, and uses it to advocate for their full reintegration within their societies. Future books with a similar vision could communicate their messages in other, newer ways that remain to be seen.

**Notes:**

All translations of titles and quotations from Arabic into English are my own. An earlier version of this paper was presented at one of the parallel sessions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual IBBY UK/NCRCL MA Conference “Belonging is... an exploration of the right to be included and the barriers that must be overcome”.

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