

Aesthetic Features and Moral Values in Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman by the Algerian Short Story Writer Masouda Kahman

Dr. Samia Ghechir ¹, Dr. Khaldi Khaled ², Dr. Belbachir Abderrezak ³, Dr. Elhelali Ibrahim ⁴,
Dr. Makdad Imene ⁵

¹ Hassiba Ben Bouali University, Chlef, Algeria

s.ghechir@univ-chlef.dz ; <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1413-4777>

² Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2087-6819>

³ Abou Bekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, Algeria

belbachirabderrezak8@gmail.com

⁴ National Center for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research, Tlemcen, Algeria

ibrahim.helali@cnrpah.org ; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6580-2069>

⁵ Ahmed Ben Yahia El-Wancharissi University of Tissemsilt, Algeria

i.makdad@univ-tissemsit.dz ; <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7131-8415>

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Abstract

Stories are among the principal prose forms written for children. Their artistic and aesthetic qualities concern both form and content. They also convey moral, religious, and human values that connect children with their identity, heritage, culture, and religion.

The Algerian short story writer Masouda Kahman is one of the leading women writers in this genre. Her works include *The Vain Bird*, *The Window*, *The Carnival*, and *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*. We selected the last of these works for this study. The study is entitled *Aesthetic Features and Moral Values in Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman* by the Algerian Short Story Writer Masouda Kahman. It aims to identify the story's artistic and aesthetic features, together with its educational and moral values.

Keywords: Children's stories; aesthetic features; educational values; identity; religion; *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*.

1 Introduction

Writing for children has a primarily educational purpose. It also has distinctive artistic and aesthetic features. These connect children with their history, homeland, cultural roots, and shared symbols. They also introduce Islamic, revolutionary, and human values. Experimentation and a spirit of rebellion are further features of this writing. Authors have produced outstanding works that pursue noble aims.

Writing for children is among the most demanding forms of writing. It requires awareness and skill on the part of the author. Ideas and intended messages must suit the child's age. The writer therefore avoids taboo subjects and prohibited content because of their harmful effects on children and their conduct. Children's literature also promotes "emotional balance and stimulates mental and cognitive development. It integrates children into the culture of their community and strengthens their connection

with it. It offers positive preparation for life, rich in moral lessons and judgments. It also plays an important role in stimulating their imagination and developing their talents and creative abilities.”¹ In addition, it strengthens creative capacity and broadens children’s knowledge and experience. It seeks to provide a sound upbringing and prepare them for the future. It thus enables them to contribute to the cultural, intellectual, and social development of their community and country.

Literature for children has artistic features that distinguish it from other literary writing. It is a specialized form of literature adapted to a particular age group. It takes account of children’s physiological, psychological, and intellectual development. Its main elements include language, character, time, place, plot, complication, and resolution.

2 Stories for Children

Stories are among the most popular prose forms for children. They inspire affection and enthusiasm through suspense, knowledge, aesthetic qualities, and moral values. A story is “a tale recast according to modern artistic principles to make it more engaging and enjoyable.”² Children’s stories encompass a range of subjects and forms. These include realistic fiction, religious stories, tales of the supernatural, and animal stories. Like other literary genres, they comprise several artistic elements.

2.1 Central Idea

A children’s story rests on a clear, accessible idea suited to the child’s age and understanding. The writer avoids complexity and ambiguity. The subjects usually convey educational and cultural ideas that support a sound upbringing. They engage children’s interests, attention, and imagination. Children can then respond to the story and relate it to their own social environment.

2.2 Language

Language is the most important element of narrative. Stories for children should use standard Arabic suited to their intellectual, psychological, and cultural development. The language must also be appropriate to their age. Vocabulary should be familiar and easy to understand. Writers should avoid complexity, ambiguity, and excessive use of elaborate poetic imagery. Language also helps to “enrich children’s linguistic repertoire in accordance with standards of correct pronunciation and fluency. It supports their understanding of spoken and written meanings and maintains communication with them.”³

2.3 Characters

Characters in children’s stories should be clearly defined and readily understood. Writers therefore avoid overly complex characterization. They often seek to connect children with the history of their country and nation. This helps to instill a sense of belonging from an early age. There should be “care in naming characters and in matching their names to their qualities. This encourages children to

¹ See Khalid Salah Hanafi Mahmoud, “Enhancing the Role of Children’s Theater in the Upbringing of Arab Children: A Proposed Framework,” *Journal of Psychological and Educational Sciences*, an international, peer-reviewed, biannual journal published by the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Hamma Lakhdar University, El Oued, Algeria, 8, no. 1 (April 2019), p. 160.

² Al-Rabai Ben Salama, *On Children’s Literature in Algeria*, 1st ed., Dar Midad University Press, Constantine, Algeria, 2009, p. 78.

³ Mahmoud Khalif Khudr al-Hayyani, *The Semiotics of Visual Images in Children’s Stories: Strategy and Technique*, Dar Ghaida for Publishing and Distribution, Jordan, 2017, edition not specified, p. 41.

sympathize with good characters and reject evil ones. Clarity, specificity, careful selection, realism, an appropriate number of characters, and thoughtfully chosen names all contribute to effective characterization in children's literature."⁴

2.4 Time and Place

The treatment of time and place in children's stories differs from that in other literary works. The setting should be specific, clear, and accessible to the child. A play has "temporal and spatial dimensions. Time provides the course along which it unfolds, while place provides the location it occupies. These dimensions bring it into close contact with human life in general, or with everyday life and its geographical boundaries." (7)

2.5 Conflict

Conflict in children's stories should suit the child's understanding. It should present a clear struggle between good and evil without instilling fear or panic. Particular attention is given to the hero's eventual victory over the forces of evil.

2.6 Plot

Plot is a central element of dramatic writing. It consists of a sequence of events. In children's stories, these events should develop logically, without complexity or ambiguity. Children can then understand how the events are constructed and how they progress. A children's story usually contains a single complication that moves toward resolution. Children cannot grasp a complex plot with multiple interrelated problems. A simple plot makes events easier to understand and explains their causes logically. It also helps children connect those events with familiar situations and people in their daily lives.

2.7 Complication

Complication usually arises as events intensify and reach a crisis. It is a central technique in the construction of a story.

2.8 Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the main elements of narrative. It takes two forms. External dialogue involves exchanges between characters. Internal dialogue, or monologue, presents a character speaking to themselves. The language of dialogue conveys the characters' ideological positions, thoughts, and psychological states. Dialogue also reveals and intensifies conflict.

2.9 Resolution

Resolution occurs at the end of the story. In children's literature, the ending usually serves a clear purpose. It offers moral lessons, reflection, direction, and guidance. Resolution is "a calm, convincing, and logical ending that develops gradually after the crisis rather than appearing abruptly."⁵

Children's stories have aesthetic features suited to their readers' age and intellectual development. They aim to enrich vocabulary, strengthen mental abilities, and develop thought. They also encourage creativity, discovery, inquiry, and understanding. These are among the higher aims of children's

⁴ See Muhammad Mahmoud Radwan and Ahmad Najib, *Children's Literature: Its Principles and Foundations*, Dar al-Fikr al-Arabi; Dar al-Maarif, Egypt, 1982, edition not specified, p. 29.

⁵ Lina Nabil Abu Mughli and Mustafa Qasim Haylat, *Drama and Theater in Education: Theory and Practice*, Dar al-Raya, Amman, 2007, edition not specified, p. 53.

literature, which seeks to nurture the child's self, mind, and spirit. "Like stories for adults, children's stories can address every aspect of individual and social life. Religious, national, humorous, and imaginative themes are among the most common. These themes generally serve educational, therapeutic, and instructional purposes. Such purposes vary according to the approaches and philosophies adopted in different countries."⁶

Several Algerian writers have distinguished themselves in the children's short story. Ezzedine Djelaoudji's notable collections include *The Golden Chains*. Ahmed Menouar is known for stories such as *The Great Lake*. Mohamed Chenoufi wrote *The Little Elephant*, *A Bird's Tale*, and *Samir and the Swallow*. Masouda Kahman has also written distinctive stories, including *The Vain Bird*, *Juman* and *Anbar*, and *Ayman and the Evil Old Woman*. Other, less widely known writers have yet to receive adequate scholarly attention.

3 Aesthetic Features and Moral Values in *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*

3.1 Central Idea

In *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, Masouda Kahman creates a distinctive narrative marked by its aesthetic structure and noble human ideals.

The story centers on Ayman, a child who lives with his mother in a quiet village within a vast forest. His intense curiosity drives him to investigate everything and explore the forest's secrets. His mother warns him against venturing deep into the forest. An evil old woman lives there and abducts children to exploit them. Ayman ignores his mother's advice, and his excessive curiosity leads him into grave danger. He wanders through the forest until he encounters the old woman. She takes him to the other children she holds captive. She forces them to dig a well in search of a treasure that will restore her youth, strength, and vitality.

After a dangerous and exhausting adventure, Ayman uses his intelligence and resourcefulness to help the children overcome her. Together, they throw her into the well, break her spell, and put an end to her evil. The children are eventually reunited with their parents. They learn from their experience and resolve always to follow their families' advice and guidance.

The story rests on a simple idea appropriate to young children: the struggle between good and evil, or innocence and darkness. The children embody innocence, while the wicked old witch represents darkness. The central idea is straightforward. It seeks to instill solidarity and a sense of community among children at school, in institutions, and in wider society. The ending affirms the victory of goodness, truth, and purity of heart. It emphasizes that falsehood, deceit, and evil are short-lived. Life, in this view, belongs only to the pure of heart.

"Thanks to Ayman's intelligence, the children defeated the old woman. They jumped for joy at being free of her. They decided to return home and always obey their parents, so that they would never endure such a harsh experience again."⁷

3.2 Language

⁶ Al-Rabai Ben Salama, *On Children's Literature in Algeria*, p. 78.

⁷ Masouda Kahman, *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, Al-Muthaqqaf Publications, Algeria, no edition or publication date specified, p. 12.

Kahman uses simple, clear, and direct language suited to the educational, religious, and instructional messages addressed to young children. She avoids poetic language, difficult vocabulary, imaginative language, and ambiguity. This allows children to understand the story's meaning and lesson. She writes: "Ayman crossed the river and reached the other bank. He began to run happily, jumping here and there. In his delight, he sometimes imitated the way the animals along his path walked. At other times, he tried to catch the beautiful butterflies."⁸

The story's clear, precise, and accessible language serves its various purposes. Its use of standard Arabic also conveys the central message: following parental advice leads to success and well-being.

3.3 Characters

Characters in children's stories should be clearly defined and easy to understand. Writers avoid complex characterization and describe their characters' qualities precisely. Some characters are made appealing so that children will adopt them as role models. Ayman is one such character. Despite his curiosity, he is innocent, intelligent, and loving toward his mother. He later joins forces with the other children to defeat the old witch. His most admirable quality is his determination to survive and prevent her from taking his life. He declares: "I will not give up. I will think of a way to get free of her."⁹

The old witch, by contrast, embodies evil. Her repellent qualities include tyranny, brutality, trickery, cunning, and deceit. Kahman portrays her negatively to provoke the children's rejection of her. Readers are encouraged to dislike her and avoid being influenced by her.

Ayman's mother represents generosity, love, tenderness, and concern for her child. Kahman presents her as a model of goodness and virtue. Young readers are encouraged to follow the example of such mothers. Their own moral development and success depend on honoring them and heeding their advice.

3.4 Time and Place

The story unfolds in three main spaces: the river, the forest, and the hut. Its temporal setting is established when Ayman leaves school. He goes directly to the river to enjoy his favorite pastime, fishing. Enchanted by the beautiful scenery, he then ventures deeper into the forest. This leads him to the hut, where the events become more complicated. The hut is the main arena of conflict between the children and the old woman. Ayman and the other children spend their time digging the well at her command. They ultimately defeat her.

3.5 Plot

Kahman constructs a plot around a single, straightforward problem and develops it in detail. The events follow a logical sequence and remain clearly connected. There is no confusion, complexity, or manipulation of their order. This allows young readers to understand the story quickly and with little effort. The plot begins when Ayman disregards his mother's warning to stay away from the forest because a cunning old woman lives there. The events then become increasingly entangled and move toward a crisis.

3.6 Complication

The events intensify until a resolution becomes necessary. The children's fate is at stake because the witch threatens them with severe punishment. She orders them to dig the well and remove the stones.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Masouda Kahman, *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, p. 10.

After enduring suffering, torment, and oppression, they continually search for a way to defeat her. One child warns: “Do not even try. You will be punished severely, just as we were. She deprived us of food and drink for an entire day. We nearly died from the torture and beatings. That is why we did not try again.”¹⁰

3.7 Dialogue

The dialogue occurs between human characters. Some exchanges take place among the children; others involve the children and the old witch, a supernatural character. Dialogue intensifies the conflict and drives the events toward greater complexity and crisis. Its language is often sharp and violent, marked by harshness and cruelty. This reflects the fierce struggle between the good characters, the children, and the evil character, the old woman. Kahman also uses internal monologue. Ayman speaks to himself as he searches for ways to outwit the cunning witch and escape her.

3.8 Conflict

The story presents a struggle between good and evil. The innocent children represent good, while the deceitful witch embodies evil. The children’s voices ultimately prevail in this intense conflict. They symbolize hope, development, and prosperity for countries, peoples, and nations. Kahman thus appears to locate the promise of national development in children’s capacity for purity of heart, intelligence, and mutual support. The witch, by contrast, is selfish and cunning. She acts alone in carrying out her malicious schemes. The ending affirms that collective action will prevail, however long the darkness lasts.

3.9 Resolution

Kahman avoids open endings because they do not suit children’s understanding. Children cannot resolve narrative complications on their own. The story therefore ends with the witch’s defeat and the end of her tyranny. Ayman is reunited with his mother, and they live happily and peacefully. Children favor such endings and respond to them more strongly than to sad conclusions. Unhappy endings cause grief, distress, and sometimes fear. Kahman writes: “... His mother was delighted that Ayman had returned and had benefited from the harsh lesson life had taught him. A few days later, she regained her health. Ayman became an obedient son who took his studies seriously and cared for his mother’s comfort. They lived in happiness and peace.”¹¹

3.10 Moral and Educational Values

Values play an important role in children’s stories. Such stories reinforce values and encourage habits and practices that develop character. Values motivate children to grow as individuals and guide them toward appropriate conduct. Their study matters “in several fields, including vocational guidance. This involves identifying people suited to particular professions, such as religious scholars, politicians, and social workers. Its general aim is to help individuals choose and prepare for a profession, advance in it, plan for the future, and achieve occupational adjustment. The study of values and value systems is also particularly important in counseling and psychotherapy.”¹²

¹⁰ Masouda Kahman, *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, p. 10.

¹¹ Masouda Kahman, *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, p. 16.

¹² Sufyan Bouatit, *Personal Values amid Social Change and Their Relationship to Occupational Adjustment*, doctoral dissertation in Work and Organizational Psychology, Mentouri University, Constantine, academic year 2011–2012, p. 74.

The story conveys the religious value of obeying and honoring one's parents, especially one's mother, for paradise lies beneath her feet. In this way, Kahman fulfills the story's highest aim: teaching successive generations to obey and honor their parents. This reflects the command of God, glorified and exalted: "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and show kindness to your parents. If one or both of them reach old age in your care, do not utter even a word of irritation to them. Do not rebuke them, but address them with respect" (Qur'an, Al-Isra, 17:23).

The story also conveys the moral and educational value of social solidarity among children during crises and difficulties. Solidarity, mutual support, and a spirit of cooperation are qualities that children should learn and practice in later life.

A further educational aim is to encourage children to love nature and appreciate its beauty. The river, butterflies, gazelles, trees, and forest nurture their aesthetic sensibility. This appreciation can inspire creative activities such as writing poetry, stories, and personal reflections, as well as drawing.

4 Conclusion

In *Ayman and the Cunning Old Woman*, Masouda Kahman successfully presents educational and moral themes through narrative imagery. She also selects visual images that convey the story's central idea, meaning, and highest purpose: affirming goodness, childhood, and motherhood. The story therefore retains its relevance across time and place

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