

In Between Hijab and Stories: Exploring the Intersectionality in Children's Literature of Shaikha Alzeyara



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ABSTRACT: This study explored the portrayal of Qatari girls in children's literature of Shaikha Alzeyara, a prominent Qatari author. It uses the concept of intersectionality and empowerment to acknowledge the interconnectedness of social identities like gender, disability, and religion. The research highlighted the significance of children's literature in shaping children's assumptions about societal roles. Currently, the available literature for consumption conforms to the idea of boys as heroines and putting girls into a box like sheltered pearls. The analysis focuses on Alzeyara's stories. Through intersectionality, the study examines how these stories depict Qatari girls and the influence of Arab culture. Using qualitative methods through content analysis of the stories and in-depth interviews with the author and key personnel involved, the findings revealed a complex portrayal of girls. While some stories reflect traditional Qatari values of family and patriarchal society, others present independent, resilient girls who challenge limitations. The author's background as a Qatari woman is acknowledged as contributing to a more complex representation of girls. Alzeyara's work offers a starting point for a more intersectional approach to Qatari children's literature. Furthermore, intersectionality and empowerment as a framework for analyzing children's literature and promoting more inclusive narratives for young learners could contribute to the lack of knowledge in Arab women's studies.

KEYWORDS: Children's Literature, Intersectionality, Empowerment, Qualitative, Qatar

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, gender portrayal in children's literature carries a complex past, marked by both progress and persistence of stereotypes. Boys dominated as protagonists, often embodying traits like bravery and adventure, while girls played supporting roles associated with passivity and domesticity. It has always been the story of a fragile princess who needs a strong prince. While there is a continuous attempt for equal representation, challenges remain. Modern books increasingly feature diverse female characters defying limitations, but gendered language and restrictive portrayals of occupations and emotions linger. A concept called intersectionality provides a constant light to the lived experiences of women as explained in children's literature. Intersectionality adds another crucial layer to understanding gender portrayal in children's literature. Including more female characters is not enough; we need to consider how the intersection of their gender shapes their experiences.

Stories and images in books hold significant power; they convey implicit and explicit messages about who can occupy different roles in society and shape children's subconscious assumptions. Roles like gender and race play a vital role in children's literature in order to understand the characters. Perpetuating a story that erases biases and promotes diversity can lead children to understand the complexity of gender more than the assigned role^[1]. Moreover, scholars have been calling intersecting literature, such as Arab Americans, as a cornerstone to elaborate further the need to talk about the existing racism, orientalism, and even xenophobia through stories. The thematic connections touching cultural and transnational concepts in the literature strengthen the understanding of the minority and marginalized^[2].

In this light, the works of Shaikha Alzeyara, a prominent Qatari writer focusing on children's literature, have been essential educational material for sharing the experiences of Qatari children. Her works not just featured the stereotypes of boys as protagonists but also girls who have intersecting concepts such as disability, religion, race, etc. This is similar to the framework utilized by scholars as she examined how women's oppression changes in patriarchal societies. Historically, women faced general suppression, but today's oppression considers race, class, and sexual orientation. It showed that women face layered oppression – being a woman is a factor, but so are other aspects of identity^[3]. This creates internal conflict among women. Education does not guarantee job opportunities. Regardless of advantages gained by race or class, we need to unite to fight for social change. The identified research gaps in the available literature highlight the need for more diverse and inclusive portrayals. Girls are commonly subjected to and viewed as sheltered pearls and dictating gender roles, a common stereotype that hinders the lack of girls'

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empowerment^[4]. Children's literature lacks inclusivity in most areas, and teaching is difficult for teachers as there are embedded biases and discrimination^[5]. The need for children's content for young learners to be aligned with their culture so they can fully grasp the story's message and lesson^[6].

Qatari society, a country in the Arab Gulf region, is still patriarchal today. In Qatari children's literature, there is a growing awareness of intersectionality, and authors portray female characters with richer identities, acknowledging the influence of factors like race, class, and disability on their experiences. In a way, few authors are pushing for more socially relevant stories to enhance the way children see themselves in girls' characters. However, there is little progress in using gendered narratives that empower women in the Arab world. Many stories failed to exercise the needed diversity because of their preconceived notions and other limiting beliefs. This study will explore the intersectionality of Qatari children's literature to analyze the contents and learn the insights of the authors and others involved.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Arab Female Characters

Arab female character's proper depiction counters negative portrayals. By providing children with books featuring relatable Arab characters, we actively subvert the stereotypical and often negative representations present in media, entertainment, and educational materials^[7]. Qatari textbooks, even those for non-native speakers, perpetuate gender inequality. Despite some positive portrayals of women, the analysis reveals a strong bias towards the male perspective^[8]. Children's literature reinforces traditional gender roles, limiting children's understanding. Girls lack positive role models, potentially harming self-perception^[9]. Female characters in children's and young adult fiction claim agency, examining how their portrayals have evolved^[10]. Utilizing adaptation theory, feminist perspectives, and ideas of agency, it studies how female protagonists have diversified and gained more substantial roles.

There is a boom in Arabic children's books, but schools have not kept up. This means students have limited exposure to diverse cultures. While the number of books is growing, the content in schools focuses heavily on Arab-written works or those depicting Arab experiences. This lack of multicultural literature can lead to lower-quality books being chosen to fill shelves^[11]. More importantly, it limits children and teachers from encountering different cultures and perspectives. This absence of diverse voices in classrooms reinforces existing power structures and can negatively impact students, especially Arab ones.

Furthermore, the depiction and use of literature in the classroom has been an ongoing process in Qatari schools. Qatar's ambitious development plans include education reforms and a focus on modernity. Qatar Foundation (QF) plays a key role in these efforts, and its publishing house translates and publishes works aligned with this vision. However, there is a disconnect between the official view of culture as tradition and the emphasis on literature. While they publish some works aligned with national goals, others explore challenging themes. This suggests that a potentially vibrant literary culture exists but is limited by censorship^[12].

B. Intersectionality in children's literature

Common perception related to language literature is conservative and traditional, while Indian writing in English is modern and progressive. It analyzes how gender interacts with other social identities (caste, class, community) in children's books written in both English and Gujarati^[13]. It does have limitations in its portrayals of marginalized groups. Female portrayal in some children's books reflects societal limitations placed on girls, valuing them for domesticity over intellect. Pressure to conform to beauty standards can be harmful^[14]. However, the girl's agency in her actions shows potential for change. The rhyme, despite limitations, can be seen as encouraging education and cultural pride. Different feminist interpretations exist. Analyzing the rhyme critically helps us understand how cultural norms shape gender expectations. View of culture as tradition and emphasis on literature. While they publish some works aligned with national goals, others explore challenging themes.

Elementary students typically learn about just three Black women in history: Truth, Tubman, and Parks. However, these lessons often miss how their race and gender shaped their fight for civil rights. Picture books about lesser-known Black women teach a more nuanced understanding of the Civil Rights Movement^[15]. Drawing on intersectionality, it argues that focusing on these women can broaden the typical view of the movement. Despite aiming for acceptance of non-binary genders, many children's books perpetuate stereotypes. Boys who like traditionally feminine things are ostracized until they prove themselves worthy. Lesbian characters are presented in a non-threatening way, often with feminine appearances. Transgender characters are limited to the binary of "girls in boys' bodies" and vice versa. This reinforces the two-gender view and excludes non-binary identities. Children's books must move beyond these limitations to create a more inclusive understanding of gender^[16].

Meanwhile, social justice issues are addressed in children's picture books. It critically analyzes text and images from eight books to see if the approach is intersectional (considers how different forms of oppression overlap). The goal is to see if these books can be a foundation for teaching young children about social justice^[17]. It is relevant to publishers, authors, educators, and anyone who puts progressive children's books in children's hands.

C. Concept of Feminism

Feminism is a broad and diverse movement that advocates for gender equality in all aspects of life. It seeks to dismantle harmful stereotypes that limit people based on their gender. Feminism in Children's books is also a well-explored topic, such as the scholar

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Rudine Sims Bishop, who is known for advocating for culturally relevant children's literature. Her groundbreaking essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors" (1990) emphasizes the importance of providing children with books that reflect their own.

Children's literature traditionally portrays females as passive and focused on beauty, while males are brave and adventurous. Feminist theory argues that children's stories should promote gender equality. The Grimm Brothers' tales exemplify this imbalance. Female characters are often silent, beautiful damsels or cursed victims. Male characters, on the other hand, are clever heroes rewarded with princesses and riches. This lack of female agency reinforces patriarchal norms. Feminist retellings of these stories challenge these stereotypes. They depict female characters who are active, clever, and can achieve their happy endings, not just through marriage. By including strong female characters, children's literature can counteract negative stereotypes and promote a more just and equitable world^[18].

Boys and girls still preferred adventure stories, but a girl pirate character, Jenny, challenged the idea that girls can only be heroes in love stories. However, boys were more accepting of girls in masculine spaces than boys in feminine, limiting options for both genders. The study suggests that children's books with characters expressing a wider range of emotions and abilities beyond gender stereotypes can help kids develop a better sense of self and challenge traditional gender roles. Feminist theory is essential for analyzing children's literature, particularly gender representation. It helps us understand how we subconsciously interpret characters and stories^[19]. By applying this theory, students can critically analyze how female characters are portrayed, the author's perspective, and if traditional gender roles are reinforced. It goes beyond Western viewpoints, using Black and third-world feminism to examine portrayals of non-Western cultures. Recognizing that even historical fiction presents a biased view, feminist theory encourages questioning the "truthfulness" of representation. The goal is to shift students from accepting the story at face value to critically analyzing power, privilege, and perspective. This allows them to challenge stereotypes and envision alternative narratives, ultimately moving beyond limited representations and fostering a deeper understanding of gender and culture in children's literature^[20]. Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping young minds, and feminist theory offers a powerful lens to analyze gender representation in these stories.

III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Content analysis is a method for systematically examining and understanding communication content. This can be written text, spoken words, or even visuals. It follows a structured approach to identify patterns and trends objectively, often using techniques like counting keywords or themes. Content analysis is valuable because it helps us uncover hidden biases, understand how information is presented, and compare different communication sources. In children's books, it is beneficial. By analyzing the portrayal of characters, word choices, and illustrations, we can see if the book reinforces stereotypes, promotes positive values, or offers diverse perspectives. This knowledge helps authors, educators, and parents choose books that challenge biases and encourage critical thinking in young minds.

Content analysis is a research method used to analyze different data types, like images and text. It helps researchers group information into categories for better understanding and interpretation. This paper focuses on content analysis in marketing research. It explains the basic steps involved, including how it can be both qualitative (exploratory) and quantitative (counting things). The paper also mentions computer software used for content analysis and discusses the pros and cons of this method. Finally, it introduces a related approach called sequential analysis, which can be used alongside content analysis for a more comprehensive research design^[21].

Furthermore, an in-depth interview is a qualitative research method where you have a focused conversation with a single person to gain rich insights into their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Unlike surveys with fixed answers, in-depth interviews use open-ended questions, allowing the interviewee to elaborate and provide a nuanced perspective. This is particularly valuable when understanding an author's creative process, especially for someone writing about a specific cultural context, like girls in Qatar. Through in-depth interviews, you can look into the author's inspirations, personal connection to the topic, and the messages they hope to convey to young readers. This deeper understanding goes beyond the text, revealing the author's background, cultural influences, and the motivations behind their portrayal of girls in Qatari society. This rich information can provide context to the children's stories, allowing readers to appreciate the deeper layers woven into the narrative.

In-depth interviews are qualitative research methods that involve intensive interviews with a small group of people to understand their experiences and perspectives on a particular topic. They are helpful when you want detailed information about someone's thoughts and behaviors or to explore new issues in depth. In-depth interviews are preferable to focus groups when participants might not be comfortable talking openly in a group setting or when they want to get individual opinions. One advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide much richer information than surveys. Participants are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their experiences in a conversational setting^[22]. However, a limitation is that the findings may not be generalizable to a larger population because only a few people are interviewed.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Qualitative Content Analysis

The books contained themes like sheltered pearls wherein they are subjected to someone who should stay home. They are also seen as fragile individuals. Little girls should follow a particular norm. However, the author also utilizes modern and empowering approaches such as independence and resilience. Qatari culture played a huge role in shaping how the girls were presented in four stories. This is important to analyze as these materials are used in schools and can be a reference point for most children. This paper presents the results of the qualitative content analysis to identify emerging themes. This only looks closely at how depiction can help empower young girls in reading. Children's books can play a vital role in reflecting Qatari culture, traditions, values, and social norms. Research in this area can analyze how these elements are portrayed and how they contribute to shaping children's understanding of their own identity.

Qualitative content analysis is an important research method because it allows researchers to systematically analyze and interpret large amounts of qualitative data, such as text, interviews, and images, to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. This methodology can help explain and explore new areas of research.

Table 1. Shaikha Alzeyara's Themes

Book Title	Content Analysis		
	Girl's Depiction	Intersectionality	Purpose
The Story of Princess Amena	Independent but sheltered	Gender and Education	Self-confidence
When thoughts visit us	Optimist vs Weak and Fragile	Gender and Disability	Optimism and Mental Health Discussion (Anxiety)
Weird Story	Weak and Disable but Resilient	Gender and Disability	Resiliency
Story of Huge Socks	Sheltered	Gender and Family Status	Love for Family

It is interesting to highlight the use of mental health themes, as the author provided a space to talk about these themes. While it is highly influenced by Qatar's patriarchal background, the story provides an inspiring twist to the characters. Qatari female characters with intersecting oppression such as education, social status, and disability can also be heroines of their stories without the need for help from boys.

First, The Story of Princess Amena explores intersectionality through the character of Amena. While Amena loves the traditional fairy tales filled with white princesses, her mom challenges the idea that a princess looks a certain way. Amena can be a princess because of her inner qualities, regardless of ethnicity, hair color, or dress. Readers can perceive that the story dismantles stereotypes and celebrates individuality. Amena's mom's message is empowering because it redefines what it means to be a princess, focusing on kindness, helpfulness, and hard work. This resonates with intersectionality, acknowledging that a person's identity is multifaceted and narrow portrayals do not limit their value.

While many girls used popular media characters and plots, others presented new perspectives on love stories and gender roles. Some stories featured girls making the first move, celebrating female solidarity, or rejecting stereotypical princesses. The researchers analyzed these stories in light of the girls' backgrounds and role models^[23].

Second, the story of Mona and Ahmed, though lacking explicit intersectionality, explores feminist themes through Mona's active role and dismantling of gender norms. Collaboration across species and children emphasizes the power of collective action, a concept that resonates with intersectionality. Despite limitations in scope and complexity, the story equips children with tools to navigate emotions, highlights the importance of community, and offers a message of hope and resilience. Mona is the central character driving positive change. She welcomes ideas, actively participates in watering the cherry tree, and fights off negative thoughts. This challenges traditional narratives where girls are passive recipients. The story does not limit activities based on gender. Mona and Ahmed participate in traditionally "feminine" acts like singing and sharing tea.

A female pirate character who challenged the norm of women solely associated with love. This highlights the importance of offering children diverse narratives that include female heroes and bodily agency. While girls can now access traditionally masculine characters, boys face limitations in exploring traditionally feminine roles^[19]. This research suggests a need for more inclusive stories that promote cooperation and dismantle rigid gender stereotypes for all children. Future studies could explore the impact of this approach on other aspects of identity and analyze how children contribute to shaping meaning through their interactions with stories.

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Third, the weird story explores themes of prejudice, though unnamed. The new girl faces exclusion for her appearance, speech, and behavior, mirroring how people with different identities are marginalized. The children can accept or reject her, reflecting real-world power dynamics. The label "weird" reinforces social divisions. Despite this, the narrator, initially influenced by peers, overcomes fear and befriends the girl, showcasing a subtle form of women's empowerment through challenging social norms and promoting empathy for those who are different. Stories that feature understanding are essential. Teacher integrated character education while teaching a narrative text. The teacher used frameworks, including analyzing cause and effect, comparing character traits, and discussing values. This suggests that the teacher recognized the story's potential to teach moral lessons. The study also highlights the importance of teachers understanding a text's underlying messages (ideologies), as it helps them effectively use literature for character education^[24].

Last, the story of Huge Socks transcends the typical parent-child dynamic, exploring love expressed in unconventional ways. The absent father bridges the physical gap through nightly rituals with mismatched socks, creating a secret language of care and security for the child. Fueled by the child's imagination, this playful interaction fosters a growing bond built on acceptance and appreciation of their unique connection. It highlights the power of love to take unexpected forms, reminding us that family can be defined by shared languages, even those woven from mismatched socks.

Hence, children's books often contain stereotypes and underrepresent certain genders. This is concerning because repeated exposure to these biases can shape how children view the world. To address this, educators should be mindful of the books they choose and actively seek out those that depict a wider range of characters and experiences. Further research on a larger scale is recommended to understand the full scope of the issue and its impact on children. Additionally, studies could explore how children interpret the messages they receive from books^[25].

B. In-depth Interviews

This interview highlights the power of children's literature to shape young minds. Stories featuring diverse characters and tackling important issues can equip children with critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and cultural awareness. They can also serve as mirrors reflecting a child's reality and windows to new experiences, ultimately fostering self-confidence and a strong sense of belonging.

The transformative power of stories, particularly for children. Children can develop critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and a deeper understanding of the world by grappling with complex ideas and situations within narratives. The goal is not to provide easy answers but to encourage children to analyze and find solutions themselves, fostering creativity, resilience, and strong values. Ultimately, stories are seen as tools to empower children with the life skills they need to navigate the world.

"When I write for children, I make sure to contribute to influencing them by providing content that makes children learn to think critically and understand the world around them. I seek to make them differentiate between the different meanings and contradictory dualities in this world, not by giving them ready-made solutions but by having them deduce the solutions based on what they discover in the stories. It also developed their creative and intellectual abilities, helped them solve problems they may face daily, enhanced their ability to adapt to surrounding circumstances, and instilled noble values. I believe that stories can be a powerful tool to empower children with life skills that will help them grow normally." *Alzeyara, author*

There is a growing focus on creating high-quality children's literature in Qatar. Stories come in two flavors: those reflecting Qatari heritage and customs and those with broader themes that still incorporate values like respect for elders and community. The goal is to engage children of all ages by offering relatable stories and fostering well-rounded individuals who appreciate diversity.

"Even if the stories do not directly reflect the reality of Qatari society, they must include elements that are consistent with local customs, traditions, and ethics, such as respect for elders, cooperation, and a sense of community responsibility, and include various topics covering cultural, educational, and social aspects, which broadens children's horizons and helps them. They help them better understand the world around them, and this diversity ensures every child finds something that attracts and benefits them." *-Alzeyara, author.*

The author argues the importance of featuring girls as protagonists in children's literature. It highlights several benefits: promoting gender equality, inspiring girls, encouraging respect between genders, and reflecting broader social diversity.

"The origin of life is a woman and a man. It is important to have a girl character in stories, which enhances equality and confirms integration between the sexes, as it shows girls and boys alike that girls can be strong and capable of facing challenges and succeeding. Girls who are heroines in stories can be role models, inspiring girls to achieve their dreams and develop self-confidence. It encourages boys to appreciate the role of girls, which promotes mutual understanding and respect between the genders. In addition, it contributes to representing cultural and social diversity." *-Alzeyara, author.*

The author emphasizes the importance of creating well-developed girl characters. This goes beyond just gender; the character needs clear goals, relatable experiences, and consistent personality traits to be believable and engaging for the reader. The author sees this as particularly important in Qatar, where girls should be portrayed as strong and capable while respecting their cultural background. This approach can empower girls and promote gender equality from a young age. The author believes children's literature should depict a wide range of characters, including those dealing with mental health issues. Stories featuring such

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characters can educate young readers about these challenges and foster empathy and acceptance of diversity. They point to their story "Strange" as an example, where a girl with a mental disorder is portrayed to help children understand this reality.

It is used in schools and libraries, highlighting the value of children's literature. Stories can empower children by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and cultural identity. By seeing characters overcome challenges, children gain confidence and learn to value diversity, becoming well-rounded individuals who contribute to society. Children's stories are powerful tools for shaping young minds. Stories with girls as heroes can boost their self-confidence by showing them courageous girls overcoming challenges. These stories can also act as guides, teaching valuable life skills like problem-solving and perseverance. More importantly, they break stereotypes by showcasing girls in diverse roles, inspiring them to pursue any dream they hold. The stories also promote positive values and strengthen Arabic language skills, making them a well-rounded resource for children.

Reading stories to children can be a powerful learning experience, especially when it comes to strong female characters. Educators can choose diverse stories with courageous girls as heroes and then use questions and discussions to help children learn from the characters' actions. Educators can keep children engaged by using different voices, asking questions, and even having them retell the story themselves and deepen their understanding of the story's themes. Group activities and connecting the story's lessons to real life further solidify the learning, making story time a fun and empowering experience.

"Educators can follow the following steps to affirm these values: Choose appropriate stories with diverse characters. Choose stories that feature girls, provide positive role models for girls, and show girls as heroines who face challenges and overcome challenges in innovative and courageous ways."

-Museum Personnel

According to school personnel, children's stories have the power to shape young minds. Stories with positive themes like honesty, strength, and perseverance directly influence children through the hero's actions. Children imitate these characters, embodying their positive traits. In this way, stories act as seeds that nurture a child's potential and instill self-confidence.

"Most children's stories carry lessons and wisdom, such as (honesty, success, strength of character, defending one's opinion, confronting negativity, showing abilities, and many others. Through these stories and reading them by the child, he is directly influenced by them through the character of the hero of the story, so we find the child imitating that character."-
School Personnel.

Reading is a gateway to positive development in children. Stories instill values like empathy, compassion, and tolerance and open doors to understanding different cultures and perspectives. This early exposure to diversity fosters acceptance and lays the foundation for a generation that embraces the world's richness.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Shaikha Alzeyara's children's stories offer a unique glimpse into the lives of Qatari girls, navigating the complexities of their cultural backgrounds and intersecting identities. While some portrayals adhere to traditional expectations, there is a clear push towards dismantling stereotypes and empowering young female characters. This is evident in stories like "Princess Amena," where the concept of a princess is redefined based on inner qualities rather than narrow beauty standards. Here, intersectionality is celebrated as Amena's ethnicity and appearance are acknowledged without limitations. Similarly, "When the Thoughts Visit Us" features Mona, an active protagonist who tackles challenges and collaborates with others, regardless of gender. This challenges traditional narratives where girls are passive and reinforces the importance of community and collective action.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations. While some stories touch upon mental health themes, a deeper exploration of the impact of societal pressures on Qatari girls could be valuable. Additionally, the research suggests a potential need for more nuanced portrayals of boys who can explore traditionally feminine roles without limitations. Her work paves the way for more inclusive children's literature in Qatar. By acknowledging intersectionality and celebrating diverse identities, these stories empower young readers and offer a foundation for a more just and equitable future.

Her stories hold the potential to impact young readers significantly. Emphasizing female characters overcoming challenges can inspire girls to defy stereotypes and chase their dreams. This is particularly significant as the stories showcase these characters within a cultural context, empowering girls without neglecting their background. Furthermore, the stories weave invaluable life lessons like perseverance and kindness. Exposure to diverse characters and situations fosters empathy and appreciation for the world's richness, while the complexity of the narratives encourages critical thinking. Ultimately, these stories serve as tools to equip young readers with the skills and values they need to thrive in a world of challenges and opportunities.

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