

## The Notion of Childhood in Arab American, Arabic, and French Literatures: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

The paper aims at investigation the notion of childhood in Arab American, Arabic, and French literatures through analyzing the poetry of the Arab-American poet and writer Gibran Khalil Gibran, the Arab poet Nizar Qabbani, the French poets Jaques Prevert and Victor Hugo. Each poet tackles the notion of childhood in his poetry highlighting his viewpoint on childhood and reflecting how adults should view and deal with children. A close reading analysis technique will be applied for the analysis of the poems. Additionally, the poems will be comparatively analyzed in light of the most famous theorists' arguments in the field of childhood, such as Aries, Lock, Rousseau, Blume, and Hunt.

**Key words:** Childhood; Adulthood; Innocence; Adult interference; Notion of childhood

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### INTRODUCTION

The notion of childhood has been tackled by many sociologists and literary writers. It is still a controversial term because it changes with societies, ideologies, cultures, and history. Most of the theorists in this field agreed on the idea that childhood is "a social construction," in which it might differ from one society to another depending on the attitudes and beliefs of societies

(Norozi & Moen, 2016, p.75). Childhood might differ in the same society depending on the variation in gender and social class (Ibid.).

Prout and James have defined the key features of childhood, in which

The socially constructed childhood is different from biological immaturity. It is contextualized interpretation of human's early life based on societal beliefs and cultures. Childhood is intertwined with other social variables in societies such as gender, class, ethnicity...Children must be viewed as active participants not only in construction of knowledge about them but also in construction of society as a whole. (qtd. in Norozi & Moen, 2016, p.78)

The historian Philippe Aries in his book entitled *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) claimed that the notion of childhood started to emerge in Western Europe in the end of fifteenth century. The researcher explores the image of childhood in the medieval European art, in which he claims

in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist...The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: It corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. (p.128)

In other words, what Aries wants to convey to us that there was no division between childhood and adulthood in medieval society.

The philosopher John Lock has enriched childhood studies with his ideas on childhood, in which he claims that "children were born neither evil nor good but as 'blank slates' whose minds and characters would be shaped by their education and training" (Montgomery, 2009, p.23). In other words, Lock pays the adults' attention to the importance of developing the child's reason through education and experience.

What is more valuable in this study is to explore the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's arguments on

childhood in his book *Emile or On Education* (1762), in which he declares that

Children would grow up properly if they were not corrupted by adult influence and were not forced out of their “natural” surroundings in order to go to learn “civilization” at school... childhood should be a time of innocence, when children learnt what they needed to at their own pace, away from the interference of adults. (Ibid.)

In other words, Rousseau wants children to entertain the freedom of their childhood; he does not children to read anything factual because reading will be similar to “formal schooling.”

It should be stated here that both Lock and Rousseau were interested in educating the child and they highlighted the “natural goodness and innocence, and [the] inevitable corruption by contact with adult civilization” (Ibid., p.24).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF POEMS

In his poem entitled “On Children,” Khalil Gibran, the Arab American writer, offers us a liberal view of dealing with childhood away from the conservative concepts of this stage of life that considers it as a stage of obedience for adult authority. The poet attempts to erase these misconceptions about childhood when he addresses adult readers:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s  
longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you.  
And though they are with you yet they  
belong not to you.

It should be noted in the previous quotation that Gibran highlights the particularity of childhood, in which it is owned or controlled by adulthood although the adults bring children to life. This is due to his belief that children are not subordinates to adults due to the fact that they are created from them. In other words, Gibran, in his address to the adults wants to distinguish the stage of childhood from the adult one. He liberates the adults from their thinking that childhood is an extension to adulthood because he thinks that childhood is a distinguished stage from adulthood in all its characteristics.

Gibran, in his view of childhood, draws our attention to our role as adults in giving love and affection for children. But such role does not mean that we should consider them as subordinates to us or to obey our orders and instructions:

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,

Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
But seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.

([Http://tyros.leb.net/gibran/](http://tyros.leb.net/gibran/))

Commenting on the previous quotation, it is noted that Gibran does not believe in the adult dominance on childhood. This is due to the particularity of the world of childhood, in which children have their own thoughts, mode of thinking, imagination. Children, from Gibran’s view, should be given their childhood away from the adult dominance because they have their own world and imagination that are different from the adults’.

Thus, Gibran attempts to reform the adult ideologies about childhood that they are incapable of thinking or making their own lives. He refuses to accept the adult authority over children’s thinking and behaviors because children should be left to their own world of thinking, imagination which is only owned by them.

Additionally, it should be noted that Gibran wants childhood to be a stage different from adulthood because it has its own characteristics. He does not want adults to interfere in this stage because such thing will never make it a fruitful stage of life. He like Philip Pullman in *Northern Lights* who wants to free childhood from the adult domination that might turn it into a dull stage of life. In other words, Gibran does want the adults to influence children and to let them think, imagine as they want because this is their own world. He wants to root in the minds of adults that childhood is related to futurity, to aspirations, to imagination. It is not related to that past that the adults are adhered to. Children, from Gibran’s view, should be given the chance to think and imagine as they want. He draws the adults’ attention to the fact that they have lost their own childhood that become in their minds, so children should be given their own chance of entertaining their own childhood.

Furthermore, Gibran highlights the adults’ role in giving children their own way of life when he says:

You are the bows from which your children  
As living arrows are sent forth.  
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
And He bends you with His might  
That His arrows may go swift and far.  
Let your bending in the archer’s hand be for gladness;  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
So He loves also the bow that is stable.

In the previous quotation, Gibran draws the parents’ attention to the right way of dealing with children, in which parents are similar to the bows and children to the arrows. In other words, Gibran says that the adults should pave the future way for children reasonably and should be flexible and loving for them because God loves

both parents and children. Furthermore, Gibran advises parents to be examples for their children if they want them to be good products in life. Here, Gibran highlights the moral responsibility of parenthood, in which parents should be guiding their children to the right path in a flexible and reasonable way instead of making them inactive in life.

It seems clear that Gibran is influenced by Rousseau's view about *Childhood* who claims in his book *Emile* (1762):

We know nothing of childhood: And with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray... Nature wants children to be children before they are men... Childhood has many ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for them. (qtd. In Jenks, 1996, pp.2-3)

Nizar Qabbani in his poem entitled *The Child Scribbles*, highlights children's innocence, spontaneity, creativity, and transparency when he says:

My fault, my greatest fault,  
O sea-eyed princess,  
Was to love you  
As a child loves.  
(The greatest lovers,  
After all, are children)

.....

My weakness was to see  
The world with the logic of a child.

(<http://www.poemhunter.com>)

It clearly noted quotation that Qabbani, in his address to his beloved, likens himself to children who are innocent, pure, spontaneous, and passionate. Although Gibran considers this as a mistake in his dealing with his beloved, his words reflect his view of childhood as a stage of innocence, creativity, and emotionality. His mentioning of "the logic of a child" reveals the world of childhood which is not related to the world of adulthood which is full of selfishness, dishonesty, and harshness.

Qabbani highlights the distinction between childhood and adulthood when he addresses in his poem "Verse" the Arab children after the occupation of Palestine by Israel. He considers them the source of hope for the older generation who will change the depressing state in the minds of the adults.

Qabbani highlights the purity of childhood which resembles "snow". He does not want children to be spoiled by reading about the defeated, depressed, and weak older generation. Even he insists on not making children to read about the adults' news and thoughts because they are weak, hypocrite, and defeated. Qabbani likens childhood to spring season which is full of hope and fertility whereas he likens adulthood to the fruitless life which is full of defeat. The poet is hopeful that children will make victory over defeat (<http://www.poemhunter.com>).

It should be noted here that Qabbani in both poems glorifies the stage of childhood over adulthood. He believes in the purity and innocence of childhood; he views childhood as a stage of life that is full of hopes, purity, and strength. On the contrary, he undermines the stage of adulthood which is related to depression, defeat, and hypocrisy. The poet does not want childhood to be pure and to be influenced by adulthood.

In Jacques Prevert's poem entitled "l'enfance" (childhood), the poet depicts the gap between childhood and adulthood, and how adults despise children of being immature and narrow-minded. The poet depicts how adults always view children of being "small". He does not view them small because they say what they know. The poet blames the adult educators who want children to be nature and grownups, and forget about childhood as a distinct stage from adulthood. The poet stresses on children's need to dream and to be with other children like them (<http://www.wikipoemes.com/poemes/jacques-prevert/lenfance.php>).

It seems clear that both Qabbani and Prevert agree with what the writer Judy Blume claims that:

I don't know what childhood innocence is supposed to mean. Children are inexperienced, but they are not innocent. Childhood can be a terrible time of life. No kid wants to stay a kid. It is only adults who have forgotten who say, "if only I could be a kid again." The fantasy of childhood is to be an adult. (qtd. in West, 1988, pp.11-12).

In other words, both poets believe in children's ability to think and to take decisions in life. To them, children's innocence should not justify adults' tendency to protect children because they are innocent. It should be stated here that Qabbani, Prevert, and Blume agree with what Lock and Rousseau believe that children are innocent and good but they will be corrupted when they contact with adults.

Similarly, Hunt (2009) seems in harmony with Gibran, Prevert, and Blume when he claims in his article "Instruction and Delight" that

Texts for children do not portray childhood as it was or is, but portray childhood as the writers wished it to be seen for political, sociological or dramatic reasons...children's books say a great deal to adults about the relationships of adults to childhood, or about the concept of childhood at a particular period, rather than portraying actual childhoods. (p.14)

Here, it should be noted that the shared thread among Gibran, Prevert, and Blume lies in the interference of adulthood in the world of childhood. Such interference limits the notion of childhood and makes it a product of adults' tendencies and ideologies.

Additionally, some writers like Qabbani, Prevert, and Gibran are confused about writing for children because this stage of life has its distinct features that are not similar to adulthood. Ransome, the author of *Swallows and Amazons* reflects this idea when he says: "I do not know how to write for children and have the gravest

doubts as to whether anybody should try to do any such thing” (1937/1977, p.6). This is due to the general conception of childhood which “is generally defined either by physical and mental characteristics-size, development or immaturity, and so on” (Hunt, 2009, p.23).

The previous poets seem to agree with what the thinkers in the field of childhood say that “the adults... are protecting themselves or their idea of childhood” (Hunt 24). Additionally, like Prevert, Hunt draws the adult readers to the fact that “we can, perhaps, make pragmatic guesses about what a child can understand, or what is irrelevant to the child and might thus be ignored—but these are only guesses” (Ibid., p.16).

Like Gibran, Qabbani, and Prevert, Victor Hugo, the French poet, glorifies childhood as a stage of life full of purity, beauty, and innocence when he says in his poem entitled “Lorsque l’enfant paraît” (When the Child Appears):

....His sweet face  
Which shines, makes all eyes shine,  
And the saddest faces, the dirtiest,  
Lose their frowns suddenly seeing the child appearing,  
Innocent and joyous.

Hugo considers the child’s beauty and innocence a source of changing all people into beautiful. He reflects the joy that the child brings with him to parents when he comes to life and the sense of protection that the parents have toward their child:

When the child comes in,  
Joy arrives, and we light up.  
We laugh, we cry out, we call him,  
And his mother trembles  
To see him walk.

The poet highlights the difference between the adult world and the child’s one when he likens the child to “dawn,” “sweet murmurs,” and golden rays”. Whereas he compares the adults to:

...the forest whose sad branches  
Come forth at your sweet murmurs  
And golden rays  
(Trans. by Frankie Kemp, 2015)

It seems clear from the previous quotation that Hugo considers childhood as the stage of innocence and purity whereas adulthood as the stage of sadness because of its lack of beautiful moments.

Hugo has highlighted the innocence and purity in his poem which are not corrupted by the adults’ evil acts and desires:

Because your beautiful eyes are pure and infinitely  
sweet,

Because your little happy and blessed hands  
Have never done evil—  
Never has your innocence been touched by mire  
.....  
Beautiful angel—  
A golden halo.  
You are among us the dove of our ark.  
Your tender and pure feet are ageless  
Where they walk.  
.....  
You look at the world untainted.  
Twice innocent—body and soul  
Free from all impurities.

Thus, it is noticed in the previous quotation that Hugo makes a sharp distinction between the world of childhood which is similar to the world of angels because it is innocent and pure and the world of adulthood which is full of evil and impurity. The poet wants the world of childhood to remain pure and away from the influence of the adults who will taint it with their evil feelings. Even Hugo relates the world of childhood to his supplication for God to keep children in the world of adulthood to make it sound beautiful and pure:

Lord God, save me! Save all those I love!  
.....  
From evil’s triumph.  
And never let us see, Lord,  
Summer without  
Rosy flowers,  
Empty birdcages,  
Hives without bees,  
Or a house without children.

It is noticed here that Hugo relates the world of childhood with nature which is a romantic feeling, in which both children and nature represent innocence and purity.

Hugo in his poem entitled “Every child we educate is a soul,” highlights the adult educational responsibility toward children in educating them in order to make them good products in society:

Every child we educate is a man we gain.  
Ninety thieves out of one hundred in prison  
Never once went to school

.....  
Ignorance is the night that opens upon an abyss.  
The school is sanctuary as much as chapel.  
The alphabet that the child with his finger spells  
Contains virtue in each letter; ...

.....  
So, to the little child, give the little book.  
Walk, lamp in hand, so he can follow you.  
Thus, Hugo draws the adults’ attention to their role in educating children and taking care of them to avoid

committing crimes in the future. In other words, Hugo wants to say that children today are the future tomorrow, and adults should not be ignorant to their children. The poet agrees with the thinkers' views in the eighteenth century who emphasize "the importance of education, and particularly maternal education," in which such education to children was "not only as a personal responsibility but as a national...imperial, duty" (Grenby, 2009, p.45).

It seems clear that what Hugo has said is harmonious with what Kim Reynolds has said about adults' role in helping children "construct a discourse of their own to empower them as political subjects" (Keenan & Thompson, 2004, p.147). In other words, taking care of children's minds is a responsibility of adults, "What goes into children's minds is our responsibility, just as much as what goes into their stomachs" (Hunt, 2009, p.16).

It seems clear that Hugo agrees with the Enlightenment thinkers who think that

a child was simply a miniature adult, a chrysalis from which a fully rational and moral being would duly emerge, providing parents and educators did their job properly. There was no question of children having an independent imaginative life of any importance, or of their being able to perceive anything that was invisible to adults. (Carpenter, 2009, p.56)

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## CONCLUSION

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It can be concluded that all poets in this study have agreed on the view of childhood as a stage of innocence, goodness, and purity which is similar to Lock's and Rousseau's. Like Lock and Rousseau's viewpoints, the poets highlight the importance of this stage of life as a stage of exploration and learning from life instead of imitating adult's mode of life and thinking. They reflect their refusal of adult's interference in childhood life because this might corrupt its purity and goodness. However, although Hugo romanticizes the stage of childhood as a stage of beauty, purity, and goodness, he, like Lock, highlights the importance of educating and training children by adults to avoid making them criminals in adulthood. It should be stated that although the poets belong to different cultures and ethnicities,

they all highlight the notion of childhood as the stage of innocence and goodness in life.

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