“Decolonizing” the minds of children in Africa: Youssef in Egypt and Achebe in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to shed light on how children’s literature in Africa deserves to be studied because African writers “decolonize” the minds of African children and children and adults around the world.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper defines children’s literature from an African perspective and the “decolonization of the mind.” This is done to examine how two African writers provide narratives for children inspired by their cultures. They deal with themes, characters and symbols that interest children and adults.

Findings – Achebe and Youssef crossed many borders: the world of children and adults, animals and humans, vice and virtue, supernatural and real. Their stories take the reader on journeys that involve enriching, engaging and inspiring adventures.

Research limitations/implications – Youssef and Achebe are prolific writers. Providing a survey of what is available in Arabic and Nigerian literature for children, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Practical implications – This paper sends a message to those in charge of the curriculum in schools in Egypt, the Arab countries, Africa and the world at large: decolonize the syllabi in schools because the world is not black and white. Literature for children that encourages critical thinking is available by African writers in Egypt, Nigeria and elsewhere.

Social implications – The works discussed show that African writers are creative, and their works inspire the African child with pride in his/her identity, culture and heritage.

Originality/value – To the best of the author’s knowledge, no one has compared Egyptian and Nigerian literature for children before. Youssef and Achebe provide evidence that “Good literature gives the child a place in the world … and the world a place in the child.” – Astrid Lindgren.

Keywords Children’s literature, Comparative literature, Decolonizing the mind, Egypt and Nigeria

Paper type Research paper

This paper discusses trends in writing for children in Africa to “decolonize” the African mind and the minds of children everywhere. The three trends involve writing to revive the oral tradition of the ancestors, resist the stereotypical ideas of the colonial era and maintain a sense of identity. Many African writers for children in the north and south are sending similar messages to their children: that their ancestors have excelled in many fields, their countries are rich and beautiful and their cultures deserve preservation. This paper will provide evidence that writers in Africa are committed to dealing with figures that convey a positive image of characters who have strength, pride and dignity to shatter the negative self-image that some African children might have. They write about and for African children to empower them and stress that Africa has its own culture, history, identity and its own stories, heroes and superheroes that ought to be shared. The question is how does a writer for children in Egypt and another in Nigeria write to cross the borders of Africa and deal with themes that decolonize the minds of their children and of children in general? To answer this question, the focus will be on four works for children who are about eight years old (the beginning of Piaget’s “concrete operational” stage), namely, The Flute (1975) and The Drum (1978) by Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) and Unique Encounters: Al-Haytham meets Newton and “I am a Burāq” by Abdel-Tawab Youssef (1928-2015).
Good literature gives the child a place in the world . . . and the world a place in the child.

— Astrid Lindgren

Introduction

The interest in children’s literature as a genre has been growing in Egypt, in Africa and in the world. Much has changed since 1981 when Egoff (1981, p. 1) claimed that generations of critics have reached no consensus on a definition of children’s literature, since works of fiction and non-fiction for children, namely, books, plays, magazines, poems, songs and insightful writings of a literary nature in journals and magazines for children are easily identifiable on bookshelves. Like literature for adults, these are works of art for children that inspire many readers at different stages of their lives and are inspired by real life and imagination. Critics, writers and scholars agree that the unique distinguishing factor in children’s literature is that it addresses a specific young audience. Some critics believe that the problem is some works for adults are read by children, and some works for children are appreciated by adults (Oberstein, 1996, p. 17; Townsend, 1990, p. 61). This should not be regarded as a problem, since children at an early stage of childhood (until around 12) are not independent, there is a stage when the choice of what they read, watch and learn is the choice of adults, namely, parents, grandparents, teachers, librarians and older siblings.

During the 20th century, a division of the American Library Association, namely, the Association for Library Science to Children has been honoring prominent American artists and writers for children by giving a number of prestigious awards: The Newbery Medal was first awarded in 1922 and The Caldecott Medal in 1938. In 2002, The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) was founded by the Swedish government to “honor the memory” of Sweden’s most celebrated writer for children and “to promote interest in children’s and young adult literature around the world” (http://www.alma.se/en/about-the-award/). In France, the Institute of Charles Perrault and the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) founded in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1953 and UNESCO are all fruitful efforts that have led to the booming interest in children’s literature and culture. On 5–9 September 2004, the IBBY held its 29th Conference in Cape Town to pay homage to African literature for children with the theme “The Renaissance of African Children’s Literature.” The Bologna Children’s Book Fair, held in Italy, also helps in inspiring writers for children to interact and exchange ideas. The one held in 1999 was particularly important in highlighting African writers and illustrators.

With such numerous and vibrant activities, and with names of prominent writers for children and critics of children’s literature everywhere in the world, if there is no clear extended definition of the genre, critics and scholars are to blame. Since the beginning of the 21st century, international conferences focusing on children’s culture have attracted participants from all over the world. Those on children’s literature have enriched the field and have been inspiring for writers who discovered that this is a rich area that still requires attention and in-depth research. In the case of literature for children produced in Africa, there is evidence that African folktales and the Arabian Nights have affected the west, and western development in writing for children has affected African writers in the north and south. The exchange happened first because some westerners lived in Africa during the colonial era and others went on voyages of discovery to Africa. Secondly, Africans who went to America, either as slaves or free men, carried with them fresh stories that were different and, therefore, quite captivating to the western audience. Third, stories from Arabian Nights like Ali Baba, Sindbad and Aladdin have also inspired writers for children in the west. Other means of exchange of stories were through Egyptians/Arabs and Africans, being inspired by western ideas of freedom and communicating this sense of freedom to liberate their own countries.
Attempts at defining children’s literature are numerous and varied. It will be appropriate in the context of discussing literature for children in Africa to cite Philomena Osazee Fayose, the Nigerian scholar and writer for children. For her, African literature for children is that piece of literary creation which draws its subject matter from the African worldview and which is written in a language and style the African child can comprehend. It must be seen as promoting African culture and enable the child or young adult to understand and appreciate his or her environment better and it must give him or her some pleasure. (1991, p. 74)

This pertinent definition is significant because it pinpoints five elements that African literature for children ought to address, namely, “language and style” that the child is familiar with, comprehension, “promoting” an African culture, assisting the child “to understand and appreciate his or her environment better” and entertaining him/her. These elements are comprehensive, cross borders and, in fact, can be applied to literature for children anywhere in the world. When works for children are successful in satisfying these elements, analyzing these works in depth can reveal a great deal about the past and present and possibly the future of the culture these works represent. Fayose’s idea that African literature for children “must be seen as promoting African culture” indicates and implies an awareness that there is room to encourage growth and development in Africa, but that Africa has a great deal to share as well.

The stories that African writers for children share are counter-hegemonic narratives that liberate the Africans from the negative stereotypical images of the colonial powers. Because children are the future, if the African child is able “to understand and appreciate his or her environment” through stories about the rich African heritage, they will acquire confidence and pride to not only preserve but promote this heritage for future generations. Commenting on Fayose’s definition, Granqvist (1997) in “Who is building the House’ Myth, Nation and Culture in African and Caribbean Children’s Literature” said,

The definition postulates that there operates “an African worldview” in whose service the literature may be conscripted, that the child’s interpretive competence is matched by the intelligibility of the text, and that this negotiation yields at least “some pleasure.” (23)

But indeed, African literature for children does reflect “an African worldview”, since literature, in general, reflects the society that produces it. But what also needs to be highlighted is that Africa is a continent with countries that represent different cultures and worldviews. More about this will be discussed later.

In my experience as a child and as an adult, storytelling has been powerful and enriching. In and out of class, I often find myself slipping into storytelling mode. Whether these stories narrate a personal experience or allude to a literary work, students more often than not listen attentively. Why? The answer came to me when Clarissa Pinkola Estes (xxiii) asks the profound question “What Does the Soul Want?” she argues that “above all, the soul wants stories.” She adds,

If courage and bravery are the muscles of the spiritual drive that help a person to become whole, then stories are the bones. Together, they move the episodes of the life myth forward. Why stories? Because the soul’s way of communicating is to teach. And its language is symbols and themes—all of which have been found, since the beginning of time, in stories. I would even go so far as to say, the soul needs stories. (Estes, xxxi)

It is true this is a generalization, but one that is valid. Good stories address logos (the mind of the child when dealing with themes, characters and events), ethos (aspects of culture) and pathos (the feelings of fear, anger, etc.) all at once and, therefore, they cross borders. With Estes’s shift from “wants” to “needs,” she is not simply stressing desire, but a requirement that must be satisfied. Failing to do this can have grave consequences. Focusing on children, Estes
explains that “One fine way parents, teachers, and others who cherish the minds of the young can rebalance and educate modern children’s psyches is to tell them, show them, and involve them in deeper stories, on a regular basis” (Estes, xxxiii).

In the English Teaching Forum Volume 50 Number 3 published in 2012, Robert E. Jones writes about “Creating a Storytelling Classroom for a Storytelling World”. The four steps that develop what he calls “conversational storytellers” are: 1. Model story with questions to shed light on “the story’s generic structure” (a story with a purpose); 2. Students “practice telling stories of their own”; 3. “Learners add interest to their stories”; and 4. “Active role of the listener” to give feedback. To follow Robert Jones, my model Arabic story is about Amm Abdelazim’s “The Water Pump” by the late Abdel-Tawab Youssef, the prominent and prolific Egyptian writer for children. Second-grade primary students in all Egyptian public schools read an English translation of this story in their Connect textbook for the purpose of introducing children to an Egyptian writer for children rather than western writers only. The story is set in rural Egypt rather than in England or America. The one-legged farmer Amm Abdelazim (who lost one leg in the 1956 war) from Beni Swaif, an Egyptian governorate, narrates a story about how he warned his wife and neighbors not to deprive the villagers of the fresh water of his water pump while he was out of town. When he returned, the water pump was out of order because it had not been used. While fixing it, Amm Abdelazim found rust in the heart of the water pump. Cleaning the rust, he reflected on how vital it is to have a clean heart. The story of “The Water Pump” was read on Cairo Radio by Abla Fadila, the well-known announcer of a popular children’s program that aired for more than four decades (as of the beginning of the 1970s). As a child, this story taught me what really matters in life: neither money, strength nor power. The idea that “the heart must be clean” is one I lived with all my life.

At the early stage when the character of the child is being shaped, some of the stories children need to be exposed to are ones that help in the socialization process and in hopefully positively affect do not change the way they think and act. James Smith succinctly describes how children’s literature can help parents when he said,

Through their children’s reading, parents may hope to influence their attitudes and actions toward family, neighborhood, school, church, nation, or the world society. They may use books to shape a child’s values, to create or change his ideals. Such counsel, embodied in fiction, poetry, or nonfiction, may cover a tremendous range of behavior matters—obedience, independence, physical safety, doing chores, being honest, study habits, hygiene, attitudes toward school, being kind to animals. For many parents the book is still primarily a moral agent, an influence upon belief and behavior (1967, p. 68).

The key point here is that children’s literature is not only of value to the child but to the parents/adults who are not equipped to teach and entertain children in ways that works of literature and works of art in general can. Literature empowers the child and the adult as well. The question is how far do African writers for children address the needs of children and their parents?

**Methodology**

To discuss or compare the works for children produced in Africa is mission impossible simply because, first, what is being published, creatively and academically is immense; and second, Africa is a continent with a diversity of cultures. Evidence of this diversity will be immediately obvious by examining the child protagonist of a work produced in Egypt and another in the south of Africa. One difference is the one from the south will portray a black child but the one from the north will not. Comparing the problems that children in Egypt and in the south of Africa suffer from, some problems are shared while others are not. Generally,
although many children in Africa suffer from poor living conditions, there are local and global efforts to address this challenge (but this is not within the scope of such a short paper). Writers and illustrators addressing these children also share similar problems: they are not well recognized compared to those addressing adults, and the struggle to make a living hinders their progress and development in writing for children.

Another important similarity is that in Africa at large, addressing children through literature occurred in three stages: one in which literature was based on the oral tradition; a second stage in which the literature of the colonial powers prevailed; and a third post-colonial stage. Because there are cultural differences between the different countries in Africa, the content of the stories that belong to each stage are quite different. Whereas stories from ancient Egypt and the Arabian Nights constitute the legacy of the Egyptians, trickster and animal stories like Anansi spider stories were integral to African folklore. So, the stages seem similar, but the cultural and historical differences are many. In order not to go beyond the focus of this paper, it will be necessary to allude to the fact that all African countries suffered from imperialism and colonialism that lasted for centuries rather than decades. When such conditions prevail for long, they affect the mind of the people: change and decolonization become difficult. Mbalia (1995) correctly points out that decolonization involves “a path of rediscovery and reclamation” (22).

The aim of this paper is to discuss trends in writing for children in Africa to “decolonize” the African mind and the minds of children everywhere. The three trends involve writing to revive the oral tradition of the ancestors, resist the stereotypical ideas of the colonial era and maintain a sense of identity. The question that this paper raises is how does a writer for children in Egypt and another in Nigeria write to cross the borders of Africa and deal with themes that decolonize the minds of their children and of children in general? To answer this complex question, this paper will focus on four works for children who are about eight years old (the beginning of Piaget’s “concrete operational” stage when the child understands symbolism and pretend play), namely, The Flute (1977) and The Drum (1977) by Achebe (1930-2013) and Unique Encounters: Al-Haytham meets Newton and “I am a Buraq” by Youssef (1928-2015). Written by two contemporary African writers, these stories not only enrich the imagination of children in ways that ought to be explored but also play an important role in decolonizing their minds. Initially, it is necessary to address the question “What does “decolonizing the mind” mean?” and secondly to make a few relevant observations about literature for children that cross borders.

Although clearly children’s literature is a multi-disciplinary field of knowledge, and childhood studies is a growing discipline in a few academic institutions in the west, this paper will not dwell on the many theories scholars deal with when analysing the four literary works this study focuses on. This paper will provide evidence that writers in Africa are committed to dealing with ideas that highlight cultural values and characters that convey a positive image: ones who have strength, pride and dignity, to shatter the negative self-image that some African children might have. Achebe, Youssef and others write about and for African children to empower them and stress that African countries have a diversity of cultures, histories, identities and stories, heroes and superheroes that ought to be shared. Writers in different countries in Africa send similar messages to their children: that their ancestors have excelled in many fields, their countries are rich and beautiful and their cultures deserve to be preserved.

As is well known, under the guise of “educating the brutes,” when one nation controls or governs another, the claim is that the inhabitants of the occupied country are unable to run their own affairs. This claim gives the occupier power to deprive the people of the occupied country of their freedom and exploit the land and everything on it. Literature of the colonial powers had a negative effect on the readers of colonized countries: it dealt with the western experience, ignored the African experience and made the Africans feel inferior and unworthy
of being portrayed in literature. The Africans were made to feel that African history and culture are not worthy of attention. Aware of the riches of the land that is occupied, the colonizer uses a discourse that highlights the backwardness of the people and their inability to govern their country and make use of these riches. Such a discourse, poverty and the absence of a good education system lead to what Fanon (1961) calls “a collapse of the ego” (154) in *The Wretched of the Earth*. This causes hopelessness, apathy, a sense of inferiority and inadequacy and leads to crime, violence and even more poverty and ignorance.

Decolonize/Decolonization, the verb and the noun, imply and indicate that both action and a process are needed to free those who have been colonized from subjugation which is both physical and mental. Whereas the first step of the process entails being aware of the destruction and devastation caused by the colonial powers in exploiting the people and land, the action involves physically freeing the people and land from this disease. This metaphor of a disease of the body and the mind requires the wisdom of the therapist to write a prescription to eventually lead those needing therapy to be cured through what Ngũgĩ wa (1986), in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* regards as “a fundamental social transformation of the structures of our societies.” He adds that the “Prescription of the correct cure is dependent on a rigorous analysis of reality.” This rigorous analysis of reality is needed on every level and in every field of knowledge. Although this might seem like a sweeping generalization, it is not. Colonialism has affected different countries in both similar and different ways, and the process of decolonization must be applied to the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of life. Timothy Morris’s *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (1995) is one simple example of how poetry, one of the genres of literature, requires an effort in creating awareness that a revolution in what is being published, studied and read as part of the canon ought to be revised. The implication is that the ongoing revolutionary efforts should entail a preoccupation with the production of knowledge by those who have been silenced for long. Even when African writers speak or write, they do not get the attention they deserve in being published, read, heard and or studied.

When Achebe gave a presentation in 1964 discussing “The African Writer and the English Language,” he asked the question “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s?” By so doing, he created an awareness that abandoning one’s language and, therefore, one’s culture and identity is an act of “dreadful betrayal.” It would also be an act of “dreadful betrayal” on my part to ignore African writers who believe in the value of addressing children and empowering them through literary works that can inspire hope in the future of decolonized Africans.

**Children’s literature crossing borders**

Now, a few observations on literature for children that crossed borders are necessary. First, many of the characters, places and ideas that children read about in literary works are cherished and remembered by children as they grow. Literature must be either/both informative and entertaining. Aladdin, Sindbad, Ali Baba, Snow White, Alice in Wonderland and many more are fun stories that children around the world read and enjoy. But because nowadays different kinds of screens attract the child of the 21st century, many new virtual characters have crossed many borders. Second, the other feature that most literary critics of this genre stress is didacticism. John Stephens in *Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction* argues that “Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience” (1992, p. 3). Perry Nodelman stresses that children’s literature (fables, folktales, poems and plays) is “didactic” (1996, p. 288). So, literature for children is linked to pedagogy and has a pragmatic and functional role to convey what society regards
as moral but must avoid propaganda. In the case of the four works that are the focus of this paper, they do not only instruct the Egyptian/Arab and Nigerian children each writer addresses, but they address aspects of Egyptian/Arab and Nigerian culture to the children of the world. Third, the language a bilingual writer uses indicates a choice: bilingual Egyptian writing to children in Arabic, for example, sends a subliminal message to Egyptian children that Arabic is the rich language of their culture and heritage and ought to be the medium of communication. Ngugi wa Thiong'o rightly argues that “the Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). Being a native speaker of Arabic, choosing Egyptian works for children is not difficult, but choosing a text in any African language other than Arabic is not as simple, to say the least. Because of the linguistic diversity in Africa, with Nigeria having more than 500 languages, the Somali, Berber, Swahili, Hausa, Nilo-Saharan languages, Niger-Congo languages and the list goes on, I had no choice but to focus on texts in English that crossed many borders.

This is not a survey of African works for children that crossed many borders, but the few that focus on African children that will be cited are notable. The white American writer and illustrator living in New York, Ezra Jack Keats, produced The Snowy Day, the first picture book he wrote and illustrated. He introduced Peter, a black child, as the main figure in the story, experiencing the joys of playing with snow. This picture book won the Caldecott Medal in 1963 and Peter remained the hero of a series of five more picture books that mark his growth to adolescence in A Letter to Amy (1968). This attempt at “enculturation,” a term defined by Berit Kjos as developing the consciousness of the reader to accept other cultures and universal values (1995, p. 255), elevates the position of the black child to appeal to the American child/reader. This series reveals the ideology of Keats who is propagating ethnic equality. It also shows that changing the attitude of the American/western society regarding ethnicity and racial discrimination requires the efforts of Americans/westerners in raising their children to appreciate global culture. This implies that children’s literature has a significant socializing influence.

Even a quick survey of a sample of what is produced for children in different African countries will provide evidence that African writers empower their children to free them from the stereotypical idea that Africans are slaves and instill in them pride in the richness and beauty of Africa and in African history and culture. To stress the importance of the local languages and to instill pride in Swahili, for example, Muriel and Tom Feelings, author and illustrator, published the picture books Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book (1992) and “Moja Means One: Swahili Counting Book.” Even when the books for children are in English, they allude to African themes. The nonfiction book A Is for Africa (1997) by the Nigerian writer and photographer Ifeoma Onyefulu introduces 26 pictures that portray the diversity of African life through the bond between members of the family, traditional life in the village and the richness and beauty of color in the African environment and art not only in Nigeria. For her, “B is for the Beads a girl may wear on her head, ears or neck”; “R is for River. Africans believe many rivers are sacred;” “E is the embrace we give our loved ones;” “K is for Kola nuts offered to guests to show warmth and friendship;” “S is for Shaking hands;” “T is for Turban;” “V is for Village,” etc.

To make their children proud of their identity and culture, Africans publish many books about the well-known African safari experience. We All Went On Safari (2004) by Laurie Krebs (Author), and Julia Cairns (Illustrator) is about a group of friends who learn to count elephants, lions and monkeys from 1 to 10 in both English and Swahili during a journey in Tanzania. The book also introduces information about the Tanzanian people, environment and culture. To teach children to have a sense of responsibility, Cunnane (2006) wrote For You are a Kenyan Child. Ana Juan illustrated the story that portrays the relationship between a child and a mother in a village where “Roosters crow and you wake one morning in the green hills of Africa, sun lemon bright over eucalyptus trees full of doves.” In one colorful sentence,
the child/reader wakes up in a heavenly scene: the morning, the sun, roosters and doves, the hill and trees, and the “you” is immersed in the beauty of nature in Africa. Girls are also portrayed in a positive light in African stories. Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters by Steptoe (1987) is a story that blends an African folktale and the Cinderella story to shed light on the culture, history and geography of Zimbabwe. In this story, the King holds a party to choose a wife and Mufaro takes his two daughters, the kind Nyasha and selfish Manyara. The question is: who will the King choose to become the Queen? Weaving fairytales, African folk stories and oral literature with contemporary stories is an enriching combination.

Spiderman is one of the most popular American superheroes, but Africans choose to deal with the spider in their own unique way. In African stories, spiders are depicted in a variety of ways: as regular spiders that crawl; spiders in human clothes and/or as a human with the eight legs of a spider. Sometimes spiders acquire human attributes like greed, for example. In African folktales, the sky God Nyame possessed all the stories in the world, which he saved in a secure box beside his throne. In his quest to have access to these stories, Anansi or Anancy (a word in the Akan language of Ghana which means spider’, a well-known character in African folktales), the spider man who is also a trickster God, had to overcome three sly creatures to reach his goal. His success shows his persistence, resistance and determination. He, therefore, has skills and acquires wisdom from the stories he possesses. A Story, A Story by Haley (1970) and Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti (Ashanti is the present-day Ghana) by McDermott are spider stories adapted from this known African folktale. Published in Highlights, the well-known magazine for children, is another spider story retold by Sassi and illustrated by Christian Epanya namely The Greedy Spider: A Folktale from Ghana. Here the spider is a mother who is not motherly in any way. The writer merges real facts about the shape of the spider and what the spider eats with a fictitious story about this particular greedy mother.

Chinua Achebe
The Flute and the Drum
Inspired by Igbo (people of southeast Nigeria) folktales, Chinua Achebe’s two picture books The Flute (illustrated by Tayo Adenaike, a member of a group of seven artists who call themselves the Nsukka Group, the name of a town in southeast Nigeria) and The Drum (illustrated by Anne Nwokoye), belong to the postcolonial phase of writing for children and confirm Achebe’s belief that “the writer is a teacher” (Hopes and Impediments). Both stories are idyllic, focus on musical instruments which allude to the importance of music in the African culture and are about the disastrous outcome of greed. Like all stories for children, on the superficial level, the basic story line in both is simple. In The Drum, the Tortoise, who is in search of food, manages to find the land of the spirits. They give him a magic drum that provides food in abundance and gives him the power to become the king of the animals, only temporarily. In The Flute, a man takes the members of his family to work at a farm and one of his children forgets his flute and is determined to go back to get it. In both cases, the details of the stories show that they are far from simple.

Achebe’s The Drum, which focuses on a magic musical instrument, is in the tradition of West African Tortoise tales. The development of critical animal studies (CAS) aligned with the animal rights movement as well as anthropomorphism, that is, to attribute human qualities to animals, has discovered that the portrayal of animals in literature for children enhances the bond between children and animals. Human-Animal Studies (HAS) which started in the late 1990s and trans-species psychology established by the American psychologist and ecologist Gay Bradshaw discuss the impact of trauma and oppression on both and the benefits each party reaps. Gary and McHugh in (2014) “In it Together: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies” explain that
scholars are interested in the whys, hows, and whats of human-animal relations: why animals are represented and configured in different ways in human cultures and societies around the world; how they are imagined, experienced, and given significance; what these relationships might signify about being human; and what about these relationships might be improved for the sake of the individuals as well as the communities concerned. (2)

In addition to referring to endless ways in which humans and animals get together, this extract implies that animals are functional in a variety of ways in different cultures. Exploring how animals can be symbols of desirable and undesirable qualities is important. Orr (1992) convincingly argues that stories that focus on animals help in the development of “ecologically literate children.”

In Achebe’s *The Drum*, what does the story of the Tortoise teach the child? Set “long, long ago, when the world was young” (1), the story starts with a description of harmony and affluence at a time when “the crops grew and there was enough for everyone to eat and drink” (1). Human qualities are attributed to the speaking Tortoise and the drum is a gift from the land of the spirits, which introduces the element of the supernatural to the story. But why a Tortoise? Is Joseph (1997) right in asserting that this story is “a satirical attack on colonialist European values”? (150) By nature, the lion is the king of the animals, and the differences between the lion and the tortoise allude to who is king by right and who is not. The character of the tortoise in *The Drum* acquaints children with greed and figures who strive to gain political power. Known as a reptile that lives long, has a hard, protective shell and is slow but achieves its purpose, the Tortoise has qualities that enable it to take control. Initially, the Tortoise is described as searching for food when there is a shortage, by collecting dates on top of a palm tree. Searching and storing food are activities that humans and animals share. As a reader, the child is made aware of the hard work required to overcome such a problem. When the dates fall in a hole, the Tortoise goes on a journey down the hole to find them and encounters the land of the spirits. This is what Joseph Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* regards as “The Call to Adventure” (45) and the Tortoise going after the dates is what he calls “A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unexpected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (46). The reader crosses from the real world to one that is supernatural. It is at this stage of the plot that the imaginary can become real: the manipulative Tortoise becomes king.

The portrayal of the tortoise subtly trains the reader/child to be a good judge of character and to understand that the outcome of greed is never positive. Because one of the children of the spirits has eaten the fruit, the Tortoise asks for compensation and is given a drum. In demanding compensation, the tortoise now acquires a human quality. When the drum proves not to simply be a musical instrument, but a magic drum that provides an abundance of food, the versatile tortoise shares the food on the condition that he becomes king of the animals. In a community of animals, the lion (Odum in this case) should be the king, being the strongest. Clearly, this drum allows the tortoise to gain power and exploit those who are hungry. It is easy for an eight-year-old to understand that the tortoise does not deserve this honor. And although a tortoise is generally reclusive, this one is portrayed as seeking power and becoming king.

At a dramatic moment, while preparing for the coronation, the elephant, who is assigned by the tortoise to beat the drum, breaks it. Because the drum was meant to function as a tool to announce the coronation of the new king, suspense is created. The question is what will the tortoise do because the food supply stopped? Determined to rise to power, the tortoise journeys back to the world of the spirits, gets a child to eat another fruit and demands another drum. Offered many drums to choose from, the tortoise chooses the largest. Poetic justice is achieved: what is the result of beating the new drum? Unaware that this drum is different, the animals who wanted food said “We! Want! It! Now! We! Want! It! Now! The King! Of! Drums!”
What follows leads the child/reader to understand that the irrational reaction of the masses can be tragic. Rather than music and food, flies, wasps, and bees erupt and the animals “scattered in every direction of the world and have not yet stopped running” (33). The animals “all live a happy life” (I) at the beginning, but at the end, they are “howling and bleeding” (33). The tortoise brought about destruction and this indirectly teaches the reader to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong.

Achebe’s The Flute, like The Drum, starts with the “timeless” “Long ago”, focuses on a musical instrument and has a plot that includes two journeys, one that is successful and another that is not. In The Flute, the beginning sheds light on an aspect of Nigerian culture that is a fact of life: “Long ago there was a man who had two wives.” If the idea of the two wives shocks the non-African child/reader, the “Long ago” makes up for the shocking piece of information that this man has two wives: one is old and one young; the old has many children, but the young has only one. Following this introduction, the plot starts with this family going to a farm on the border of the land of the humans and the land of the spirits. The members of the family are aware that they must return home before dark because during the night the farm is inhabited by spirits. A problem arises when one of the boys forgets the flute he made and cherishes on the farm and is determined to go back at night to retrieve it. There is a sense of mystery and danger in this first journey because the boy is crossing the border of “time” and intruding on the land of the spirits: his parents object because he is their only son, but he insists and goes. Arousing the anger of the spirits who inhabit the farm at night, the boy is not intimidated when they communicate with him and put him to the test: they show him a golden flute and then a shining flute, but the boy accepts neither and wants his own bamboo flute. He is described as acting “gently but boldly.” Because he is truthful, he succeeds in claiming his flute but is asked to show them that he can play the flute. His reward is to choose one of two pots as a gift. Not being greedy, the boy chooses the gift and receives the one he deserves: a pot with valuables that he shares with the members of his family. The second journey is carried out by one of the sons of the old wife who goes pretending he has forgotten his flute too. He lies, is rude and greedy, and he gets what he deserves.

Portraying both human and supernatural characters, the story of The Flute shows that the humans in the story are not only aware that the spirits exist but respect their right to the land at night. This, according to Achebe, is a reference to “the theme of boundaries.” (“Work and Play”). Simola (1993) explains that in The Flute “Time, thus works as a boundary: daytime is the appropriate time for men to plant their yams, and nighttime is for the spirits” (89). Clearly, the first message is that the flute is not simply a musical instrument that the boy cherishes, but a work of art he himself made, and it, therefore, represents his identity. The second message of the story is to empower black children and make them realize that they have talents and that the choices one makes show qualities of character. Both boys are black, but one is creative, productive, dignified and trustworthy, while the other is not. The third message has to do with the role of the mother in bringing up and directing the child. Jealous of the gift the boy received, the old wife takes her son and goes to the farm pretending to be looking for the flute he forgot. When offered the golden flute, the boy takes it and when offered the choice between a big and small jar, he takes the big one. Arriving with the jug, the mother closes the hut with all the children in it and opens the jar: “Immediately leprosy, smallpox, yaws, and worse diseases without names and every evil and abomination filled the hut and killed the woman and all her children.” The emphasis of the message is on the value of integrity. Referring to Achebe and The Flute, Raoul Grandqvist sums up the message of the story when he said,

Naturally, his tale is inscribed with Igbo ethics—or better his interpretation of it. The simple flute made by the boy in the tale cannot be replaced by any other flute, however gorgeous, not even by a gift flute from his mother. Possession does not only imply ownership, it mediates an organic
relationship between the user and his or her tool. Translated into a cultural scheme of relationships it
suggests the interdependence of art, work and (wo)man. This dynamism, the story cautions us, is
always menaced by the evil powers of greed and personal gain that if allowed to expand may break
loose and spread definitely and even become a politically destructive force. (38)

The Flute conveys another message which sheds light on the relationship between parents
and children. Raisa Simola confirms that “Obedience towards parents is the norm” (90), but
later argues that “The tale, written for children, in a way sets a great responsibility on them:
they have to be wiser than their parents” (90). This is a serious and interesting claim, but
Simola is justified in making it. This claim is suggesting that the parent has to bring up the
child to face a world that is changing and challenging, a world that the parent is not familiar
with, but one that the child has to be ready for. Linked to yet another message of the story that
Simola regards as a “warning” by stressing that “The Flute also depicts human evil. It tells us
that jealousy and greed may break up a family. These vices make man forget his morality and
duty [and] the most dreadful things are unnamed and hidden” (90). Achebe is conveying a
lesson to the child: greed ends in a loss rather than gain.

Abdel-Tawab Youssef

Al-Haytham meets Newton and “I am a Burāq”

As for literature for children in Egypt, although it covers the three stages of literature for
children in other African countries in South and West Africa (the first is based on the oral
tradition, the second consumed the literature of the colonial powers and the third is the post-
colonial stage), the themes of the stories are different. Providing a survey of what is available
in Arabic literature for children, is beyond the scope of this paper. Each of the two Arabic
stories that are focal here belongs to a series that addresses the same theme. The first by
Abdel-Tawab Youssef is entitled: Al-Haytham meets Newton which is one of eight stories in a
volume called Arab Pioneers and Western Scientists in a Strange Encounter (translated in
1984) and the second is “I am a Burāq” which is one of twenty stories entitled “A Life of the
Prophet Muhammad in Twenty Tales” (2003) [1]. This first series won one of the first
Egyptian state prizes for children’s literature when it was first published in Arabic in the late
1970s, which implies that at this time the Egyptian government started acknowledging that
literature for children deserves state recognition. Like many of Youssef’s writings, the
framework of these stories is fictitious, but the details within are accurate and true to life. The
subtitle of this book is “The Story of Arab Civilization: How Arab Scholars Paved the Way for
Western Scientists”. It reflects Youssef’s plan that he clearly states in his introduction when
he said, “we were the founders of their civilization” (6). Youssef makes use of historical facts to
provide evidence that supports his claim. Clearly, his message to Egyptian and Arab children
is evident: you have a legacy, be proud of it and work on reviving the glory of your heritage.
Youssef wrote these stories to children at the same time Said (1999) was writing his
Orientalism to deliver the same message, namely

It is an extraordinary thing to discover that the origins of the modern system of knowledge that we
call humanism did not originate as Jakob Burkhardt and many others believed it did in Italy during
the 15th and 16th century Renaissance, but rather in the Arab colleges, madrasas, mosques and
courts of Iraq, Sicily, Egypt, Andalusia from the 8th century on. And in those places were formed
the traditions and the curricula of legal, theological as well as secular learning – the so-called studia
adabiyā – from which European humanists derived many of their ideas not only about learning itself,
but also about the environment of learning where disputation, dissent and argument were the order
of the day.

In this series of unique encounters between Arab and western discoverers, scholars and
professionals, Youssef identifies prominent western characters in the history of humanity,
namely, Isaac Newton, Vasco Da Gama, the Wright Brothers, Florence Nightingale, Lewis Esdon Waterman, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Galileo, William Harvey, Durkheim and others. Many of these are familiar names in school textbooks in both east and west. Searching Egyptian or Arabic school textbooks, one will realize that unfortunately the Arab counterparts of these figures are not included in the curriculum. What Youssef does is use the dream mode to link these prominent western names with their Arab counterparts to give the child an informative visionary experience. Youssef is not only addressing Egyptian and Arab children but is crossing many borders to address the children of the world to introduce them to facts – historical truths. From this series, children are not only introduced to Arab scholars and discoverers, namely, Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham (Light), Ahmed Ibn Maged (Navigation), Abbas Ibn Fernas (Aviation), Rufaida Bent Saeid (Nursing), Al-Mo’ez Ledin Allah (The Fountain Pen), Ibn Tofayl’s Hai Ibn Yakazan (Literature and Philosophy), Ibn Younis Al-Misry (Watch Making), Ibn Al-Nafees (Cardiology), Ibn Khaldun (Sociology) and others but realize that they are the real pioneers because each of these preceded his counterpart not by years but by centuries in many cases. Whether the child has read about the characters in this series or not in school, the child is lured into their lives through the portrayal of characters and Socratic dialogue. Together with the information about light, navigation, aviation, nursing, the fountain pen, literature and philosophy, watch making, cardiology, sociology and psychology, there are lessons in history and geography in every story.

In Youssef’s strange encounter Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham meets Isaac Newton, the third person method of narration is used in a story divided into four short parts/scenes with an omniscient narrator. The narrative is intercepted by dialogue between the two scientists which fulfills all the criteria of a Socratic dialogue. There is a quest that involves a process to answer a universal question. Each had a personal experience that leads to universal truth, neither is too emotional about this experience, they are both attentive, simple and brief and they ask real not hypothetical questions. Like a Socratic dialogue, this is a conversation, not a competition or a debate, that is there is no winner and loser. The dialogue, therefore, does not lead to divisiveness or discord. And although the language use in the story is simple because it addresses children, it involves wit and rhetorical skills. During this process, other questions are asked which are relevant, the answers lead to consensus, and the readers (the children in this case) constitute the group that succeeds in understanding a universal truth. As a Socratic dialogue, this story anticipates dissent, but this dissent is transformed into consensus. Misconceptions, falsifications and flaws are identified and addressed.

Youssef is careful about introducing concrete details in order to create an atmosphere that is true to life for the child reader: he sets the story in London since Newton is English and the encounter happens on his territory in the form of a dream (like most of the stories in this series as mentioned earlier). This dream mode is one that the child can understand. Youssef does not tell the child the fact that Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham was born in the 9th 10th century (965–1040), whereas Newton was born in the 16th 17th century (1642–1727) because these are facts that the child can easily find out. What Youssef does is he creates the true-to-life scene on paper before he moves on to the actual dream. In so doing, he helps the child to visualize the dream. Although the scene is set in London, it is a bright sunny morning which is unusual in London, but appropriate for a story about light. Where exactly is Newton in the story? To answer this question, Youssef refers to the familiar anecdote about Newton sitting under an apple tree from which an apple had fallen to inspire him to discover the law of gravity. He adds that when the apple fell, Newton did not pick it up to eat it but did not ignore this observation either. This will encourage the child not to take what happens around him/her lightly, but to reflect on what he/she observes. This is the first step in the scientific method. Youssef creates a scene that introduces the second and third steps of the scientific method, the hypothesis and experiment. Before the Socratic dialogue starts with the appearance of
Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham, Newton has a monologue in which he asks himself a question that the child can understand easily “Why did the apple fall?” For the child, Newton becomes alive and has a voice. Without much ado, Youssef said “The attempt to answer this question led to one of the greatest discoveries of the era: the law of gravity,” thus giving the child the conclusion of the experiment.

The division of the story into four parts, which seem like scenes in a play (because of the dialogue), helps an eight-year-old to grasp the structure Youssef has in mind: part one introduces a fictitious scene in which Newton is resting on a sunny day in London. To pave the way for the dream in which the encounter takes place, Youssef, the omniscient narrator gives more details of the fictitious setting Newton is in, but one that is believable. Youssef tells the reader that Newton is not concentrating on the apple and the tree, but on “a pyramid based triangular glass prism” that he is exposing to the rays of the sun. Here Youssef gives the child information about light and the colors of the rainbow and an experiment the child can carry out. By explaining that after Newton played with the prism in the light of the sun, he continues reading the book on his lap, Youssef is implicitly introducing the book and reading in an enchanting atmosphere. This magical atmosphere in London, a city that is known to be cloudy and gloomy, is created by having Newton sit on the green grass in the sun and play with the glass prism. The appearance of the rainbow prepares the child for the dream.

Before scene one ends, Newton had fallen asleep and Ibn Al-Haytham approaches to sit by him. In the dream Newton starts a conversation, asking about his identity. Instead of answering the simple question “Who are you?” Ibn Al-Haytham responds with a simple question, “Can’t you see me?” The assumption is that Newton should recognize Ibn Al-Haytham and need not ask this question. Newton’s answer “I see you with my mind’s eye not my eyes” can be understood literally and/or metaphorically. Because this dialogue is part of a dream, Newton does not physically see Ibn Al-Haytham. On the metaphoric level, Newton is going through an experience that is beyond the five senses and requires the use of the imagination. This indicates that Newton is having a vision and in such a context the reader/child can feel that in meeting Ibn Al-Haytham Newton is privileged, since a dream could be regarded as a wish come true. In response, Ibn Al-Haytham asks yet another question, “Do the eyes see?”

Scene two does not start with an answer to this seemingly simple question, but with a comment by the narrator that “Newton smiled.” Here is Youssef’s first attempt to decolonize the mind of the Egyptian/Arab child. This smile is one of acknowledgement and recognition and is followed by an informative narrative in which the narrator is given access to what is going on in Newton’s mind and a dialogue. The very simple question “Do the eyes see?” reveals to Newton that his interlocutor is a “scientist” who is knowledgeable. At this point, it is not difficult to imagine how intrigued the reader/child can be. Youssef provides an answer to this simple question in steps: initially to resolve the misconception of “ancient Greek scientists” that the eye has rays of light that enable it to see; second, to explain how the eye sees; and third, to acknowledge that it is Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham who discovered this at the end of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th century. Newton and Ibn Al-Haytham have a light-hearted conversation about how Newton mispronounces Al-Hassan’s name. Once Newton learns how to pronounce the name correctly, he calls him “my teacher, the teacher of the whole world in the “science of light”.” When Ibn Al-Haytham asks Newton whether he had read his book about the light, Newton confirms that he could not have written about the colors of the rainbow without the knowledge Ibn Al-Haytham provided. Newton adds that Galileo (1564–1642) too followed Ibn Al-Haytham’s footsteps. Here, Newton is providing evidence that Arabs had knowledge that enlightened the west.

At the beginning of scene three, it was Ibn Al-Haytham’s turn to smile when Newton mentioned Galileo “the discoverer of the telescope and the microscope.” Examining the dialogue in this part is revealing because it includes information about the backgrounds of
the two scientists, elements of humor and satire on more than one level. Newton informs Ibn
Al-Haytham that he was born in 1642, the year Galileo died. So clearly the child is told that Ibn
Al-Haytham is their predecessor. When Ibn Al-Haytham asked when Newton read his work,
Newton said, “at the age of twelve” although his mother regarded him as stupid, only fit to be
a carpenter. Although this makes Ibn Al-Haytham laugh, it is making fun of societies that do
not appreciate their scientists who were not recognized for what they are worth and
underestimates the value of creativity and innovation. The second satirical comment is made
by Ibn Al-Haytham when Newton asks him about himself and his country. Informing him that
he is from Al-Basra, a port in Iraq, Ibn Al-Haytham Newton’s response was “Oh! Oh! The one
from which Sindbad the Sailor sailed on his seven voyages.” Ibn Al-Haytham is critical that the
west knows nothing about the east except the stories of The Arabian Nights. Newton objects,
asserting that without Ibn Al-Haytham’s contributions the telescope, the microscope and
eyeglasses would not have been invented. For an Arab child, this confession that the Arabs are
the source of the knowledge that the west has used restores his confidence in the Arab heritage.
This confirmation gives the child hope that Arabs can restore and revive their great civilization.

In the final scene, the focus of the dialogue is on the financial status of scientists in Arabia
in the 10th century versus in England in the 16th century. Newton poses an interesting
question asking how Ibn Al-Haytham earned a living. The dialogue provides a juxtaposition
between the Arab and western cultures with a view to the status of scientists in society and
the western perception of Sultans as patrons of artists and scientists. Newton informs Ibn Al-
Haytham that the sources of his own income are varied, namely, teaching at university,
selling his inventions and publishing his books. As for Ibn Al-Haytham, he explained that he
“earned a living by weaving books, mine and books by others.” This interesting fact reveals
first, that during the 10th and 11th centuries books were produced by using threads and
yarns to weave the pages made of cloth rather than published by using paper. Second, Ibn Al-
Haytham was not only a scientist but an artist as well with different skills and talents. Third,
Ibn Al-Haytham was highlighting the value of art in the Arab culture. Weaving his own book
did not simply result in the production of knowledge, but in the production of an
incomparable work of art. In a matter-of-fact tone, he tells Newton that he was poor but
explains that he spent half the money he earned from weaving part of Euclid’s book on
mathematics in a year. This shows that he led a frugal life, but it also indicates that life in the
east is less expensive than life in the west.

This part of the dialogue is significant because although the tone is jocular, with Newton’s
reaction Youssef addresses one of the misunderstandings and stereotypical ideas about
extravagant sultans. In response, Newton asks a naïve question that creates a scene in a
comic film: “Did you not meet one of the sultans we read about? Didn’t one of them tell one of
his boys “Give him a thousand dinars”?” Although Ibn Al-Haytham laughs, he takes Newton
seriously and tells him about his Egyptian experience: meeting the Fatimid ruler Abou Ali
Mansur, known as Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah Al-Fatimi (985–1021), that is the ruler by God’s
order, discussing building the High Dam to store the water of the Nile and conducting and
publishing research for 18 years. In the concluding part of the dialogue when Newton asks
Ibn Al-Haytham to tell him about his work, Newton compares the intellectual scene and the
publication of books in England at his time in the 17th and 18th centuries and Egypt at the
time of Ibn Al-Haytham in the 10th and 11th centuries. Whereas Ibn Al-Haytham published
200 books in the field of philosophy, engineering, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and
others in the Arab world in the 10th and 11th centuries, Newton had difficulty publishing his
work in England in the 17th and 18th centuries. He said,

I hesitate in publishing my research, my studies and my books. This is because people attack my
ideas, my writings and my theories. The scientific atmosphere in Cairo and Baghdad in your time is
better than in London now.
For an Egyptian and Arab child/reader, this is reassuring: compared to England, Egypt and Baghdad had production of knowledge and freedom. Unlike Newton who was attacked for his ideas, Ibn Al-Haytham was “appreciated.” It becomes clear to the child/reader that Newton is not only paying tribute to an individual but to civilization. It is Ibn Al-Haytham in the end who gives Newton advise to proceed with his contributions no matter what.

At the end of the narrative, the child can deduce that the production of knowledge involves a process in time and the efforts of scientists who acquire knowledge through studying the works of those who came before them. A real scholar acknowledges the efforts, contributions and knowledge of the predecessors. The message to the Arab child in this story and in all the others in the series is that his/her Arab ancestors not only excelled in many fields of knowledge but were pioneers simply because their contributions to human knowledge were made earlier in time. The details and the parts of the dialogue are as rewarding as the purpose: answering a universal question, the revelation of universal truth.

The second story by Youssef that this chapter will discuss, namely, “I am a Burāq” gives voice to a burāq, an animal that is unique and is in fact not known to humanity. The burāq is one of the 20 animals and objects that Youssef chose to tell children about the life of Prophet Muhammad. This animal, known to have carried Prophet Muhammad on alisrāʿ wa almiʿrāj, is rendered as a credible narrator to recount the details of this transcendental/epic journey, one during which he crosses many borders. This is the actual trip by Prophet Muhammad at night from Makka to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to the Seventh Heaven and back in no time. Before exploring how far the stages of this journey correspond with the stages that Joseph Campbell’s hero goes through in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, it will be necessary to discuss some background information about this journey in the Islamic culture. The Arab creative imagination produced an archetype of man’s journey to the knowledge of God based on alisrāʿ wa almiʿrāj. It is well known that the two references that confirm the basics of the two stages of this journey are introduced independently in the Qur’an: there is a straightforward reference to alisrāʿ in Surat Al-Israa (The Journey by Night 17-1), whereas almiʿrāj (The Ladder) is alluded to in Surat Al-Najm (The Star 53: 12–18). From the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad, he said very little about both parts of his divine journey: commentators who were endowed with a rich sense of imagination elaborated on reports handed down by Prophet Muhammad’s contemporaries. They based their comments on simple principles handed down by the Prophet. If someone, for instance, reported that the Prophet had communed with the spirit of prior apostles during the trip to the High Heaven, or that he actually saw Archangel Gabriel (confirmed by the Qur’an), commentators found an ample opportunity to imagine what the communion with other apostles was like and what the vision of Gabriel involved. However, Muslims are bound by the strict fact that both parts of the journey took place: by land (mundane) together with the divine part, as many scholars insist, it was performed in body and spirit.

Because Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the word of God, they regard what is said in the Qur’an as fact. In the first reference to this night journey (which the burāq quotes at the end of the story) God said,

श्रीकृष्ण यदि अद्यावर यह होता कि नमस्कार करता हुए, तो मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती थी झुकाई तथा मेरे पास होती ।

Glory to God, Who did take His servant for a journey by night from the Inviolate Mosque [in Makka] to the Farthest Mosque [in Jerusalem], whose precincts We did Bless, in order that We show him some of Our signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). (Translated by Enani in Youssef’s “I am a Burāq”). (76).

The one point that this quote has in common with the Qur’anic reference to the second stage of the journey in Surat Al-Najm (The Star 53: 12–18 which will be discussed later) is that there
is a confirmation that this journey is miraculous. The emphasis in these quotes is on the purpose of the journey, namely, to show the Prophet, and consequently humanity at large, the “signs” of God. The fact is we are faced with a symbolic crossing of many borders: both physical and spiritual. Rereading the aya (verse) above which starts with the glorification of God to confirm and assert that what follows is sublime, it becomes clear that this journey is one of a kind. What refutes the idea that the journey was done merely in spirit is that God “did take His servant for a journey by night from the Inviolate Mosque [in Makka] to the Farthest Mosque [in Jerusalem].” This indicates that this is not a dream, but a physical journey. If it were a dream, the glorification and miraculous power of God would not be needed or relevant. The mention of Muhammad as God’s “servant” implies that Prophet Muhammad was taken body and soul, otherwise the aya would have specified that God took his soul on the journey rather than his whole being. What has never been verified is the means of that crossing. It is easy to say it is the power of God, but this will inevitably open the door for speculation, or conjecture which constitute a rich literary tradition, impossible to ignore. Religious scholars like the well-known Egyptian Al-Suyuti wrote about how he imagined what Prophet Muhammad saw during almi’rāj, but without evidence and support from the Qur’ān or the Traditions of the Prophet. What he wrote is more like Dante’s Divine Comedy.

This literary tradition has struck roots in the Muslim imagination and encouraged many to elaborate on it, presenting what they liked to believe as well as what appealed to the masses. It is from this point of view that this tradition comes as creative writing or literature proper, centering on the crossing of the material world into the world of the spirit. Campbell argues that a hero is inevitably a creature of the popular imagination, that is to say, people want a hero as Byron said in his Preamble to Don Juan “I want a hero” (Canto i. Stanza 1) as a means of breaking through the logic of the mundane realities which can be too much for any man. It is T.S. Eliot who said in Murder in the Cathedral that “the human mind cannot bear too much reality.” This is the key that Campbell uses in explaining the phenomenon of hero worship, thus developing the earlier ideas of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) (in Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1841) which deal with six types of heroes: Hero as Divinity, Hero as Prophet, the Poet Hero, the Hero as Priest, the Hero as Man of Letters and the Hero as King). Campbell, who does not see eye to eye with Carlyle, identifies a hero capable of trespassing and transcending the limits of reality.

It is interesting that the hero-hero worship polemic was transferred to the Arabic scholarship by the early 20th-century writers who took positions for and against Campbell. Al-Aqad was all for Carlyle, while Shuckry Ayad was a disciple of Campbell. This, however, secularizes the Islamic tradition of alisrā’awalmi’rāj, but it had to be secularized at one point so that people can accept reality and what is beyond. Maintaining its pure divine character seemed untenable, as the wave of enlightenment was rising high and could not be kept at bay (no blind faith). Most Arabic attempts to adopt the western/modern view of Islamic ideas/principles/tenets involve a degree of secularization. Carlyle’s sense of Islam was not concerned with its theological aspects but rather its mundane value in terms of the renaissance/rebirth of man. When western countries fought the Ottoman Empire from the 16th until the 19th century, they did this because the Turks were symbolic of the enemy of the west and represented the Turban. However, even while the west celebrated its victory over the Turks, thinkers and poets did realize that the Turkish Empire was not the real representative of Islam. Those who hated the Arabs for truly secular reasons insisted on regarding the Turks as representing Islam and Muslims (most importantly the late Bernard Lewis in his many books especially the latest What Went Wrong). Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, writers like Lord Byron and Bernard Shaw saw secular values in Islam which Muslims celebrate and never ignore. But, when Byron (1788–1824) said that Islam is a religion of justice, he is referring to worldly justice rather than divine justice. What westerners see/saw in Islam is/was its idealistic and romantic view of man and nature,
i.e. Islam as a social system, as a worldly state organized on principles of faith, love, charity and justice; not as a religion based on the revelation of the word of God by Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad. This is why for the west, alisra’ wa almi’rāj is fiction rather than fact.

This journey has inspired narratives for adults and children. The tesseract, which is the act of travelling in no time, is focal to well-known works for children, one of which is the Newbery Award-winning novella A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L’Engle. This is a fictitious novel, but works on alisra’ wa almi’rāj convey what for Muslims is a miraculous yet real event that happened on 27th Rajab more than a decade after the Qur’an started being revealed to Prophet Muhammad. In the Bologna Award Winning story book for children entitled “حياة محمد في عشرين قصة” (A Life of Muhammad in Twenty Tales translated by M. Enani), Youssef short story “I am a Burāq” is the eighth story in the book. At this point, the child-reader is not surprised that the burāq is talking since the elephant, the she-ass and the camel, who are familiar animals, have already spoken, telling the TRUTH about an event in the Prophet’s life. From the very title of the story, it is immediately evident that Youssef is practicing anthropomorphism, following the footsteps of Aesop, Orwell and others. Margo DeMello and other scholars in the book Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies (2012) attempt “to understand animals in the context of human society and culture. We explore the literary and artistic usage of animals in works of literature or art.” (9) It will, therefore, be thought-provoking to explore how the term “literary and artistic usage” of an animal not known to mankind, namely, the burāq, is credible in Youssef’s story. Being such a broad term, it can refer to how an animal is used for an aesthetic purpose in a literary work for children to convey a message. To discuss the use of a cat or a lion or a crocodile in a work for children can be easy if animals are classified into tame and wild or according to the known features of the animal. This is not the case, however, with the burāq, that is “the Arab Pegasus, [which] is the hybrid creature identified by Ibn-Katheer and Al-Qurtuby (Vol. 3, 4; Vol. 6, 3821) as the extraordinary creature that the Messenger of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, rode during his well-known journey alisra’ wa almi’rāj.” (ElHady, 2017, p. 107) Being a mythical figure in Greek and Roman mythology, Pegasus, this white-winged horse, does have a concrete presence in western culture. A possible explanation why the Muslim tradition refers to a horse is because, in Arab culture, the horse is symbolic of strength, beauty and grace. In the Arab imagination, for the burāq to do what it had to do, namely, take Prophet Muhammad across borders, it had to be a horse with wings.

Unlike Achebe’s tortoise, which is a familiar animal, the burāq is a challenging to deal with since his identity is questionable: he is both real and fictitious. Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad must have made use of a vehicle to go on the journey, but it is also fictitious in a way because such an animal does not exist in a form that human beings are familiar with. One fact that is definite about the name burāq is that barq, the root of its name in Arabic, literally means lightning, which is symbolic of both light and speed. In the child’s mind, the burāq is an animal and is, therefore, somehow real. Like the other animals before it in Youssef’s book, the burāq acquires a human quality but preserves characteristics of its own, to narrate the events of this journey to children. Dividing the story into five uneven sections, Youssef starts by having the burāq introduce himself, then describes what he and Prophet Muhammad saw on the way from Makka to Jerusalem, and the two stages of the journey followed by returning to Makka and the Prophet informing the people of what he went through.

So, what does the burāq tell the child more about itself? At the outset, the burāq introduces itself in three concrete statements; first, through establishing the fact that it actually existed by saying, “More than fourteen hundred years, before the invention of rockets and satellites, was I, AlBurāq” (Youssef 73) Linking himself with the modern world renders the burāq as informative and credible, and comparing itself with rockets and satellites is a captivating beginning for children. Second, and more importantly, addressing the child as a mature reader, the burāq asserts that “Reports vary in describing me, and even in specifying my
shape and kind, but the important thing is that I was made by God, Creator of the Earth and the sky, may His name be exalted, the All-Capable.” (Youssef 73) Here, the writer, through the burāq, shows respect for the mind of the child in understanding that the story at hand deals with details that are controversial. The child will not fully comprehend the complexity of the controversy about this journey, but this can be food for thought and the child can explore the issue further as an adult. This is a key statement because the writer is initially confirming that the identity of the burāq is contentious and dubious, which creates a sense of mystery. The writer is also stressing that he is reporting the tradition rather than dealing with history. Traditions can be colored by the imagination of those who provide the reports, and therefore, the story can be interpreted on a symbolic level. The story can be read in two categorically different ways: as a real physical journey or as a journey with the spirit. Read as a real journey, the references in the burāq’s statement to inventions that travel at high speed which exist now, imply that if human beings have managed to make such spaceships, it is not surprising that a burāq, created by God, can travel as fast or even faster. If this was a journey with the spirit, the use of the burāq in the story is a technique, a fantasy masquerading as truth in concordance with a belief Muslims have. Youssef, as a man of letters, in this case, is allowed to deal with what might seem to some as imaginary to confirm a given tale or part of a tale.

The third statement the burāq said about himself is a declaration: “with Prophet Muhammad I had a unique miracle, a story that is real in every respect, though stranger than the flights of fantasy.” (Youssef 73) Such an assertion does not negate any of the two readings mentioned above: it proclaims that Prophet Muhammad went on the journey, and that journey is a miracle. For all the arguments of both camps, there remains a historical fact, namely, that there is a symbolic relevance of alisrā’wa almi’srāj as a night journey to the life of every Muslim individual: the mandatory five daily prayers that bind Muslims to God and to the rhythm of the universe. This is a journey that alerts us that we cannot simply be oblivious to the fact that miracles can happen, the laws of nature can be broken. We cannot accept that the mind of man alone, as we know it, is can be the ultimate arbiter of all things human. All the details attributed to this night in Youssef’s “I am a Burāq” from my point of view, can and should be interpreted in terms of both logos (اللغة) and muthos (المزحة). In the Greek era, both terms when used as nouns meant “word” and as verbs, legein and mythein meant “to speak.” Thus, they both signified logic and truth until in time muthos became associated with the oral tradition and logos with written solid arguments. Consequently, muthos became associated with the fictitious (which does have elements of the truth but can also be linked to the supernatural and/or the spiritual), whereas logos started denoting conveying the truth. Although this is the case, muthos can explain what is beyond logos. Because alisrā’wa almi’srāj has been narrated time and time again during the years, the miraculous, alien features have become quite familiar. In this children’s story, Youssef is merging the marvelous with the real, to tell the truth as he knows it in narrating the details of this journey to children.

After establishing the credibility of the burāq, the omniscient narrator, Youssef succinctly gives the child-reader background information about what preceded the journey. In so doing, Youssef is introducing the Heideggerean “Being-true of logos” which “must be discovered.” (56) The five historical facts are “Twelve years had elapsed since revelation first came to Muhammad,” the death of his uncle (his prime supporter) and his wife (Khadiga, the love of his life), his unsuccessful mission to convince the people of the nearby city of Al-Tayef to embrace Islam, and praying to God for support. After knowing that they will read about a miracle and being exposed to these facts, the final one being a prayer to God, the children can draw a portrait in their minds of a Prophet they can sympathize with. They understand the hardships he has gone through and is now eager to read about the miracle and about how God will answer his prayers. At this point, the burāq introduces Gabriel, the “protective
figure" (Campbell 63) who is the Prophet’s companion on the journey. It is important for children to know that the name Gabriel has the Arabic root *gabr*, which as a verb means to restore, comfort, gratify and treat with kindness, and as a noun means power and might. The implication is Gabriel stands for the power of God and is helping Prophet Muhammad to deliver the message of God. For Prophet Muhammad, the mere emergence of Gabriel is uplifting because this is a sign that he comes with a message from God. At this point, the child-reader already knows from the *burāq* that Prophet Muhammad has known Gabriel for 12 years and that this time Muhammad is not simply receiving a message but experiencing a miracle. By definition, a miracle involves supernatural power and an extraordinary event. The matter-of-fact tone of the *burāq* and the simple straightforward style of the writer help the child in following the footsteps of the Prophet and accepting the details, some of which are symbolic.

As the name *alisrā’ wa almi’rāj* indicates, the journey is composed of two stages, each involves different stops that the *burāq* imparts clearly. Identifying the journey as “my miracle with the Prophet,” the *burāq* describes different scenes during each of the two stages of *alisrā’ wa almi’rāj*. To start *alisrā’* from the Ka’ba in Makka to Bait Elmakdes in Jerusalem, Gabriel, the perfect companion, goes to the Prophet’s home and together they go to the *Ka’ba*. Informing the reader that he was waiting for the travelers at the *Ka’ba*, the *burāq* mentions the first scene where the cleansing of the Prophet’s heart with Zamzam water occurs. This is clearly symbolic because it can be regarded as comparable to ablution. Since Gabriel knows that Prophet Muhammad is on his way to meet God Almighty, cleansing is appropriate. In this case, the purgative act is applied to the heart as the seat of the soul. Carrying Prophet Muhammad on the journey, the *burāq* proceeds to describe five scenes on the way that are undoubtedly symbolic. These are not narrated simply as entertaining episodes, but again the Heideggerean “Being-true of logos” is relevant. The child/reader discovers that these scenes are functional. First, all three travelers saw three different caravans, one had a camel that had gone astray, another had a camel with a broken leg and a third had a camel “carrying two black bags” (Youssef 73). At the end of the narrative, the description of these scenes proves to the people of Quraish that Prophet Muhammad witnessed first-hand their caravans on their trade route, which implies that he went on the journey. Here the *burāq* reveals one of the first qualities in portraying the character of the Prophet: he is honest and gives them concrete evidence. Because he could see the she-camel that strayed from the herd of camels, he told them where it was. To discuss the character of Prophet Muhammad during the journey, Campbell’s “rites of passage: separation—initiation—return” (28) can offer a framework for the discussion, bearing in mind that Campbell’s explanations and terms pertain to Christianity rather than Islam. Although this is the case, Campbell classifies heroes into two, “Tribal or local heroes, such as the emperor Huang Ti, Moses, or the Aztec Tezcatlipoca, commit their boons to a single folk; universal heroes —Mohammed, Jesus, Gautama Buddha—bring a message for the entire world” (35).

Before starting his list of universal heroes with Prophet Muhammad, Campbell had already explained that “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (28). This is concisely and precisely what Prophet Muhammad goes through in the *burāq*’s narrative: at night, Muhammad is at home, Archangel Gabriel takes him to the Ka’ba, then to the Mosque in Jerusalem after which Muhammad goes to the Seventh Heaven, encounters God and returns to direct Muslims to pray five times a day, an activity that structures their day. When Campbell gives the subsections of the “rites of passage” in the life of the hero, namely, an event, activity or series of events that mark a radical change in the life of the hero, it becomes clear that although these subsections apply to the Christian faith, a few of them are relevant to *alisrā’ wa almi’rāj*. Campbell explains that,
separation or departure, will be shown ... in five subsections: (1) “The Call to Adventure,” or the signs of the vocation of the hero; (2) “Refusal of the Call,” or the folly of the flight from the god; (3) “Supernatural Aid,” the unsuspected assistance that comes to one who has undertaken his proper adventure; (4) “The Crossing of the first Threshold”; and (5) “The Belly of the Whale,” or the passage into the realm of night. The stage of the trials and victories of initiation will appear ... in six subsections: (1) “The Call to Adventure,” or the dangerous aspect of the gods; (2) “The Meeting with the Goddess” (Magna Mater), or the bliss of infancy regained; (3) “Woman as the Temptress,” the realization and agony of Oedipus; (4) “Atonement with the Father”; (5) “Apotheosis”; and (6) “The Ultimate Boon”. (34)

Campbell’s first subsection “The Call to Adventure” applies to the Prophet’s life after the revelation. The biographies of the Prophet show that he was going through one adventure after another in his quest to spread the new faith. Clearly, alisrā’ wa almi’rāj is one of the sublime proportions. Prophet Muhammad does receive “Supernatural Aid” as Campbell explains. As for Campbell’s reference to “the stage of the trials,” the second scene the burāq describes portrays Gabriel as the trustworthy and knowledgeable companion who answers the Prophet’s first question about “a beautiful girl wearing magnificent clothes; she called out his [the Prophet’s] name, but he never looked” (73). This according to Campbell is “Woman as the Temptress,” which Gabriel identified as “that was this world, looking splendid for you!” The Prophet said: “I have no need of her” (74). In addition to the portrayal of Prophet Muhammad as prudent and virtuous, this scene tells the child/reader that the temptations of the world can be luring, and it is wise not to be trapped.

The third scene the burāq mentions is when they “arrived at Yathrib, Gabriel said: “this is Yathrib; you will migrate to it; it will be called Al-Madina Al-Munawara; and therein you will die” (74). Here is a reference to another adventure, in Campbell’s terms, when in AD 622, for fear of being killed, Prophet Muhammad and his followers left Makka and immigrated to what is now known as the City of Light, Al-Madina Al-Munawara, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It is relevant here to add that when he describes the hero, Campbell said “Frequently he is honored by his society, frequently unrecognized or disdained” (35). This is certainly true in the case of Prophet Muhammad: he was honored by his followers but was attacked and abused by the people of Makka which led to him to migrate. Campbell proceeds to explain that the hero “prevails over his personal oppressors, the latter brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole” (35). This sense of victory that Campbell refer to does happen in time when Prophet Muhammad gets the support of the people of Yathrib and Islam starts spreading. The fourth and fifth scenes are allegorical, one describes heaven and the other hell. The symbolism in the scene that describes heaven is in rural terms, in which the figurative cultivation of the land yields a rich harvest again and again. In this scene the child understands how good deeds are rewarded. All the senses are stirred: the travelers can see the harvest multiplying, there is a breeze and “a fragrance sweet as perfume”, the Garden of Eden, presumably, has a “voice” which said “I am full of sumptuous chambers and silken material, gold and silver, cups and jugs, honey, milk and water” (74). The final scene, before they reach Al-Aqṣa Mosque in Jerusalem, is one that Campbell regards as “the passage into the realm of night” with a description of hell: “a nasty scent” and “a jarring voice” (74). When Prophet Muhammad asked Gabriel about it, Gabriel said that Gehennam (Hell) is eager to punish those who deserve it.

The reference to the prayer in Al-Aqṣa Mosque is narrated in a matter-of-fact tone. The burāq said the Prophet “went into Al-Aqṣa Mosque where all the Prophets and Messengers of God were waiting. They stood in their ranks as he led them in prayer” (74). This tone echoes that of the first aya in Surat Al-Asraa in the Qur’an in which God states that his purpose is to show Prophet Muhammad the Al-Aqṣa Mosque in its blessed surroundings and some signs of His Almighty Power. As for the second stage of the journey, almi’rāj, it is narrated by the burāq in two scenes. In one, Gabriel gives the “Prophet a mi’rāj (ladder) which reaches into the
heavens” and in the other, God “raised His chosen Prophet to the “Lote-tree of the Ultimate”, to the High Divine Presence” (75). In the first, there is a list of the Prophets who welcomed Prophet Muhammad in each of the seven heavens (Adam, Jesus, Yehia and Zakaria, Joseph, Idris, Haroun son of ‘Imran, Moses and Abraham). This is an interesting list that can raise endless questions: should the reader literally accept that Prophet Muhammad met these nine Prophets? How did he recognize them? Where were the other Messengers of God? The easy answer is that since this is a story for children, the writer has listed the names of well-known Prophets that the child might already know. In the final scene, the climax, the Prophet is in the presence of the Almighty. Understandably, the burāq tells the reader “The Prophet fell prostrate in a prayer of thanks to the One God, for allowing him to be where no one else had ever been before” (75). For Campbell, this is a victorious moment in which the Christian hero experiences “Atonement with the Father,” but for Prophet Muhammad, this is the incomparable moment in which he communicates with God Almighty. Here, the burāq adds “It was here that God decreed that Muslims should pray five times a day, directing their faces towards the Ka’ba in prayer” (75). Again, the matter-of-fact tone shows that the writer is introducing the fact without any details from the traditions that could be fictitious or controversial.

This second stage of the journey ends with the return to Makka. Campbell explains that “The return and reintegration with society, which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community,... the hero himself may find the most difficult requirement of all” (34). This clearly applies to Prophet Muhammad: on the one hand, facing the “pagan members of Quraysh” with the details of alīsra’ wa almirāj was the real challenge. On the other, the unwavering trust of his friend Abu Bakr gave the Prophet the support he needed. The two specific characters the burāq introduces are Abu Jahl who represents the disbelievers and Abu Bakr who supports the Prophet. Quoting a disbeliever who said, “It takes us a whole month to go to Jerusalem, a whole month to come back; how can Muhammad go and return in one night?” Others “challenged the Prophet to describe the Aqsa Mosque,” but the burāq portrays the Prophet as victorious. The caravans they saw on the way, the Prophet’s detailed description of Al-Aqsa Mosque that he had never seen before, and the support of Abou Bakr who acquired the title “siddeeq (true believer)” (76) were factors that brought about the resolution of the story and a sense of victory to the Prophet.

To conclude the story, the Youssef makes use of the omniscient narrator, the burāq who quotes the first aya of Surat Al-Israa (17-1), but not the ayat where almirāj is alluded to in Surat Al-Najm (The Star 53:14) (both quoted above). A possible justification can be the reference to almirāj stage of the journey in the Qur’an is conveyed in enigmatic terms, difficult for the child to grasp. It is, however, relevant to shed light on the seven ayat because they specifically address the disbelievers that the burāq focuses on at the end of the story and provide details that confirm that Prophet Muhammad physically went on this journey.

Will you argue with him (Prophet Muhammad) about what he saw (during almirāj)? And indeed he (Prophet Muhammad) had already seen him (Gabriel) in another descent, at the Lote-Tree of the Utmost Boundary (beyond which no one can go), near it is the Garden of Refuge (Eternal Abode); when the Lote-Tree was half-hidden. In no way did his eyesight swerve, and in no way did it transgress its limits. He certainly saw the greatest signs of his Lord. (Translation mine).

Starting with a rhetorical question, the above quote portrays Prophet Muhammad as above and beyond suspicion. Here, God is his witness and in validating that the Prophet is telling the truth “about what he saw” during alisra’ wa almirāj, God is declaring that this journey is real,
Conclusion
Reading, writing about and travelling with both Achebe and Youssef have allowed me to cross many borders: the Nigerian and Egyptian borders, respectively, the world of children and adults, animals and humans, vice and virtue, supernatural and real. Their stories for children took me on journeys that involve adventures that are enriching, engaging and inspiring. The works discussed here provide evidence that African writers are creative in empowering African children and are producing works that inspire the African child with pride in his/her identity, culture and heritage. Achebe’s *The Drum* asserts that whoever gains power by abusing people is bound to lose it. *The Flute* portrays two stepbrothers, one is creative and honorable while the other is a greedy liar. Each gets what he deserves. It sends a message to black children that they can be productive, creative artists and must have dignity and a sense of morality. No one can deprive them of such positive qualities. If the person is dishonorable, the outcome will inevitably be bad. Achebe deals with the young and old, the real and ideal, trust and lack of trust. As for Youssef’s *Unique Encounters* and “I am a Burāq,” they equip the children with stories that exhibit the value of asking informed questions about the Arabic Islamic heritage and exploring the answers wisely.

This paper is sending many messages. The first is that writers for children in Egypt and Nigeria take children seriously and do not speak down to them. The second message is that more in-depth research on literature for children in Africa can reveal a great deal about the past and the present, in an attempt to take part in enriching the lives and imagination of children. The third most powerful message has to do with what Raphael d’Abdon wrote in his paper about “Teaching spoken word poetry as a tool for decolonizing and africanizing the South African curricula and implementing literocracy” (2016, pp. 44–62). Although he focuses on spoken word poetry and South Africa rather than narratives from Egypt and Nigeria, what d’Abdon argues is relevant.

The assumption that the only way to appreciate and study poetry is through the written page is a legacy of the colonial project, an obsolete assessment that undervalues the poetry published outside the mainstream publishing industry. One of the objectives of the decolonial critical discourse is the eradication of coloniality from the narratives that still shape the curricula and the academia. According to the decolonial paradigm, knowledge production is situated in time and space and conditioned by social, historical, cultural, and political circumstances: it comes out from a peculiar context, and the core of African decolonial pedagogy is the overcoming of pedagogical decadence and the production of pedagogical diversity, i.e. of a body of knowledge that is committed to change in the specific African context. (2016, p. 57)

This extract stresses three serious issues; first, poetry and other literary genres for children, I would add, are more adamant and progressive in fighting the “legacy of the colonial project” than academics and those who design the curricula in educational institutions. Second, scholars and researchers interested and involved in “decolonial critical discourse” ought to have the power to revise and redesign the “canon.” Third, the ultimate goal of writing, reading and studying literature is directly linked to the acquisition and the production of knowledge.

Those in charge of the curriculum in academic institutions in Egypt, the Arab countries, Africa and the world at large: decolonize the syllabi in schools because the world is not black
and white. Literature for children that encourages critical thinking is available by African writers in Egypt, Nigeria and elsewhere. African children can continue reading stories about colonization for the purpose of liberating them from colonialism. They should read about places, events and themes that empower, inspire and uplift them without ignoring works that introduce them to the world. The publication of the story “The Water Pump” in the English textbook for Egyptian school children is a breakthrough. Including a story originally written in Arabic in a book that teaches English is acknowledging the fact that experiences in an Egyptian rural setting, focusing on an Egyptian farmer conveys the message that this is not a local story, but one with universal relevance. Both Youssef and Achebe adopt the Kiswahili proverb which states that “Muacha Mila ni Mtumwa,” that is one who abandons one’s culture is a slave. And to quote Estes again, “The Repair Needed In and For This World” is “Story Can Mend, and Story Can Heal” (xliii).

Note
1. The English translations of these Arabic stories are in the Appendix.

References

Primary Source
Secondary Source


**Further reading**


**Appendix**

**Unique Encounters**

- Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham Meets Isaac Newton
- On the Science of Light
- By Abdel-Tawab Youssef
- Translated by Loubna A. Youssef

(1)

One morning, the sun shone brightly on London. Newton was quietly resting under the famous apple tree. This is the tree from which an apple had once fallen. When this happened, Newton did not pick it up to eat it. He did not ignore this incident either as others could have done. Instead, he reflected on what happened for a long time and simply asked himself,
Why did the apple fall?

The attempt to answer this question led to one of the greatest discoveries of the era: the law of gravity.

On this sunny morning, in his hand, Newton had a pyramid-based triangular prism that has three sides. Turning the prism in his hands in the sunlight, a rainbow with seven colors appears. Newton smiles and tries to continue reading the pages of a book he has on his lap.

He sat for long. Apparently, it seems he fell asleep.

Quietly, Al-Hassan slipped over to sit by Newton, the young scientist. In a deep voice, Newton asked,

Who are you?

Can’t you see me?

I see you with my mind's eye not my eyes.

Do the eyes see?

Newton smiled. The man who came to sit beside him is a “scientist” because with this simple question he is making fun of the ancient Greek scientists who thought that a ray of light coming out of the eye enables us to see things. This is why Newton said,

I, like everyone in the world, now know that light is independent of the eye. I know that it is actually the light ray that falls on objects and the reflection of the light reaches the eye. This is how the eye sees the object.

Great. All the world knows this now.

Do you not know this?

How would I not when I am the one who revealed this to the world?

Then, you must be “Hazan” or “Al-Hazan”?

The man laughs and says, “My name is “Hassan” or “Al-Hassan” not “Hazan”!

Newton cheers in a welcoming voice,

Welcome my teacher, the teacher of the whole world in the “science of light”. Welcome great world scientist, “Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham”.

Al-Hassan asked: “Did you read my book on ‘the light’?”

As Newton moved the glass prism between his fingers in the sun:

Of course. How could I have been able to say that light is composed of the colors of the rainbow if I had not read your work? You are the first to correct the misconceptions of Greek science regarding light. You are also the first to discuss the reflection, diffraction and diffusion of light. Your experiments dealt with the light of the sun, the moon and the planets. You also studied strong and faint light. Galileo followed you.

When Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham heard the name Galileo, the discoverer of the telescope and the microscope, he nodded and smiled. At this point, Newton added,

By the way, I was born the same year Galileo died, in 1642.

Ibn Al-Haytham asked, “When were you introduced to my work?”

When I started reading, at the age of twelve. Before then, my mother thought I was stupid and good for nothing; except perhaps if I become a carpenter or . . .
Ibn Al-Haytham laughed: “A carpenter? You are regarded as the best scientist in the history of the world. You have established the rules and foundations of scientific theories that shook modern science when you were only twenty-one.”

Newton said, “These rules and theories are not my invention. I made use of previous scientists. Let me tell you that I learned a lot from your works, books and experiments, but also from the discoveries of Galileo. But you are my pioneer without doubt, and in fact the pioneer of the world in the science of light. Tell me about yourself and your country and . . .”

Al-Hassan Ibn Al-Haytham smiled and said, “What is of interest to you is science; but in any case, I was born in Al-Basra in Iraq. Do you know it? It is the well-known Iraqi port on the Gulf and Shatt Al-Arab River.

Newton cheered, “Oh! Oh! The one from which Sindbad the Sailor sailed on his seven voyages.”

Ibn Al-Haytham laughed and said, “Even you talk about Sindbad and Alf Leila Wa Leila, the Arabian Nights? Do you not know anything about us other than these?”

No! No! I told you I know a great deal about what you have done for the science of light; and that your contribution in the production of the telescope and microscope is known. In fact, every time I see eyeglasses covering eyes, I remember you. It could not have been created without you.

Seriously? Thank you.

There was a moment of silence between the two men, and then Newton said,

The puzzling question is how did you earn a living? You were not a university professor like me; you did not sell your inventions to any companies or institutions; and you did not publish your books and gain money from the publications.

“I earned a living by weaving books, mine and books by others. I copy them and sell them to those who would like to buy them. This is why I led a poor life and I died poor. I earned seventy-five darham for weaving part of Euclid, a book on mathematics. I spent a whole year spending half this amount of money.”

Did you not meet one of the sultans we read about? Didn’t one of them tell one of his boys “Give him a thousand dinars”?

Ibn Al-Haytham laughed wholeheartedly and said,

I only met one of them. He appreciated me. His name was Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah Al-Fatimi. He heard about my idea of storing the water of the Nile when it floods. I wanted to build the High Dam for this purpose in Aswan in the south of Egypt. He summoned me to go from Baghdad to Egypt. He welcomed me himself at the gates of the city as a sign of warmth and respect.

But you did not build the High Dam, did you?

No, but I lived in Egypt, and devoted eighteen years to my research and studies. These were the years during which I was most productive. Do you know that I wrote two hundred books?

I heard this and was astounded. Tell me about them.

I have written 43 books in the field of philosophy, 58 in engineering, 25 in mathematics, 24 in astronomy, 3 in arithmetic, 2 in medicine and others.

I hesitate in publishing my research, my studies and my books. This is because people attack my ideas, my writings and my theories. The scientific atmosphere in Cairo and Baghdad in your time is better than in London now.

Do not worry about what people say. What is right is right. They will appreciate your work after many years. Continue doing your work, Newton.

At this point, an apple fell on Newton’s head. It woke him up. He found the glass prism between his fingers, the book on his lap and not beside him. It was clear that reading the books of Al-Hassan Ibn

Youssef and Achebe decolonize minds
Al-Haytham made him think about him for a long time until he met him in his dreams. He talked to him, discussed matters about the science of light with him and exchanged views about different issues. The man had to wake up to proceed with his huge projects, benefiting from his great pioneer: Ibn Al-Haytham, the son of Basra, Baghdad and Egypt.

A Life of the Prophet Muhammad
In Twenty Tales
By Abdel-Tawab Youssef
English Translation by
Mohamed Enani

I AM A BURĀQ
More than 1400 years, before the invention of rockets and satellites, was I, Al-Burāq!

Reports vary in describing me, and even in specifying my shape and kind, but the important thing is that I was made by God, Creator of the Earth and the sky, may His name be exalted, the All-Capable.

I had been ridden by God’s Prophets, but with Prophet Muhammad, I had a unique miracle, a story that is real in every respect, though stranger than the flights of fantasy.

Twelve years had elapsed since Revelation first came to Muhammad, during which time he had suffered a great deal of hardships. His uncle and his wife died; his companions emigrated; and his journey to al-Taif came to nought, but his faith never faltered, and he continued to ask God to grant him more support and fortitude.

After these eventful years, my miracle with the Prophet took place – the Israa and the Mi’raj (the night journey to Jerusalem and the heavens). The night was that of the 27th of Rajab, the lunar month. Gabriel first went to the house of the Prophet and accompanied him to the Inviolate House, the Ka’ba, where I had been waiting. Having washed the Prophet’s heart with Zamzam water, Gabriel filled it with wisdom and faith. Then the Prophet rode me and set off, in Gabriel’s company, to Beit Al-Maqdis, Jerusalem, with the utmost speed.

Just outside Mecca, we passed by a caravan belonging to Quraysh. A she-camel had strayed from the caravan, and the Prophet told them where it was. We passed by another caravan whose camels had dispersed, and one of which had a broken leg. We passed by a third caravan, at the forefront of which was a camel carrying two black bags.

On the way, Muhammad saw a great deal. He had many questions to ask, and Gabriel gave the answers. He saw a beautiful girl wearing magnificent clothes; she called out his name, but he never looked. Gabriel said: “that was this world, looking splendid for you!” The Prophet said: “I have no need of her.”

When we arrived at Yathrib, Gabriel said: “This is Yathrib; you will migrate to it; it will be called Al-Madina Al-Munawara; and therein you will die.

We passed by some people who had planted a crop and every time the harvest was over, the crop was renewed and they had to harvest it again. The Prophet asked about them. Gabriel said: “There are people who have fought for God; the reward of their good deeds is multiplied seven hundred times. We also witnessed the punishment of those who would not pray or pay their zaka (2.5% of uninvested capital annually). We felt on the way a breeze wafting a fragrance sweet as perfume, with the echo of an indistinct voice. “What is this, Gabriel?” Muhammad asked. “This is,” Gabriel replied, “the voice of the Garden saying: O God! Get me that which you’ve promised; I am full of sumptuous chambers and silken material, gold and silver, cups and jugs, honey, milk and water; get me, O God, that which you’ve promised me.”

Passing by another valley, we smelt a nasty scent and heard a jarring voice. “What is this, Gabriel?” the Prophet asked. “This is the voice of Gehenna calling,” Gabriel answered, “God! Get me that which you’ve promised; I am full of shameful chambers and shackles, and my heat is scorching; so get me that which you’ve promised me.”

We arrived in Al-Quds (Jerusalem) in no time at all. Muhammad took me, Al-Burāq, and bound my halter to a ring in a high rock, which still stands, where later Muslims built a beautiful, towering dome. He left me there and went into Al-Aqsa (the farthest) Mosque where all the Prophets and Messengers of God were waiting. They stood in their ranks as he led them in prayer.

After the prayer, Gabriel provided the Prophet with a Mi’raj (ladder) which reaches into the heavens, and the Prophet climbed it, making another journey simply called Al-Mi’raj. The Prophet ascended to
the first heaven, where our father Adam welcomed him. In the second, he met Prophets Issa Ibn Maryam (Jesus son of Mary), Yehya and Zakaria; in the third, he met Youssef Ibn Ya’coub (Joseph son of Jacob); in the fourth, Idris; in the fifth, Haroun Ibn ’Imran; in the sixth, Moussa Ibn ’Imran (Moses son of ’Imran); and in the seventh, Ibrahim Al-Khalil (Abraham). Each welcomed the Prophet saying: “Welcome! Good Prophet and good brother!”

Then God raised His chosen Prophet to the “Lote-tree of the Ultimate,” to the High Divine Presence. The Prophet fell prostrate in a prayer of thanks to the One God, for allowing him to be where no one else had ever been before. It was here that God decreed that Muslims should pray five times a day, directing their faces towards the Ka’ba in prayer.

Then the Prophet went down to the noble rock, having bade farewell to all the Prophets and God’s Messengers. He then rode me, Al-Burāq, on the journey of Israa and Mi’raj which came to an end. I said goodbye and he went home. On the next day, he went to the Ka’ba and told this story to the people, but the pagan members of Quraysh did not believe him, with Abu Jahl being the most persistent in disbelief. One of them said:

It takes us a whole month to go to Jerusalem, a whole month to come back; now how can Muhammad go and return in one night?”

At this moment, Abu Bakr arrived at the Ka’ba and sat near the Prophet. He heard from the pagans what the Prophet had to say about his journey, and how they would not believe any part of it.

The argument raged unabated. Finally, they challenged the Prophet to describe the Aqsa Mosque, secure in the knowledge that he’d never visited it. But Muhammad began a detailed description, as though he was looking at something in front of him. He spoke of every part of it, with a degree of precision that stunned everybody. Abu Bakr said: “You’re truthful, O Messenger of God!”

Nor did the Prophet confine himself to the detailed description of the mosque; he had further proof of the truth of his story. He spoke of the caravans he had seen on the outskirts of Mecca which, later on, arrived back in Mecca. With them were the she-camel that had gone astray, the camel with the broken leg and the one carrying two black bags – precisely as reported by the Prophet.

The disbelievers were bewildered and speechless. Abu Bakr said, yet again, “You’re truthful, O Messenger of God! I believe everything you’ve said.” The noble Prophet said, “You are the siddeeq (true believer) O Abu Bakr!” the word used by the Prophet that day became the title of Abu Bakr, who is always referred to as Abu Bakr Al-Siddeeq.

Thus I, Al-Burāq, conclude my story with the Messenger of God in the Night of Israa and Mi’raj: It is a true and real story, which occurred 14 centuries before the age of rockets and satellites.

Glory to God
Who did take His servant
For a journey by night
From the Inviolate Mosque
To the Farthest Mosque
Whose precincts We did
Bless,—in order that We
Might show him some
Of Our signs: for He
Is the One Who heareth
And seeth (all things).

Holy Qur’an
About the author

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