Post-modernist experiments in Egyptian children's literature: The case of Ahmed Khalid Tawfik

Antar Abdellah

Professor of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Education, South Valley University. solhyabdallah99@gmail.com

Abstract

The study reviews some key works of the late Egyptian novelist Ahmed Khalid Tawfik, to analyze aspects of post-modernist children's literature. Tawfik used to experiment with new, sometimes confusing perspectives in the teen novels he wrote in Arabic. The study identifies certain common aspects among Tawfik's postmodernist works such as indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, irony, hybridization, performance, and participation. Through his well-received and highly-celebrated teen stories, Tawfik manifested different postmodernist characteristics including less stability and fewer conventions, open texts, intertextuality, disorientation, multivocality, less authorial power and more liberation of the reader. Materials for analysis included most of the special issues of the Paranormal series. Results showed that Tawfik was a pioneer in breaking the classical frames for children's writing. Such liberating efforts should thus be reinforced in both literary and educational aspects of Arabic children's literature.

Keywords:
Postmodernism, children's literature, Arabic literature, Egyptian teen stories.

1 Introduction

Postmodernity or postmodernism can be defined as a cultural condition of "living in an increasingly technologically-orientated society, with lower levels of trust in authority and 'truth' than previously, where the meaning of things is unstable and open to interpretation" (Lewis; 2000, p. 270). Postmodernism, as it relates to literature, refers to "texts that can be seen to represent such instability and unreliability" (Lewis, 2001). It is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in the human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, Sarlak (2011) sees that postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations that claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to each one of us. According to Haulman (2008), postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.

"Postmodernism is "post" because it denies the existence of ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called "modern" mind. For Eiss (2014), the paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning" (p. x).

The key feature of postmodern texts is the intrusion of the author. Postmodern texts are often playful, opening up alternative interpretations for the reader in a variety of creative ways. According to Swann et al., (2004), "Postmodern literature and art often challenge conventions of representation, particularly any straightforward notions of unity of meaning, emphasizing instead the possibility of consciously playing with meaning in any text or art form." (p. 246). With the changing technological media of the third millennium, children's literature has witnessed remarkable postmodernist experiments. Examples include David Macaulay's Black and white (1990), which is a picturebook telling four stories

in one, where the focus is on how space is reconceptualized in book design, engendering a blurring of boundaries between characters, authors and readers. The paratext in Black and white is subject to another postmodernist experiment; as Library of Congress Cataloging- in Publication Data & copyright information – which we see in a book but rarely pay close attention to, are printed as if torn-off scraps of paper, & are placed haphazardly on-page. On the contrary, Anthony Browne's Voices in the Park (1990) is a postmodernist example of one picturebook story told from four different characters' perspectives. Sara Fanelli's Dear Diary (2000) experiments with collage and bricolage. Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith experiment with textual play and boundary-crossing where characters stepping out of the text, talking to the reader in The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (1992).

Although children's literature has a long tradition in the Arab world, it does not seem to catch up well with the new advancements in the field. Fairy tales like those scattered in the celebrated Arabian Nights constitute part of world children's fairytales; for example, Aladdin and magic lamp is now more of a Disney property than an Arab one. In the twentieth century, Egyptian writers had an urge for moral and pedagogical missions that led them to revisit and reproduce Arabic and world children's literature. Famous names such as Naguib Al Kelani and Yaquob Al Sharowni are among the celebrated Egyptian children's writers. Both authors worked on rewriting classical Arabic literature as well as world masterpieces for Arab young readers. With the beginnings of the 21st century, most Arabic children's literature became limited to translations and adaptations from English literature; so Arabic versions of Cinderella, Rapunzel, Elsa, Merida and Sophia for example are the most celeberated among girls. Marvel superheroes are preferable for boys. Nevertheless, one innovative writer wasperforming a solo tune that attracted thousands of Arab children and teenagers; namely the late Ahmad Khalid Tawfik.

2 Purpose of the study and methodology

The present study seeks to shed light on some postmodernist experiments in contemporary Egyptian Arabic Children's literature through analyzing some teen stories by the Egyptian late novelist Ahmad Khalid Tawfik.

Born in June 1962 in the northern Egyptian city of Tanta, Tawfik graduated from Tanta University's medical school in 1985. Before he attained his Ph.D. in medicine in 1997, he he joined the Modern

Arab Association publishing company in 1992, and began writing his first series of novels the following year. In January 1993, he published the first episode in his thriller series Ma Waraa Al Tabiaa that translates to The Paranormal of which he wrote 80 episodes, in a addition some special issues. He also wrote some articles for journals and web-based magazines such as El Destoor and Rewayty. His writing style has appealed to both Egyptian and the broader Arabic-speaking audiences, gaining him popularity in Egypt and the Middle East, especially among teenagers. In 2018, he passed away in a sad incident of a heart attack. In 2020, selected episodes of Paranormal series have been adapted for Netfleix as a TV sereis and recvied a controversoy among fans of Tawfik.

Tawfik's novels typically feature all Egyptian characters and are set both in Egypt and around the world. Some of his characters are semi-autobiographical since he draws from personal experiences in their creation. Most Egyptian as well as Arab young adults consider him their "godfather" and identify him most closely with his character, Ref'at Isma'il, who was featured in the Paranormal series.

In this study, I am analyzing six of Tawfik's fictions in order to highlight the postmodernist techniques he was using. The novels are The Alphabet, the forgotten Dragosan caves, 36, the legend of Maisa, and Ma Amam Al Tabiaa. I will first discuss the features of postmodernist literature, then will attempt an analysis and interpretation of Tawfik's experiments in light of these features.

3 Features of postmodernist literature

For Lewis (2001), the main features of postmodernism in literature are: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, irony, hybridization, performance and participation.

3.1 Indeterminacy

In the postmodern world, we are less sure about the nature of objective reality, our own selves and the products of our hands and minds than we used to be. The more we know about the world the less stable and certain it seems. Although our knowledge and understanding are growing steadily in a cumulative way, science and philosophy -along with many other disciplines- seem to be telling us that we will never be able to be sure of anything, once and for all, ever again. (Lewis, 2001: 88 in Bland, 2013). The human universe has also become a far less stable place. The more we know about other societies and cultures, the more we become attuned to differences and the less confident we become in our

judgments of what constitutes normal human behaviour. Literature has responded to such developments by placing an increased emphasis upon undecidable outcomes and irresolvable dilemmas. In place of the obscurities of the modernist text, we now have the indeterminacies of the postmodern text. Readers of the postmodern are uncertain about which way to turn.

3.2 Fragmentation

Postmodernism suspects totalization; attempts to unify and synthesize are thus considered the imposition of an ideological, and thus spurious, order. According to Hassan (1986, p. 505), postmodernists prefer the 'openness of brokenness, unjustified margins' to the tendentious unity brought about by the various forms of artistic closure. The metaphor of 'unjustified margins' is a useful one for it suggests graphically the refusal to tidy up loose ends. Rather than attempting to pull everything into shape at the last minute, and thus create an illusion of order where none in fact exists, the postmodern artist or writer is likely to let the ends remain loose and visible: indeed they may well be moved to the foreground to emphasize the fact that wholeness and completeness are not honestly achievable (Lewis: 2001: 89). Sara Fanelli's Dear Diary (2000) is an example of fragmentation.

3.3 Decanonization

In view of Lyotard (1984), the most widely disseminated principle of postmodernism is that the governing narratives of our culture have broken down. We are less likely to trust blindly in authority than were the citizens of previous ages. Fewer people believe the overarching stories we tell ourselves about ultimate values, truth, progress and reason because the authorities that underwrote such stories are no longer viable. Philip Pullman's Northern Lights (1995) is an example of such uncertainty and doubt in authority.

3.4 Irony

Indeterminacy, fragmentation and decanonization inevitably lead to irony. Whether we like it or not, modern life and culture are massively 'double- coded', images and ideas coming to us ready equipped with an ironic spin that tells us not only what we are looking at but also how to look at it. High Street and television advertisements are today so much more 'knowing' than they were and the consumer at whom they are aimed is expected to understand the allusions and get the jokes in the act of reading the text. Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith's The Stinky Cheeseman and

Other Fairly Stupid Tales (1992) is a perfect example of postmodernist irony.

3.5 Hybridization

The dissolving of boundaries, the fragmentation of wholes, the flattening out of differences between high and low are all held to be characteristic of our postmodern condition, and they have all contributed to the rise of bizarre hybrid genres and artifacts. Nothing is sacred anymore for the canons have faded that told us of the great and the good and that kept high culture and low in separate compartments. Brian Selznick's The Invention of Hugo Cabret (2007) is an example of hybridity as it moves between verbal and cinematic modes.

3.6 Performance and participation

The more authorities dissolve and the more authors and artists cancel responsibility for leading readers and viewers towards sense and meaning, the more readers have to write the text they read. Much art is now conceived in terms of performance and participation, the role of the viewer or participant in the process being deemed as important as any product. In such a climate the craft element in art, the idea that the artist possesses superior manipulative and creative abilities, has faded away. Anthony Brown's Voices in the Park (1990) is an example of the reader's participation.

4. Analysis of Tawfik's experiments

4.1 In the Alphabet (2007)[1], Ref'at Isma'il goes to Kenya where he faces the wrath of a small village sorcerer. Isma'il forgets his watch in the village near to their worshiped idol. The sorcerer curses Isma'il and tells him that he would suffer endless pain throughout the hours of the day and in concordance with the Alphabet. When Ref'at returns home to Egypt, he spends twenty-four days with no harm at all except some light nightmares.

Image (1) front cover of the Alphabet

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[1] Permission to reuse the novels figures and screenshot in this article has been obtained from the publishers.

After the twenty-fourth day, he is delusional and suffers from seeing different scary monsters each hour. He then realizes that the names of these horrible monsters coincide with the number of hours. Therefore, in the 13th hour (1:00 pm) he visualizes the Mothman (the letter M is the 13th letter in the alphabet). At 14:00 (2:00 pm) he is faced by a Necromancer (N = 14).

Having set this rule, Tawfik invites the reader to look at their watches and see what time it is, then refer to the table in image (2) and go directly to the chapter that starts with this letter. Thus the story is not linear. It does not have one end, and each reader will start with different chapters based on the time at which different readers read the book or return to it. Such an experiment is relevant to the postmodern theories of readers' independence and reader's voice in literature. Of course, a reader can discard the whole idea and read the story in a linear order as selected short stories. But even this is also a reader's independent choice.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
V	W	X	Y	Z		
22	23	24	25	26		

Image (2) Table of letters and numbers

One flaw in this experiment is that the day has 24 hours only while the English Alphabet has 26 letters. In order to overcome this flaw, Tawfik keeps the last two letters (Y,Z) to finalize the novel and reach a resolution that sets Ref'at free from the curse of the wizard. Isma'il finds the way out through processing the camera film that he photographed in that village. He finds that one of the photos has the face of the wizard in it. According to the belief of these primitives, a camera photo steals one's soul and imprisons it in the photo. So, Ref'at decides to address the soul of the wizard captured in the photo and tells him that he will set his soul free by burning the photo and that the wizard has in return to finish the curse of the hourly Alphabet. Having burnt the photo, everything returns to normal and the curse is cast away.

4.2 In the forgotten caves of Dragosan (2005), Tawfik makes use of many tricks. The story is mainly a hyperfiction; whereby there are many different endings based on the different choices of the reader. A hyperfiction however is mostly presented via an online portal where readers can click on a hyperlink that takes them to an alternative ending. What Tawfik did is however more complicated, because the different alternatives are now printed on paper. So the reader can actually see all the different alternatives on different page numbers but cannot make sense of them unless he follows the rules of the game.
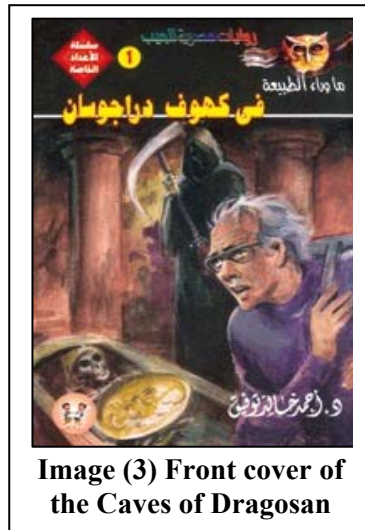
Image (3) Front cover of the Caves of Dragosan

For example, the reader is asked on page 13 to toss a coin. If the coin's face is up, the reader is advised to go to page 167. If the coin's face is down, the reader is advised to go to page 266. On page 22, the writer makes the reader in front of a crossroad, then asks the reader if s/he chooses the right lane to go to page 41. If s/he chooses the left lane, they have to go to page 78. Tricks become more complicated as the readers go on. So, on page 26, s/he is asked to look at their watches and see if the time now is a number that can be divided by
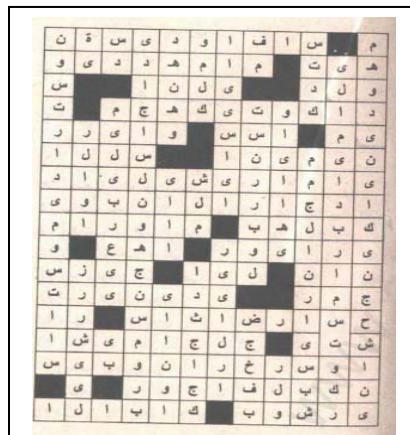

Image (4) sample of the puzzles readers have to solve to continue reading

two, s/he should then go to page 27, if not, s/he has to go to page 130. The most complicated trick is introduced on page 223 where Tawfik introduces the reader to a crosswords puzzle (image (4)). The reader has to solve the puzzle by answering 33 questions that are based on all the different episodes of the original series (Paranormal). By solving the puzzle, a reader should reach a 6-letter word. Then s/he is asked to go to page 252 if they knew the

answer. On page 252, there is another more complicated puzzle that asks the reader to use the 6-letter word in a new anagram so that s/he reaches a number (image 5). This number should be the page the number the reader has to move to. Thus Tawfik blocks the reader who skips pages and ignores puzzles, and by doing so ignores the rules of the game. Ridiculously, there are some pages that have not been assigned to any of the different alternatives. In such pages, Tawfik scolds the readers and says "why did you come here? no page in this novel leads here, it seems you are skipping around. I hate those who come uninvited. Go back to where you came from!". In addition, there are some reference pages to
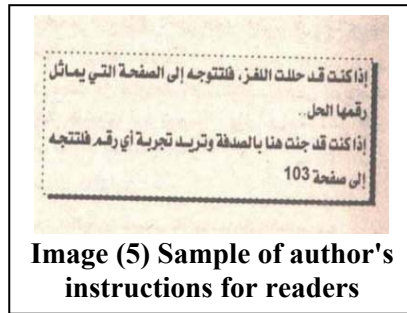

Image (5) Sample of author's instructions for readers
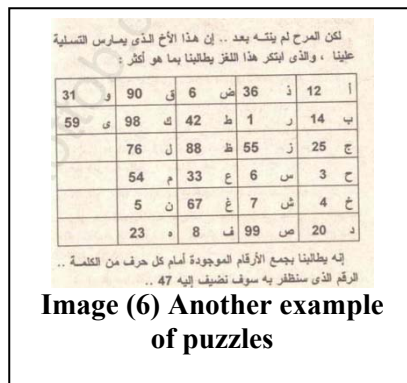

Image (6) Another example of puzzles

which Tawfik advises readers to return, to record the spells they have come across as this can be of benefit in the remainder of the novel (image 7). The forgotten caves of Dragosan ideally represents a postmodernist novel where all boundaries have been crossed.

In 36 (2006), Tawfik introduces the reader to a spectrum of choices (image 8). A reader can choose who to accompany Ref'at Isma'il in his adventure (four well-known characters for readers who are familiar with the series). Then a reader can also choose the theme of the adventure (vampires, an old forgotten spell, people who

Image (7) Readers have to actively participate so as to continue reading

seem to be dead or a wicked fortune teller). Still a reader can further choose whether s/he likes to end the story with an absurd ending or a boring ending (image 9).
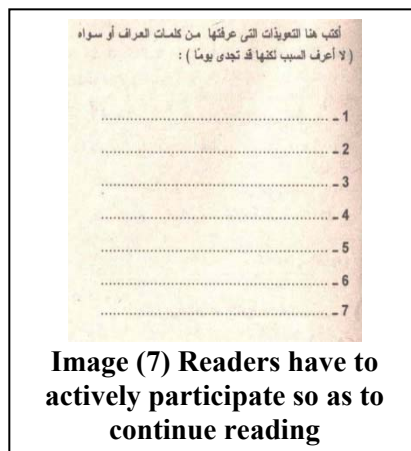
Calculating all the different alternatives a reader has at his/her disposal, we have a total of 36 different plots in one novel, hence the title (36). There does not seem to be lots of complications in this novel, as all the plots are straightforward and there are no dead ends. In fact, each plot is composed of two chapters. The first one sets the scene and gives the reader the needed information to start a new adventure. The second chapter however is a two-way passage; either to an absurd ending or to a boring ending.

Image (8) Front cover of *36*

4.3 In the legend of Maisa (2009), Tawfik makes use of the colorful screens of computers and is assisted by talented graphic designers. The novel is in a comic format, so much of the description and the narration is deleted as the images provide sufficient details. The drawing and graphics are wonderous

Image (9) Sample of how the story might start

and tell us a lot about the characters and the plot. The story is simple; Ezzat, the sculptor who is Refʿat's neighbour, sculptures a remarkable statue. The problem with the statue is that it is moving and changing its posture independtantly. The novel is more of a short story in twenty pages.

The graphics however help in explaining lots of the multimodality in the novel. For example, there are 3 successive images of the door of Refʿat's apartment coming closer to resemble the perspective from the point of view of the statue as it moves towards the door (image 11). To impart life on the statue, the

Image (10) cover of the online Legend of Maisa

designer shows us Ezzat washing the dishes but the scene is photographed from his back (image 12). As there are no other people in the apartment with him, we realize that this is the view perspective of the statue.

Image (11) Camera visual suspense effects

4.4 In "Ma Amam Al Tabiaa= Beyond Paranormal" (2009), Tawfik crosses the boundaries between writer, narrator, protagonist and reader. The narrator – and assistant of Refʿat -this time is the Fantasia series young lady Abeer. As she is the main protagonist of the series, she seems to take command of the events. However, the writer moves between her realization as an outside character in a dream-like adventure and her role as an American journalist who is

Image (12) visual details

assisting Ismaʿil (image 13). In addition, Tawfik mocks the labels that he gives to each chapter – some of them are repeated word by word, mocks the typical sentences he uses in the Paranormal series, and mocks the flash-back flash-forward technique that he is known to overuse. Near the end of the novel, Abeer asks Refʿat about the meaning of a symbol he was referring to a lot. He says that he does know- "It seems the writer forgot what I should do with this". But in the final chapter, this symbol proves to be very important, so Refʿat says "It seems the writer remembered now what to do with this- it proves that he is not a total idiot!". The novel continues

Image (13) Front cover of Ma Amam Al Tabiaa

like this crossing between the reality of the events, the narrative of

the dreaming girl, and the mocking of the writer. The reader feels as s/he is omnipresent or ubiquitous as s/he is seeing behind the scenes and is encouraged to leave the position of a passive receiver and engage in similar ridicule of the text and the texters. In order to increase the border crossing, Tawfik calls this novel a name that denotes the antonym of Paranormal and mocks the name that Ref'at suggests for this adventure "the legend of the ……." dots denoting nothingness.

4.5 Affected by Tawfik, many young writers started their own experiments. Some of them started their post-modernist experiments on the level of cover making. Because they witnessed the historical events of the 25th of January revolution, they made their main themes represent political opposition. One example is that of Hussam Ramadan who posts on his blog fake covers for new Paranormal episodes inspired by the name "paranormal" and encouraged by Tawfik's postmodernist experiments.

Image (14) is one cover of Ramadan's where he draws the ousted president Mubarak as a buried pharaoh and calls the novel "the legend of the Busted" in allusion to the events of the revolution that ended in dismissing Mubarak. In addition, on the back cover, he writes "the only way to get rid of him was to bury him in the desert. On him, millions of tons of sand were put. They thought by doing this they would cease him, not

Imag (14) Cover of the pseudo-Tawfik's novel relevant to the political events in 2011

knowing that they just gave him the life kiss, a life that is so terrifying". Ridiculously, he writes "forthcoming episode: the legend of the military" in reference to the military transition stage during 2012.

5 Discussion:

By reviewing Tawfik's experiments, we can say that all his special issues can be described as postmodernist hyper-fictions. He is trying to make use of all the available technologies whether on

paper or on screen. We can sum up the experiments that Tawfik utilized as follows:

1. Less stability and fewer conventions
   Although each novel has a starting point, there are more ending points. The reader can choose different endings if s/he does not like certain endings. (Goodman and O'Halloran, 2006: 270).

2. Open text
   Since there is no fixed ending point, the reader stops reading simply when s/he does not feel like reading anymore, if the text loops too much, or if it simply becomes too enigmatic and frustrating. In Landow's words "the concepts of beginning and ending imply linearity" (Landow, 1997, p. 77). Furthermore, borders like a designated "beginning" and "ending" help to uphold the illusion that the autonomous, original artwork exists independently of other works. They situate the reader in a hierarchy and works against a "healthy" awareness of the fact that all texts are connected in some way.

3. Intertextuality
   Hypertext can easily direct the reader to other texts in a way that books cannot. If a passage in a hyperfiction alludes to something in another story, then the hypertext writer can link the allusion to the actual piece in the other story and perhaps to more information about it. Although this is more different on paper, Tawfik experiments with it by referring to other texts, or other former episodes of the thriller series. (Jensen, 2001: 11)

4. Disorientation
   Multilinearity and the rapidly changing contexts of Tawfik's special issues make the reading confusing to a mind accustomed to linear unidimential technique in reading novels. Furthermore, the reader often has no idea how far into the text s/he has reached. These new aspects of the reading experience may be undesirable to some readers, while to others, this confusion and lack of smooth coherence may inspire the experienced reader to pause and consider the contexts and implications surrounding the text.

5. Multivocality
   The reader of Tawfik's special issues often experiences a blurring of the identity of who is narrating or which character is speaking. The overlapping of the author's voice with

different points of view, time and space, may make identities vague and the reading experience very focused on trying to determine who says what. This vagueness of identity decreases the author's authority because the voice of the narrator does not seem clear or consistent.

6. Less authorial power and (de-)liberation of the reader
Postmodernism is associated with the liberation of the reader. Rules and borders may seem looser in these special issues, but they can also be perceived as being even more strict, as the reader cannot turn to a certain passage as easily as in an ordinary book and in most of these special issues, the author dictates what paths the reader may take in which order. Tawfik tends to change his well-known phrase (let me deceive you, let me be deceived) to something like (let's play a new game, yets lets!".

6 Conclusion

Based on the analysis of selected keyworks by Tawfik, we can say that he was a pioneer in postmodernist experimentation in Arabic children's literature. Although some of Tawfik's experiments were not as successful as others, the field of Arabic children's literature is still in need of more liberating experiments.

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تجارب ما بعد الحداثة في أدب الأطفال المصري: أحمد خالد توفيق نموذجًا

أ.د./ عنتر صلحي عبد اللاه. أستاذ اللغويات التطبيقية، كلية التربية، جامعة جنوب الوادي. solhyabdallah99@gmail.com

المستخلص

تستعرض الدراسة بعض أعمال الروائي المصري الراحل أحمد خالد توفيق لتحليل جوانب ما بعد الحداثة في أدب الأطفال. اعتاد توفيق تجربة وجهات نظر جديدة ومربكة في بعض الأحيان لروايات المراهقين التي كتبها باللغة العربية. حددت الدراسة بعض جوانب ما بعد الحداثة المشتركة بين أعمال توفيق مثل اللاحتمية، والتجزئة، والخروج عن المألوف، والسخرية، والتهجين، وتعمد الأداء، واستجداء المشاركة. ومن خلال قصصه الموجهة للمراهقين التي لقيت استحسانًا بينهم وشهرة كبيرة طوال حياته وبعيد مماته، أظهر توفيق خصائص مختلفة تميز أدب ما بعد الحداثة، بما في ذلك مفارقة الاستقرار والتقاليد، وانفتاح النصوص، وفضاءات التناص، وتعمد الإرباك، وتعددية أصوات الشخصيات، وتشظي سيطرة المؤلف في مقابل تعاظم حرية القارئ. الروايات التي تم تحليلها هي الأعداد الخاصة من سلسلة ما وراء الطبيعة. وأظهر التحليل أن جهود توفيق في عمليات الكتابة للأطفال والمراهقين في العالم العربي تمثل مفارقة للأطر الكلاسيكية التي يجب أن يستفاد منها من الناحيتين الأدبية والتربوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، أدب الأطفال، الأدب العربي، روايات مصرية للجيب.