The Representation of Iran (Persia) in Young Children’s Picture Books in North America

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There are a few empirical studies that examine the portrayal of the Middle East and its people in young children’s picture books. Many of these books depict Muslim life and celebrations without delving into the specificities of each Middle Eastern country. This study, which focuses on Iran as a non-Arab Muslim majority Middle Eastern country, investigates how Iran and its diverse cultures are represented in children’s picture books published in North America. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 27 picture books written in English between 2000 and 2021, targeting children aged three to nine. The findings reveal that a significant number of these books revolve around Nowruz celebrations (the Persian New Year) or ancient Persia, often presented through popular folktales. These findings underscore the need for books that depict the contemporary lives of Iranians, both within and outside the country, through narratives and illustrations.

Keywords: Iran/Persia, young children, picture books, multicultural literature

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES

With the contemporary social movements toward equity, diversity, and inclusion for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in North America, there is a critical need to enhance the equitable understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds in children’s curricula and library resources (Panjwani, 2017; Short, 2018). Recently, researchers have shown an interest in multicultural education to promote the appreciation
of diverse cultures among young learners (Baghban, 2007; Bennett, 2001; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hansen-Krenning, 1992; Klefstad & Martinez, 2013; Morgan, 2009). Multicultural literature was primarily developed in recognition of the presence of people of color in American society and, as Botelho and Rudman (2009) frame the argument, “it is the literature by and about people of color” (p. 73). Despite the importance of multicultural literature, Harris (2015) reported, “out of the 5,000 plus children’s books and 2,000 young adult literature books published, less than 10 percent are written and/or illustrated by individuals that are African, Asian, Latino, or Native American” (p. 11). Other scholars have indicated that many regions, including the Middle East, are still underrepresented in children’s early resources such as elementary school curricula and picture books (Callaway, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Panjwani, 2017; Raina, 2009; Short, 2018; Torres, 2016). The underrepresentation of scholars from diverse backgrounds in authoring children’s literature precludes access to authentic textual materials for the diverse populations living in North American society.

Despite the emphasis of multicultural literature on the authentic presentation of people of color, many Middle Eastern and Muslim students face multiple challenges imposed by the socio-political context of the American education system. The post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims depicted all members of this community, regardless of their residential status or political and religious beliefs, as threats or potential enemies (Fadda-Conrey, 2011). Reinforced by the Islamophobic attacks of the 2016 Presidential campaign in the United States, it is necessary to educate the young generation about Islam and what Muslim countries and their peoples are like. However, this cannot be done without differentiating between the Middle Eastern cultures and countries. Many people use the terms Arab and Muslim interchangeably, leading to the misconception that all Middle Eastern people are Arab or speak the standard Arabic as their official language. By focusing specifically on Iran, a country situated in the Middle East and predominantly inhabited by non-Arab Muslims, this paper aims to delve deeper into the portrayal and depiction of Iranians in picture books that are published and accessible in North American public resources.

IRAN’S MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

The words Iran and Persia are used interchangeably in this research. While both names referred to the same country in ancient times, Iran
became the nation’s official name in 1935 to reflect the diversity, both ethnic and religious, of its people. Though the majority of Iran’s population is Shia Muslim, not all of them are ethnically Persian (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006). If language were used as a distinguishing feature of ethnicity, barely half of the population speaks Farsi (Persian) even though it is the country’s official language. Other languages include Turkic (of different dialects such as Azeri, Turkmen, Qashqai, and Shahsavan), Kurdish, Baluchi, Luri, Arabic, Gilaki, Assyrian, and Armenian (Sanasarian, 2004; Tohidi, 2009). The Turkic-speaking people are considered the largest and most linguistically diverse ethnic group after Persians.

Tohidi (2009) reports Iran’s ethnic classification as of 2003: “Persian (51 percent), Azeri (24 percent), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8 percent), Kurd (7 percent), Arab (3 percent), Lur (2 percent), Baluch (2 percent), Turkmen (2 percent), and other groups (1 percent)” (p. 300). Sanasarian (2004) introduces the Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Qashqais, Bakhtiaris, Turkmans, Arabs, Shahsavans, and Lurs as politically significant ethnic groups, among which the Kurds and Baluchis are overwhelmingly Sunni.

In addition to Iran’s ethnic and linguistic minorities, there are non-Muslim religious minorities of “Armenians, Assyrians, Bahais, Chaldeans, Iranian Christian converts, Jews, and Zoroastrians” (Sanasarian, 2004, p.1). Among the non-Muslim religious minorities, the Bahais, Jews, and Zoroastrians speak Persian as their mother tongue. Bates and Rassam (2001) report that Jews have been living in Iran since ancient times, and even though their native language is Persian, “they maintain a strong sense of separate identity fostered by close intermarriage, residential segregation, and a focus on a number of shrines and pilgrimage centers within Iran” (p. 104). Bahaiism is a complex case in Iran because it is the country’s largest non-Muslim religion, but after the 1979 Revolution it was introduced as a “misguided sect” with no “legitimate claim to be one of the acceptable revealed religions” (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006, p. 59).

In addition to such diverse religious minority groups in Iran as Bahais, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who speak Persian as their mother tongue, there is a significant Armenian presence in eastern Anatolia and the surrounding areas of Mount Ararat dating back to prehistoric times. Both Persian and Greek sources refer to this region as “Armenia” and identify its inhabitants as “Armenians.” Sanasarian (2004) argues that although Armenians were under the direct or indirect rule of the Persians for twelve centuries and were influenced by their religion and
culture, they still retain their unique characteristics as a nation. In the early 17th century and under the reign of Shah Abbas of the Safavid dynasty, a large number of Armenians were forced to relocate from the city of Julfa and their ancestral lands in Northwestern Iran to the New Julfa in Isfahan.

The Assyrians are a non-Muslim minority in Iran that speaks an Aramaic dialect and belongs to the Nestorian church. According to Sanasarian (2004), the majority of Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia belong to the East Syrian Church or Nestorian Church and comprise the two main groups of Assyrians and Chaldeans. While a large number of Assyrians live in Urumiyeh, a city in northwest Iran, the Chaldean population that adheres to Catholicism resides in Khuzestan province (in southwest Iran) and is concentrated in Ahvaz (Sanasarian, 2004). Exploring complex identities and embracing multiple perspectives enables a thorough investigation of individuals, ultimately enriching our understanding of diverse human experiences.

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF IRANIANS (PERSIANS) IN THE NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

This research originated from a graduate course literacy project in the United States, where I was tasked with enhancing the literacy skills of a second-grade Iranian student. Upon recognizing the student’s deep connection to Persian culture, I proposed introducing Persian picture books as a means of improving the student’s overall literacy. Picture books, which combine visuals and written content, are a valuable resource for enriching children’s literacy experience (Wert, 2023). However, there are limited options for picture books about Iran, most that are available focus solely on Nowruz (the Persian New Year), and the illustrations in them are of poor quality. Few of the books explore life in Iran beyond the Nowruz celebration, which leaves a gap in understanding peoples’ everyday life and other aspects of their culture and diversity.

Given the various ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, the current research set out to examine and gain insight into how this diversity is portrayed in children’s books distributed in the United States and Canada. The study is guided by two main research questions: (1) What are the primary themes and topics explored in American children’s picture books about Iran and its cultures published between 2000 and 2021? and (2) How do these children’s picture books depict Iranians’ contemporary practices and cultures?
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in Rudine Sims Bishop’s notions of children’s literature as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (1990). Literature plays a significant role in promoting multicultural values. It is a source through which children and young adults are exposed to other cultures and dialogues on issues regarding diversity. Bishop (1997) emphasizes the dual role of multicultural children’s literature as a mirror in which the child’s life is reflected in books and as windows which are an opportunity to see into someone else’s life. While Bishop (2012) emphasizes the balance between the two, children from historically underrepresented groups “had been offered mainly books as windows into lives” whereas the children from the dominant cultures were exposed to “mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives” (p. 9). There are few children’s picture books in English about contemporary Middle Eastern cultures and individuals. Many include teachings about Islam or Muslim rituals and celebrations in a nonfiction format. Others mostly fall into the main categories of war, historical figures, folktales, and ancient times (Gultekin & May, 2020).

While many published books and articles in the area of children’s literature have depicted the experience of Blacks/Africans, Asians, Indigenous, and Latinxs, relatively few studies have portrayed Middle Eastern people and their cultures. In her dissertation, Raina (2009) examined 72 children’s and young adult books about Muslims that focused on areas such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well as some Middle Eastern countries. Her analysis noted the dominance of Western worldviews regarding the culture on the part of both outsiders and insiders. Raina (2009) believes the authors’ access to English language publications rather than those in their own language was what influenced their content selection to suit an English-speaking audience.

Furman (2014) analyzed the portrayal of Arabs and/or Muslims in America or the Middle East in juvenile fiction and fictionalized nonfiction picture books. Her comprehensive analysis found that almost 50% of the books she reviewed were about ancient civilizations such as those in Egypt, Arabia, or Babylonia. Furman (2014) also believes this accounts for the “inordinately large number of stereotypical portrayals of mummies, pyramids, camels, pharaohs, and shy, attractive subservient maidens” (p. 135). Another unexpected finding in her analysis was the number of books with war and refugee themes, although a very critical topic to share with youngsters.
In addition, Torres (2016) examined the presentation of Muslims from preschool to the third grade. In her review of 56 books, she identified many with flat character portrayal and a concentration on Islamic teachings. Torres (2016) counted the lack of “well-written and culturally appropriate children’s literature related to Muslims” as the primary implication of this research (p. 205). Further, Panjwani (2017) drew on the Ontario Trillium list as the primary focus along with the use of other resources within the Canadian context. Although the milieu of each literary piece may have been different according to its location, she believed the overall plot and characterization of the analyzed books were largely one-dimensional and did not capture the experience of all Islamic civilizations.

Finally, as many teachers and parents turn to award-winning books for quality literature, Gultekin and May (2020) examined the Middle East Outreach Council’s Middle East Book Award collection to analyze the region’s presentation and its authenticity. Their analysis showed that one third of the award-winning books were set in the three countries of Iraq, Iran, and Morocco but nonetheless failed to capture the diversity of the people that included Kurds, Druze, and Yazidis. Moreover, some illustrations, including Demi’s (2003) Muhammad ص, are controversial because of Islam’s prohibition of graven images, especially of Prophet Muhammad and his family. Gultekin and May (2020) argue that the books’ insufficient treatment of underrepresented communities should not lead to an increase in the stereotypical and inauthentic representation of these groups.

The key to accurately representing Middle Eastern people in children’s literature is to first recognize the diversity of its cultures. Classifying the entire Middle East as Muslim or Arab may confuse readers and not allow further identification of the uniqueness of each country. Moreover, stereotypical representation of a region with more than 400 million people, reinforced by the negative influences of the media, perpetuates a single vision of these people mostly as terrorists (Jackson, 2014). Unfortunately, media plays a significant role in shaping people’s perceptions of reality, including how teachers design their curricula (Kaviani, 2007). As teachers and parents rely on various media for updated information and resources, it becomes essential to have access to a wide range of reliable materials that present an authentic portrayal of different ethnic and religious groups to children.

This study conducts a comprehensive investigation of children’s picture books centered on Iran, a country of more than 80 million people, and published in 2000–2021 in the United States and Canada, to examine how they portray the cultural diversity and practices of contemporary Iranians.
METHODOLOGY

Data Resources

The study reviewed 27 picture books published and available in North American library collections about Iran. The initial search began with “Iran and/or Persia”, “picture books”, and “children’s literature” as keywords for books published between 2000 and 2021 and written in English. Since story picture books are read more often in early childhood and elementary settings, and this is an age in children “when ideas about other cultures begin their formation” (Torres, 2016, p. 194), the inductive analysis investigated the themes and contexts of the available fiction picture books about Iran for early and primary ages. The data resources used for this research consisted of library data on Iran and other Middle Eastern categories in repositories such as the University of Arizona World of Words Center for literacy, Cooperative Children's Book Center, New York Public Library, Middle East Outreach Council, Toronto Public Library, and the Amazon website.

While searching for texts, certain criteria were developed to aid the researcher in categorizing books. Since this paper concentrates on fiction picture books, non-fiction and information series about Iran were not reviewed. Furthermore, to investigate how Iran and its diverse cultures are portrayed in children’s picture books published in North America, translations and books written in both Farsi/Persian and English were excluded. Dual language books are normally written for an Iranian audience and are seldom found in public libraries.

Finally, to keep the focus on contemporary fiction, books with the theme of “Shahnameh” or “Book of Kings” were not counted in this research (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006, p. 71). Shahnameh is one of the world’s longest epic poems about the struggle of good against evil that is set in pre-Islamic Persia and thus is devoid of familiar elements existing in contemporary life. Sung (2009) believes “traditional tales and historical fiction have “obvious” otherness due to time difference, fantasy elements, and presentational styles” (p. 71), so these topics were excluded to concentrate on contemporary settings and elements.

Table 1 presents an organized overview of the selected books arranged according to publication date, titles, and name of the respective author or illustrator. The themes were based on the book’s genre, plot, and the context in which the story takes place. An understanding of the themes in these books offers valuable insight into how Iran is perceived by young readers in North America and how that contributes to their cultural awareness and understanding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/Illustrator</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The King and the Three Thieves: A Persian Tale</td>
<td>Kristen Balouch</td>
<td>Folktale</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>The Persian Cinderella</td>
<td>Shirley Climo/Robert Florczak</td>
<td>Fairy Tale</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Mystery Bottle</td>
<td>Kristen Balouch</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Count Your Way Through Iran</td>
<td>James Haskins &amp; Kathleen Benson/Farida Zaman</td>
<td>Fictionalized Non-Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Pea Boy and Other Stories from Iran</td>
<td>Elizabeth Laird/Shirin Adl</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale</td>
<td>Donna Jo Napoli/Gabi SwiatKowska</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Gala and Her Friends Celebrate Norooz</td>
<td>Karen McCormick</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>The Secret Message</td>
<td>Mina Javaherbin/Bruce Whatley</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>The Conference of the Birds</td>
<td>Alexis York Lumbard/Demi</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>The Girl with a Brave Heart</td>
<td>Rita Jahanforuz/Vali Mintzi</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>Two Parrots</td>
<td>Rashin Kheiriyeh</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>The Heart’s Garden: Based on a Poem by Rumi</td>
<td>Omid Arabiab/Shilla Shakoori</td>
<td>Folktales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>The Moonlight Princess: A Persian Cinderella Story</td>
<td>Sarak Ardestani/Whitney Mattila</td>
<td>Fairy Tale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Genre</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>Norooz a Celebration of Spring! The Persian New Year</td>
<td>Gail Hejazi/Christina Cavallo</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>The New Year's Goldfish: A Nowruz Story</td>
<td>Solmaz Parveen/Tata Bobokhidze</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>The Story of Spring and Norooz: An Untold Tale of Persian New Year</td>
<td>Nazanin Mirsadeghi/Sanam Hooshvar</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Niko's Nifty Box of Books</td>
<td>Sheila Salamat/Kaveh Taherian</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>Navid's Story: A Real-Life Account of His Journey from Iran</td>
<td>Andy Glynne/Jonathan Trope</td>
<td>Biography/Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Grace Learns about Persian Culture</td>
<td>Ellie Fard/Somayeh Royae</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>Hooray! Hooray! Nowruz is here!</td>
<td>Mojgan Roohani</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>Saffron Ice cream</td>
<td>Rashin Kheiriyeh</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<td>2019</td>
<td>My Grandma and Me</td>
<td>Mina Javaherbin</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Goodnight Joon: A Persian Parody</td>
<td>Nasrin Zadeh/Sarah &amp; Ari Roven</td>
<td>Parody</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story</td>
<td>Adib Khorram/Zainab Faidhi</td>
<td>Nowruz</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>The Shape of Home</td>
<td>Rashin Kheiriyeh</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Maryam's Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani</td>
<td>Megan Reid/Aaliya Jaleel</td>
<td>Biography/Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Maryam Mirzakhani-Women in Science and Technology</td>
<td>M. M. Eboch/Elena Bia</td>
<td>Biography/Fiction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANALYSIS

In this research, inductive content analysis was used as the methodology to allow the investigation of the themes as they emerge. In fact, content analysis is used by researchers to “make inferences from texts and to make sense of these interpretations within context surrounding the texts” (Johnson, et al., 2017, p. 13). Therefore, in the first phase of this research, books about Iran in different libraries and data resources available both in the United States and Canada were located. The primary focus of this study is on picture books written in English for ages three to nine. In the second phase, the books were read to get the holistic idea of the storyline and the emerging themes within their context. After the initial coding was conducted, the qualitative content analysis was applied to examine the literary and visual elements of picture books.

All the books selected for this study were published in English. In only a few books, Farsi words appeared in background illustrations or within the text, such as bababozorg (grandpa) in the Mystery Bottle by Balouch (2006). Another example is the use of the words namaz and chador in My Grandma and Me (2019). Namaz is the Persian word for prayer and chador is the type of hijab Iranians use while saying their prayers or on other occasions. Additionally, Kheiriyeh’s immigrant stories of The Shape of Home (2021) and Saffron Ice Cream (2018) are sample illustrations with Farsi words on their background pictures. The depiction of a bakery in Iran in The Shape of Home and the scenes of a home kitchen and the ice-cream seller in Saffron Ice Cream are good examples of the use of Farsi words and scripts in illustrations.

In reviewing the 27 books about Iran, the most prevalent theme emerging from them was of Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Many of the books attempted to introduce the most important celebration of Persians to the English-speaking audience using a narrative form. Following Nowruz, the remaining themes were categorized into distinct sections of fiction, folktale, fairy tale, biography fiction, and others. Although themes overlapped across the picture books, their overarching content was the basis of classification for analysis.

FINDINGS

This section is organized based on the prominent themes and topics identified during the analysis of the referenced books in relation to question 1. The categories are as follows: Nowruz, fiction, folktale, fairy
tale, biography fiction, and others. Each category is elaborated upon in the subsequent sections. To explore the second question of this study, which focuses on how picture books portray contemporary Iranians and their culture, the analysis revealed two additional categories of religious practices and contemporary culture. These categories are further discussed in the subsequent sections.

Prominent Themes

Nowruz. The majority of books reviewed for this study were about Nowruz, the Persian New Year. While Nowruz is written in different formats such as Norooz or No rouz, they all refer to the same event. Among Nowruz picture books reviewed for this study, three had a different approach and could be categorized as Nowruz fiction stories rather than presenting informational content. *The New Year’s Goldfish* (2016) by Solmaz Parveen and the illustrations of Tata Bobokhidze are in this category. Reflecting a second generation of Iranian Americans, Parveen’s collection comprises coloring and activity books to introduce Persian culture to children in fun and interesting ways. *The New Year’s Goldfish* in picture books narrates the story of Keyan, who in preparation for Nowruz goes to the pet shop and buys a goldfish. Although goldfish are one of the elements of the Nowruz Haftseen table and are usually returned to free water after the two-week celebration, many believe they should not be part of the Haftseen table due to the increasing respect for animal rights. Therefore, in the last page of the book Keyan reflects, “Goldfish had found her way to the stream that ran through his very own backyard. She had found a home with fresh water, plenty of food and other friends” (Parveen, 2016).

The second Nowruz fiction is *The Story of Spring and Norooz: An Untold Tale of Persian New Year* (2017). This book is a different version of the Nowruz story, from a girl named Bahar, which means “Spring” in Farsi. Having the elements of fantasy, Bahar spends the entire year sleeping in the skies except for the last day of winter when she wakes up to welcome the spring. The last book in this category is a sample of contemporary fiction. *Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story* (2021) is written by Adib Khorram, an Iranian American award-winning author who lives in Kansas City, Missouri. In this book, Khorram introduces Kian, the fun-loving protagonist, who tries to include his cat, Sonny, as one of the Haftseen table items all of which start with the letter “S” and symbolize notions that include health, wealth, and prosperity, among others. But Sonny messes up the Haftseen table and Kian has to come up with his own unique table, and
he replaces his superhero, sugar, sneakers, soap, scarf, and some seeds with the original Haftseen elements. But the last “S” is missing until the whole family “smiles” for a family picture. This creative book is accompanied by Zainab Faidhi’s colorful and captivating illustrations.

**Fiction.** The fiction books found and reviewed in this category were of different themes, settings, and characters. Kristen Balouch’s *Mystery Bottle* (2006) is the story of a boy who is carried by a strong wind from Brooklyn to his grandfather’s house in Iran. There, they have tea with sugar cubes together and then climb the tallest mountain. Up there, grandpa holds an empty bottle and asks the boy to breathe in the wind and, with some added love, blow it back to the bottle. Afterward, he packs the bottle into the boy’s bag and reminds him that when having a cup of tea at home the scent of the opened bottle would bring him to his grandfather. With its dynamic illustrations, this biographical fantasy takes the reader over time and space despite the political and geographical barriers between the two countries. *The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale* is by Donna Jo Napoli (2009), who is a professor of linguistics and the author of children’s and young adult fiction. The book narrates the story of Parisa, who is left alone in Bam’s earthquake in Iran. However, instead of living in despair, she inspires all the animals around with her human spirit. Although the tale’s setting is realistic, the plot and the characters, except for Parisa herself, revolve around fictional animals.

In *The Girl with a Brave Heart: A Tale from Tehran* (2013), Rita Jahanforuz suggests the book’s setting is Tehran, Iran, although the story itself is an adaptation of the Grimm’s fairy tale, Mother Hulda. This story is about Shiraz, who was born after her mother’s death in Tehran. Her father soon marries a woman with a daughter the same age as Shiraz, and the two grow together like sisters. Things change, however, when Shiraz’s father dies, and her stepmother makes her do the housework while her stepsister, Monir, continues living her life as before. Illustrated by Vali Mintzi, the pictures match the plot by depicting ancient times. *Two Parrots* (2014), *Saffron Ice Cream* (2018), and *The Shape of Home* (2021) are three works of fiction authored and illustrated by Rashin Kheiriyeh, an internationally recognized Iranian artist, illustrator, and animator currently living in Washington, D.C. While *Two Parrots* is inspired by a tale from Rumi, *Saffron Ice Cream* and *The Shape of Home* depict Kheiriyeh’s own immigration stories and comparisons she draws between Iran and the United States. *Saffron Ice Cream* is about Kheiriyeh’s family trip to Coney Island beach in Brooklyn where she remembers her childhood memories of the
family trips to the Caspian Sea. Whereas in *The Shape of Home*, the author narrates her memories from schools in Iran while looking forward to her new experiences in the United States. Similarly, Mina Javaherbin’s *My Grandma and Me* (2019), shares Mina’s own stories with her grandma filled with elements of Iranian culture. She explains that her grandma used to live with them when she was growing up in Iran and that they would do everything together from cooking to saying prayers and visiting neighbors.

**Folktale.** For this category, the definition of folktale is drawn from Thompson’s (1977) explanation of prose tale as: “the story which has been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth” (p. 4). In this regard, *Pea Boy and Other Stories from Iran* (2009) by the British writer Elizabeth Laird is a collection of Persian folk tales illustrated by Shirin Adl. Although a British author, Laird has traveled around the world extensively, including the Middle East and Africa, and has particularly worked on collecting folk stories in Ethiopia. Shirin Adl is also an Iranian illustrator who currently lives in Oxford, the UK. The other book from this author and illustrator is *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* published in 2012.

Mina Javaherbin, the author of *My Grandma and Me*, retells the story of the parrot and the merchant based on a poem of Rumi. *The Secret Message* (2010), one of Javaherbin’s favorite childhood stories, with its subtle humor and the vibrant images of Bruce Whately, is a good introduction to Persian history, literature, and culture. It is a story of a Persian merchant whose speaking parrot from the Indian forests attracts many customers to the shop. Although the parrot yearns to be free again, the merchant continues keeping him in the cage. One day the merchant decides to embark on a journey to India and the parrot asks him to deliver a message from him to other parrots in the Indian forest. The forest parrots’ subtle unity in response to the encaged parrot and the secret message they delivered set the merchant’s parrot free. Similarly, *The Conference of the Birds* (2012) by Alexis York Lumbard, an American Muslim children’s book author, is based on the ancient story by Attar, the Persian poet. The book describes the spiritual journey of a thousand birds of which only thirty make it to their destination at the court of “Simorgh,” which literally means “thirty birds.” Demi does the illustrations of this book featuring only birds as characters. To this collection can be added *The Heart’s Garden: Based on a Poem by Rumi* (2015). Authored by Omid Arabian, this volume is inspired by Rumi’s holistic worldviews and his unity with the universe. Kristen Balouch’s *The King and the Three Thieves: A Persian Tale* (2000) is another
item in this category which narrates the story of King Abbas in the faraway land of Persia and his curiosity about the common people. Disguised as a beggar, he shares his dinner with three ordinary folk and gets caught up in their scheme to enter the palace. Eventually, the king remembers his vizir’s advice that “power can be used for good and for evil,” and he decides to use it for good by not letting anyone in his kingdom ever stay hungry again (Balouch, 2000).

**Fairy Tale.** Categorized in this section are *The Persian Cinderella* (2001) and *The Moonlight Princess: A Persian Cinderella story* (2016). The former, written by Shirley Climo and illustrated by Robert Florczak, is the well-known Cinderella story plot. It is unique and different, however, in that the setting is ancient Persia and the characters, especially the main character Setareh, are all Persians. On the contrary, the story of the “Moonlight Princess” or “Mah Pishooni,” is actually a Persian fairy tale that is similar to its European counterpart, Cinderella. It is retold by Sarak Ardestani, the daughter of Iranian American parents, who first heard it at the age of six and was eager to share it with the English-speaking world. The story’s opening is very similar to the *A Girl with a Brave Heart*, with Mah losing her mother and her father remarrying a woman with a daughter almost the same age as Mah, but the narrative continues along the lines of Cinderella with its context and illustration in ancient Persia.

**Biography/Fiction.** The first book in this genre is *Navid’s Story: A Real-Life Account of His Journey from Iran* (2017) by Andy Glynne. Told in Navid’s own words, this is an immigrant story about a family of Kurdish refugees who had to flee Iran and relates what they experienced on the way to their destination. The second book is Megan Reid’s *Maryam’s Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani* (2021). As its title suggests, the book is about the Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani, who was the only female recipient of the prestigious Fields Medal in mathematics. There is another publication of this book named, *Maryam Mirzakhani—Women in Science and Technology* (2021), which was written by M. M. Eboch and illustrated by Elena Bia. While both genres are in contemporary fiction, the stories take place only partly in Iran with the rest depicting the main characters’ lives outside the country.

**Others.** James Haskins and Kathleen Benson’s *Count Your Way Through Iran* (2007) is a fictionalized nonfiction work that introduces Iran and its culture through counting in Farsi numerals. The book is illustrated by Farida Zaman, a Bangladeshi artist based in Toronto. The book opens with a general introduction about Iran, its population, and official language and
then continues to count the numbers in Farsi; yek, doh, and . . . However, each number represents an Iranian symbol. For instance, one (yek) stands for one national car, Paykan, which is only made in Iran. Two (doh) represents the two Towers of Silence near the city of Yazd, where it was built by Zoroastrians. The other book that could not be grouped within other categories is *Goodnight Joon: A Persian Parody* (2020). This book by Nasrin Zadeh is an imitation of the famous book *Goodnight Moon* that describes a home full of Persian decor. “Joon” in Farsi means “dear” and the entire book centers on a parent/grandparent’s love for their child filled with Farsi phrases. In a fully Persian setting, this retold story depicts Persian cultural elements such as a Persian cat, rug, delicacies, and other traits of the room.

Cultural Depiction

**Religious Practices.** Although Iran is a Muslim majority country and wearing hijab in public has been compulsory since the 1979 revolution, none of the books directly reference Islam as a religion or mention other Muslim practices. There are only subtle indications of the religion, such as when Mina’s grandma was saying her prayer in *My Grandma and Me* (2019). The findings suggest that older people or females in ancient times are depicted wearing scarves, unless they are part of contemporary fiction that is set in Iran. For example, in the *Seven Special Somethings* (2021), the grandma is depicted with a scarf while Kian’s mother does not wear one. While many families in the diaspora or the major cities of Iran do not wear hijab at home gatherings, elderly women keep it as a belief or tradition. In addition, Megan Reid’s *Maryam’s Magic: The Story of Mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani* (2021) is an instance of depicting women with hijab in an Iranian context. The initial pages that narrate Maryam’s school experiences in Iran portray all females in accordance with the Iranian school dress code. However, the depiction of Maryam’s geometry teacher wearing a long-sleeved shirt and skirt is incorrect as teachers are obliged to wear outfits similar to those of their students, including manteaus and pants, while also wearing the school hijab called Maghnaeh.

Moreover, none of the books refer to Muslim celebrations, a fact that also is evident in the survey by Paige, et al. (2015) of Iranian Americans who were unwilling to disclose their religious affiliation. The authors assumed this might be due to “fear of social marginalization or discrimination” (Paige et al., 2015, p. 11). However, the prevalent theme of Nowruz demonstrates the strong connection Iranians have to their cultural traditions. Rooted in pre-Islamic Persia and the secular Zoroastrian tradition,
Nowruz is celebrated by all Iranians, regardless of their ethnicity. Therefore, for Iranians, Nowruz, more than any other Muslim celebration, represents their cultural identity and unity which has been preserved for over a thousand years and predates the advent of Islam in Persia.

**Contemporary Culture.** Another dominant theme emerging from the books’ reviews is the presence of folktales derived from the works of great Persian poets such as Ferdowsi, Rumi, and Attar. Although the majority of these books, which were not included in this study, are inspired by the “Shahnameh” or “the Book of Kings,” the analysis of the folktale section proves the popularity of folktales in Persian culture among all generations. These folktales not only recount the heroic deeds of ancient Persians; they also subtly convey morals and spirituality which may captivate a diverse audience. However, another way to increase awareness of Iranians’ daily lives and practices could be through the biographies of famous contemporary figures in children’s picture books. In this regard, the books on Maryam Mirzakhani’s life were the only ones written by non-Iranian authors Megan Reid and M. M. Eboch. While there are many other prominent Iranian figures, from both ancient and current times, no biographies have been written about them. Depicting the lives of famous people in various fields would serve as an inspiration for younger generations and could foster unity and positive interactions among diverse nationalities as well.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is important for curricula and library resources to be representative of the student population and provide a mirror in which students can see themselves and other people from their own community. In this regard, picture books should integrate ethnic and cultural themes into the curriculum. As Morgan (2009) points out, children’s books not only teach reading but also transmit values. While multiple perspectives encourage readers to engage in more complex analysis of the text, it is essential to ensure an adequate availability of multicultural books for students.

The analysis of 27 children’s books about Iran revealed a relatively limited number of common themes and those were primarily focused on Nowruz stories and folktales. Although many of the authors and illustrators were Iranian or had good familiarity with the culture, most of the books do not provide insight into the contemporary life of Iranians. This aligns with Furman’s (2014) findings in which the majority of analyzed books were set in ancient times and revealed little information about
contemporary practices. Gultekin and May (2020) also shared similar findings that their analysis of the Middle Eastern cultures inadequately encompassed the full diversity of the region, resulting in the propagation of stereotypical and inauthentic representation of this group.

In addition, the settings of the contemporary fiction stories were often located either partially or entirely outside of Iran. This may be attributed to the growing number of Iranians in the diaspora and the limited resources available about Persian culture in North America, particularly in the domain of curricula and picture books. As a result, readers are unable to delve into the specifics of Iranian culture. For instance, none of the books reference diasporic ethnicities or characters speaking languages other than Persian or specific dialects. Raina (2009) had similar findings in which she believed the authors’ access to the English publishing industry rather than their own language was what influenced their content selection to suit an English-speaking audience.

Furthermore, in the books reviewed the exact setting of several books was unclear and, if mentioned, was generally referred to only as Iran. Only a few books explicitly mentioned locations such as Tehran or Kerman. In some books like The New Year’s Goldfish (2016), the setting could be assumed to be in North America based on the author’s background and the presence of English signs in the illustrations. The books reviewed also provided limited information on gender or political facts about Iran, which did not seem to be the result of a deep understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural context of Iran. For example, in Navid’s Story (2017), the author and illustrator do not provide much information about the Kurdish community that Navid is from, despite the Kurds being a distinct ethnic group in Iran. Similarly, in Maryam’s Magic, Reid (2021) explains Maryam’s attendance at school after the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) as follows:

. . . during the war that tore her home country of Iran apart, girls and women hadn’t been allowed to attend school with boys—or sometimes even at all. But after the war was over, politicians started new schools to allow girls’ talents to grow. ‘You are part of a lucky generation,’ Maryam’s mother told her.

Gender segregation in schools has been a policy predating the revolution, and girls in major cities like Tehran have been allowed to attend schools. Only in institutions established by foreigners (missionaries) or in remote areas where the total number of students was low, were boys and girls allowed to attend school together. However, after the revolution certain talent schools both for boys and girls started to grow, and
Mirzakhani was a graduate of one of these talent schools. Therefore, the paragraph mentioned represents an instance where inadequate and/or false information may have contributed to stereotypes. As Short (2018) explains, “the lack of contemporary depictions is problematic in that children may develop the misconception that other parts of the world are set back in time” (p. 295). This statement aligns with the findings of Torres (2016) and Panjwani (2017), as both studies identified issues with flat characters and one-dimensional plots. Therefore, to provide an authentic portrayal of Iran in children’s literature, resources on the contemporary life of Iranians should be expanded to capture the experience of a multicultural society.

In conclusion, the analysis of children’s books about Iran revealed a limited representation of contemporary Iranian life, with a focus on Nowruz and folktales. The settings often extended beyond Iran, and important aspects of Iranian culture, such as diasporic identities and languages, were not adequately addressed. Gender, historical, and political facts were sometimes inaccurately portrayed, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes. To foster an authentic and comprehensive understanding of Iran, it is crucial to expand resources that reflect the contemporary experiences of Iranians and their multicultural society in children’s literature.

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