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Parvin Salaajeghe. *From this Oriental Garden: Critical Theory in the Studies of Poetry Written for Children and Young Adults*

Tehran: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults,
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Az in Baagh-e Sharqi: Nazariyehaye Naqd-e She'r-e Kudak-o Nojavan (From this Oriental Garden: Critical Theory in the Studies of Poetry written for Children and Young Adults) by Parvin Salaajeghe offers readers a variety of rhetorical approaches to interpreting poetry for young audience. The book won Iran's Book of the Year Award in 1386(2007). Poetry is treated in this book as a branch of literature requiring its own critical approaches. Much theoretical rigour is sacrificed to rhetorical criticism in this book. The writer expresses her idealistic view of literature and criticism in the first chapter of the book: "this young and green offshoot [Children's Literature] has been born whether we like it or not. But it is supposed to be more beautiful and greener after being made-up and trimmed by criticism" (p.24). Conceptualizing the function of criticism as beautification has led to the exclusion of most contemporary perspectives such as feminism, marxism, new-historism, cultural studies, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, reader response theory etc.

The title of the book is redolent of Self-Orientalization! By oriental garden, the writer probably means the Persian poems that she uses as examples to elucidate different rhetorical concepts. The theoretical ground on which she stands however, seems to be fertilized with western sources that we see at the

end of each chapter. A review of the book chapters would further clarify what I mean by rhetorical approaches to interpreting literature which I think the bulk of the book is mostly occupied with.

The first chapter gives an introduction to critical theory within the domain of children and young adult literature. After highlighting the significance of literary criticism in general, she proceeds to distinguish acts of reading by adults and by children. In this part she warns against lapsing into the abyss of adult insight when criticising children's literature (p. 23). In the second chapter, she gives a history of poetry written for children in the western world and in Iran. The third chapter offers definitions of poetry and distinguishes poetry from prose. The title of the fourth chapter is "imagination" wherein the writer refers to the role of imaginative potential to find similarities between dissimilar things. Simile, metaphor, ambiguity, and imagery are explained and examples are given. Examples are two or three lines of very different poems by different poets. The same structure can be found in consequent chapters of the book. In the fifth chapter for example, titled "Trope", the writer brings lines of different poems and after a close reading of them, finds instances of literary tropes. The examples are not analysed fully and the chapter ends with examples. Seldom could I find a concluding paragraph at the end of the chapters. In the sixth chapter titled "metaphor", she explains different types of metaphor and brings examples; when I encountered the numerous technical terms in this chapter, I had a vague feeling that has found the "lapse into the abyss of adult insight when criticising children's literature" irresistible. The short and sweet seventh chapter is devoted to "synaesthesia." "Irony" is the title of the eighth chapter. A short definition is offered and three or four out-of-context examples are given. It is interesting that the structure of chapters does not change even when the writer is discussing terms that make sense in long narrative texts. In the ninth chapter titled "motif and sign" for example, motif is exemplified by out-of-context excerpts of poetry. If instead of numerous examples, only one poem was chosen and explicated in terms of its motifs, the reader would find the term easier to understand. There is the minimum degree of interpretation: explanations are merely descriptive rather than analytic. In the tenth chapter titled "Symbol", the writer offers very complicated linguistic definitions and touches the domain of semiotics. The eleventh chapter titled "satire in the poetry for children and young adults" highlights the scarcity of satire in children's literature of our country and brings few examples. And the twelfth

chapter titled “allegory” is devoted to allegory as a form of narrative, but again we face short excerpts from different poems that do not make sense unless the whole poem is read fully. The chapter ends abruptly after the last example with no commentary. After an unpredictable sequence of formalist, thematological and linguistic concepts, the writer jumps into the domain of “myth” in the thirteenth chapter. Concepts discussed in this chapter are animism, personification, identification and the sensual reactions of nature as manifested in poetry. In this section, I expected to see some references to mythological elements resurging in poetry. One of the examples is:

چکه چکه خورشید/ بر سر شاخه چکید/ بوته‌ای چشم گشود/ بعد خمیازه کشید

And this enigmatic example of myth is left with no further commentary.

The fourteenth chapter is devoted to “affection in the poetry for children and young adults.” In this chapter, representations of different emotions are discussed. But the emotions are chosen by random. Fear, loneliness, violence, wishing, praying, and happiness are the various emotions traced by the writer in children poetry. The fifteenth chapter is titled “language in the poetry for children and young adults” where issues of aesthetic qualifications, length, terseness, de-stereotyping, rhythm, redundancy etc. are highlighted. There seems to be a recourse to rhetorical elements in the sixteenth chapter which is titled “literary devices.” Very technical terms are introduced in this part and examples are given for each. The seventeenth chapter is titled “thought in in the poetry for children and young adults” and the twenty first chapter is titled “social thought in the poetry for children and young adults.” I wish the writer had merged these two chapters due to their overlaps. In the eighteenth chapter titled “meaning and theme in the poetry for children and young adults,” the writer jumps back to thematology and refers to some themes that can be found in children’s literature. The nineteenth chapter, titled “narrative in the poetry for children and young adults” deals with the questions of point of view, characterization, monologue, dramatic monologue, apostrophe, temporal continuity, and open ending. The twentieth chapter is called “rhythm and rhyme in the poetry for children and young adults.” In this chapter the writer refers to the poetic forms commonly used in such poetry. The last chapter is titled “the pathology of the poetry for children and young adults.” It embodies interesting issues that should be addressed seriously by Persian poets addressing children. She refers to weaknesses in language, choice of words

and grammatical structures and offers more appropriate options. She also refers to adult mentality which is based on binary oppositions; and believes that such a polarized view of the world is not consonant with the world of children. She warns against different kinds of stereotypes and proceeds to pinpoint the weak and stereotypical use of imagery in poetry for children; but the last chapter that seemed to be very promising at the beginning, ends abruptly without a concluding remark.

The book offers encyclopaedic information about different features of poetry but what is normally expected from a book on literary criticism is different. Maybe a better title for the book would be “what to look for in poetry” or “how to read poetry.” One of the most important issues that deserves reconsideration in the following editions of this book is its structure. There is no predictable continuity between different parts of the book and if we scrambled the order of the book chapters, hardly any change would take place. There is no step by step building up of critical competence in the reader, neither is there a logical categorization in chapter divisions. The reader is dragged on from rhetorical criticism to thematology to myth criticism and back to thematology and then to linguistics. The confusion indicates that definitions of literary criticism need to be reconsidered. At the beginning of the book, the writer claims to have used both classical and modern critical theories but she never specifies which parts are classical and which sections are modern. After reading the claims of the writer in the introduction, the reader would probably expect to see a chronological development of critical theories ranging from classical to modern approaches. But this expectation is never met. Not only each chapter lacks a concluding remark but also the whole book ends abruptly. The last but not the least which needs revision, is the referencing style which is not consistent. I think the book must be taken into consideration by those interested in writing and reading poetry. It provides the reader with encyclopaedic information about poetry in general, a rich bibliography and an interesting collection of Persian poems written for children.