

The Becoming of the Fantastic Imaginary between Oriental Heritage and Occidental Modernity: An Approach into Structural Transformations and Aesthetics of Reception.

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Abstract:

This approach investigates the structural and aesthetic transformations of the "Fantastic Imaginary" within the context of transculturation between Eastern narrative heritage and the modern Western literary system. Its central problematic revolves around the mechanisms through which the triad of (the Marvelous, the Uncanny, and the Extraordinary) transitioned from the realm of "metaphysical certainty" associated with ancient beliefs, into a "creative laboratory" that employs the irrational as a critical and psychological tool to deconstruct the anxieties of contemporary man.

The approach discusses the demarcation of the conceptual boundaries of these terms, highlighting the impact of "intellectual hesitation" in reshaping reception mechanisms and developing the poetics of strangeness. Furthermore, it elucidates how Western cultural centrality assimilated the "Oriental Other's marvelousness," reproducing it within modern epistemic frameworks. This process transformed Eastern supernatural elements from pure mythological material into narrative techniques and existential metaphors that delineate crises of identity and alienation. Ultimately, this imaginative interaction liberated global narrative from the monotony of positivist rationalism, shifting "strangeness" from a transient state of deviation into a cognitive mirror for probing the existential complexity of the shared human experience.

Key words: *The Fantastic Imaginary; Narrative Transculturation; Poetics of the Marvelous; Cultural Centricity.*

1- Introduction:

The strange tale is considered one of the most theoretically problematic literary genres, given the complexity of its concepts and their intertwining with a system of closely related terms between which it is sometimes difficult to draw clear boundaries. This conceptual confusion stems primarily from the diversity of critical frame works and the variations in Arabic translations of Western terms, which has led to a certain ambiguity in defining what constitutes the "fantastic" and the "strange" and their relationship to concepts such as "fantasy" and "the supernatural the Fantastic as a Narrative "Island".

Returning to lexical references, we find that the term "Le Fantastique" refers to everything that arises from the imagination and appears as a marvelous creation dominated by extraordinary (supernatural) elements; in short, it represents "the unreal" (l'irréel).

In the context of Arab literary theory, researcher "Shu'aybHalifi" places the Fantastic in a middle ground between the marvelous and the bizarre; he argues that the identity of a work depends on the outcome and conclusion of its events. If the story concludes by offering a "natural explanation" for the mysterious phenomena, we are dealing with "grotesque" literature; however, if the phenomena persist without a logical explanation, we are dealing with "fantastic" literature¹.

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Thus, the fantastic represents that pivotal point or “isthmus” situated between the strange and the wondrous, encompassing all supernatural phenomena that spring from the imagination. In what follows, we will examine the distinction between the terms “the strange” and “the wondrous.”

2- The Terminological and Aesthetic Significance of the Unusual (L'insolite):

The concept of “the unusual” is one of the most difficult terms to define. Researcher"AbdelfattahKelito " argues that strangeness is a quality inherent in everything that deviates from the familiar and established perceptions in the collective consciousness of a group; For him, strangeness is linked to “distance,” as he views strange expressions as those that traverse great distances to settle in an unfamiliar environment, making strangeness a relative concept that shifts with changes in time and place². What is strange is not strange in and of itself, but rather in the context of its reception outside the realm of the ordinary.

From a philosophical perspective, Schelling offers a definition that links strangeness to revelation; for him, it is “the name for everything that should have remained hidden and secret, but which nevertheless became manifest and appeared.”³ It is this sudden revelation that evokes a sense of awe, which led researcher" Shaker Abdul Hamid" to link the uncanny to the “monstrous imagination,” viewing it as a form of imagination associated with anxiety and apprehension about the unknown⁴ A multifaceted term that brings together contradictions; in it, the presence of death at the heart of life becomes apparent, as do long-suppressed emotions⁵ In an unfamiliar present context. Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the term “the uncanny” gave it a profound psychological and existential dimension through his articulation of the concept of “the uncanny” (Das Unheimliche). In his view, the uncanny is not merely an encounter with a strange unknown, but rather a state of acute confusion that combines two opposites: “familiarity” and “fear.” This state manifests when the “safe and familiar” suddenly transforms into its “frightening opposite” as if we were to see a mechanical doll so disturbingly human-like, or catch a glimpse of our reflection in the mirror in a way that makes us doubt our own identity.⁶ What is strange here is the “return of the repressed” that is, the sudden emergence of the buried past at the heart of the present, which confuses the mind and shakes its certainty about reality.⁷

This psychoanalytic approach aligns with the critical perspective of” Kamel Abu Deeb”, who shifts the grotesque from the realm of psychoanalysis to that of “literary poetry.” For him, the structure of the fantastical text is based on the principle of the “shocking surprise” where the writer plunges the reader into a maelstrom of narratives that astound the mind and defy immediate logical comprehension.

Examples include the sudden shifts in *One Thousand and One Nights* or the amorphous spaces in Kafka's stories; what is strange here is not merely the supernatural event itself, but rather how the reader's expectations are shattered, opening the text to infinite interpretive horizons unbounded by a single meaning.⁸ What lends this strangeness an “artistic radiance” and makes it a deeply evocative symbol is the creator's reliance on “refined language” and an exquisite style.

The strangeness lies not only in the content but also in the “rhetoric of composition” where bold metaphors and unusual similes contribute to widening the gap between “language” and “ordinary reality.” The language of the strange text with its exceptional rhetorical expressions takes the phenomenon out of its narrow descriptive framework and into a vast suggestive space causing the text's meaning to shift and multiply according to the diversity of readers and their

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aesthetic sensibilities; for each reader reconstructs “strangeness” according to their own imagination.⁹

3 - The Crucial Distinction Between the Extraordinary and the Astonishing:

The term “extraordinary” refers to abilities that transcend human nature, stemming from connotations that suggest a breaking of the norm and a violation of the familiar¹⁰ This is where the superhero genre intersects with the “fantasy” (or magical) genre, which centers on the presence of supernatural beings such as fairies and witches, and the transformations that accompany them and alter the course of events.¹¹

The astonishing and the supernatural become an integral part of the fabric of the fantastic, as they constitute the element that gives the narrative its astonishing character and takes it beyond the bounds of reason. From this theoretical description we conclude that the fantastic and the bizarre are overlapping elements; If the described phenomena are ultimately explained logically, we are dealing with “strange literature”; if the events remain ambiguous and defiant of reason while the reader accepts them, we are dealing with “fantastical literature” This shift toward the strange, the wondrous and the supernatural enabled literature to shape its modernity through a comprehensive aesthetic infusion, transforming the Eastern heritage from a body of belief into critical and artistic tools for probing the unknown in humanity and the universe.¹²

4. The Problematic Nature of the Term “Le Fantastique” and Related Terms:

Based on French lexical references, the term “Le Fantastique” is defined as a pure product of the imagination, manifested in forms and images beyond the ordinary, dominated by supernatural and extraordinary elements; it is in essence a manifestation of the “unreal” (L’irréel) and a deviation from it In the light of contemporary Arab theory, specifically in the works of researcher” Shu’ayb Halifi”, the Fantastic is situated in a luminal or “middle zone,” functioning as a cognitive and narrative bridge connecting the boundaries of the “marvelous” with the realms of the “strange.” He argues that the identity of a work depends on the outcome and conclusion of its events. If the story concludes by offering a “natural explanation¹³ for mysterious phenomena we are dealing with “strange” literature but if the supernatural phenomenon persists without a logical explanation, we are dealing with “fantastic” literature.¹⁴

Researcher” Muhammad Nasser Al-Shayhan” also argues that modern Arab fantasy has successfully employed myth and historical symbolism to create a world in which the reader oscillates between the real and the imagined asserting that “wonder” is the primary driving force of this genre a wonder that stems from the blurring of reality and illusion.¹⁵

In an effort to deepen our aesthetic understanding “Kamel Abu Deeb” points out that the fantastic (or what he calls “supernatural art”) is the “art of the infinite,” which does not merely describe the supernatural but reconstructs the world according to a vision that transcends narrow rational logic making the fantastic synonymous with “absolute creative freedom” that is not bound by the limits of time and space¹⁶. For her part,” Sanaa Shaalan” asserts that fantasy represents the “dark side” of human consciousness, where strange creatures and bizarre phenomena emerge to express humanity’s fears and deep-seated anxieties a quality that lends fantasy a psychological dimension that goes beyond the simple magical tale.¹⁷ Building on this critical momentum, it becomes clear that the fantastic serves as the overarching “umbrella” encompassing manifestations of the strange and the bizarre term that has enabled modern Arab criticism to engage with mechanisms for analyzing the “unreasonable” in narrative,

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transforming it from mere “myth” into a complex “artistic vision” that engages with questions of existence and reality

5. The Evolution of the Fantastic Imagination: From Ancient Eastern Epics to Modern Western Fantasy:

In world literature, the fantastic does not represent a fleeting phenomenon or an isolated literary genre; rather it is a narrative structure deeply rooted in human history, having evolved through an extended process in which ancient orient myths intertwined with classical theological conceptions and later with modern Romantic visions. While contemporary Western criticism has framed the “fantastic” as a literary genre with its own structural characteristics, its historical precedence and creative leadership essentially stem from ancient oriental and Arabic discourse ; the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh is considered the oldest human work to contain magic and wonders within its pages.

This epic features the wondrous “metamorphosis” of the consorts of the goddess “Ishtar” and the legendary hero’s journey to the “end of the world” across the seas of death in search of the herb of immortality in a sweeping embodiment of primitive humanity’s desire to shatter existential boundaries and share with the gods the secret of survival.¹⁸

This Eastern influence served as the primary source of inspiration for the ancient Greek imagination, which in turn was captivated by animal fables and their strange powers especially the serpent, which was symbolized as possessing the secrets of regeneration and immortality¹⁹.

This trend evolved from simple mythology into the sweeping epic structures of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* which were built on the intertwining of the human world with divine powers and demigods a legacy that the Romans adopted and worked to “localize,” as seen in the tale of “Love and the Soul” within Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* and in Virgil’s *Aeneid* which contained early depictions of the epic fantastical elements employed in the construction of national memory.²⁰

With the transition to the Middle Ages, the genre of the fantastic underwent a shift toward “theological and cosmological representation,” as evidenced by the works of Dante, particularly *The Divine Comedy* which serves as a comprehensive record of medieval culture. In this text “Dante views death not as the opposite of life but as its extension; thus, his work serves as a vision that leads us to the afterlife, with all its imaginative conceptions of human destinies.”²¹

The fantastical elements did not stop at “Dante” but extended to include the “chivalric fantasy” of the legends of “King Arthur” and the voyage of “Saint Brendan” which depicted sea creatures and moving islands whose strangeness intersects with the Eastern voyages of Sinbad making the fantastic at this stage a bridge connecting the reality of human suffering with the ideal of spiritual salvation²².

The narrative richness of *The Nights, Biographies, and Miracles of the Sufis and the Diaries of Arab Travelers* was interpreted through a supernatural, otherworldly lens, which created a sense of bewilderment and hesitation in the Arab reader true precursors of fantasy literature; Had Western theorists such as “Todorov” examined it, they would have reconsidered the foundations of this literary genre.²³ With the dawn of the Renaissance, the fantastic emerged in the West as a conscious literary genre through the tales of “Charles Perrault” and “the Grimm brothers”, who drew on folk mythology* to recreate a sense of wonder²⁴ This genre expanded to include “cosmic pessimism” in the works of “Edgar Allan Poe”, magical realism in Latin

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America and even “Kafkaesque surrealism “ in which the metamorphosis was employed as a nightmare to depict the alienation of modern man²⁵.

This genre expanded to include “cosmic pessimism” in the works of “Edgar Allan Poe”, magical realism in Latin America and even “Kafkaesque surrealism” in which the metamorphosis was employed as a nightmare to depict the alienation of modern man.²⁶ Thus, we find that modern fantasy is the result of a historical convergence, through which it has evolved from a spontaneous creative practice in the ancient East to a well-defined critical term in the contemporary West.²⁷

6-“The Aesthetic Secularization” of the Fantastic: From Eastern Metaphysical Elements to Western Reception Psychology:

The deepest dimension of this transition lies in the structural shift from the “innate fantastic”—associated with metaphysical certainty and metaphysical acceptance in the Arab heritage—to the “artistic fantastic”²⁸ The “artistic fantastical” in Western literature, where themes of death, metamorphosis, and dignity have been reclaimed not as existential truths or supernatural phenomena of faith, but as critical and aesthetic tools for exploring the “unconscious” and the anxieties of modern man in the face of the objectification of the world. For the metamorphosis, which began as a mythical event or divine punishment in the Epic of Gilgamesh and ancient Arab heritage, ended as an existential cry and radical alienation in Franz Kafka; In his novel *The Metamorphosis* the transformation into an insect is no longer a terrifying miracle, but rather a visual metaphor for human helplessness within the modern bureaucratic machine²⁹ What is remarkable here is not the “supernatural act” itself but rather the “ordinariness” of its occurrence and the protagonist’s acceptance of it as an absurd fate.

Likewise, the magical ability to bend time and space manifested in the flying carpet or the mystical feats of Arab nights was reimagined by Jorge Luis Borges, transforming from “supernatural feats” into philosophical and mathematical labyrinths that explore the relativity of truth and the infinity of text; In his story “The Thousand” the luminous point containing the entire universe becomes a vehicle for discussing the dilemma of human perception and the limitations of language. Similarly, we find that Sufi miracles and transcendence of the laws of matter were transformed by pioneers of magical realism such as Márquez into a “narrative technique” that blends the mythical with the every day.

Thus, the ascent of “Beautiful Remedios” to the heavens in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a secular appropriation of the aesthetics of the “Mi’raj” or “ascension,” employed here to break the dominance of dry European realist fiction and to re-establish the imagination as a tool for resisting oblivion and official history

Furthermore, the shift in the concept of the fantastic has enabled Western literature to transition from the “strangeness of place” to the “strangeness of the soul”; whereas in the Arabic tale, the fantastic often took place in external spaces (islands, caves, seas), we find that Edgar Allan Poe transferred this magic to closed rooms and the labyrinths of the subconscious, transforming the physical “jinn” into “obsessions,” neuroses, and a “cosmic melancholy” that expresses the disintegration of the self. This trajectory culminated in the emergence of the “fantastic” with Hoffmann and the Gothic novel, which drew from the East its ability to evoke “awe,” but channeled it into literary forms that explore humanity’s anxiety regarding science and technological progress.

This process was clearly evident as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which drew on the “supernatural” elements of Eastern creation myths to address humanity’s anxiety regarding science and technological progress. The transmission of the strange tale served as a comprehensive

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“aesthetic inoculation”; it saved Western literature from the aridity of positivist rationalism and endowed it with the tools of grand narrative modernity. Thus, the Oriental fantastical transformed from a space “to be embraced” (as a mystical reality in the East) into an “aesthetic laboratory” in which the West forged its modern artistic consciousness and its most complex existential dilemmas.³⁰

7- From “The Wonder of Things” to “The Wonder of the Self”:

The narrative triad the wondrous, the strange, and the supernatural—did not make a seamless transition from the worlds of the East to the formation of the modern Western imagination rather, it formed a coherent intellectual system of a metaphorical and philosophical nature, based on the fusion of the triad (the wondrous, the strange, and the supernatural) into a single crucible. In the Arab heritage the “wondrous” crystallized as a deviation from the norm that provokes bewilderment due to ignorance of the underlying causes, as in the miracles of Sufis and the biographies of saints while the “strange” was linked to the “geography of the Other” and deviates from the familiar in distant spaces as in Al-Qazwini’s **Literature of Travel and Wonders of Creatures** As for the “supernatural,” it is embodied in the complete breaking of nature’s physical laws by divine or magical forces³¹

When European literature embraced these themes, it began to draw on the “aesthetics of the exotic” the geographical strangeness of the East to quench the “thirst for the imaginary” left behind by strict Enlightenment rationalism; Thus, Baghdad, Basra, and the magical caves became spaces for imaginative freedom and existential alternatives that the West lacked in its industrial and technological age. However, the deepest and most influential shift was embodied in the transition of the “Arabic wonder” from the realm of “metaphysical certainty” to the realm of “fantastic hesitation” (*The Fantastic Hesitation*)³².

While the ancient Arab reader accepted the fantastic as part of the metaphysical realm of possibility, Western literature (particularly in the works of Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe) transformed it into a psychological tool for exploring the “unconscious.” The orient marvel that inhabited “Aladdin’s lamp” as an external force moved to inhabit “the recesses of the human psyche”; where magic became a reflection of psychological obsessions and cosmic melancholy expressing the disintegration and alienation of the self in the face of a world that had lost its ancient magic³³

As for the “supernatural,” which is embodied in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Arab heritage through the motif of “metamorphosis” as a divine or magical act with moral dimensions it has undergone a process of “aesthetic secularization” in modern occidental literature transforming into a major “existential metaphor.” For Franz Kafka in his novel **The Metamorphosis**, the metamorphosis is no longer a supernatural phenomenon intended to moralize or intimidate, but has become a visual embodiment of the state of “reification” (Reification) suffered by modern man within deaf bureaucratic machines; for here the supernatural has shifted from a “miracle” that arouses wonder to a daily “nightmare” that provokes silent terror and from a “mythical event” to an “absurd realism” that requires no explanation³⁴

Western literature has also drawn on the techniques of the “Oriental super natural” such as the bending of time and space as seen in **The Flying Carpet** and **The Adventures of Sinbad** to transform them, in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, into linguistic and mathematical labyrinths that explore the “relativity of truth” and the infinity of existence. In his story “The Thousand,” the Oriental point containing the entire universe transforms into an “aesthetic laboratory” for discussing the dilemma of human perception and language’s inability to

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encompass existence. Similarly, we find that “miracles” and the ability to break the laws of matter were transformed by the pioneers of magical realism (such as García Márquez and Isabel Allende) into a “narrative technique” that blends the mythical with the everyday to break the dominance of official history where the “supernatural” with absolute seriousness as if it were a natural part of the fabric of social life, there by imbuing the modern novel with a new “epic” dimension drawn from the spirit of the East.

This shift toward the strange, the wondrous, and the supernatural enabled Western literature to shape its modernity through a comprehensive “aesthetic cross-pollination”; it rescued the European imagination from the aridity of “positivism,” transforming the Eastern heritage from “mere material for belief” into “critical and artistic tools” for exploring the unknown and existential anxiety. Thus, the orient ceased to be merely a source of stories and became the “structural engine” that allowed the occident to rediscover the extraordinary powers of the imagination in the face of the materialism of the modern world³⁵

Based on the critical and historical approaches outlined above, we conclude that the evolution of the fantastical imagination was not merely a mechanical transfer of narrative content from East to West, but rather a process of structural interaction that led to a radical transformation in the nature of global narrative and its aesthetic concepts. Thanks to its mythological momentum and semantic richness the Eastern narrative was able to provide Western literature with “imaginative alternatives” that saved it from the aridity of the strict positivist rationalism that prevailed during the Enlightenment and opened up vast horizons for it to explore the shadow realms of the human soul and dissect the anxieties of modernity and beyond.

This transformation manifested at its deepest level through a fundamental shift from “certainty of the unseen” to “the poetics of art”; the fantastical departed from the realm of “belief and metaphysics” that characterized ancient Arab heritage to take root as an aesthetic laboratory and a critical and psychological tool in modern Western literature.

In this context, the supernatural was stripped of its religious connotations to become artistic symbols expressing the “strangeness of alienation,” as in Kafka, or the “labyrinths of truth,” as in Borges. This philosophical shift coincided with the establishment of a precise terminological distinction in the mechanisms of reception; for the distinction between (the strange, the bizarre, and the supernatural) is no longer merely a linguistic luxury, but has become a distinction within the “philosophy of rational explanation” For while the strange remains governed by the laws of familiar matter, which find their explanation in dreams or illusions, the strange breaks those laws to establish a new logic that confounds the reader’s consciousness making “fantastic hesitation” the primary engine of the process of interpretation and the production of meaning. On the other hand by drawing on Robert Young’s arguments in *White Myths* the research revealed the mechanisms of deconstructing Western centrality and how the West has come to understand the “Eastern Other”; where its wonders were contained within European epistemological frameworks transforming Eastern magic from authentic mythical material into “artistic masks” for dissecting the crises of the Western self and the anxieties of contemporary humanity.

This explains, for example, the transformation of the theme of the “monster” from a supernatural punishment in ancient myths into an “existential night mare” par excellence that embodies a state of alienation and loss. This influence was not limited to major narrative structures alone but extended to encompass the poetics of “strangeness” and the language of suggestion as this acculturation process created a sophisticated language that transcends direct factual description making the fantastical text an open text that defies direct rational

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comprehension and encourages the reader to participate in constructing meaning through the medium of bold metaphors and similes.

In conclusion, the fantastical remains a cognitive and aesthetic bridge spanning continents affirming that the human imagination is a “universal language” that transcends the boundaries of geography and the narrowness of history, to frame the great questions of existence in a mold of wonder and magic. It is a journey that proves that the “strangeness” of the other has never been anything but a carefully polished “mirror,” through which we see the depths of our shared humanity and through which we rediscover the magic of the world that strict rationality nearly extinguished.

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