Mechanisms of Transition from the Marvellous to Science Fiction in Arabic Narratives

Soumia Salhi
[1] University of El Oued, (Algeria), salhi-soumaia@univ-eloued.dz

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***Abstract**:*

This paper explores the transformations that the Arabic narrative has undergone in recent decades, tracing its shift from traditional marvellous, associated with cultural and mythological heritage, to the horizon of the "global imagination," a narrative field open to new possibilities of representation and imaginative construction. The study proceeds from the hypothesis that the imaginary of the possible contemporary Arabic narrative is no longer confined to the recuperation of the mythic or fantastical uncanny; rather, it has come to employ universal narrative mechanisms that reformulate the relationship of the text to reality, to global cultural interaction, and to new narrative techniques. The paper examines three central mechanisms: first, the reinterpretation of the marvellous through the deconstruction of its heritage-based structure and its reintegration into modern narrative spaces; second, the deployment of science fiction and utopia/dystopia as an entry point for expanding the limits of narrative possibility; and third, an openness to global imagination through the interaction of the Arabic narrative with transnational cultural references, as well as post-colonial and metafictional narrative modes. The paper concludes that the transition of the Arabic narrative from the "marvellous" to "global imagination" does not constitute a rupture with heritage; rather, it represents a reconfiguration of the Arabic imaginary from a universal perspective, enabling Arabic writing to enter into global narrative dialogue without losing its cultural specificity.

Keywords: *Arabic narrative, contemporary Arabic novel, global imagination, marvellous, science fiction, , utopia and dystopia,.*

* Soumia Salhi .

Introduction:

Since the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Arabic narrative has undergone profound structural, linguistic, and visionary transformations that have led it to move from the space of the traditional marvellous, grounded in mythic imagination, Sufism, and the uncanny, to new spaces more open to shared human experiences. From this perspective, "global imagination" has become a conceptual framework that enables the Arab writer to reshape his vision of the world through the employment of universal narrative mechanisms, engagement with technological transformations, cultural globalisation, and overlap among literary genres.

The importance of this study lies in its aim to delineate the features of this transformation from a critical-analytical perspective, with a focus on the mechanisms that have enabled the Arabic narrative to expand the scope of the "possible" in writing.

How, then, did the Arabic narrative move from the traditional marvellous to the space of "science fiction"?

What narrative mechanisms contributed to reshaping the imaginary of the possible contemporary Arabic novel?

This study adopts an analytical-comparative method that combines the structuralist approach to analyse transformed narrative structures, discourse analysis to understand the relations between text and reality, and the cultural approach to studying the interaction between the Arabic narrative and global frames of reference.

First: Reinterpreting the Marvellous in Contemporary Arabic Narratives

The marvellous in Arabic narrative has undergone a qualitative transformation over the past few decades. It is no longer merely a narrative technique derived from heritage, myth, and folktale but has become an aesthetic and intellectual strategy for rereading and deconstructing reality. This transformation has been linked to a change in the very function of literature, together with the emergence of new questions concerning identity, authority, memory, and modernity, which has led writers to reproduce the marvellous in light of these renewed questions. This transformation can be read through three principal levels:

1. Modernising the Structure of the Marvellous: From Retrieval to Rewriting

In traditional literature, the marvellous was often employed as an extension of popular or mythic heritage, in which old tales were retrieved almost as they had been transmitted (Muhammad, 2011, p12) .Moreover, it is used to create an uncanny world that transcends the laws of nature (Al-Shalan, 2011, p12).

The contemporary Arabic narrative, however, has reformulated this function as follows:

a. Employing myth as an epistemological tool rather than as a ready-made tale

Ibrahim al-Koni has represented a pioneering model in this context because he has not treated desert myth as folkloric material but rather as an ontological consciousness that reveals the relationship of the human being to existence and the absolute.(Nidal, 2008, p87). In his novels, such as *Bleeding of the Stone* and *The Red Oasis*, desert symbols such as the wind, the wolf, the camel, and the jinn are transformed into instruments for reflecting on freedom, fate, wisdom, and cosmic presence. (Tzvetan, 1991, p19). Here, the marvellous becomes a language of existence rather than a narrative ornament.

b. Reintegrating heritage into contemporary contexts

Under modernity and postmodernity, the Arab writer no longer confines himself to transferring heritage into the modern narrative but instead works to deconstruct it, modernise it, and reinterpret its symbols in light of contemporary questions. (Louis, 2006, p59).

For example, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, in some of her texts, treats the marvellous as a means of representing existential ruin (Yumna, 2010, p94), whereas Waciny Laredj, in *The Lady of the Shrine*, reintroduces spiritual and Sufi figures in order to reread political and cultural reality.

2. The Marvellous as an Interpretive Structure: From the Supernatural to Critique

One of the most significant manifestations of renewal is that the marvellous is no longer merely a "supernatural event" but has become a critical perspective that brings into relief the profound contradictions within reality.

a. The marvellous as a disclosure of reality

In works such as *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadaoui (Faisal, 2015, p41), the uncanny creature, the Whatsitsname, becomes a material embodiment of political chaos, recurrent death, and collective violence in modern Iraq (Charbel, 2005, p38). Here, the marvellous is transformed into a mirror of reality, a symbol of its disordered structure, and a narrative mechanism for revealing what cannot be stated directly.

b. The marvellous as a space of transgression and questioning

Marvellous is employed to raise questions concerning authority, truth, memory, identity, and representation. In this context, the marvellous is transformed from an uncanny tale into a discursive instrument that reshapes the social scene.

This is clearly manifested in the works of Elias Khoury, who blends Palestinian memory with the marvellous, and Raja Alem, who employs Meccan rituals within imaginative structures that transcend reality.

3. Dissolving the Boundaries between the Real and the Imagined: The Marvellous within the Horizon of Postmodernity

In the postmodern narrative, the marvellous oscillates between the possible and the impossible, between reality and illusion, within a space marked by uncertainty.

Here, the marvellous no longer appears as a clearly defined phenomenon; rather, it permeates the narrative in such a way that the reader becomes incapable of making a complete distinction between the real and the imagined (Shakib, 2012, p131).

a. Zones of Narrative Ambiguity

This pattern appears in the works of Ismail Fahd Ismail, in the variations of Sonallah Ibrahim that play upon the boundaries between document and fiction, and in the works of Mohamed Berrada, which engage with polyphony and the fragmentation of truth.

In these works, the marvellous becomes an extension of reality, an interpretation of it, or a resistance to it.

b. Writing as a Marvellous World

In metafiction, that is, narratives about the process of narration itself, the marvellous is constituted at the level of discourse and not only of story. Here, strangeness arises from the novelist's manipulation of the structure of time, the fragmentation of narrative, the insertion of the author himself into the novel, and the questioning of the possibility of attaining a single truth (Shakib, 2012, p132).

This places the reader in a permanent state of questioning (Jacques, 2001, p152), which is a fundamental aesthetic aim in the contemporary novel.

The reinterpretation of the marvellous in the contemporary Arabic narrative is not merely a renewal of form but a profound reconsideration of the function of literature.

The marvellous has become a way of reading the world, a cognitive language, a critical instrument, a means of reshaping identity, and a space for negotiating between heritage and modernity (Muhammad, 1991, p61).

Thus, it has been transformed from "strangeness" into an instrument of deconstruction and interpretation and from a supernatural narrative into an intellectual strategy for revealing reality and reproducing it.

Second: The Employment of Science Fiction and Utopia/Dystopia in Contemporary Arabic Narratives

Science fiction and utopia/dystopia constitute among the most important avenues through which the contemporary Arabic narrative has sought to reshape the imaginary of the possible, that is, the imaginative space that enables literature to anticipate reality and interrogate its future possibilities. This tendency has emerged as a response to major global transformations: the digital revolution, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, environmental threats, and changing structures of power and knowledge (Shakib, 2012, p81).

1. The Transformation of Science Fiction into a Narrative Laboratory for Arab Consciousness

Arabic science fiction is no longer merely an imitation of Western models or an ornamental attempt to depict future worlds; rather, it has become a medium for envisioning the existential and social questions experienced by Arab societies. This transformation is manifested in three principal trajectories:

a. Employing technology as an instrument for redeconstructing social structures

Future-oriented Arabic novels raise questions concerning the impact of technology on identity, ethics, individual freedom, the form of authority, and the aesthetics of the body and knowledge (Najla, 2015, p11).

In this context, the Arabic novel offers a critical vision that rejects naïve fascination with technology and instead regards it as a double force: both liberating and hegemonic at once.

b. Employing climatic disasters as a mirror of political fragility

Some works use environmental and climatic disasters not only as natural dangers but also as symbols of the collapse of political and social structures and as instruments for revealing the relationship of Arab people to land, cities, and the future.

c. Moving towards posthuman worlds

Novels have begun to raise questions concerning the fate of the body, the limits of consciousness, the possibility of replacing the human being with hybrid entities, and the interpenetration of the natural and the artificial, thereby granting the Arabic narrative a new philosophical dimension.

2. Prominent Narrative Models

Frankenstein in Baghdad—Ahmed Saadaoui (Bushra, 2018, p213)

Ahmed Saadawi's novel constitutes a model for the blending of fantasy with political violence, as the creature known as the Whatsitsname is created from the remains of bombing victims and is thus transformed into a symbol of justice, revenge, and chaos at the same time.

Here, the marvellous and science fiction become a means of understanding the sociology of war and of interrogating moral values at a moment of collapse.

Utopia — Ahmed Khaled Towfik (Muhammad, 2010, p432)

The novel presents an intensely bleak social dystopia, depicting a future in which Egypt is divided between a wealthy minority protected by fortresses and walls and an impoverished (Ahmad, 2017, p521), oppressed classes.

Here, the future becomes a tribunal that puts neoliberalism, corruption, the collapse of the middle class, and the disintegration of the social contract on trial.

The works of Mohamed Afifi Matar (Abd al-Mun, 2016, p87):

In constructing utopian and metaphysical worlds, Matar rethinks the meaning of justice, the essence of the human being, and the production of truth.

In his work, the utopia is transformed into a philosophical space rather than a social project, reflecting his preoccupation with existence and meaning.

3. The Narrative and Aesthetic Functions of This Tendency

a. Expanding the Boundaries of Narrative Possibility

Science fiction and utopia/dystopia have enabled the Arab writer to free himself from the constraints of traditional realism and to construct alternative worlds that internalise reality rather than merely replicate it (Nadia, 2015, p265).

b. Raising New Political and Ethical Questions

These novels constitute a laboratory for the following question:

What will the future look like if the past continues to govern?

They raise problems related to digital surveillance, technological despotism, biological justice, and ownership of the body.

c. Reshaping the Relationship of the Text to Science and Technology

Technology is no longer merely a backdrop or a set of tools; rather, it has become a structural principle within narrative, directing time, characters, narrative structure, and the narrator's perspective (Mahmoud, 2016, p548).

It also grants the novel the capacity to engage with scientific knowledge as part of contemporary culture.

4. The Implications of This Transformation in the Arab Imaginary

The employment of science fiction and utopia/dystopia shows that Arabic literature has become more prevalent (Said Yusuf, 1997, p143):

- bold in anticipating the future,
- capable of interrogating authority and reality,
- open to new sciences,
- aware that the future is not a destiny but a space for imagination and reconstruction.

Thus, the Arabic narrative is transformed from recording the past into producing the possible narrative.

Third: Global Imagination and the Interaction of Arabic Narratives with Transnational Frames of Reference

The concept of global imagination in Arabic literature refers to the novel's capacity to transcend the local or national framework and to open itself to multiple cultural spaces (Yumna, 2010, p53); thus, the novel becomes a field for the cross-fertilisation of ideas, images, and global narrative patterns without losing its cultural specificity (Sharaf al-Din, n d, p23). This is a natural development of the contemporary Arabic narrative in the context of cultural globalisation and the transition from national or heritage-based writing to transnational writing.

1. Interpenetration of Cultures and Frames of Reference

This dimension concerns the fact that the Arabic text has come to interact with the following:

- Western and Eastern narratives,
- colonised and colonising cultures,
- contemporary world literature.

This is manifested in the Arabic novel through migrant characters(Charbel, 2005), multiple settings, and polyphonic narration (Shakib, 2012, p213), as in the works of Amin Maalouf, where his characters move between Europe and the Arab world, thereby embodying cultural cross-fertilisation and conflicts between identities (Nidal, 2008, p341).

It is also evident in the works of Tahar Ben Jelloun, who employs the experience of migration and exile to depict the relationship between the individual and society through narratives that are culturally and linguistically diverse.

2. The Employment of Metafictional Techniques

Metafiction, or narratives about narratives, has become an effective means of foregrounding the writer's awareness of the text and of the global cultural context.

This includes (Nidal, 2008, p341):

- narrative about writing within the text, such as the figure of the narrator who speaks about his writing or about the process of writing itself;
- the self-reflexivity of texts, whereby the novel recognises that it is part of a broader narrative network interacting with global and local texts;
- The incorporation of multiple cultures and literary genres within the narrative creates hybrid texts that challenge the conventional boundaries between reality and fiction.

An example of this may be found in the novels of Amin Maalouf (Amin Maalouf, 1986) and Waciny Laredj (Waciny, 2008), which incorporate global historical and cultural references and interrelations, making the text a platform for dialogue among different frames of reference.

3. Constructing Hybrid Characters and Identities

One of the fundamental practices of global imagination has become the creation of characters that are culturally, linguistically, and socially hybrid. These characters (Faisal, 2015, p33):

- live between two or more cultures,

- oscillate between belonging and estrangement,
- and reflect both global and local conflicts at the same time.

Examples include the narrator or migrant protagonist in the novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun or the characters of multiple affiliations in the works of Amin Maalouf, which express multiple and open identities and reveal the Arab capacity to participate in the global narrative without complete cultural assimilation.

4. Openness to Global Narrative Modes

The Arabic novel has come to interact with globally recognised narrative modes, such as the following (Abdelfattah, 1997, p91):

- the road novel, for exploring movement, migration, and borders;
- the noir novel, for exposing crime, the social shadow, and the corruption of authority;
- The memory is novel for deconstructing the history of the individual and society and linking the individual to identify and community.

This openness enables the Arabic narrative to contribute to global dialogue on human beings, history, and politics while preserving its cultural specificity and reproducing heritage and the Arabic imagination within a cosmic, polyphonic horizon (Hassan, 2006, p25).

5. The Implications of This Transformation in the Arab Imaginary

The impact of global imagination on the Arabic narrative can be summarised in the following points:

1. Reproducing Arab identity in a multidimensional form that transcends local or national closure.
2. Expanding the imagination of the possible through the assimilation of elements from universal human experience.
3. Integrating Arabic literature into a global dialogic network without sacrificing cultural specificity.
4. Enhancing critical awareness of global and local issues through characters and narrative modes.

Conclusion

The study confirms that the transition from the “marvellous” to “global imagination” in the Arabic narrative is not merely a formal transformation in the structure of the novel or a stylistic modernisation; rather, it is a radical epistemological and aesthetic transformation that reflects a broader shift in the way

the world is represented and the Arab self is understood within the context of cultural globalisation. The Arab novelist has come to realise that the marvellous is not merely a heritage-based component but an instrument of thought capable of interrogating reality through the reinterpretation of heritage and its reproduction in light of the challenges of the age. For its part, global imagination is neither an alienation into Western culture nor a dissolution within it but a conscious openness to the plurality of frames of reference and the diversity of human experiences, enabling the Arabic narrative to live at the heart of the global literary movement without losing its distinctive voice.

- This transformation highlights three central levels:
- the development of Arab novelistic consciousness,
- the expansion of the Arab imaginary of the possible
- The interaction of Arabic literature with the contemporary world.

In summary, these transformations indicate the emergence of a new Arabic narrative capable of constructing universal imaginative worlds that transcend the boundaries of the real and the local while simultaneously preserving cultural memory and Arabic narrative identity. Thus, the Arabic novel is advancing confidently toward an active position within the global literary scene as part of world literature rather than being subordinate to it and as a producer of knowledge rather than a consumer of it.

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