J. King Saud Univ., Vol. 5, *Arts* (2), pp. 105-120 (A.H. 1413/1993).

The Nature and Uses of the Fantastic in the Fictional World of Naguib Mahfouz

Nedal M. Al-Mousa
Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Kuwait University, Kuwait

(Received 26/12/1410; accepted 9/10/1412)

Abstract. The main concern of this paper is to explore the nature and roles played by the fantastic in the fictional world of Naguib Mahfouz, with particular reference to two of his major works: *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* and *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights.*

Both of these works belong to a particular phase in the course of the development of Mahfouz's literary career, a phase in which his writings are characteristically inspired by indigenous sources, such as *The Arabian Nights* and Sufism. This accounts for the distinctive native flavor of the fantastic elements in the novels under consideration.

In *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*, Mahfouz's attempt to use Sufi doctrines and practices to establish a kind of native version of epic machinery is somewhat akin to Milton's basing his machinery in *Paradise lost* on the Bible. However, fantasy does not enter the novel only as a generic device, but also as a direct expression of 'authorial vision,' a medium of commentary upon reality, and as an effective means of investigating the human condition.

The same holds true for *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights* in which Mahfouz sets out to imitate the manner and style of *The Arabian Nights*, utilizing its fantastic potentialities mainly to investigate and comment upon the socio-political conditions in the modern Arab world.

In a recent interview Naguib Mahfouz maintains: "The writer may employ fantasy, but he always has an eye to reality. I belong to this type of writers. I may invest my work with abstract dimensions, but this is only to get to the heart of reality. I there-

fore, believe that unrealistic literature does not exist."(1) Mahfouz's notions coincide with Apter's thesis that "fantasy is essential to the author's various purposes, which must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it."(2) Similar views(3) are held by Kathryn Hume when she contends that the representation of reality in literature can be considerably enhanced by the interaction of the "mimetic impulse" and the "fantastic impulse."(4) Hume points out other primary functions of fantasy that are particularly relevant to our study of the nature and the various roles played by fantasy in the writings of Mahfouz. Fantasy, she argues, can enter a work of art as a direct expression of "authorial vision", a medium of "commentary upon reality,"(5) and, finally, as an artistic device dictated by the "demands of the genre."(6)

It is mainly along these lines that this paper examines the fantastic elements in two of Mahfouz's major works: *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* (1977) and *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights* (1982). It is of interest to note at the outset that both of these works belong to a particular phase(7) in the course of the development of Mahfouz's literary career, a phase in which his writings are characteristically inspired by indigenous sources, such as *The Arabian Nights* and Sufism. This accounts for the distinctive native flavor of the fantastic elements in the two novels under consideration.

The Epic of the Riff-Raff begins with a spiritual Sufi scene underlining Mahfouz's peculiar concern to draw on indigenous material in weaving the texture of his epic. Absorbed in his spiritual ecstasy on his way to perform the dawn prayers at al-Hussain Mosque, from which pleasant chanting of mysterious songs emanates, Sheikh Afra Zeidān is distracted by the crying of a child abandoned under the old

---

(1) Nabil Faraj, *Naguib Mahfouz: Life and Literature* (Cairo: al-Haya al-Misriyah al-Amah lil-al-Kitāb, 1986), p. 20.

(2) T.E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 2.

(3) In the same vein Scholes also maintains: "Fabulation, then, means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondence between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality. Modern fabulation accepts, even emphasizes it fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look toward reality." Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 8.

(4) Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. xii.

(5) Hume, p. 84.

(6) Ibid., p. 6.

(7) For a full description of the different phases of Mahfouz's literary career, see, Malak Hāshem, "The Sense of an Ending in *'The Day the Leader was Killed.'*" in *Naguib Mahfouz Nobel 1988, Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1989), pp. 203-4.

wall of the mosque. The foundling is, of course, Ashour, the central character in the epic. Ashour's rescue at the hands of Sheikh Zeidān foreshadows his survival of the horrendous epidemic which has annihilated all the inhabitants of Ashour's alley where the whole action of the epic is set. Even the family name of the hero, al-Nājī (the saved), functions, in the tradition of Greek epic, as an epithet indicating the most important thematic concern of the epic — salvation. Indeed, if it is true that each epic has a peculiar passion, then salvation could be rightly considered the predominant passion of *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*. We need hardly remind ourselves that salvation is a cardinal Sufi "doctrine," but Mahfouz's dramatization of the theme of salvation is projected on a large scale that encompasses, even as it goes beyond, the Sufis' narrow spiritual concept of salvation.

Ashour acquires his family name in the aftermath of his "miraculous" escape from the epidemic which has taken a heavy toll of the alley's inhabitants. In the midst of this epidemic, the ghost of the late Sheikh Zeidān appears, in a dream or vision, to lead Ashour to safety in the nearby wilderness. Within the framework of the Sufi superstructure of *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*, the miracle *(karamah)*(8) accorded to Ashour, at least as the riff-raff tend to believe, functions as a doctrinal Sufi event. But in terms of the "demands of the genre," the miracle serves as part of the supernatural machinery common to epic. In their capacity as two other peculiar manifestations of Sufism, magic and superstitious practices figure also as dynamic components of the epic's distinct machinery, as the ensuing discussion will reveal. Mahfouz's attempt to use Sufi doctrines and practices to establish a kind of native version of epic machinery is somewhat akin to Milton's basing his machinery in *Paradise Lost* on the Bible.

Of course, it is not on record that Mahfouz is affiliated with any Sufi order, but his remarkable attraction to Sufism in his fictional writings(9) reflects the extent to which Sufi activities are widely spread in modern Egypt. In his book *Islam in Egypt Today*, Morroe Berger writes:

> A great deal has been written about Sufi doctrine in the past but very little on Sufi organization and activity today or in this century. This lack is particularly unfortunate because in Egypt there are still many

(8) There is, however, an essential difference between *karamah* and a 'miracle' in the sense that the former is accorded by a saint to a devout disciple, whereas the latter is accorded by God to his prophets.

(9) Sufism finds its way as a central theme in two Mahfouz's early novels: *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961) and *The Beggar* (1965).

> active Sufi orders each commanding the loyalty of many thousands of members and other followers.(10)

He later adds: "In late 1964 I was given the names of sixty-four functioning Sufi orders in Egypt, all of them represented in the Supreme Sufi Council *(al-majlis al-sufi al-'ala)* ... The head of the Council was appointed by the khedive under nominal Ottman rule, then by the king, and that power is now reserved for the president of the Republic."(11) Small wonder then that Sufism figures as a prominent theme in *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* whose action is conceived on a large national scale.

In keeping with this pervasive Sufi influence, Ashour undergoes intense spiritual self-cultivation in the wilderness. In fact Ashour's preoccupation with cultivating the spiritual side of his personality is in evidence even prior to his retirement into the wilderness; so much is implied by his remarkable attachment to the *takiyah*(12) and his passionate attraction to the mysterious Sufi rituals and songs. But in his Sufi 'khalwa,' or retreat, into the wilderness, he has attained such an advanced state of spirituality, that, we are told, he feels that he is very "close to God" and that he is able to hold "communication" with mysterious "invisible forces."(13)

This presentation of the Sufi experience on the plane of the fantasy comes within the framework of Mahsouz's attempt to make of Ashour a legendary figure fit to play the leading role in the epic. Traditionally, however, the epic has always tended to pay special attention to the portrayal of the personality of the epic hero.

The legend of Ashour figures as a leitmotif throughout the ten 'tales' which form the whole bulk of Mahfouz's epic narrative. Basically, like his famous *Trilogy* which depicts the life of a middle class Cairene family in three generations, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* portrays the fortunes of ten generations of the family of Ashour al-Nājī, but with a fundamental difference. In the *Trilogy* the mode of representation is purely mimetic, corresponding with the primary concern of the *Trilogy* to present a realistic image of the impact of socio-political conditions on the fortunes of an Egyptian family in a transitional period in Egypt's history (as Hume rightly observes: "A strictly

---

(10) Morroe Berger, *Islam in Egypt Today: Social and Political Aspects of Popular Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 62.

(11) Berger, pp. 67-78.

(12) *Takiya*, for the Sufis, is the equivalent of the monastery in Christian tradition.

(13) Naguib Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* (Cairo: Dār Misr li-al-Tiba'a, 1988), p. 64. All references are to this edition.

mimetic piece is well adapted to the presentation of material values, or even humanitarian ones, but cannot readily get beyond these."[14]), whereas, in *The Epic of the Riff-Raff,* Mahfouz sets out mainly to dramatize human transcendental dreams of hope, salvation and immortality making use of the fantastic wide scope of the epic form. Yet Mahfouz's epic is written in the form of folk tales whose traditional tendency to fuse fantasy and reality enhances further the wide scope of the epic narrative.

The rallying point of all these structural and narrative ploys is the legendary figure of Ashour, and Ashour is cast to play yet another role dictated by the epic's mimetic level of action. This role should be briefly considered in order to make subsequent comments on Ashour's fantastic role more intelligible.

Ashour is a striking repository of his creator's synthetic vision of *futuwwa*[15] which combines, on the one hand, established Sufi doctrines of altruism, self-sacrifice, and spiritual salvation, and, on the other, socialist principles of collectivism, social justice, and dedication to promoting common human welfare. The intellectual source of this can be found in an interview in which Mahfouz reveals to one of his biographers that 'religion' and 'socialism' are two of the most significant factors that have contributed to the formation of his vision of life.[16] It is by internalizing those social and religious principles that Ashour succeeds in assuming the leadership of the *futuwwa,* which draws him into a fierce struggle against the aristocrats and their powerful allies, the merchants, in the alley which functions as a microcosm of the whole society. No sooner has Ashour succeeded in imposing his authority over his powerful enemies and embarked on his crusade against social disintegration and corruption, than he disappears leaving the riff-raff to their own resources in their struggle to maintain the leadership of the *futuwwa* against the constant threats of the aristocrats. (Such power struggles are a persistent[17] theme in Mahfouz's writings, and will be examined more elaborately in the discussion of *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights.*)

(14) Hume, p. 90.

(15) The Sufis have their own version of *futuwwa.* For a fuller discussion of this theme, see Abu al-'Alaa Afifi, *al-Malamatiya wa-al-Sufiya wa-Ahl al-Futuwwa* (Cairo: Dār Misr li-al-Tiba'a, 1945), pp. 25-26. See also Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta* (London: Groom Helm, 1986), pp. 140-47. In this book Dunn points out interrelations between the concept of *futuwwa* and Islamic traditions.

(16) Faraj, p. 79.

(17) Mahfouz's earliest comprehensive dramatization of this theme is to be found in his novel *The Children of our Alley* (1951).

Ashour's mysterious sudden disappearance, which parallels his mysterious origins, marks the beginning of his existence entirely on the fantastic level of action. He has become a kind of collective fantasy symbolizing the hopes and desires of the riff-raff. Characteristically, the references to Ashour and the invocation of his spirit by the riff-raff become more frequent whenever their fortunes reach rock-bottom. (The turn of events in the Fourth Tale provides us with a striking example of this pattern.) The strong appeal the legend of Ashour has for the riff-raff as their fortunes take a sharp downward demonstrates Mahfouz's tendency to use fantasy to comment upon, and to sharpen our awareness of, the sordid, unsatisfactory nature of reality in modern Egypt.

Ashour's fantastic role acquires a new dimension generated by his identification with Khidr. On several occasions in the course of the narrative Ashour appears in the dreams of the riff-raff in the company of Khidr,[18] the "Eternal Youth" who, according to the Sufis, "has drunk of the water of immortality, and consequently knows neither old age nor death."[19] Ashour's image as a disciple of Khidr invests his personality with a transcendent, transhistorical dimension. In the eyes of the riff-raff he is not a mere savior onto whom they project their hopes and dreams in trying social circumstances, he is also a symbol of immortality, a universal human ideal which harmonizes with the traditional tendency of the epic to depict grand human desires and emotions. In this transcendence *The Epic of the Riff-Raff* echoes *The Epic of Gilgamesh* where the quest for immortality figures as a central theme. Likewise, according to Tawfīq al-Hakīm, struggle between man and time is a typical Egyptian theme. Explaining his attraction to the Koranic story of the "Sleepers of the Cave" as a source of inspiration for his own play, *Ahl al-Kahf*, al-Hakim says:

> You know that the basis of Greek tragedy is 'fate' — that terrible struggle beween 'man' and 'fate.' Do you know what is the basis of Egyptian tragedy as I conceive it? Its basis is 'time' — its basis is the terrible struggle between 'man' and 'time.' Read *The Book of the Dead* and you will be aware of this immediately; with the Greeks it is 'fate' and 'destiny'; with the Egyptians it is 'time' and 'space.'[20]

Mahfouz carries his investigation of human pursuit of immortality further in the Seventh Tale in which the bulk of the action is taken up with depicting the impact of the Sufi legend of Khidr on the life of one of the most important descendants of

(18) Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*, pp. 122, 125, 287.

(19) Henry Corbin, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi, translated by Ralf Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 56.

(20) Quoted by Paul Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower: A Critical Study of Tawfiq al-Hakim* (London: Ithaca Press, 1987), p. 38.

Ashour al-Nājī, Jalāl al-Nājī who, as the text makes clear, is aware of the Sufi image of Khidr.[21] Jalāl's obsession with the fantastic idea of immortality is such that he resorts to magic and tries to use a genie to build for himself an "endlessly high minaret"[22] which would, as it were, enable him to penetrate beyond the barrier of time and consequently achieve immortality. That Jalāl's fantastic enterprise is inspired by the Sufi legend of Khidr can be clearly seen in the light of Henry Corbin's relevant remarks apropos the "phenomenon" of Khidr's person according to Sufi beliefs:

> But perhaps there is another path that will lead us to an understanding of the phenomenon as it occurs among our Sufis. Suhrawardi seems to open up such a path in an intention that is quite consonant with that of Ibn Arabī. In one of the recitals that make up Suhrawardi's spiritual autobiography, that of "The Purple Archangel," the mystic is initiated into the secret which enables him to ascend Mount Qāf,[23] that is, the cosmic mountain, and to attain to the Spring of Life. He is frightened at the thought of the difficulties of the Quest. But the Angel says to him: "Put on the sandals of Khidr."[24]

Thus, if, for Ashour, Khidr figures as an archetype, for Jalāl, he is a kind of personal legend. So, magic replaces the sandals of Khidr as a means towards achieving Jalāl's fantastic crossing of the barrier of time. Suhrawardi,[25] as the quotation reveals, is frightened to embark on his quest for immortality, whereas Jalāl, the "fool," as Mahfouz tends to describe him,[26] unwisely rushes to achieve his impossible task recalling Pope's famous verse: Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread. In his delusion Jalāl goes so far as to declare publicly his victory over time and death, and, accordingly, appoints himself as a new leader of the *futuwwa*.[27]

In the character of Jalāl, Mahfouz, it might be argued, aims at exposing the superstitious practices that the Sufi pursuits might generate. Hamilton A. R. Gibb's general comments on Sufism may illustrate the point:

(21) Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*, p. 287.

(22) Ibid., p. 436.

(23) *Qāf*, according to Arabic mythology, is a mountain surrounding the earth. This mountain is referred to in *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights* (50).

(24) Corbin, p. 59.

(25) A famous Sufi philosopher who lived in the twelfth century (1155-1191).

(26) Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff*, p. 443.

(27) Ibid., p. 404.

> As often happens, the general sobriety of the major orders attracts the eye of the student less than the vast range of superstitions that flourished in every region of the Muslim world and every level of Muslim society. But superstition is the fringe of the garment of belief, or the pulp that surrounds its self-renewing kernel. Every living faith — and not only religious faiths, but political, economic and scientific faiths as well — creates around its nucleus an outer ring of superstitions, broader or narrower according to its intensity and the range of its influence. Sufism spread too rapidly, over too vast an area and too great a variety of peoples, to escape from illustrating this general tendency of the human mind in an extreme degree.[28]

But Jalāl's complex fantasy calls for interpretation on more than one level. In harmony with Mahfouz's strategy to employ fantasy as an effective means of investigating reality and the human condition, Jalāl's fantastic adventure serves the same purpose as a microscopic lens, magnifying and bringing human fears of death and hopes of salvation into fuller light. "The fantastic," Todorov writes, "explores inner space; it sides with the imagination, the anxiety of existence, and the hope of salvation."[29]

Jalāl's fantasy may also lend itself to be interpreted in terms of Mahfouz's socialist vision. Jalāl may claim that his fantastic adventure has been inspired by his concern for effecting human salvation, but a closer look reveals that self-glorification is the chief motive behind his undertaking. This comes out in Mahfouz's description of Jalāl's overwhelming sense of ecstasy and self-complacency brought about by his illusory victory over time: "He is beside himself with delight on account of his achievement of immortality .... And to make a display of his power, he challenges all the other *futuwwas* .... Every day he achieves a new victory .... Thus he becomes the greatest *futuwwa,* power incarnate, like Ashour."[30] But nothing seems more alien to Ashour's turn of thought than Jalal's inflated sense of self-glorification, which Mahfouz presents in its excessive form by using a fantastic technique. In so doing Mahfouz forces on our attention the sharp contrast between Jalāl's egocentric orientation and Ashour's sublime collective sense and socialistic principles.

The same principles inform the life of Ashour The Last, the last descendant of the al-Nājī family who takes it upon himself to revive the spirit of the age of Ashour

(28) Hamilton Gibb *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 215-16.

(29) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literature Genre,* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Cornell Univesity Press, 1975), p. 36.

(30) Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Riff-Raff,* p. 404.

al-Nājī, a task requiring first of all the elimination of Jalāl's legacy, particularly the demolition of the sinister minaret, a constant reminder of Jalāl's overwhelming preoccupation with seeking individualistic self-realization at the expense of the larger social whole, which, of course, runs counter to his creator's socialistic principles. Hence Jalāl's disgraceful tragic end which suggests itself to be a severe punishment for the intolerable indulgence of his individualistic passions. Jalāl's disgraceful death, abandoned by his ally, the genie, conforms also to the Koranic condemnation of those who seek the companionship of the devil: "He that does not heed the warning of the Merciful shall have a devil for his companion (devils turn men away from the right path, though they may think themselves rightly guided). And when he comes before Us, he shall say: 'Would that we were as far apart as the east is from the west.' Truly, Satan is an evil companion."(31)

The genies figure as a dynamic force in the development of action in *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights* in which Mahfouz sets out to imitate the manner and style of *The Arabian Nights*. Like Poe's tale "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" which is conceived as a kind of sequel to *The Arabian Nights*, Mahfouz's novel begins where *The Arabian Nights* leaves off. But, while Poe uses the fantastic machinery of *The Arabian Nights* to portray the 'marvellous' industrial and scientific achievements of the first half of the nineteenth century, Mahfouz utilizes the fantastic potentialities of *The Arabian Nights* mainly to investigate and comment upon the socio-political conditions in the modern Arab world.

Closely related to the function of genies in the novel is the theme of power struggles, a characteristic feature of modern Arab society, and one of the chief targets investigated through the medium of fantasy in *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights*. In the early parts of the novel, for instance, San'aan al-Jammālī, an influential merchant, murders the district governor, Alī al Sahlōlī. Investigation reveals that al-Jammālī has committed his crime pushed by the *ifrit* Qumqām who is desperate to liberate himself from the control of al-Shalōlī who uses him to carry out his evil plans. The most striking aspect of this tragic event is the matter-of-factness with which people are inclined to accept the idea that the crime has been committed by the intervention of the *ifrits*. Speaking for the whole community, one of the minor characters in the novel says: "If we rule out the intervention of the *irfrits*, The crime strikes us as a puzzle."(32) But everybody, including the head of the police, Jamssa al-Bultī, is inclined to blame the crime on the *ifrits*.

(31) *The Koran*, translated by N.J. Dawood (Penguin Books, 1974), 43:36.

(32) Naguib Mahfouz, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Cairo: Dār Misr li-al-Tiba'a, 1988), p. 35. All references are to this edition.

Interestingly, in his *Dictionary of Egyptian Customs, Traditions, and Expressions*, Ahmad Amīn records: "The Egyptians are strong believers in *ifrits* and genies; they even believe that some people are endowed with special powers to control them to serve their own purposes .... Several groups make their living by this means. The visitor to Dār al-Kutub would be amazed at the extensive borrowing and the enormous number of books dealing with this topic among the holdings of the library."(33)

The phenomenon of the "serving demon," described by Amīn, could be traced back to the Koran. In the chapter entitled the "Ant," for instance, we read that King Solomon is endowed with a miraculous power to control the genies. But in *The Night of the Thousand and One Nights* Mahfouz is not very much concerned with establishing the religious origins of the Egyptians' belief in the genies; nor is he concerned with registering how widespread the phenomenon of belief in genies is in contemporary Egyptian society; he is rather interested in exploring the subterranean sociological and psychological implications of the phenomenon. This emerges most fully in the life story of Jamssa al-Bultī who could be considered the central character in the novel.

In an apparent attempt to take full advantage of the atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion besetting the murder of Alī al-Sahlōlī, al-Bultī, it would seem, courts Sanjām, another *ifrit* under whose alleged influence he sets out to physically eliminate his political rivals, starting with Khalīl al-Hamadhānī, the new district governor. This gives occasion to Shahrayar (who is, of course, relegated to play a minor role in the novel) to remark: "We are in the age of *ifrits* whose main concern is to kill the rulers."(34)

Peter Penzoldt's comments on the genie which comes out of the bottle in *The Arabian Nights* provide us with useful insights into the behavior of al-Bultī, to whom Sanjām owes his liberation from his bottle. "The genie," Penzoldt writes, "is obviously the personification of desire, whereas the bottle's cork, tiny and weak as it is, represents man's moral scruples."(35) It is in these terms that we should interpret al-Bultī's seemingly accidental liberation of Sanjām from the bottle.(36) Having broken the bottle's cork, to use Penzoldt's metaphor, and thus overcoming his moral scruples, al-Bultī gives free rein to his powerful passion for getting rid of his rivals.

(33) Ahmad Amīn, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Customs Traditions and Expressions* (Cairo: Matb'at Lajnat al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 1953), p. 116.

(34) Mahfouz, *The Thousand and One Nights*, p. 58.

(35) Quoted by Todorov, p. 144.

(36) Mahfouz, *The Thousand and One Nights*, p. 38.

The list of his victims extends to include Yousef al-Tāher (newly appointed governor), Bteishah Murjān (his secretary), Adnān Shōmmah (the new head of the police), and finally the powerful merchant, Ibrahīm al Attār.

Al-Bultī commits all of these crimes in his new personality of Abdullah al-Hammāl which his soul incarnates after his execution for the killing of Khalīl al Hamadhānī. In his fantastic circumstances al-Bultī becomes fully identified with his *ifrit,* he is now a devil incarnate, so to speak. Mahfouz exploits al-Bulti's fantastic circumstances in which his soul experiences full liberation from "moral scruples" to probe very deeply into human nature and explore the supreme intensity of human evil passions. In this sense the image of the soul which survives death in Mahfouz's novel can be compared with the image of the double which tends to figure in fantastic literature. In Dostoyevsky's novel *The Double* (1846), for instance, the image of the double is used to investigate the furthest limits of the clash between the conscious and the subconscious; in Poe's *William Wilson* (1839) the investigation of the human condition through the agency of the image of the double is directed towards highlighting the intensity of the conflict between the ego and the super-ego; in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) the hedonism-Hellenism dichotomy is dramatized in terms of the image of the double.

Just as the image of the double in all of these works is used to underline the duality of human nature in its various extreme forms, so in Mahfouz's novel the image of the soul which survives death is employed to depict the eternal conflict between good and evil. For, inspired by the theme of metamorphosis in *The Arabian Nights,* Mahfouz provides al-Bultī with a new self which serves as a vehicle to demonstrate his enormous innate goodness which counterbalances the intensity of his capacity for evil-doing. For Mahfouz, it would seem, one self is inadequate for giving full scope to the dramatization of the equally intense passions of evil and good between which al-Bultī's soul oscillates.

The multiplication of personality undergone by al-Bultī comes in the wake of his madness, a sign, according to Todorov, of the breakdown of the barriers between matter and mind which serves as a suitable medium for the multiplication of personality to take place: "It is curious to note here," Todorov writes, "that such a collapse of the limits between matter and mind was considered, especially in the nineteenth century, as the first characteristic of madness ... The multiplication of personality, taken literally, is an immediate consequence of the possible transition between matter and mind: we are several persons mentally, we become so physically."(37)

(37) Todorov, pp. 115-16.

Mentally, al-Bultī is now the embodiment of goodness and virtue; he is even called Abdullah al-'Aqel (the wise). Al-Bultī acquires wisdom by going mad. As Lilian Feder points out, madness, as an avenue to wisdom, is a common literary theme:

> The history of the literature of madness makes it abundantly clear that the idea that madness can produce extraordinary insight is not a revolutionary one. It is perhaps as old as human beings' interest in the mind and is reflected in the self-revelations of the mad protagonists of ancient myth and in Plato's remarkable descriptions of prophetic and inspired madness.(38)

Al-Bultī's detachment and his resignation to all forms of worldly pursuits in his madness enable him, in the manner of King Lear, to gain better insights into life's realities, to see through social and political disintegration. Al-Bultī's fantastic madness can also be compared with Edgar's feigned madness in *King Lear*. Just as Edgar makes use of the natural immunity provided by madness to criticize corrupt socio-political circumstances in sixteenth century England, so al-Bultī, in his role as a madman, sets out to expose social evils and corruption in modern Egypt. Obviously, this fits in with Mahfouz's plan to employ fantasy for social purposes.

In a totally different context, another instructive analogy can be drawn between al-Bulti and Harry Haller in Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* (1929). Both heroes go mad and experience the related process of multiplication of personality. In the terminology of Laing, the schizophrenic experiences undergone by the two heroes contribute to the "loss" of their "egos," a loss which serves as a preliminary step towards the formation of a new self. Pablo's diagnosis of Haller's position may illustrate the point:

> We demonstrate to anyone whose soul has fallen to pieces that he can rearrange these pieces of a previous self in what order he pleases, and so attain to an endless multiplicity of moves in the game of life. As the playwright shapes a drama from a handful of characters, so do we from the pieces of the disintegrated self build up ever new groups.(39)

These remarks are also applicable to al-Bultī. In both novels the theme of the disintegrated self and the concomitant process of building a new self figure as two essential aspects of the two heroes' characteristic attempts at achieving internal sta-

(38) Lillian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univerity Press, 1980), p. 281.

(39) Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, translated by Basil Creighton (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 192.

bility as a means of counteracting external instability. A qualification is indispensable here that while the disintegration of Haller's personality is the outcome of his intellectual disorientation, al-Bultī's disintegrated self is the product of the chaotic, turbulent socio-political conditions in modern Egypt; conditions which Mahfouz exposes in the most dramatic manner through al-Bultī's fantastic circumstances.

In *The Nights of the Thousand and One Nights,* Mahfouz is particularly keen to point out al-Bultī's transitional loss identity: "Now, he has neither name nor identity."(40) And by way of underlining al-Bultī's eventual reconstruction of a new self, his spiritual rebirth, Mahfouz uses the traditional image of "purgation" by "water."(41)

The theme of spiritual rebirth in Mahfouz's novel explains to us the intimate relationship between al-Bultī and the Sufi Sheikh, Abdulla al-Balakhī who acts as al-Bultī's mentor. Al-Balakhī's remarkable renunciation and spiritual aloofness put him in a position to play the role of a spiritual guide in the lives of several characters in the novel in an age marked with fervent pursuit of materialistic interests, confusion, and an overwhelming sense of instability.

In his insightful comments on the narrative conduct in *The Arabian Nights,* Todorov points out that the intervention of supernatural forces in the Arabic tales supplies the action with a dynamic mobility based on a recurrent pattern of equilibrium followed by disequilibrium which carries within itself the potential for setting up a new state of equilibrium.(42) This of course can hardly be said of Mahfouz's novel in which supernatural forces are exclusively used to perpetuate a state of disequilibrium throughout the whole piece, which is consistent with the state of instability in the public scene.

The state of disequilibrium initiated by al-Jammālī's crime and carried much more further by the chain of murders committed by al-Bultī gains new momentum by the mischievous meddling of the other two *ifrits,* Sakhraboot and Zurumbaha, in human affairs. The two *ifrits* arrange a fanciful marriage between Dunyazād and the shopkeeper Nor al-Dīn whereupon Dunyazād gets pregnant. The confusion of the involved parties is such that they are unable to demarcate dream from reality. This 'fantastic' state of affairs is meant also to suggest human helplessness and sense of loss in modern Egypt.

---

(40) Mahfouz, *The Thousand and One Nights;* p. 112.

(41) Ibid., p. 264.

(42) Todorov, pp. 164-65.

These themes recur more dramatically in the tale of Fādel al-Jammālī, another victim of the intervention of *ifrits*. Fadel's intense blurring of fact and fiction and his overwhelming sense of helplessness acquire Kafkaesque absurd dimensions. For Mahfouz, as for Kafka, life's essential turmoil and confusion can be most adequately expressed in fantastic tales. Mahfouz dramatizes Fadel's moral plight by using another device derived from *The Arabian Nights*, namely, the enchanted cap. But while in *The Arabian Nights* the enchanted cap is used by Hasan of Bassorah to achieve a beneficial act (Hasan uses the cap to release his wife and children from prison), in Mahfouz's novel, Fādel's unfortunate acquisition of the cap contributes to his disorientation, perplexity, and confusion. So much so that he, notwithstanding his reputable moral integrity and uprightness, gets involved in mysterious acts of theft, rape, and murder.

As in the story of Jamssa al-Bultī, Mahfouz's use of fantasy in Fādel's tale is not confined to highlighting social distortion and chaos, fantasy is also used as a means to delve very deeply into human psyche and the intricacies of man's interior world. A clue to this interpretation is couched in Fādel's immediate reaction when he first acquires the cap:

> He has been overwhelmed by the new magical experiment. The exciting experience of being invisible ... creates in him the illusion that he has the initiative to do whatever he wants, and that the range of his actions is limitless .... It is a unique respite from the burden of his body, the troublesome attention of people, and the restraints of human laws.(43)

But Fādel's passion for self-expansion, as I have just pointed out, centers solely on his indulgence of deviated, base desires.

Mahfouz's use of fantasy to explore social and individual distortion seems to have a modern flavor as it is defined by Apter: "In the modern novels and stories .... Fantasy discovers and aggravates disintegration. It is not a means of consolation and recovery but of registering losses and fears. Thus, such fantasy is predominantly 'negative' in that it does not resolve problems but rather magnifies them."(44)

For Mahfouz the only 'positive' solution that fantasy can offer is ironically presented in the fantastic tale of 'Ma'aruf The Cobbler." In this tale, Mahfouz reproduces most of the events of the original tale carrying the same title in *The Arabian*

---

(43) Mahfouz, *The Thousand and One Nights*, p. 217.

(44) Apter, p. 6.

Nights. For instance, just as the acquisition of Solomon's ring earns Ma'aruf kingship in *The Arabian Nights*, so in Mahfouz's novel Ma'aruf's coming into possession of the ring contributes to his election as a new ruler. Suggestively enough, the 'miraculous' prospects of the new ruler's acquisition of the ring reconcile people to their sordid, unstable circumstances. We shall certainly miss the point if we fail to recognize the ironic implications inherent in Mahfouz's deliberate setting up of this correlation between fantasy and the solution of public socio-political problems in modern Egypt. I take Mahfouz to mean that Egypt's chronic socio-political problems (in the period in which the action is set, the late 1970s and early 1980s) are such that they can not be solved except through the agency of 'miraculous' forces. "The fantastic," Rabkin writes, "is a potent tool in the hands of an author who wishes to satirize man's world."(45)

(45) Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 41.

طبيعة الفانتازيا ووجوه استخدامه في عالم نجيب محفوظ الروائي

نضال موسى محمود الموسى

مدرس، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، كلية الآداب، جامعة الكويت، الكويت

ملخص البحث. يعني هذا البحث بدراسة طبيعة عنصر الفانتازيا ووجوه استخدامه في عالم نجيب محفوظ الروائي — بصورة خاصة في *ملحمة الحرافيش* و*ليالي ألف ليلة*. تنتمي هاتان الروايتان إلى مرحلة متأخرة في سياق تطور نجيب محفوظ الأدبي، حيث نجده يستلهم التراث القومي في كتابة رواياته. في هاتين الروايتين يلجأ نجيب محفوظ إلى الصوفية وإلى *ألف ليلة وليلة* كمصادر أساسية لعنصر الفانتازيا ذي الطابع القومي المميز.

في ملحمة *الحرافيش* يمكننا مقارنة محاولة نجيب محفوظ في استخدام مبادىء الصوفيين وبعض نشاطاتهم كمصدر لبناء الهيكل الملحمي للرواية باستخدام «ملتون» للإنجيل في بناء هيكل ملحمته ***الفردوس المفقود***. لكن دور عنصر الفانتازيا في *ملحمة الحرافيش* لا يقتصر على تلبية أحد متطلبات البناء الملحمي الفنية فحسب، بل إنه يستخدم أيضًا كوسيلة يعبر بها الكاتب عن رؤيته الخاصة، وكأداة لنقد الواقع وتقصي الأوضاع الإنسانية.

ينطبق كل ذلك على رواية *ليالي ألف ليلة* حيث يحاول نجيب محفوظ محاكاة أسلوب كتابة *ألف ليلة وليلة*، خاصة في استخدام عنصر الفانتازيا كوسيلة لنقد الأوضاع الاجتماعية والسياسية في العالم العربي في العصر الحديث.