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MAGICAL REALISM IN RAJA ALEM'S *FATMA; OR A NOVEL OF ARABIA*

Maryam Ebadi Asayesh* and Mehmet Fikret Arargüç**

Abstract: Although the term magic (al) realism appeared in 1925 in the pictorial art in Germany, it became well known with the boom of magical realist fiction in Latin America in 1960s. Since 1980s, it has become one of the popular modes of writing worldwide. Due to being an oxymoron and its hybrid nature (magic plus realism), it has caught the attention of critics.

The present study examines magical realism in *Fatma*; or a novel of Arabia by Raja Alem (1963-), the Saudi Arabian writer. She is one of the well-known female Arab writers whohas received several awards in the Arab world and Europe such as Arabic Booker Prize for her novels. Alem published Fatma in 2002 in English in the United States and it is one of the banned novels of the writer in Saudi Arabia. The novel shows the slow metamorphosis of Fatma, caught in a patriarchy of her snake venom dealer husband, to a woman snake. While Alem, like the other magical realist writers, does not call her work a magical realist fiction, this study attempts to show the techniques of magical realist fiction which include irreducible element,the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity in the novel.

Keywords: *Fatma*, Magical Realism, Oxymoron, Raja Alem.

INTRODUCTION

Although the term magic (al) realism appeared in 1925 in the pictorial art in Germany, it became well known with the boom of magical realist fiction in Latin America in 1960s. Since 1980s, it has become one of the popular modes of writing worldwide. Due to being an oxymoron and its hybrid nature (magic plus realism), it has caught the attention of critics. Some have called it a postcolonial mode because of its rise in postcolonial countries as a mode of writing, but others have called it a postmodern mode because of the time of its emergence and the techniques applied in these kinds of novels.

Since 1980s and the appearance of the noble prize winning figures in literature, writers all over the world have tried to use the techniques of this mode in their fiction. These authors used the oxymoron characteristic of magical realism: the presence of both natural and supernatural in the text. It must be noted that while this characteristic is the most significant characteristic of this type of fiction, other features are required to call a novel a magical realist fiction.

Female writers across the world, along with male have tried their hands in writing this type of fiction and the result was a global success for Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Laura Esquivel, Ana Castillo, and Marie Darrieussec. Typically

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the female writers who use magical realism in their works concentrate on women's experience, problems, and the most substantial issue in the female world which is the challenge with patriarchy. We, even,can say magical realism"can act like a literary language for the females". (Ebadi, 2015:194)

Raja Alem who is one of the distinguished female writers of the Arab world, published *Fatma; or a novel of Arabia*in English with Tom Mcdoungh in 2002 in the United States. *Fatma* shows the slow metamorphosis of Fatma to a woman snake who is imprisoned in her snake venom dealer husband's world. While Alem herself does not call *Fatma* a magical realist fiction(personal contact with Raja Alem, 30 August 2013), like the previous authors in the mode such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Toni Morrison, Cooke (2005) and Ebadi Asayesh (2015) referring to the magical realistscenes in *Fatma*, regard it a magical realist fiction.

The present study after reviewing *Fatma* and then magical realism, will focus on the features of a magical realist fiction based on Faris' division which include: irreducible element, presence of the phenomenal world, merging realms, unsettling doubts and disruptions of time, space and identity.

RAJA ALEM AND *FATMA*

Raja Alem, (1963-), a Saudi Arabian novelist, is from Mecca. She is a graduate of English literature and trains kindergarten teachers in Jeddah. Her body of work includes ten novels, two plays, a biography, short stories, essays, literary journalism, writing for children, and collaborations with artists and photographers. She has received many awards in the Arab world and in Europe, including one from UNESCO for creative achievement in 2005, and another from the Lebanese Literary Club in Paris 2008. In 2011, she won the Arabic Booker prize at the London Literature Festival with Mohammad Achaari. Some of Alem's works in Arabic have been banned. She wrote *Fatma: a novel of Arabia* in English but Tom Macdoungh, an American journalist and cinematographer, edited it. *Fatma* was published in 2002 in the United States.

Fatma starts with Fatma being kicked out of her house and her husband, Sajir's curses. After twenty years living with Sajir and having no relationship with other people, she does not know where to go. There is an old Yemenite porter accompanying her.

Later we see a flashback to the time that she is a young girl living with her father and grandmother. When Fatma's father was twenty years old, he married Fatma's mother who was seventy and Fatma was born when her mother was one hundred years old. But she died at her birth. Fatma's grandmother Shumla, who could see Azrael at her bed every day, waiting to take her, was famous for her love potions. At sixteen Fatma marries Sajir. She has not seen him before. One day he comes to Fatma's house and after a marriage contract is read, she leaves her father's house. The only dowry Fatma has is an abaya of her grandmother that her father gives.

In her new house, Sajir tells her that she is not allowed to enter one of the rooms. But on the sixth day of marriage, after Sajir enters the forbidden room, she follows him and finds that the room was a snake barn and her husband is a snake venom dealer. He used to go to that room every day to take venom. Seven days after Fatma enters the room at night, a Great Horned Black comes to her bed and bites her. When Sajir finds it, he immediately goes to Fatma's father and tells him because the poison of Great Horned Black would bring death. While Fatma is unconscious, her father washes her with Camphor to prepare her for burial. The moment that he splashes glasswort water on her hair, she awakens but she is different, full of life and changed.

After marriage, Fatma stops talking. After her rebirth when she goes to the snake barn, all the different sorts of snakes seem to be under her control and eat whatever Fatma gives them. She finds a shadow on the wall and starts talking with him. The shadow had a lion's head and a snake's body. Fatma calls him Noor. He tells stories to her and interprets her dreams. Sajir is aware of the presence of that shadow, too. Fatma tries to sew the stories that Noor tells her on her abaya like embroidery.

There are many tales, dreams, or books Noor mentions and in all of the tales Fatma is a character present. Some of these stories are parts of history like King Molkshah the Khawarizme's story who is enchanted by Fatma's grandmother, her grandmother's being kidnapped by Satan, Ibn Seren's *The Book of Dreams*, Saturn's soldiers, the tree of Toba (heaven's tree), King Thonawas's story; the first holocaust in the history of the world in which the Jew king in Yemen persecuted the Christians.

All the adventures Fatma takes are in the world of books and dreams. The only real adventure is when on an invitation of a Prince who wanted to see Sajir's collection of snakes, Fatma masked as a dump boy accompanies her husband to Najran, a green land in southwest of Saudi. People watch their circus of snakes in their stops. Nobody finds Fatma's true identity except Prince Taray who asks her love but Fatma saying she is married rejects him. Taray becomes mad for his love to her.

As Fatma's supernatural power and her presence is threatening to Sajir, he kicks her out. After leaving her husband's house she returns to his door and tells him that she is dying, she is ready to enter the book, the book of heaven. Fatma as a she-snake fights with king Thonawas and wins. There, in the eternal world or the book of heaven, she sees Noor, Taray, and the other characters she accompanied in the world of her dreams.

MAGICAL REALISM

The term "magic realism" first appeared in German philosophy in 1798 in Novalis' notebook. Then, it entered art criticism in 1925 through Franz Roh's essay and developed in Europe through the work of Bontempelli. Although nearly forgotten in Europe in the 1940s, it emerged in the discussions of European-educated Latin American writers such as Pierti, Asturias and Carpentier who wanted to present a Latin American version of surrealism. Magical realism entered the realm of literary criticism through the work of Flores. Writers such as Echevarría and Spindler tried to define different types of magical realism based on the definitions of Roh and Carpentier and the magico realist fiction written in Europe and Latin America. Magical realism became global through the works of Noble Prize winners who used magical realism in their fiction.

Critics like Jameson, Bhabha, Jean Durix, Chanady and Cooper viewed magical realism as a postcolonial mode because of its textual hybridity (magic plus realism) and cultural hybridity, as well as its rise in postcolonial countries. Some critics, like D'haen, find it postmodern, while others such as Hegerfeldt, Bowers and Faris use the techniques of a postmodern novel to analyze magico-realist novels due to its time of flourishing and decentering realism. All critics agree on the oxymoronic characteristic of magical realism: the presence of both the natural and supernatural in the text.

Having a postcolonial outlook to the term, Bhabha suggested magical realism is the "literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (Bhabha, 2003 p: 9). However, this statement cannot be totally right as far as magical realism was not born in Europe. We can accept its appropriateness as a postcolonial strategy in writing (Bowers, 2005 p:46), as suggested by Bowers, because marginal writers not only in postcolonial but other countries like the United States have used it against the dominant culture. At the same time, magic realism appeared in 1920s art, the time of modern art in Europe. Thus, we can use Faris' statement that magical realism is like a tree with its roots in modernism and branches in postmodernism (Faris, 2004 p: 30).

In examining books about magical realism, it seems that there are two authors who have attempted to chronicle the quintessential attributes of magical realist texts; Amaryll B. Chanady and Wendy B. Faris. In *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985), Chanady compares magical realism and the fantastic. She presents three characteristics that are found in the literature: the presence of the natural and supernatural, antinomy, and authorial reticence.In *Ordinary Enchantments Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Faris defines five characteristics for a magical real text: irreducible element, presence of the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts,merging realms, and disruptions of time, space and identity. The features that Faris documents for magical

realist narratives appear to be an expanded form of Chanady's characteristics because they overlap. For example, the presence of the natural and supernatural comes in Faris' discussion on irreducible element and presence of the phenomenal world, antinomy in her merging realms and authorial reticence in her unsettling doubts.

MAGICAL REALISM IN *FATMA*

Regarding the features that Chanady and Faris found for a magical realist text, these characteristics are going to be examined and discussed in *Fatma*.

The Irreducible Element

What Faris identifies as the irreducible element, Chanady sees as the presence of the supernatural. Chanady finds this presence to be the essential characteristic of magical realism, with critics agreeing on the definition of this term as "the occurrence of the supernatural as contrary to our conventional view of reality" (Chanady, 1985 p:18). The presence of the supernatural is not problematic in magical realism, unlike the fantastic. Faris defines the irreducible element as "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse, that is, according to 'logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief,' as David Young and Keith Hollaman describe it" (Faris, 2004 p:7). Faris considers that this puts the reader in a quandary regarding the collecting of evidence to establish questions about the position of events and characters in such fictions (ibid.).

In *Fatma*, Fatma's metamorphoses from an obedient woman to a woman snake with her strange skills in taming the snakes is an irreducible or supernatural element which appears after being bitten by Great Horned Black and her resurrection. Sajir had never taught her anything about the snakes but she "could sense their needs; the knowledge of what their blind souls wanted, seemed to be in her blood. They knew where to move and Fatma knew how to move with them far better than she'd ever known how to be with her husband or father" (*Fatma*, p: 26).

Another irreducible element in the novel is a shadow on the wall which appears to her after becoming a female snake. Fatma "discovered a strange shadow on the side of the flintstone basin. It was shaped like a human body, but the face was featureless. Though she spent several days meditating on the shape, she was unable to persuade it to talk to her" (*Fatma*, p: 28), but after some time "the shadow in the sink was pleased to keep appearing to Fatma. It monitored her daily routine and spoke with her regularly about her worries and fears" (ibid. p: 30). Fatma calls him Noor and he becomes Fatma's companion, telling her stories or helping her enter the worlds of the books she reads. Alem writes that "Noor, the image that appears to Fatma in the smudged of burn, on the wall, which is the remains of the burnt hair of the previous wife, is called Noor" (Personal Contact with Raja Alem, 29 August 2013).

There are many more irreducible elements in the novel. But it is important to note that the existence of the supernatural is not the only way to make the narrative a magical realist one. The supernatural should be accepted within the text by the others. If the irreducible element is only accepted by one, it can be a hallucination or mere fantasy. But when it is accepted in the level of the text it is magical realism. Fatma's community is limited but her supernatural power is witnessed and accepted by Sajir.

The Phenomenal World

Faris considers the second feature of a magical realist text as being "that its descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. This is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (Faris, 2004 p: 14). Chanady refers to "realistic detail" as the essential factor to magical realism (Chanady, 1985 p: 47). She remarks that:

> In order to define a story as magico-realist, it is not a sufficient condition that the natural and supernatural are present in the text. The degree of presence of these two codes is essential in determining to which mode a particular narrative belongs. If there is insufficient realistic detail, the story tends towards the fairy tale or other types of pure fantasy. If the supernatural does not constitute a coherent code, it is perceived as out of place or absurd, or as a dream of hallucination within a realistic narrative. A dream about the supernatural, narrated in the form of free indirect discourse within the framework of a realistic novel, does not transform the narrative into an example of magical realism. (Chanady, 1985 p: 57)

Faris states that the phenomenal world happens in several ways. One is through realistic descriptions that "create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in, often by extensive use of detail" (Faris, 2004 p: 14). Use of the details brings two points to consider: "On one hand, this attention to sensory detail continues and renews the realistic tradition. On the other hand, in addition to including magical events …or phenomena …magical realist fiction includes intriguing magical details"(ibid.). Bowers also states that magical realism "relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings" (Bowers, 2005 p: 3). Due to this reason, it is often regarded as a kind of literary realism. But she adds that the "distinguishing feature of magical realism from literary realism is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective" (ibid.).

Regarding *Fatma*, the description of the magical shadow on the wall that Fatma calls Noor comes into detail: "She discovered a strange shadow on the side of the flintstone basin. It was shaped like a human body, but the face was featureless" (*Fatma*, p: 22). We read more details about the shadow when one night Sajir saw Fatma's fingers moving slowly across the pillow to his neck and told her to get away:

> Fatma spent the rest of the night sitting on the floor of the snake farm staring at the shadow. Suddenly it came to life. She gasped when it took on the shape of Noor, the flag holder of her girlhood. The lion's tail was wrapped around his waist and he was griping the end of the tail in his hands. Noor himself had the appearance of a snake with a lion's head. Fatma stared at the thick hair covering the lion's head. Was Noor a lion? Or was he one of her husband's snakes? (ibid. pp: 28-9)

After the Great Horned Black bites Fatma, Sajir goes to take Mansoor, Fatma's father, to look after her. Fatma is in a coma for one month. When her father thinks that she is dead, he prepares her for burial. The description we read of Fatma's resurrection, which is a magical event, is another example for this type:

> Suddenly, standing at his daughter's feet, which had turned the darkest shade of blue, Mansoor detected a change in the atmosphere. The air was heaving rhythmically, breathing in time to the music of his daughter's body. He shook himself to get rid of the wicked sensation. He knelt over the body and went ahead with the washing ceremony. Then he froze again, thinking: *This is a bad thing to do. She has been cast beyond the pale, she is no longer a creature worthy of human consideration, she is evil-evil forever and ever. There is no sense thinking otherwise.* Nevertheless he knelt, trembling. He uncovered his daughter's magnificent sapphire corpse and carried it toward a bare wooden bench. The skin was satiny on his forearms. He felt overwhelmed by the body and laid it down in a hurry. He sprinkled a few drops of glasswort-water on her black hair.
>
> Fatma's sigh came from the depth of creation. (ibid.pp: 22-3)

After this sigh, Fatma is revived but she looks like an "enchanting nymph, no longer a girl but a seductive woman overflowing with life" (ibid.p: 23).

Faris considers another way to show the phenomenal world in magical realist fiction, stating that: "if we focus on reference rather than on description, we may witness idiosyncratic recreations of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical realities, often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (Faris 2004, p: 15). She goes on to state that, " [t]his grounding in history grows out of realism's frequent 'embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history,' as Erich Auerbach expressed it" (ibid.). Similarly, Hegerfeldt remarks that these works explicitly imitate non-fictional genres such as history or biography, raising the realist tradition more powerfully (Hegerfeldt 2005: p. 76).

In *Fatma*, the novel's setting is Mecca but the exact time is not known. Just the cars that pass with high speed near Fatma at the beginning of the novel show the contemporary time of the novel: "Fatma walked toward the lights blazing on the main road. She blinked at the blasts of wind from the cars whooshing by-they

were just like the hissing demons that possessed her husband's soul" (*Fatma*: p.2). Fatma's travel to the past, and her fight and defeat of King Thonawas at the end of the novel when she enters the book of eternity, has its roots in history. Her expedition with Sajir to Najran uses a true location in the southwest of Saudi Arabia, the green land of snakes.

Unsettling Doubts

Unsettling doubts is the third quality of a magical realist fiction in Faris' studies. She states that "before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts" (Faris 2004, p: 17). Faris goes on to explain that:

> The question of belief is central here, this hesitation frequently stemming from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative, which moves toward belief in extrasensory phenomena but narrates from the post-Enlightenment perspective and in the realistic mode that traditionally exclude them. And because belief systems differ, clearly, some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others, depending on their beliefs and narrative traditions. (ibid. p: 17)

Unsettling doubt in Chanady's discussion is represented as authorial reticence. She explains that in magical realism, the function of authorial reticence is different from that of the fantastic, and accepts the supernatural and the strange world view presented in the text as a given. If there is no authorial reticence an "explanation of the supernatural, or an attempt to analysis the perspective that differs from our normal view of reality, would only draw our attention to the strangeness or even impossibility of certain events and beliefs"(Chanady, 1985 p: 149). Chanady states that magical realist scenes might look like dreams, but they are not dreams, and the text may entice us to both nominate them as dreams and not to do so (ibid: 17-8). Explaining how a magical realist text makes the reader hesitate about what they thought of as the dream, she states: "Magical realist narratives almost seem to bring up the possibility of interpreting what they chronicle as a dream in order to forestall that interpretation, after having first aired it as a possibility. That strategy, while allaying the reader's doubts, also calls them into being, causing the reader to hesitate" (ibid: p. 18). Similarly, Bowers states that one of the distinctive features of magical realism is its dependence on the reader to follow the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical viewpoints of reality on the same level (Bowers, 2005 p: 3).

In regards to *Fatma,* the reader wonders whether Noor, Fatma's companion, is a character created in Fatma's imagination. But we read that Fatma covers the wall before their travel to Najran with her abaya and takes Noor within that. Sajir makes us accept the shadow's presence. He has seen that shadow on the water basin

because the "next morning Sajir paused by the basin, whose walls had repulsed all previous attempts at cleaning. He blinked in amazement at the absence of the shadow but left without making a fuss. He didn't want to stir things up or jeopardize the morning's uneasy truce" (*Fatma,* p: 73). Another instance occurs after the snake truck's departure from Najran and people of the tribe look for prince Taray. They pursue the stallion that never left his owner. The stallion followed the snake show truck and when it reached the back of the truck, "Taray's stallion rolled its eyes, reared up and began frothing at the mouth" (ibid.p: 103). When the tribesmen lower the rear door, they see "Taray, crown prince of the Yami, tangled in the coils of the enormous snake" (ibid.). They try hard to make him free but whenever they pull at the snake its body changes to liquid. At last with an enormous effort they pull off its black skin and throw it by the side of the road and there in dust it took the shape of *abaya*. When they look at Taray, they see "the snake was still lying with him like a devoted lover, only now it was a golden-green color, glowing, and running like water all over the prince's body. The tribesmen hacked and slashed at the green skin with their daggers" (ibid.). No one asks about Fatma, not even Sajir, who looks on in astonishment, but the masked boy is nowhere: a fact the knights notice while they carry Taray to a safe place. Fatma's metamorphosis to a snake is seen by others, including tribesmen and Sajir.

Merging Realms

The fourth quality Faris mentions for a magical realist fiction is merging realms, the "closeness or near merging of two realms" (Faris, 2004 p: 21). To explain this, Faris refers to the metamorphosis of a woman to swine in *Pig Tales* in which a narrator is a captive between two worlds. Faris states that:

> The magical realist vision thus exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Ghosts and texts, or people and words that seem ghostly, inhabit these two-sided mirrors, many times situated between the two worlds of life and death; they enlarge that space of intersection where a number of magically real fictions exist. (ibid.pp: 21-2)

Merging the realms is what Chanady has called the emphasis on or resolution of antinomy: "The magico-realist author creates a convincing world view which is radically different from our own. It may be based on Western superstition, such as ghosts and doubles, or it may be based on a culture with a different perception of reality entirely, such as that of the Indians of Central America" (Chanady, 1985p:114). She adds that magical realism is not limited to these two traditional types, and must not essentially contain the familiar themes of the supernatural (ibid.). We should add that Chanady in her later study claims that a concept like antinomy,

"with its strong implication of logic and rationality", is actually unrelated to most magic realist writing. Due to this, in her later work on magic realism she leaves the concept of antinomy "in favor of a broader reflection on the mode" (ibid. p: 432). It seems that she abandons the antinomy because she considers it only to be found in some magico-realist fictions, not in all.

Regarding *Fatma*, Fatma's slow metamorphoses to a woman-snake puts her in two worlds; she is both a woman and snake like. Seven nights after she enters the snake farm when Great Horned Black comes to her bed and bites her, Sajir could not distinguish if the shriek comes from Fatma or the snake (*Fatma*, p: 19). Fatma does not die from the poisonous snake bite: instead, the Great Horned Black dies and changes to flames. Cooke states that from that moment, Fatma is dangling between the human and snake realms:

> For weeks she lies in a comalike state, her inert body filling the room with the sickening smell of musk that becomes her hallmark. During the coma, her skin changes color, turning dark sapphire, and her body is tattooed with black markings. This coma recalls the Sufi barzakh, a third state that separates and then brings together the worlds of the living and the dead, the human and the animal realms, analogous to the border in the ocean where sweet and salt water mingle and yet are cut from each other. Fatma will remain suspended between the human and the animal realms. This is her becoming-animal that Deleuze and Guattari claim is neither dream nor fantasy but real. The movement between the two conditions does not commit to either animal or human but is always in flux because 'a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first.' (Cooke, 2007pp: 19-20)

Cooke mentions that Fatma lives at the joining point of the real and the supernatural although neither of them are in total struggle with each other. They (real and supernatural) are not separated by hesitancy but there is barzakh between them that helps to both separate and bring them together at the same time. This coexistence of the natural and supernatural is a mark of magical realism, she quotes Faris adding that "'fluid boundaries between the world of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed….Metamorphoses area relatively common event (embodying) a collusion of two different worlds' (p. 172, p. 178)." (ibid. p. 27) Cooke mentions that as soon as Fatma has entered the barzakh of becoming-snake, she becomes a sorcerer who lives on the borders of places, amongst places (ibid. p: 19).

In her travel to Najran, Fatma sleeps at the back of the truck among snakes, making it difficult to distinguish between her and the snakes. On their way from Najran to Mecca, Sajir was afraid of Fatma and her movements; "[w]hat frightened

Sajir was the noiseless way she moved. 'You can't hear her coming,' he muttered. 'It's like she's a shadow or a flickering light. Or an actual snake'" (*Fatma*, p: 107). Sajir felt the threatening atmosphere around her: "More and more, she gave herself over to the snakes. Her body changed. She looked increasingly like a serpent- in the sleekness of her movements, the glow of her skin, and the cast of her eyes, which seemed to look forward at a secret world" (*Fatma*, p: 107) .

Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

Faris adds the fifth characteristic for magical realist fictions and that is the disruptions of time, space and identity which mean these types of fiction "disturb received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris, 2004 p: 23).

In *Fatma* there is no reference to the exact time that events take place. Neither is time important in Fatma's world; "[a] year went by, two years perhaps, or ten - time didn't matter in Fatma's world. She was totally immersed in the snakes' timekeeping: one turn of the tail might mean a lifetime. And a lifetime could be a blink at a flash of the great void they were able to see" (*Fatma*, p: 30). In another passage we read: "Many winters and summers went by during which Fatma and Sajir said not a word to one another. All that passed between them was the silent business of milking snake venom and concocting a vast store of ancient, magical remedies" (ibid. p: 66).

Fatma asks Noor about her age:

"Do you know how old I am?" Fatma asked.

"Old enough to die."

"I can't die," she said annoyed by his firmness. "I inherited my grandmother's longevity"

"But you just said you don't know how old you are. You could be older than grandmother already." (ibid. p: 32)

Despite what Noor says here, from the novel we know that Fatma marries Sajir at sixteen and dies twenty years after this time, "[t]wenty years a wife…twenty years of marriage, twenty years in prison…" (ibid.p: 2), this is what Fatma says to herself after Sajir throws her out of his house and soon after she dies.

We observe in *Fatma* that while she dies in her thirty-sixth year, Noor tells her she is older than her grandmother. Besides this disruption of time, there is disruption of space; whereas she is in her room talking with Noor we also see her in another place, mostly in the realms of books. When she is in the snake show truck, Ibn Madhy comes and takes her to the locations beyond time and place.

In addition to our habit of time and space, magical realism reorganizes oursense of identity. Faris states "[t]he multivocal nature of the narrative and the cultural hybridity that characterize magical realism extends to its characters,which tend toward a radical multiplicity" (Faris, 2004 p: 25).

Fatma's grandmother is multiple in character, too. Old Shumla the queen of longevity, a mongoose who hunts King Molkshah the Khawarizmi (ibid.pp. 32-4), a nymph who seduces the poet Ibn Madhy (ibid.pp. 110-1), a favourite woman of the tribe among men who is kidnapped by Satan, the mother of the green ogre who is the child of Satan and at the same time his enemy (ibid.pp. 42-5). The multiple characters of grandmother are revealed to Fatma in the stories that Noor tells her.

CONCLUSIONS

As it was mentioned magical realism,with its oxymoronic characteristic (magic + realism) as a global mode since 1980s was used by female writers as well as male ones.

The present study showed the features of magical realist fiction according to Faris and Chanady's division in *Fatma; or novel of Arabia* by Raja Alem, the Saudi Arabian writer. In her novel, Alem showed the gradual metamorphosis of a girl from Mecca to a woman snake who is entrapped in the patriarchal societies of her father and then her husband.

The first feature of a magical realist fiction was the the irreducible element or the presence of the supernatural which was the essential characteristic of magical realism. Fatma's metamorphosis from an obedient woman to a woman snake with her strange skills in taming the snakes was an irreducible element which appeared after being bitten by Great Horned Black and her resurrection. Another irreducible element in the novel was a shadow on the wall which appeared to her after becoming a woman snake and Fatma called him Noor.

The second feature of a magical realist text was the phenomenal world which included the realistic description of a magical event. In*Fatma,* the description of the magical shadow on the wall that Fatma called Noor came into detail. The description we read of Fatma's resurrection, which was a magical event, was another example for this type. In addition the writer of a magical realist fiction tries to use the true locations in her work to make it acceptable; in *Fatma*, the setting is Mecca and Najran.

Unsettling doubts as the third quality of a magical realist fiction in Faris' studies expressed the hesitation of the reader between two contrary understandings of events. While the reader hesitates about the irreducible element, there are other characters in the text who approve it. In *Fatma,* the reader wondered whether Noor, Fatma's companion, was a character created in Fatma's imagination. Sajir makes us accept the shadow's presence because he saw the shadow and surprised when it was not on the wall of the water basin. In addition, Fatma's metamorphosis to a snake was seen by others, including the tribesmen in Najran and Sajir.

The fourth quality Faris mentions for a magical realist fiction was merging realms, the "closeness or near merging of two realms" like ghosts and texts, or people and words (21). Regarding *Fatma*, Fatma's slow metamorphoses to a woman-snake put her in two worlds; she was both a woman and snake like.

Faris adds the fifth characteristic for magical realist fictions and that is the disruptions of time, space and identity. Personal multiplicity could be seen in *Fatma*. Shewas many things: a girl from Mecca, a woman who changed to a woman snake by being bitten with one of her husband's snakes, a leaf from a Tuba tree in heaven in a story Noor told her, prince Taray's love, a woman who appeared as a snake in the book of eternity, killed King Thonawas and changed to the river Lar and sang the music of unity with the universe.

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