

MAGIC REALISM IN JORGE LUIS BORGES'S *FICTIONS* AND NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S *ARABIAN NIGHTS AND Days*

Iman A. Hanafy

“... magic realism is less a trend than a tradition, an evolving mode or genre that has had its waxings and wanings over the centuries and is now expressing one more period of ascendancy”¹.

Magic realism is a narrative technique that acquires an important presence in contemporary world literature. Its widespread appeal is not only due to its innovative impulse but also to its connection with tradition. It has its long history beginning with the masterful interweaving of magical and real in the epic and chivalric tradition and continuing in the prose fiction of *The Thousand And One Nights* and *Don Quixote*. Contemporary magic realist writers consciously depart from the conventions of nineteenth and twentieth-century realism in favor of a new narrative technique in which the magic events are woven into reality in such a way that the boundaries between the two are either blurred or non-existent.

The very term “magic realism”, is paradoxical for the term implies an opposition between magic and reality. However, it is this paradoxical juxtaposition of magical elements in a world of realism that gives the genre its own identity and its highest aesthetic impact. John Erickson explains:

In narrative marked by magic realism... two diametrically opposed ontologies coexist on equal terms: the empirical world of reason and logic and the supernatural world of unreason. In such narratives the supernatural serves to rupture the ‘coherence’ of the systematized empirical world by revealing it to be, not a universally true or absolute representation of external reality, but only one of several possible representations².

Although magic realism writers violate standard novelistic expectation by the fusion of the everyday with the magical, their magical element is simply there, part of the world. "...it is an ordinary matter, an every day occurrence—admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism"³.

Consequently magic realism cannot be identified with either fantasy or surrealism. Unlike fantastic literature, magic realism does not create an imaginary world that the rational mind considers impossible. It also breaks away from surrealism because of the surrealist's interest in the effects of dreams and in the psychological analysis of the character in quest of the sacred hidden territory.

Jorge Luis Borges is regarded as one of the major Latin American writers in world fiction and a founder member of magic realism as a genre. Naguib Mahfouz is one of the great Egyptian novelists who also writes magic realism. Both writers write fiction to represent not the real world, but a fanciful recreation of the cultural invention of man whether in history or in literature. By the fusion of everyday experience with the magical, they depict the absurdity of life and the meaninglessness of man's existence; searching for a meaning of the universe beyond concrete reality. In doing this, they set their reader on a journey into a hallucinatory world of magic realism.

Although Borges and Mahfouz use the same narrative technique, each employs it differently. This is due to the wide diversity of the constituent features of magic realism—the use of myth and fairytales, the contamination of reality by dreams, the journey through time, the element of suspense and surprise.

A first reading of Borges's *Fictions* and Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* shows that both are greatly influenced by their reading of the medieval Arabic text *The Thousand and One Nights*. They have achieved magical phenomena by resorting to the universal historical heritage based on the assumption of myth. In the article that borrows

the same title, Borges's enthusiasm for the orient is obvious for its "vast, immobile, magnificent incomprehensible"⁴ mystery. For him, *The Thousand and One Nights* is not something which has died because it is "part of our memory, and also, now, a part of tonight"⁵. This is apparent in Borges's constant references throughout his work to *The Thousand and One Nights* which forms a kind of leitmotif. In "The Circular Ruins", By the number of nights the wizard needs to procreate his dream, a thousand and one nights, Borges makes reference to *The Thousands and One Nights* with its cyclic type of reasoning in which Schrazad's tales imply the possibility of an infinite circular repetition. In "The South", Borges's reference to the Arabic text is rather obvious in which the protagonist tries to use a magical text, *The Thousand and One Nights* to change his reality and rewrite his existence. "To travel with this book, which was so much a part of the history of his ill-fortune, was a kind of affirmation that his ill-fortune had been annulled" (155).

Moreover, Borges shows interest in the miraculous phenomena of *The Thousand and One Nights*. For example, many of his characters have extraordinary characteristics. In "Funes, The Memorious", Funes is capable of embracing all things simultaneously without omitting anything and registering it all in his memory for ever. In "The Circular Ruins" and "Tlon, Aqbar, Orbis Tertius", mere products of the human mind come to life. Therefore, Borges somehow manages to revive the ancient legends and captures this magical atmosphere, assimilating it in his own way.

Borges also shows interest in the structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*—story within a story. In "Tlon Aqbar, Orbis Tertius" the discovery of the idealistic Tlon—non-existent planet in our actual world indicates a world within a world. In "The Library of Babel", Borges uses the same illusion talking about non-existent book within a book. Borges states that "Stories within stories create a strange effect, almost infinite, a sort of vertigo"⁶. He endows this narrative mode a special place in his fiction because it enhances the magical effect of the story. He not only reflects our situation in the real world but also intrudes and involves

the entire world. Borges proceeds to imply that we are all characters in a gigantic book of creation, being read about. The possibility that, we, the readers of fiction may in turn be fictional characters, being read about, at the same moment, by some one else. Borges says, "If the characters in the stories can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious"⁷.

Mahfouz also shows his interest in Arabian mythology. His novel evokes *The Thousand and One Nights* not only in its title but also in its frame structure. The resemblance in structure is apparent if we read the first episode. Mahfouz's novel is thirteen loosely related stories enclosed within a central tale. Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* begins at the point where *The Thousand and One Nights* ends, when king Shahryar, the king of *The Thousand and One Nights* has decided to save Shahrazad's life. In a series of stories recounting the events in the kingdom, Mahfouz is able to explore the force beyond man's power mingling the magical elements within the events of everyday life.

Mahfouz uses the Arabian mythology to mediate between his material and his imagination. For Mahfouz, Myth is the symbolic expression of man's hope, man's fears and man's unconscious desire that underlies the conscious patterns of human behavior. Mahfouz's hero ventures forth from the world of common day into the reign of the unknown, great forces are encountered and he comes back as one reborn and filled with power.

Another device used by both Mahfouz and Borges to evoke the magical elements is the use of dream. The subject of dream is a favourite of *Arabian Nights and Days*. From the very beginning, Mahfouz develops the idea of dream to be more than a dream. In his tale about Sannan Al Gamali, the hero dreams of a genie. When he wakes up he feels that the dream fills him more than wakefulness itself and with the bite in his arm, dream becomes not an illusion. Then we have the same vision coming to Gamasa Al Bulti in the middle of the day which shows that it is not really a dream but it is part of real life. Later on in the tale of Nur Al

Din and Duniyazad, the dream becomes real and the border between them non-existent. Dream or more precisely dream like reality is considered the driving force for the events of *Arabian Nights and Days*. The real characters, living in a real world, radically change by the immense effect of horrible dreams (the appearance of the genie in their life). For Mahfouz, dream is a moment of revelation. It may be a call, an awakening of the self. It marks the dawn of religious illumination. Because when the spell of dream breaks, the hero reconsiders his own reality and looks at it with new eyes. Mahfouz sets out to explore the other side of the visible world—the corruption, the evil as well as the power and mystery beyond man's existence. He does that in order to render the duality of existence, and thereby achieve a unified double vision, a conjunction with the invisible essence of reality.

Similarly, the world in Borges's stories is illusory—a dream. "The Circular Ruins" is the most elaborate expression of this device. It is based on the idea of a dreamer who longs to create a man. His creation is distinguished from other real beings by its immunity to fire. At the end of the story when fire breaks out in the circular ruins of the temple, the hero discovers that "he also was an illusion that some one else was dreaming him" ("The Circular Ruins",58); a philosophy inherent in all Borgesian fiction "In the dream of the man that dreamed; the dreamed one awoke who may also be dreams themselves" (56). In "Tlon Aqbar, Orbis Tertius", Borges depicts a world modified by one person dreaming, dreaming of an utopian world that exists and affects people's life and the theme of "The Library of Babel" is nourished by those dreams of order dreamed in the chaos of the library.

Borges's interest in metaphysics and theology shapes all his artistic creation. All his metaphysical speculation is directed towards destroying earthly reality and imposing on it a dream vision. He believes that the world that is perceived by the human mind is a dream. Man is not able to perceive the laws that govern the world, instead, he has invented his own world. It is in the fantastic that Borges finds out real

entity. Thus, the unreality which man has created now becomes his own reality. Borges's magic realism is an attempt to interpret art in terms of a dream. "I dream therefore I exist"⁸.

This dream-like image expressed in Mahfouz's and Borges's fictions reveals their belief in the limitation and ignorance of man. Their characters are always in the presence of a deeper, more penetrating meaning that goes beyond the surface of events. They inhabit an invisible world of metaphysics. They are living in a labyrinth of life, a labyrinth in which all men would become lost.

This leads us to another source of magic realism—the cyclical use of time. Both Mahfouz and Borges use time to add to the magical effect of the story. If we pause for a minute over the title of Mahfouz's novel, we realize that it is synonymous with infinite, infinite nights, endless nights. It suggests the circular movement, which indicates the possibility of combining the present, the past and the future in an endless wheel of time. The very structure of the tale can evoke multiplicity that continues the journey of life by its cyclic repetition. This idea is repeated in most of Borges's short stories—the circularity of time. In "Theme of the Traitor and Hero", the events themselves express this circularity. The story is an incessant movement between fiction and reality. This skilful time shift is introduced by Borges to imply the eternal cyclic nature of time. In "The Babylon Lottery", chance which determines the destiny of men is the result of "...the sacred drawings of lots, which were carried out in the labyrinth of the gods every seventy nights" (64). This automatic repetition of lottery suggests the circularity of time.

Moreover, time, for Borges, has no specific beginning and consequently, no definite end. We cannot feel the tenses in his writings. A denial of time lies deeply imbedded in his stories. Borges transcends the reality of daily occurrences to the discovery of new dimensions. He creates a closed, all-encompassing system within the book in which the simultaneity and convergence of all past, present, and future experiences occur, regardless of passing time. For

example, shortly after the opening of "The Garden of Forking Paths", Yu, the hero, sits in his room pondering his past and wondering what to do, he reflects that "all things happen to one, precisely now. Century follows century, and things happen only in the present" (82). Later, as Yu walks towards Albert's house, hounded by fear, he offers the same advice but applies it not to the past but to the future. "*Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past*" (84, emphasis in the original). This strand of thought is picked up again near the end when, just after Albert has completed his elucidation of T'sui's book, Yu remarks out aloud, "The future exists now" (92) and shoots the Englishman. In "A New Refutation of Time", Borges explains:

In the course of a life...and (at times) to metaphysical perplexity, I have glimpsed or foreseen a refutation of time.... We may compare time to a constantly revolving sphere; the half that was always sinking would be the future; but the indivisible point at the top would be the extensionless present.⁹

Mahfouz has his own perspective concerning time. Time in his novel is neither present nor future time but meta-time. It is the time within us, which is by nature complex, confounding dreams and reality. Mahfouz says that he is "up to his neck in the present, with my eyes constantly on the future"¹⁰. In Mahfouz's novel, there is no dividing line between the present and the future. The two are instantly fused in one moment.

This leads us to another metaphysical element of time which both Mahfouz and Borges employ in their fictions. They believe that the real destiny of man consists of a single moment, a single moment in which the characters have to transcend their real life situations, detach themselves from their own interests in order to fulfil their role on earth. In Mahfouz, It is the moment in which Gamsa Al Bulti discovers the hypocritical nature of his own work as the chief of police:

"You' ve arrested the thief?" [the governor] inquired with sudden optimism.

"I've come for that purpose" [replied Gamasa Al Bulti]
The governor frowned questioningly. "Do you think he's in my household?"

Gamasa pointed at him. "There he is," he said, "talking unashamedly."

"By the Lord of the Kaaba, you've gone crazy" shouted Khalil al Hamadhani, aghast

"It is the truth being spoken for the first time."

As the governor prepared to take action, Gamasa drew his sword. "You'll receive your true deserts."

(47)

It is also the moment when Shahryar abandoned the throne and glory for the sake of repentance. "He [Shahryar] deposed himself, defeated before his heart's revolt at a time when his people had forgotten his misdeeds. His education had required a considerable time. He did not venture on the decisive step until the fear within him had gone out of control and his desire for salvation prevailed"(222). In Borges's "The End", this moment is one night when the hero discovers the reality of Martin Fierro. In "The Garden of Forking Paths", It is the moment when the spy carried out his plan because he felt the chief is afraid of his race. He "wished to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies" (89). In "Theme of the Traitor and Hero", the moment is the moment of salvation in which Hilpatrick compensates for his treachery by his cooperative efforts "which allowed him the opportunity to redeem himself and which would add a flourish to his dead" (115).

De identity is another technique used by Borges and Mahfouz to enhance the atmosphere of magic realism. Their stories are built on the notion of the double, the idea that one man being literary two. It could be one person with two different personalities or two persons having the same aspect. The idea of the double is the most potent force in art because it stems from the view that man himself is a double: spiritual and corporal, evil and good, mortal and immortal. In Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*, Gamsa Al Bulti is doubled. Although he was sentenced to death, he did not die because of the interference of the genie that created a phantom to be killed in stead of Gamsa. Then Gamsa re-

appeared in another face and in another personality. Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and Hero" ends with the disquieting revelation that the traitor and the hero are really one person. In "The Garden of Forking Paths", the identity is obvious in the fact that Tsu Pen and Albert Stephen are but two aspects of the same person. Both Mahfouz and Borges use this technique to shatter the logical coherence of existence and deepen our sense of loss. It enforces the chaotic ambiguous universe.

Furthermore, Borges carries the duality of man to its ultimate expression. It is the artistic possibilities of personal non-existence and the loss of personal identity. In "The Garden of Forking Paths", Borges states, "we do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, but not I, in another, I and not you; in others both of us" (88).

In Mahfouz's and Borges's works, one finds that their writings are a combination of magic and the technique of detective stories based on surprise and suspense. Their plots unfold themselves in an unpredictable and amazing endings. From the beginning the reader is thrown into a timeless flux and the unconceivable which add to the dramatic suspense of the stories.

A distinctive mingling of fantasy and reality dominates Mahfouz's and Borges's fictions. One wonders how Mahfouz in *Arabian Nights and Days*, creates such a richly composed imaginary world so similar to our everyday one yet so different from it. By telling a realistic story in a serious and natural narrative tone, Mahfouz is able to produce a magical realm where everything is possible and believable. His characters accept the fantastic (the appearance of the genie in their life) as an integral part of life without having any signs of disbelief or amazement at such marvelous phenomena. After listening to Gamasa Al Bulti's story of the appearance of the genie in his life which opens his eyes to the corruption and ends in his bloody act of repentance, Sahriyar comments: "We've found ourselves in the age of genies who have nothing better to do than kill governors" (48). Brook-Rose identifies this modern element noting that

The sense that empirical reality is not as secure as it is used to be is now pervasive at all levels of society. Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to... the only 'true' or 'another equally valid' reality.¹¹

For Mahfouz, the magical text is not much more magical than reality itself. Brook-Rose concludes that the "inversion of real/unreal is perfectly logic"¹²

On the other hand, Borges shows another aspect of magic realism. In his *Fictions*, Borges tells an imaginary story in a realistic way so as the reader might not be able to realize what is factual and what is imaginary. His technique is to transform the fabulous into true existence. The writer confronts reality, trying to reveal it by looking for what can be mysterious in life, objects and even human actions in order to create the illusion of unreality. Borges creates a supernatural atmosphere without denying the natural. It is his intention to provoke strange feeling, the rendering is neither utterly clear nor completely logical. In "The South", Borges writes:

The magnetized mountain and the genie who swore to kill his benefactor are—who would deny it?—marvellous, but not so much more than the morning itself and the mere fact of being. The joy of life distracted him from paying attention to Scheherezade and her superfluous miracles. Dahlmann closed his book and allowed himself to live (155).

In "Theme of the Traitor and Hero", Borges explains his narrative: it is the creation of unrealities.

Both Mahfouz and Borges destroy the gap between fantasy and reality. They fuse the ordinary and the extraordinary, the visible and the invisible so as to give us a new kind of reality. Their aim is not to portray or copy reality, but rather to represent before our eyes the mystery that breathes behind it. They uncover and interpret the world as they see it, thereby creating a New World vision. However, both writers cling to reality as if to prevent literature " from

getting in their way as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairytales, to supernatural realms"¹³. They do not escape reality. But on the contrary bring us near to reality.

Borges is an intellectual writer whose views are shaped by his metaphysical and theological ideas. He believes that metaphysics and theology are the creation of the human mind. The reality man lives is not created by God but invented by man. Borges's skeptic view regarding the world is confirmed by the element of doubt that runs throughout his writings. He suggests that since man can never find the solution to the labyrinth of reality, he has constructed his own reality, which is no more than a dream in man's imagination. Here, Borges tries to approach cultural values, not in the context of reality, but in the context open to man—his own created culture. Giovanna de Garayalde explains:

Borges tries to free us from thinking in patterns and to increase the range of our thoughts, leading them along new paths. Borges is not ignorant of nor does he reject the possibility of a fuller development for the human mind, a development which would enable man to perceive different characteristics and dimensions of reality¹⁴

Despite Mahfouz's belief in the chaotic nature of the universe, his world is completely different from Borges's. Mahfouz depicts the inner forces that are inherent in man to search for something better, a desire for redemption from the past. His characters are always in the presence of forces that go beyond the surface reality. They inhabit a world of spirit—either angelic or devilish. Throughout the constant conflict between the real characters and the magical ones, Mahfouz directs our attention to the inner world of the individual. He tries to dramatize the conflict between man and the devil, or between man and his fellowmen, or even between man and his own internal self. His characters goes through an inner journey to make it possible for man to know himself and to reach a higher wisdom. In depicting these kinds of conflict, Mahfouz is able to give his novel a unique Islamic flavour.

Yet despite differences—a transcendental faith in Mahfouz and a radical skepticism in Borges, both authors make an effort to overcome the narrowness of realism. Whereas Borges sees in imagination the real forces to transcend the limitation of our human condition, Mahfouz looks for unity in the apparent chaos of life and hence imparts meaning to it. If we look at the picture reproduced at the end of his work. We find that the fantastic dream has vanished and that our real world reemerges before our eyes; we recognize it but this time we look at it with new eyes, a religious and transcendental world. Yet both writers try to increase the range of human thought, the possibility of a fuller development for the human mind, a development which would enable man to perceive different dimensions of reality.

The originality of both Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz in contemporary world fiction lies in the revival of some of the resources of myth, and raising the novel above the level of realism. With Borges and Mahfouz, the world of fiction is revolutionized. Their technical innovation gives life to the element of magic in the novel which is not much more magical than reality itself.

Notes

¹ Lois Parkinson Zamora & Wendy B. Faris, ed. & introd., *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1995),5

² John Erickson, "Metoikoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi" in *Magic Realism: Theory, History, Community* . Ed. Zamora & Faris, 1995, 428

³ Zamra & Faris, 3

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights* (trans. Eliot Weinberger; New Directions Book, New York, 1984), 42

⁵ Ibid, 57

⁶ Ibid, 53

⁷ “Other Inquisitions” in Jaime Alazraki, *Jorge Luis Borges* (Columbia University Press, New York & London, 1971), 66

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In an interview with Naguib Mahfouz by Ghali Shukri (G. Shukri, *Naguib Mahfouz*, The State Information Service, 1988), 112

⁷ Angel Flores, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” in Zamora & Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1995), 107-8

⁷ Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of The Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 4

⁸ Ibid, 4

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