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A preliminary study about the fantasy genre in contemporary Arabic literature

Abstract

Contemporary Arabic literature is slowly approaching a local production of the “fantasy” genre through attempts that can be considered an important starting point for this new genre still being defined in the Arab world.

During the last decades the influence exerted by Western countries on the production of this literary genre, that reaches the Arab world around the twentieth century, has been evident mainly through the translations of Western fantasy novels. Among the various genres of fantasy novels which still enjoy international fame and have been translated into Arabic we find: *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien; *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–2005) by Raymond Richard Martin and *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) by Joanne Kathleen Rowling.

The delay in the introduction of the fantasy genre in the Arab countries has begun to be overcome in recent years, in fact many Arab authors have tried to write new fantasy novels.

The fantastic tradition of Arab Islamic civilization is also an important part of drawing on the creation of original fantasy works.

The study shows a general propensity of the contemporary Arab world to create a local fantasy, in which the Arab authors try to put the accent on the characteristic elements of Middle Eastern culture, though also drawing on the Western fantasy tradition.

Keywords

contemporary Arabic literature, fantasy genre, new literary genres, Arab writers.

Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed the first attempts at producing “fantasy”¹ literature in the Arabic language. In general, the main historical and political events that characterized the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had distanced Arab literature from the production of novels based on the fantastic; in fact Arab literature has focused on social and political issues.

However, today the Arab world is experimenting with an openness to fantasy through the translation of the most famous international fantasy works and through a slow autonomous process.

The fantasy genre in Arab literature is being defined and has not established itself as in the Western world, where it has already achieved great success, but this has not discouraged some Arab authors, who have begun to face the challenges posed by the experimentation of fantasy. Although Arab authors recognize a supremacy of the Western model, they have tried to open themselves to modernity of this literary genre through original works.

Reflections on the definition of the fantasy genre

Fantasy is a literary genre developed in western countries between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The fantasy genre is considered a part and sub-genre of the literary world of the fantastic. The roots of fantastic genre are easily discernible in the myth, a fantastic narrative based on events that can deviate significantly from reality.

Cvetan Todorov (1939–2017), Bulgarian philosopher and essayist of French citizenship, defines the literary genre of the fantastic «une hésitation du lecteur – a lecteur qui s’identifie au personnage principal – quant à la nature d’un événement étrange. Cette hésitation peut se résoudre soit pour ce qu’on admet que l’événement appartient à la réalité, soit pour ce qu’on décide qu’il est le fruit de l’imagination ou le résultat d’une illusion»². The fantastic is not simply the opposite of reality but has an important relationship with it: their contact causes what Todorov calls “hesitation” originated from what we recognize as familiar and what is new and unexpected. Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, mentioned above, is considered by many authors to be a starting point for defining fantasy.

During the second half of the 20th century, fantasy novels written for children and young adults were very successful. This was initially considered a frivolous type of entertainment, which cannot be categorized among the texts

¹ The term “fantasy” that indicates a specific contemporary literary genre is put in quotation marks here as it is mentioned for the first time, then the quotation marks will no longer be reused.

² Todorov, 1970: 165.

that are part of serious literature. However, many authors succeeded in making the fantasy novel a literary genre suitable for presenting social themes on which to reflect; this is why fantasy begins to be appreciated by the adult public.

Since 1950 this literary genre has centered on characters, elements, epochs and themes of the past. Particular attention is paid to the novels of the round table. «The Arthurian mythos continues to exert a strong influence in works as diverse as Guy Gavriel Kay's epic fantasy "The Fionavar Tapestry" [...] and Jane Yolen's "Sword of the Rightful King" (2003), in which a young boy named Gawen who pulls the sword from the stone is revealed to be Gwen, short for Gwenthwyvar, playfully suggesting the rightful place of women in Arthurian tradition as the real power behind the throne»³.

Among the main fantasy novels of the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the 2000s, those that still enjoy international fame today are the novels *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) by Joanne Kathleen Rowling and *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–2005), commonly known as "Game of Thrones" by Raymond Richard Martin.

Numerous authors have tried to give a definition of this new literary genre, with opinions and points of view often conflicting including certain characteristics and excluding others. Even today there is no complete and shared definition of the fantasy genre.

Trobia (2008) defines fantasy as a sub-genre of the fantastic and includes the presence of a supernatural world, non-real elements that follow the rules of the world from which they come and distort the conception of reality.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien elaborates a more specific definition of fantasy; the writer recognizes three main elements that can be identified in all fantasy novels: "recovery", "escape" and "consolation"⁴.

In fantasy, originally, two main strands emerge: "Sword and sorcery" and "Epic fantasy"; today the division is no longer so clear and the novels of contemporary authors are strongly contaminated by other genres such as science fiction and horror. The first expression was coined by the writer of fantasy and science fiction novels Leiber (1961)⁵ to describe tales of heroes, engaged in fighting supernatural characters such as magicians, witches, demons and spirits.

³ Reid, 2009: 68.

⁴ These considerations are collected in *On Fairy-Stories*, an essay by J.R.R. Tolkien which discusses the fairy-story as a literary form. It was initially written (and entitled simply "Fairy Stories") for presentation by Tolkien as the Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, on 8 March 1939. The publication of this article took place then in 1947 with the title *On Fairy Stories*.

⁵ The expression "sword and sorcery" was proposed by Fritz Leiber in the April 1961 issue of the *Ancalagon* magazine and taken up in the July 1961 issue by another magazine, *Amra*, in response to Michael Moorcock's request, which he had published in the previous issue by *Amra* an article asking for a name to define the type of stories written by Robert E. Howard.

The protagonists of the events are not the classic heroes endowed with altruism, idealism, courage, nobility and fortitude that we are used to know in classical literature, but they are barbarians, thieves, pirates, delinquents, mercenaries and ordinary people who fight for the own personal interest. An example of Sword and Sorcery is “Conan the Barbarian” by Robert Ervin Howard (1932).

The second category is called “Epic fantasy” or “High fantasy”, an expression coined by Lloyd Alexander in the essay *High Fantasy and Heroic Romance* (1971) and developed by Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer⁶. This denomination is attributed to the stories of heroes who face their adventures in a “Secondary World”⁷, that is a world created specifically for that story, without ties to the real world and with rules that are defined and learned only by living within it. The Epic fantasy is inspired by mythology and medieval life, taking up many features from the literary genre of the fairy tale and folklore of the most ancient populations⁸. The typical elements that we find inside the novels belonging to this vein are the romanticized Middle Ages, fairy kingdoms, magicians, heroes and the struggle between good and evil.

A classic example of Epic fantasy is *The Lord of the Rings* by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien who is considered the father of this genre, adding to it its own profound Christian Catholic ethics.

The fantasy genre in Arabic literature

The reasons for the delay in the creation and affirmation of the fantasy genre in the Arab world are plausibly to be found in the difficult historical, social and political events that have affected most Arab countries where literature is primarily perceived as an instrument of social and political struggle. In general, the works produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had the task of informing about the historical and political background of Arab world, leaving behind the literature of escape and entertainment.

The success that some Western fantasy works have received worldwide has recently reached even the Arab countries, where some Arab authors decided to return to translate works belonging to the literary genre of the fantastic that had long been shelved.

The translation became a tool to fill the lack of Arab-made fantasy works but, at the same time, the comparison with a typically Western literary product was not considered easy.

Among the various genres of fantasy novels, which still enjoy international fame and which have been translated and published in Arabic, mainly by Egyptian

⁶ Stableford 2005: 198.

⁷ Term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien in the aforementioned essay *Fairy Stories*, 1939.

⁸ Reid, 2009.

publishing houses, we find: *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien; *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–2011)⁹ by Raymond Richard Martin and *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) by Joanne Kathleen Rowling.

From a terminological point of view, fantasy literature is generally translated into Arabic الأدب الفانتازيا (*Al-'adab al-fāntāziyā*) although this term is often shared with science fiction literature. Barbaro (2013: 23) adds: «E' opportuno far riferimento alla terminologia utilizzata da Aḥmad Ḥālīd Tawfīq (1962) che, in un racconto della popolare serie tascabile “*Fāntāziya*”, individua ben venti specie differenti all'interno della fantascienza».

The science fiction genre, unlike the fantasy one, already has its own tradition of literary criticism in the contemporary Arab world. Beginning in the nineties (there is also in this case a strong delay respect to Western society) the first science fiction works by the Egyptian playwright Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987) began to be published. This new narrative genre becomes the subject of essays and articles that initiate a literary criticism process. Also for the science fiction genre one of the main antecedents is identifiable precisely in the fantastic and the marvelous genres of classical production¹⁰.

Regarding fantasy, this genre is only beginning to develop its own definition path in contemporary Arabic literature. Some fantastic elements can also be identified in the Egyptian mythology, full of symbols, talismans, myths and rituals, and in the Arab Muslim tradition. The supernatural has always played an important role in the literature of the pre-Islamic era, in which we find the so-called *ḡinn*¹¹ who continued to have a very important role even after the advent of Islam which recognizes for these creatures (good or bad) a world of its own, a dimension parallel to the human one.

Among the literary genres that continued to maintain fantastic elements during the *Nahḍa*¹² era we find the neo-*maqāmāt*, prose stories that presented a mixture of fantastic and realistic aspects, written in *sağ* with an elegant and refined style and an often ironic and mocking language.

We also find fantastic elements in the famous opera *The Thousand and One Nights*¹³, an inspirational text and a reference point for modern Arabic literature.

⁹ The last two novels with the title are coming out *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*.

¹⁰ Barbaro, 2013: 29.

¹¹ The word *ḡinn* has the same root as the word *maḡnūn* “who is inspired by *ḡinn*”, commonly used as “crazy”. In the Islamic tradition these invisible and capricious spirits are responsible for intruding into the daily life of men bringing chaos and impediment to rationality.

¹² This term refers to the movement of intellectual, cultural and literary awakening in the Arab world that took place in the nineteenth century. For further information: Camera d’Afflitto, 1998.

¹³ The oldest evidence of this work is a fragment from the 9th century; already in the 12th century a collection of the same title was widespread. The three main nucleuses are the stories set in Baghdad during the caliphate of Ḥārūn ar-Raṣīd, a series of tales of Indian origin and a line of narratives that concerns the events and the adventures of various characters in the city of Cairo in the Mamluk era.

One of the main precursors of both new literary genres is Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfīq (1962–2018), an Egyptian physicist and writer who has published many works of sci-fi and horror, influencing many contemporary Arab authors and bringing younger people closer to reading. Among the main works in which we find elements and fantastic characters we recall *ما وراء الطبيعة* (*Mā warā' aṭ-ṭabī'a* literally “What is beyond nature”), a series of 81 stories whose frame is made up of the story of memories and experiences of supernatural events faced by a retired Egyptian doctor, Rafa't 'Ismā'īl.

There are many stories of the author in which it is possible to trace fantasy features and characters. In this series, one of the stories titled *مصاص الدماء وأسطورة الرجل الذئب* (*Maṣāṣ ad-damā' wa 'aṣṭūrat ar-rağul ad-di'b* “Vampires and the legend of the werewolf”) tells the story of Dr. Rafa't 'Ismā'īl and the mummy of Count Dracula, returned to life to kill. In this first part of history we can find references to the three monotheistic religions and direct contact with the supernatural world. There is a probable case of possession of the spirit of Count Dracula in the body of the young Katharine, the daughter of Dr. Richard, friend of the protagonist. The second part of the story concerns the werewolves instead: the protagonist investigates about a possible werewolf who kills the inhabitants of a small village during the full moon. Many references to ancient legends about werewolves appear, including the red color of the eyes during mutation and the possibility of turning other men into wolves through a deep wound. The story *خائب النجوم* (*Ġānib an-nuğūm*, literally “The side of the stars”) addresses the theme of a world, different from the earthly one, in which all the most evil supernatural creatures reside. In this reality there are vampires, werewolves, demons, iety and other monstrous creatures. For Tawfīq the supernatural becomes a tool to scare and this is why he creates a “dark-fantasy”¹⁴ with the aim of surprising the audience of teenagers and young adults who are the main recipients of his works. Thanks to this author, a path of openness towards the experimentation of this new literary genre is starting, which is now beginning to receive the first successes among Arab readers.

It is important to highlight how in the Arab world, at the end of the twentieth century, a point of contact was established with contemporary fantasy literature starting from a literary subgenre marked by the mixture of elements that characterize two distinct genres defined in the western world “horror” and “fantasy”.

Among the major works of the 21st century that are constituting a particularly successful local fantasy literature are: *من حكايات الغول الأحمر الأخير* (*Min hikāyāt al-ğūl al-'aḥmar al-'aḥīr*, literally “From the tales of the last red ġūl”) by Muḥammad Al-Dawaḥlī an Egyptian pharmacist, translator and writer

¹⁴ It is considered a literary sub-genre that combines elements of horror novels with those that characterize the fantasy novel.

of novels. The work, which is categorized as “epic fantasy”, was published by the Egyptian publishing house *Dār al-kutub li-n-našr wa t-tawzīʿ* in 2011 and was not translated into other languages.

The setting of the novel takes up the historical Mameluke context of the thirteenth century and tells of the end of a kingdom following a failed revolution that brought chaos and injustice. The protagonist ‘Abd aš-Šahīd is a simple but clever man who joins a secret military group almost completely extinct. The young man thus becomes “الغول الأحمر الأخير” (*al-ġūl al-ʾaḥmar al-ʾaḥīr*, literally “The last red *ġūl*”) and tries to counter the coup d’état of a bloodthirsty tyrant. The protagonist has to face numerous trials, first of all the contempt of the family that reminds him of the shame of his father who escaped leaving everyone in the hands of the enemy. The novel presents numerous features of the so-called “epic fantasy” in which the fantastic elements are inserted into a typically medieval atmosphere consisting of kings, knights, tribes and an enemy to be defeated. In the title there is a reference to *ġūl* supernatural entities of the Islamic tradition, even if in this case it is the name of the secret group of which the protagonist becomes part.

The production of fantasy novels in the Arab world is not exclusively involving Egypt: between 2012 and 2014 a trilogy of the Egyptian-born writer ʾIslām ʾIdrīs was published by the Platinum Book publishing house (بوك بلاتينيوم) of Kuwait; also in this case the fruition is destined exclusively to an audience of Arabic speakers since there are no versions in other languages. The works are called: أسطورة العودة (*ʾAsṭūrat al-ʾawda*, “The legend of the return”), أسطورة الكاهن (*ʾAsṭūrat al-kāhin*, “The legend of the priest”) and أسطورة الرحيل (*ʾAsṭūrat ar-rahīl*, “The legend of the exodus”). The novels speak of the eternal struggle between good and evil in a world conceived by the author, in which more populations live in different kingdoms, empires, cities and villages. Most of the population that lives in this world has magical and mysterious origins and in ancient times had established ties with the human people, now severed for many generations. In particular, the novel focuses on the narration of a people called “الموريزور” (*Al-Mūrīzūr*) who loves nature and has the task of serving it through magical powers that derive from the earth itself.

The story begins with the attack by the people of “النازيل” (*an-Nāzīl*) consisting of deformed and savage creatures who had previously tried to attack humans with the aim of exterminating them, only to be repelled by the latter, thanks to a close alliance with the people of Al-Mūrīzūr. For some time, however, the humans had dissolved the alliance and found themselves alone without knowing how to deal with the renewed and imminent threat.

In addition to the people described above, there are other fantastic creatures that populate this enchanted world like magic horses, nymphs and dragons.

The second book introduces a series of battles involving the people of the humans and the tribes of an-Nāzīl which slowly destroy the cities of the

adversaries under the direct command of الكاهن الأسود (*al-kāhin al-'aswad*, “the black priest”) who wants revenge on the previous defeat at the hands of humans allied with Al-Mūrīzūr. An important element that we find in many Western fantasy novels and which is repeated in this second part of the trilogy is the prophecy: the Al-Mūrīzūr people can only defeat their enemies by returning to the ancient lands of origin where a hero will be born who will bear the victory and peace.

The third book consists of the conflicts between the two factions, we find other fantastic creatures used as combat tools by the “black priest” including giants, pygmies, traitors of the human faction and of Al-Mūrīzūr¹⁵.

One of the most recent attempts at fantasy reworking dates back to 2018, the year of publication of ريم *Rīm* (translated into English as “Reem: into the Unknown”) by the Egyptian author 'Aḥmad Ṣalāḥ al-Maḥdī. The novel was published by the Egyptian publisher al-Kanzī li-n-naṣr wa-l-tawzī' and has become very famous as a fantasy among literature for children and young adults; the novel presents a reworking in an Egyptian folk key of the dark fantasy novel *The Seventh Bride* by Kingfisher¹⁶ from 2015.

Reem is a blue-eyed blond girl forced to practice witchcraft by the evil grandmother entrusted to her following the death of her parents caused by an accident. Sayf meets a black cat and decides to look for the cat's previous mistress. It turns out that the legitimate owner of the cat is Reem who tells her sad story to Sayf.

The story is set in Cairo and refers to the previously mentioned “dark fantasy” style, to which the author 'Aḥmad Ṣalāḥ al-Maḥdī decides to add a typically Arabic folklore.

In an interview the author says he opted for the writing of a fantasy novel for young adults because “Teens in Egypt do not have many choices; most publishers tend to focus more on children's books or adult books, and some of them don't even acknowledge the category of Young Adults; that's why it's hard to publish novels in this category in Egypt. The Egyptian Pocket Novels¹⁷ were a great way to reach the teens, because the books were cheap and sold in the same places that sell school materials, but today they have no choice but to go to the Cairo International Book Fair, where there are always sales and even families go there with their kids to buy books”¹⁸. The young writer also reaffirms the importance of government action in order to provide schools with the possibility for students to approach this type of literature and at the same

¹⁵ For further information: Noura Al-Noman, 2015: <http://no-censorship.blogspot.com/2015/01/blog-post.html>.

¹⁶ T. Kingfisher is the pseudonym in which the author Ursula Vernon signs her novels.

¹⁷ روايات مصرية للجيب are a collection of stories and books by various Arab authors; it is also included in this work Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfiq.

¹⁸ ArabLit, 2018: <https://arablit.org/2018/09/01/ahmed-al-mahdi-on-writing-young-adult-literature-in-egypt/>.

time in order to lower the prices of books. Aḥmad Ṣalaḥ Al-Mahdī has decided to translate the book into English to get even closer to the Western world and increase the audience of young readers.

As many Arab authors claim, the fantasy genre in the Arab world is going through an experimental phase in which both the works of established writers, and those of young emerging authors are gradually providing material for this new literature. Many references to those elements that characterize the western fantasy genre continue to remain, nevertheless Arab authors often try to customize novels taken from the Western world, rewriting them with reinterpretations in an Arab-Islamic key.

On the other hand, Western fantasy production does not remain indifferent to a possible influence deriving from the Arab world in the literary field. Leaving aside the numerous fantasy works of the Western world that over the centuries have drawn inspiration from the grand collection “The Thousand and One Nights”, we can refer to a more recent literature that led to the creation of Western novels of Arabic-Islamic style. Among the most current works we find *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* written by the American author Saladin Ahmed (born in 1975 in America, of Arab origin) and published in 2012 by the publisher specializing in science fiction and fantasy DAW Books.

The novel is set in a fictional world, specifically in the city of Dhamsawaat, a land inhabited by *gūl* and *ḡinn*. The protagonist, Adoulla Makhslood is the last hunter of these creatures and, being ahead of his time, he decides to retire. Some supernatural and mysterious murders take place in Dhamsawaat and convince Abdoulla to solve this last case together with his aide Raseed, extremely agile with the sword and very rigid in moral convictions. Zamia Badawi, protector of her tribe, joins their adventure. She has failed to complete her task and has been expelled from her people; the girl has the power to assume the form of a lion and wants to avenge her father’s death. Suspicions of all the crimes lead to the “Falcon Prince” a cruel criminal hired by a vicious and unhappy caliph. The protagonists will try to defeat their enemies and save the city of Dhamsawaat.

This fantasy novel recalls the famous and always current opera *The Thousand and One Nights*; Frammartino (2016) highlights: «quello che le due opere hanno in comune è l’atmosfera torrida del deserto, la presenza di creature demoniache come i ghouls, il fascino di una metropoli orientale i cui abitanti pregano con regolarità il loro Dio ma al contempo si danno da fare per risolvere i problemi con le loro forze, la magia basata su invocazioni e preghiere così diversa dalle magie occidentali. Se per troppi anni il fantasy ha narrato, almeno nelle sue opere più note, storie che richiamano le atmosfere di un Medioevo europeo, Ahmed ha l’indubbio merito di portare al centro dell’attenzione un’ambientazione esotica troppo spesso trascurata»¹⁹. *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* reproduces

¹⁹ Frammartino, 2016: <https://www.fantasymagazine.it/25715/il-trono-della-luna-crescente>.

a medieval atmosphere that does not relegate the city of Dhamsawaat to an isolated and remote land but, on the contrary, inserts into it lively political and social clashes. The novel recounts not only the fight against the tyrant caliph and his assassin but also the conflict between the poor and the rich.

The result of this novel is therefore a perfect mixture of two realities, the western one from which derives a well-established tradition in the field of fantasy that has received and still today receives much success, especially among the youngest and the eastern one which provides a series of elements that contribute to creating a completely oriental fantasy novel. We find from the Arab world not only the atmosphere, the desert, the cardamom tea and the prayer that marks the daily life of the characters, but also typically oriental fantastic elements that we are not used to encounter in Western fantasy novels such as Eastern magic rituals, *ǧūl*, *ǧinn*. This intertwinement of cultures and traditions has led to Saladin Ahmed's great success as the novel has received numerous awards at the international level: in 2012 it won a first prize for the Nebula Awards²⁰ while in 2013 it returned among the "Best Novels" of the Hugo Awards²¹.

The production of Western fantasy has in recent years been an influence of the Eastern Arab world. Precisely for this reason the term "Muslim fiction" has been coined to describe the vast range of works by contemporary authors that cannot be categorized into a single nationality or ethnic group but that write for a mainly English-speaking audience and are, in most cases, immigrants or foreigners born in the West, often (but not always) Muslims.

Conclusion

The Arab-Islamic world is gradually getting used to experiment new literatures with good results and in recent years has started a slow and gradual process of delineation of an Arab fantasy genre that takes up some traits, in key modern, of that fantastic tradition belonging to the Arab-Islamic world of previous centuries. In the fantasy novels taken into consideration, the presence of western influence is evident but, at the same time, during the 21st century, the Arab authors of this new literature in definition have very often kept to the Arab tradition and its fantastic elements. In fact, we find references to Egyptian mythological creatures and to the myth of Osiris, elements taken from the

²⁰ Nebula Awards, 2012: <http://www.sfga.org/2013/02/2012-nebula-awards-nominees-announced/>.

²¹ Hugo Awards, 2013: <http://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history/2013-hugo-awards/>. Hugo Award is an award for science fiction and fantasy work awarded each year during the World Science Fiction Convention. It is often referred to as the "Hugo Prize" in homage to Hugo Gernsback, founder in 1926 of the magazine *Amazing Stories*, the first science fiction magazine in the world. During the congress the most voted author by the public among those presented wins the prize.

various epochs that characterize Arab-Islamic history from the *Ġāhiliyya* to the age of the Turks. The figure of the *ġinn* is particularly taken up with particular interest in his demonic and evil evolutions. Fantasy novels often refer to the world-famous opera *The Thousand and One Nights*, echoing its setting, style or structure.

In conclusion, Arab authors mix elements inspired by the Arab and Oriental fantastic tradition and by Western fantasy.

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