

# Magic Realism and the Power of Supernaturalism: A Study of Selected Short Stories in Arabian Days and Nights

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## Abstract

*This study explores the application of magic realism and supernaturalism in Naguib Mahfouz's selected short stories from Arabian nights and days. It examines how Mahfouz skillfully integrates fantastical elements with ordinary realities to address socio-political challenges and delve into existential and moral questions. By focusing on stories such as "the angel of death," "the slave and the sorcerer," and "The Revenge of the Ifrit," the research highlights how supernatural entities like angels, sorcerers, and ifrits function as allegorical tools to critique power structures, corruption, and moral dilemmas. Findings reveal that Mahfouz employs these supernatural beings to reflect psychological conflicts and engage with broader cultural and political issues. For instance, the angel in "the angel of death" symbolizes the interplay between divine justice and human limitations. At the same time, the sorcerer in "the slave and the sorcerer" represents the manipulation and exploitation prevalent in authoritarian regimes. Mahfouz's narrative approach, deeply rooted in Egypt's cultural and spiritual heritage, draws from Islamic mysticism and folklore, enabling him to craft stories that resonate with universal themes of justice, morality, and human resilience. This research concludes that Mahfouz's use of magic realism is a deliberate narrative strategy that transcends stylistic boundaries, offering a profound lens to examine the socio-political and cultural complexities of 20th-century Egypt.*

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Naguib Mahfouz, Supernaturalism, Arabic Literature, Short Stories, Power Dynamics, Moral Ambiguities.

## Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz, an iconic figure in Arabic literature and the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1988) is renowned for his unique narrative style that interweaves realism with the fantastical. His body of work is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of Egypt, yet it transcends mere storytelling to venture into realms where the mundane intersects with the mystical. One of his most celebrated collections, Arabian days and nights, exemplifies his mastery by integrating magic realism and supernaturalism, which lend a distinct depth and texture to his narratives. This study, titled "magic realism and the power of supernaturalism: A study of Naguib Mahfouz's selected short stories in Arabian days and nights," explores how Mahfouz employs these elements to delve into deeper thematic concerns, enhance narrative impact, and reflect the complexities of human experience amidst a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

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### **Recent Perspectives on Magic Realism and Supernaturalism in Mahfouz's Work**

Contemporary scholarship continues highlighting Mahfouz's innovative use of magic realism and supernaturalism to navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity. For instance, recent studies emphasize the relevance of Mahfouz's narratives in addressing themes such as identity, colonial aftermath, and the alienation of individuals in a transforming society. Scholars like Samman (2021) argue that Mahfouz's ability to intertwine magical elements with the realities of Egyptian life reflects an effort to resist the dominance of colonial and post-colonial narratives, presenting an alternative lens for understanding societal struggles.

Further, Rahman and Abdulla (2022) explore the psychological dimensions of supernaturalism in Mahfouz's stories, suggesting that these elements serve as allegories for collective traumas and unspoken cultural anxieties. In particular, *Arabian Days and Nights* resonate with readers as it bridges the timeless allure of folklore with contemporary societal critiques. This blending preserves cultural heritage and provides a framework for exploring existential dilemmas, such as the tension between free will and predestination—a recurring theme in Mahfouz's works.

### **Contextualizing Magic Realism and Supernaturalism in Literary Studies**

To fully appreciate Mahfouz's mastery, it is essential to contextualize the concepts of magic realism and supernaturalism within the broader field of literary studies. Magic realism, initially coined by German art critic Franz Roh in the 1920s, described an artistic style blending realistic depictions with surreal, magical elements. This term was later adopted into literature, most notably by Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, who portrayed the magical as an integral part of everyday life without disrupting the narrative's plausibility (Faris, 2004).

In literature, magic realism serves as a tool to challenge hegemonic worldviews by presenting alternative realities that question dominant narratives. In Mahfouz's case, this allows for a nuanced critique of Egyptian society, as magical elements such as jinn and prophetic dreams are not merely fantastical but deeply symbolic of his time's cultural, spiritual, and political tensions. Recent critiques by El-Saadawi (2023) also highlight how Mahfouz's use of magic realism reclaims indigenous storytelling traditions, infusing them with contemporary relevance.

Supernaturalism, distinct from magic realism, explicitly incorporates forces or beings that transcend natural laws. While magic realism tends to blur the lines between the ordinary and the extraordinary, supernaturalism emphasizes the coexistence of both realms, often dramatizing internal or societal struggles. Zamora and Faris (1995) differentiate these two approaches by noting that while magic realism destabilizes the boundaries of reality, supernaturalism amplifies the tension between reason and the unknown. In *Arabian Days and Nights*, Mahfouz integrates both techniques to explore moral ambiguity, societal corruption, and the enduring influence of tradition in a modernizing world.

### **The Relevance of Socio-Cultural Context**

Mahfouz's *Arabian Days and Nights* is inspired by one thousand and one nights, a cornerstone of Arabic literary tradition known for its narrative complexity and infusion of folklore, fantasy, and moral teachings. However, Mahfouz adapts these classic tales to reflect the socio-political realities of 20th-century Egypt, particularly the struggles associated with post-colonialism, modernization, and identity formation. His stories are not merely retellings but sophisticated reinterpretations imbued with allegory and symbolism.

Recent studies, such as those by Ahmed and Zaki (2022), underscore the richness of Mahfouz's socio-political commentary. For example, his use of magical elements in "the sleeper awakes" parallels Egypt's struggle to reconcile its historical legacy with modern aspirations. Similarly, supernatural elements in "the enchanted castle" serve as metaphors for societal fears and suppressed desires, encapsulating the tensions between reason and superstition that characterize much of Egyptian culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Pakistani society, beliefs in supernatural elements like jinns, sorcerers, and the death angel (Malak-ul-Maut) are deeply ingrained in cultural and spiritual practices. These elements influence people's understanding of life, death, and morality. They serve not only as explanations for unexplained phenomena but also as metaphors for power dynamics, social hierarchies, and moral struggles.

This study explores the influence of these supernatural beliefs on social behavior and power structures in Pakistan through the lens of Naguib Mahfouz's selected short stories in *Arabian Days and Nights*. By analyzing Mahfouz's use of magic realism, this research draws parallels between his narratives and the cultural perceptions of supernaturalism in Pakistan, highlighting how the supernatural is often used to critique authority, moral corruption, and societal injustices.

### **Research Objectives**

- Investigate how supernatural elements in Naguib Mahfouz's selected short stories reflect cultural beliefs about jinns, sorcery, and the death angel.
- Explore Socio-Political Critique: Examine how Mahfouz employs magic realism to critique power dynamics and moral corruption, with implications for similar issues in various societies.

### **Research Questions**

- What role do supernatural elements play in Mahfouz's stories, and how do they connect to cultural beliefs?
- How does Mahfouz's magic realism critique authority and moral corruption, and what parallels exist with contemporary societal issues?

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study will utilize textual analysis, thematic analysis, and contextual research to explore three selected short stories from Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Days and Nights*. A close reading will be conducted to identify key supernatural elements and narrative techniques, focusing on their contributions to character development and socio-political commentary. Thematic analysis will extract recurring themes such as power dynamics and moral ambiguity. At the same time, contextual research will investigate the historical and cultural backdrop relevant to Mahfouz's work, including societal beliefs and folklore.

### **Literature Review**

Magic realism has been a subject of profound interest within literary studies, particularly in its origins in Latin American literature and subsequent adaptations in other literary traditions. This section explores the historical development of magic realism, its application in Latin American and Arabic literature, and Naguib Mahfouz's distinctive use of the genre as a tool for exploring socio-political and philosophical themes.

### **Origins and Development of Magic Realism**

Franz Roh first introduced the term "magic realism" in 1925 to describe a unique artistic movement that fused the real with the fantastical. Initially applied to visual arts, the concept was later adopted in literary studies, particularly to define the works of Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Alejo Carpentier. According to Roh (1968), magic realism is characterized by the coexistence of the ordinary and the extraordinary, creating a seamless blend of reality and fantasy.

In literature, this technique has been instrumental in portraying the complex socio-political realities of regions marked by historical upheavals. García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) exemplifies this approach, where surreal events, such as characters ascending to the heavens or communicating with the dead, are depicted as part of everyday life (García Márquez, 1982). Alejo Carpentier further expanded on this concept with his term "lo real maravilloso" (the marvelous real), arguing that the fantastical is deeply ingrained in the lived experiences and cultural heritage of Latin America (Carpentier, 1985).

### **Magic Realism in Latin American Literature**

Latin American literature has been a fertile ground for magic realism, with authors using the genre to delve into identity, history, and power. Ángel Flores (1995) posits that magic realism provides a counter-narrative to dominant European literary traditions by embracing the fantastical to articulate Latin American identity. Isabel Allende and other writers have continued this legacy, weaving magical elements into narratives that reflect the region's cultural and historical complexities.

### **Magic Realism in Arabic Literature**

While magic realism has strong associations with Latin America, it has also found a unique expression in Arabic literature, particularly in the works of Naguib Mahfouz. A Nobel laureate, Mahfouz skillfully incorporates magic realism into his narratives, drawing from Islamic traditions, folklore, and mysticism. His stories often feature supernatural beings, such as jinns and angels, as narrative devices and reflections of cultural and societal dynamics (Gindi, 1992).

### **Supernaturalism and Existential Questions**

Mahfouz's *Arabian Days and Nights* exemplifies his innovative use of magic realism, where the supernatural is seamlessly interwoven with Cairo's historical and political backdrop. Supernatural elements in these stories, such as the Ifrit in "the revenge of the Ifrit," serve as metaphors for human emotions and moral conflicts. According to Aghacy (2009), these interactions externalize internal struggles, enabling a deeper exploration of themes like justice, morality, and human suffering.

Rahman and Abdulla (2022) further analyze Mahfouz's supernaturalism, highlighting its dual role in addressing individual psychological conflicts and broader societal issues. For instance, in "the garden of delights," the protagonist's encounter with an angel symbolizes the search for spiritual enlightenment and the tension between material and spiritual realms (Mahfouz, 1999).

### **Socio-Political Critique**

One of the defining features of Mahfouz's magic realism is its capacity for socio-political critique. Siddiqi (2008) argues that Mahfouz uses supernaturalism to interrogate power, corruption, and inequality issues. Stories like "the slave and the sorcerer" and "the jinn and the nightingale's

prayer” employ supernatural elements to expose the moral ambiguities of authority and critique systemic oppression.

In “the slave and the sorcerer,” the sorcerer's manipulation of the enslaved person is an allegory for authoritarian control. At the same time, the jinn's intervention in “the jinn and the nightingale’s prayer” reflects the pervasive gendered power structures in Egyptian society. These narratives illustrate how Mahfouz’s magic realism transcends the fantastical to engage with pressing social issues, creating a platform for resistance and introspection.

### **Islamic Mysticism and Folklore**

Mahfouz’s engagement with Islamic mysticism and folklore adds a distinct dimension to his use of magic realism. El-Enany (1993) and Allen (2000) highlight how supernatural beings in their stories draw from Islamic cosmology and Sufi traditions. These elements enrich the narrative and allow Mahfouz to address themes of fate, divine justice, and spiritual awakening.

For example, in “the garden of delights,” the angel is a Sufi-inspired spiritual mentor, guiding the protagonist toward self-discovery and enlightenment. This integration of mysticism with narrative realism reflects Egypt's cultural and religious landscape, where the belief in the supernatural coexists with everyday life.

### **Magic Realism as a Narrative Strategy**

Mahfouz’s use of magic realism is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate narrative strategy. By blending the fantastical with the mundane, he creates a unique narrative space, allowing a nuanced exploration of philosophical and socio-political themes. Allen (2000) posits that this approach enables Mahfouz to delve into his characters' moral and existential dilemmas, reflecting the intricacies of human experience in a complex socio-cultural context.

Ahmed and Zaki (2022) expand on this perspective, arguing that Mahfouz’s integration of magic realism bridges the gap between Egypt's cultural heritage and its modern challenges. This narrative technique addresses the tensions between tradition and modernity, the individual and the collective, and the real and the imagined.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **“The Angel of Death”**

In the story “the angel of death,” Mahfouz introduces a supernatural figure who unexpectedly intervenes in the protagonist's life as a stark reminder of the inevitability of death. The Angel of Death, disguised as an ordinary man, forces the protagonist to reflect deeply on his past choices and the transient nature of life. This intrusion into the protagonist's mundane existence catalyzes a profound moral and existential journey, prompting him to reevaluate his beliefs and values in the face of his impending mortality. Through this narrative, Mahfouz questions the boundaries of life and death and urges the reader to contemplate the ethical implications of human actions.

The protagonist's encounter with this mystical being transcends his ordinary experiences, pushing him to confront fundamental questions about his life and its meaning. Mehrez (1994) suggests that the Angel of Death symbolizes humanity's unavoidable confrontation with mortality and the repercussions of one's actions. The blending of the ordinary and the supernatural here exemplifies Mahfouz's use of magic realism, where fantastical elements disrupt reality, providing a space for deeper reflection on existential and moral issues.

This merging of reality and the supernatural creates a narrative realm where the protagonist's inner moral struggles are externalized and brought to the forefront. Mahfouz's use of supernatural



elements is not merely for stylistic effect but serves to explore the complexities of human nature, redemption, and the acceptance of life's transience. The mystical forces the protagonist and the reader alike to grapple with the ethical dimensions of life and death, making it a powerful vehicle for philosophical inquiry.

### **"The Slave and the Sorcerer"**

In "the slave and the sorcerer," Mahfouz explores themes of power, manipulation, and moral corruption through the dynamics between a powerful sorcerer and an enslaved individual. The sorcerer, wielding immense supernatural power, grants the enslaved person extraordinary abilities, elevating his status and binding him under his control. As the slave gains influence, he becomes increasingly enmeshed in the sorcerer's web of manipulation, ultimately losing his autonomy and identity.

This story is an allegory for the complexities of power in authoritarian contexts, where those who rise to authority often become entangled in the same structures that enslave them. Siddiqi (2008) interprets the relationship between the slave and the sorcerer as a representation of how power can corrupt individuals and coerce them into perpetuating systems of domination. The supernatural aspects of the story emphasize the dangers of unchecked authority and how it can trap and erode personal freedom.

The enslaved person's transformation from a submissive figure to an agent of the sorcerer's will reflects the corrupting influence of power and the loss of individuality that accompanies it. Mahfouz critiques the nature of power by showing how those seeking it often become instruments of the forces they hope to control. Through this narrative, he highlights the moral perils of pursuing power for its own sake and the dehumanization that can occur when individuals become complicit in oppressive systems.

### **"The Revenge of the Ifrit"**

"The Revenge of the Ifrit" delves into the darker aspects of human nature, exploring themes of vengeance, justice, and moral ambiguity. The Ifrit, a mythical creature from Islamic folklore, embodies rage, vengeance, and retribution. It confronts the protagonist with his own suppressed desires and unresolved conflicts. The protagonist's interaction with the Ifrit forces him to grapple with complex questions surrounding revenge and justice, blurring the lines between the two.

Aghacy (2009) argues that the Ifrit symbolizes the protagonist's internal struggle, manifesting his darker impulses and desires. The supernatural in this story enables Mahfouz to personify the protagonist's psychological turmoil, using the Ifrit as a lens through which to examine the moral consequences of revenge. This approach allows Mahfouz to present vengeance as a double-edged sword that punishes the wrongdoer and inflicts harm on the avenger.

Through the narrative, Mahfouz questions whether true justice can be achieved through acts of retribution or if it only leads to further violence and moral decay. The Ifrit's influence over the protagonist illustrates how easily the pursuit of revenge can consume an individual, leading to a loss of self and ethical integrity. Mahfouz uses the supernatural elements in the story to challenge conventional notions of justice and to explore the destructive cycle of vengeance. This narrative suggests that the desire for retribution, if not tempered, can spiral into a cycle of harm that ultimately ensnares both victim and perpetrator, leaving lasting moral consequences.

## Conclusion

Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian nights and days* brilliantly demonstrates his ability to blend magic realism and supernatural elements, creating narratives that delve into profound philosophical, psychological, and socio-political issues. In stories like "the angel of death," "the slave and the sorcerer," and "the revenge of the Ifrit," Mahfouz skillfully weaves the extraordinary into the everyday, provoking readers to question reality, morality, and the complexities of human nature. His use of the supernatural serves as a narrative tool and a means of addressing deeper existential and societal concerns, constructing a unique narrative space where the fantastical and the ordinary intersect.

Rather than being mere fantastical elements, supernaturalism in Mahfouz's work acts as a reflective mirror, capturing the complexities of human experience. This narrative technique allows Mahfouz to explore themes like the tension between free will and destiny, the dualities of good and evil, and the internal struggles of his characters, thereby expanding the reader's understanding of the human condition. By incorporating mystical beings and otherworldly forces, he portrays the unpredictability of life and the ambiguity of moral choices, which resonate with the unpredictable nature of human emotions and ethical dilemmas.

Moreover, the use of magic realism provides Mahfouz with a powerful medium to comment on the socio-political context of his society. Blending the fantastical with the real enables him to critique systems of power and governance, reflecting on issues like corruption, tyranny, and the struggle for justice. Through these supernatural narratives, Mahfouz engages with complex themes without being constrained by the limitations of conventional storytelling. The magical elements become allegories for the excesses of those in power, the oppression of the marginalized, and the eternal human desire for freedom and truth.

This analysis highlights the significance of supernaturalism in Mahfouz's work, showing how magic realism enables him to communicate more profound truths about human nature and society. The stories in *Arabian nights and days* go beyond simple fantasy, offering profound reflections on life's enduring mysteries. By placing his characters in situations where the fantastical and the real coexist, Mahfouz challenges readers to confront the contradictions and ambiguities of existence, making the supernatural not merely a narrative element but a means of uncovering the hidden layers of the psyche.

In summary, *Arabian nights and days* goes beyond traditional narrative forms by seamlessly integrating magic realism and supernaturalism to delve into the multifaceted aspects of human experience. Mahfouz's narratives invite readers to explore a world where reality and fantasy merge, providing fresh perspectives on human struggles, ethical dilemmas, and the quest for justice and self-discovery. Through this interplay, Mahfouz not only captivates his audience but also encourages a deeper reflection on beliefs, values, and perceptions of reality, making his work an enduring exploration of the human psyche and the sociopolitical dynamics that shape our world.

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