

Magical Realism as Feminist Discourse in Raja Alem's *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*

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Abstract

This article investigates Raja Alem's *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002) as a narrative that appropriates magical realist techniques in the service of the feminist project of critiquing patriarchal notions and practices in contemporary Saudi society. Although Alem is credited by Arab and international critics as a major Saudi writer of the fantastical, it is *Fatma* that largely establishes her specific reputation as a magical realist. This article provides a close reading and critical analysis substantiating Alem's extensive use of magical realist techniques. The fabulous and the real converge to create a mysterious universe wherein various times and spaces are merged together to question contemporary society's assumptions around gender, gender ideology, and feminist issues—a central theme in contemporary Saudi fiction—thereby giving voice to the marginalized female character depicted in *Fatma*.

Keywords: magical realism, fiction, Saudi literature, feminism, Raja Alem

1. Introduction

When Raja Alem appeared on the Saudi literary scene, few would have predicted that she would establish herself in less than two decades as a major contemporary Saudi woman writer. Both Arab readers and critics in the Arab world, when her works were published only in Arabic, received her style as complicated, detached, and somewhat incomprehensible. Nevertheless, Alem very quickly became a prominent literary figure in her own country and around the Arab world. Like many other Saudi writers, such as Abdulrahman Munif, Abdo Khal, & Yousef Al-Mohaimeed, who since the beginning of the 1980s have become increasingly experimental, Alem sought new modes of literary writing through which she could express her anxiety and frustration about some of the most pressing cultural issues in Saudi Arabia, particularly those related to women's status in society. Aiming to find an appropriate mode of writing to describe the reality of Saudi women, Alem adapts certain identifiable narrative techniques and strategies associated with magical realism, that is, originally, with Latin American writers in a magical realist mode such as Gabriel García Márquez & Isabel Allende, that are well suited to her objective—to challenge the existing reality of marginalized women in her country. Like many women writers who used magical realism as a key narrative mode to destabilize the normative patriarchal discourse in their societies and to enforce their feminist perspectives, Alem embraced this mode of writing for the same reasons. Indeed, like magical realist writers, such as García Márquez, who according to Simpkins, found conventional realist fiction "hardly satisfactory, much less an accurate presentation" (Simpkins, 1988, p. 143) of a reality they knew existed but was submerged by various cultural assumptions, patriarchal or otherwise, Alem takes magical realism to provide an appropriate means to perceiving truth that is somehow obscured by reality. As such, Alem's utilization of magical realism serves her objective of reclaiming the lost/submerged identity of the female in her society by giving Saudi women the social and psychological voice they have been denied. Alem's intention is to create a text in which she can reverse reality as we know it by creating unexpected or improbable elements intended to be perceived in a plain, pragmatic manner, and not as something mysterious or bewildering as for instance in fantasy novels. This is in keeping with Theo L. D'haen's argument that magical realist writing appropriates magic elements and introduces them into putatively realistic contexts not to duplicate the existing reality (as perceived by the dominant culture) but to create an alternative reality as a corrective (D'haen, 1995, p. 195). Brian McHale describes this alternative reality as a "dual ontology," a world in which the "the normal and the everyday" and "the paranormal" or disproportionate supernatural meet at a "contested boundary" that might

or might not be present for characters within the narrative but certainly exists for the reader (McHale, 1991, p. 73). Because “disproportion is part of our reality too,” magical realism, as Lori Chamberlain says, “works both within and against the aesthetics of realism” (Chamberlain, 1986, p. 17) to amplify the very conception of ‘experienced reality’ by presenting fictional worlds that are multiple, permeable, transformative, [and] animistic”—which might explain the multiple proliferation of magical realism in *Fatma* (Zamora, 1997, p. 79). The recognition of this power of magical realist writing leads straightforwardly to the formulation of a concept of *magical feminism*, a mode of writing used by female authors to subvert/counter oppressive ideologies used against women in phallogocentric cultures. Although according to Faris “works by women authors such as Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Laura Esquivel, [and others] have used magical realism in novels that are centred on women’s experience and women’s problems, there [was] no single definable feminist ideology that joins them” (Faris, 2004, p. 172), the term “magical feminism” was initially given currency by Patricia Hart, who, in her book on the works of Isabel Allende, defines it as “magical realism employed in a feminocentric work” (Hart, 1989, p. 30). The same definition was employed by Kimberley Ann Wells (Wells, 2002, p. 20), who, in her dissertation, refers to magical feminism as a writing practice that responds to particular feminist issues with the aim of subverting monolithic patriarchal hegemony. Similarly, Ricci-Jane Adams defines magical realism as “a hybrid of magical realism and feminism” that “operates within a larger form of feminism” (Adams, 2005). Possessing elements of magical realism, the magical feminist approach is a “mode of expression that provides the literary ground for significant cultural work” towards “patriarchal culture’s disenchantment with itself” (Faris, 2004, p. 4) and with the goal of freeing the prevailing culture from naturalized patriarchal notions. Magical feminism, like magical realism, interpolates an all-encompassing “magical” form based on the equal coexistence of ontological worldviews that might have been perceived as antithetical—the real and rational with the spiritual and magical, everyday occurrences and supernatural events. Magical feminist writing practice seeks to redress the patriarchal hierarchy imposed by the male-dominated cultural ideology, and to create a discourse for women’s empowerment that interrogates the basic realist mode of representation associated with patriarchal power relationships by showing its inadequacy to fully contest the inherent contradictions of patriarchal social realities.

The magical feminist approach clearly shows itself in Alem’s work *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002). Like Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1982) and Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* (*Como agua para chocolate*, 1989), *Fatma* can be thought of as an overtly feminist critique that employs magical realism as a mode of subversion, based on the mutual coexistence of magical and real elements in the fictional work, to challenge Alem’s patriarchal society and give voice to women who seek to break loose from social strictures and overcome gender discrimination in their education, economic relations, marriage and personal relationships. Alem’s interest in magic feminist poetics arises out of her advocacy for the same feminist issues that preoccupy many Saudi women writers, like Bdriyya l-Bishr, who attempt to redefine the restrictive patterns of life as they experience it. The novel can be read simply on the realistic level, narrating the story of an abused woman divorced from her husband after twenty years of loveless marriage. However, it constantly slips into another magically perceived mode of reality, an oeuvre colored by elements of the fabulous, the fantastic, and the mythic, thus emphasizing the binary opposition between fact and fiction, the material and the spiritual, and male and female.

2. Literature Review

It might be useful at this point to review some of the very few studies that have been conducted on *Fatma*. “A New Reading of the Serpent Myth in the Ancient and Modern Arab Culture” (2013), by Hend Al-Sudairy, uses a cultural-historical approach to explore Alem’s representation of *Fatma* as an embodiment of the mythic image of the “woman-serpent” by tracing how this image has developed and metamorphosed from the Pre-Islamic Arabia into modern times. Another, more recent work entitled “Fantasy, Mysticism, and Eroticism in Raja Alem’s *Fatma*” (2015), by Ghadir K. Zannoun, explores how Alem uses the erotic as an element central to the fantastic, one that enables women to connect to the world around them (the human, the natural, and the spiritual) and achieve self-actualization. Miriam Cooke briefly touches upon Alem’s work, placing it in a magical realist tradition, in her article “Dying to be Free: Wilderness Writing from Lebanon, Arabia, and Libya.” Cooke’s treatment, however, only addresses magical realist elements primarily pertaining to characterization (by comparing the solitary life of *Fatma* to those of two other characters, the Lebanese Evelyne Accad’s E. in *L’Excisée* (1982) and the Libyan Ibrahim Al-Kuni’s Asouf in *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990)). However, none of the abovementioned critical works attempted to explore Alem’s employment of magical realist elements, which she developed in elaborate detail. The present article closes the gap by investigating the elements of magical feminism, viewed as a subgenre of magical realism, as embedded in the themes, characters, and

structure of Alem's *Fatma*. The article demonstrates how, as a Saudi woman writer, Alem uses magical realism as a means to reconstruct reality and to criticize a spectrum of dismaying patriarchal notions and practices directed against women in the male-dominated Saudi culture. The mythical and historical motifs that Alem weaves together with these elements of magical realism will help the reader explore beyond the surface of a commonly perceived reality encouraging him to question the monolithic cultural structures. This study conceives *Fatma* within the literary context of postmodern and contemporary fiction, and focuses on the novel's treatment of issues of women's consciousness, selfhood, and quest for growth, knowledge and independence against the oppressive world dominated by men. This operation is carried out by harnessing the fantastical and the imagination as an alternative to "reality," which according to Alem, is increasingly "losing its former impact" (Reif, 2014). My analysis of Alem's use of magical realism to develop a feminist discourse will significantly contribute to the critical scholarship on magical feminism, and will also provide specific evidence of how the magical and the real coexist in the novel as Alem challenges the seemingly unfathomable realities in the married life of her titular female protagonist and of women in Saudi society-at-large. *Fatma*, as the study will demonstrate, opens up a network of interpretive spaces particularly suitable to subverting the patriarchal assumptions such as the ones held in Saudi society to create an alternative narrative of magic and power (Cooke, 2007, pp. 19-20). Alem's employment of magical realism is informed by its allegorical nature, which conjures up a homogeneous world of ideas and associations to evoke the readers' imagination that enable him to question the culturally imposed values set by the patriarchal center. She combines elements of realism with the supernatural and with local and universal myths and legends to break into the patriarchal cultural discourse and create a space simultaneously containing the tensions and biases of Saudi society at-large and the opposite and conflicting properties they represent, offering an occasion for Saudi women, who have often been repressed and denied expression of their true experiences and identities, to speak.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Heroic Female Agency

One of the most interesting strategies Alem uses to convey the coexistence of the magical and the real in the novel is her depiction of her character Fatma as a woman who, although real in a mundane sense, possesses supernatural powers that allow her achieve social agency and invalidate her society's patriarchal attitudes towards women. To this end, Alem presents a Fatma who serves as a metaphor for the fluid identities Saudi women must assume; she refuses to submit to the hostilities of her patriarchal society by assuming a succession of magical qualities that enable her to gain autonomous control of her life, thereby exerting agency on herself, making her both subject and object. The novel begins on the plane of the "real," recounting events in the everyday life of Fatma, a young, Arabian peasant girl living in Mecca who was left after her mother's death to the care of her father, Mansour, who handed her over to her husband, Sajir, an illiterate, cruel, and sadistic man. Receiving the news from her father that she is "old enough to get married," she "liked the idea of sudden drastic change" that would transform her from a "wild wicked plant into a human wife" (Alem, 2002, p. 13) and was "ready to become a bee in the hive" (Alem, 2002, p. 10). However, marrying Sajir, an abusive, brutal snake-handler, Fatma comes to realize the confinement of her new life and is forced to accept her husband's brutality and aloofness. "Fatma had never discussed the feeling between Sajir and herself [...]. She'd kept this particular chilliness to herself" (Alem, 2002, p. 51). Unable to tolerate her situation, she isolates herself from her married life and spends most of her time embroidering her black silk abaya, her most treasured possession, which she has inherited from her grandmother, Shumla. "She endured her hours of isolation by listening to the sound of the waves she was stitching in the black silk of her abaya" (Alem, 2002, p. 65).

Locked as she is in her small house of two rooms, one containing nothing more than an old bed and the other forbidden to her, Fatma becomes a caged woman, a decorative object isolated from the outside world. Living with her father, after her mother's death, who cannot serve as a connection to the world for her, because he has exercised his patriarchal privilege to deliver her to another man, Fatma lives alone inside her imagination, exerting her passion for embroidering her inherited "plain black abaya" the wearing of which renders her a "silky" feeling of "solitude" that symbolizes or distills the nature of her life as a whole at this point (Alem, 2002, p. 12), "isolated as though in a wasteland" (Cooke, 2007, p. 14). "Since she first became aware of her body," she had been longing for a warm relationship with her husband, like "a sprinkle of rain to shatter her shell and unleash her torrents of passion" (Alem, 2002, p. 13). However, Fatma discovers the stark reality that it is her "duty to accompany her husband" (Alem, 2002, p. 12) into a cold marriage relationship marked by "avoidance and neglect" (Alem, 2002, p. 68). She also comes to the realization that, placed into a form of physical isolation by her husband, she is prevented from engaging in social conversation with her neighbors eliminating the possibility of her discovering the causes of his former wives' deaths (Alem, 2002, pp. 40-41).

To conquer her overwhelming sense of boredom, loneliness, and defeat, Fatma decides to stand against all obstacles on her own terms. The change in her perception of herself begins with her reassessment of her life, which becomes necessary because she can no longer tolerate the distortions in self-image she has been programmed to accept. Realizing that something has been amiss in her life, she feels rebellion growing within her. She overtly but unexpectedly shifts from submissiveness to rebellion by determining to uncover the mystery surrounding her husband's abominably bizarre occupation as a snake handler, and his former wives' deaths by deciding to disobey him and open the Pandora's box that is the locked room in their house, which her husband warns her not to enter to protect himself from his wife's curiosity. At this point, the novel moves from a realistic story of a thwarted, psychologically crippling, and unfulfilling married life into a world of high adventure, danger and endurance, a fantastic/supernatural journey or, as Cooke calls it, "an alternative story of magic and power" (Cooke, 2007, p. 18). Fatma begins to undergo "a strange transformation/metamorphosis that exhibits an astonishingly improbable" blurring of various elements: animal and human, living and dead, physical and spiritual, and natural and supernatural. This transformation occurs when, "seven nights after Fatma first entered the room, a Great Horned Black [Snake] escape[s] from its cage and slithered into bed beside her, moving like Satan across her skin," and bites Fatma (Alem, 2002 p. 19), thus transferring its characteristics to her (as explained below).

Expecting her to die, Fatma's father prepares for her burial. Shockingly, however, "she was delirious with pleasure when she felt [the snake's] bite. The burning sensation shot deep inside her, and she passed out" thereafter (Alem, 2002, p. 19). This state "exposes her to another world and moves [her] into a space between the magical realm of demons and the reality of her husband's house, where it is never quite clear whether she is alive or dead" (Cooke, 2007, p. 14). Fatma's body then begins to assume extraordinary powers, as she is transformed into a "Marquezian figure" (Cooke, 2007, pp. 19-20), a "woman snake" who assumes supernatural attributes that transcend her oppressive conditions in a way that undercuts the configuration she has maintained in the "real":

Fatma's body began to change. She was able now to detect the heat of any approaching body. The dimmer the light happened to be, the more sensitive she was. She would sit still and let her sense locate every object in the house, itemizing them one by one, until finally she reached a state in which her body was able to pass through walls and travel some distance to locate things moving outside. Needless to say, she was also able to identify all the snakes in her husband's vast collection [...]. One night, a thin line of dark blue fringed with wings of silver showed down from her chin, rippled between her breasts, continued down the middle of her belly right through her navel, and sank out of sight in the dark triangle between her thighs. (Alem, 2002, pp. 35-37)

The source of the mysterious symptoms Fatma's body has been displaying in her snakebite now becomes apparent. The changes constitute her new reality, represented in her growing passion for the snakes, which besides the powers mentioned above also endows her with a healing function that allows her to transcend the conditions that perpetuate her marginalization. Fatma's metamorphosis enables her to act in ways she had not been previously capable of, and she transforms her house into a place of emotional independence and psychic growth. It is through her distinct physical transformation, the "other than human language she used," which "seemed a mixture of wind and slithering of snakes" (Alem, 2002, p. 92), and her nurturing capacity, that Fatma is able to gain control over her husband's snakes making him "astonished at the way the snakes responded to her voice", (Alem, 2002, pp. 26-27), Fatma begins to assume a psychological and spiritual autonomy that enables her to challenge the stereotypical definitions of an oppressed woman marginalized by her community. Ultimately, she unleashes the power within her as she, through the guidance and mentoring of Noor, the half-lion/half-human shadow flag holder of her girlhood drawn on the brass urn having the appearance of a snake with a lion's head (Alem, 2002, pp. 28-29), finds the courage to face the darkest and most secret corners of her mind and to question her socially circumscribed identity. Her newfound interest in reading furthers her sense of autonomy by encouraging her self-expression. "I would like to find a kingdom—the kingdom I lost when I turned sixteen, or before. I was a queen then, and the road of life went on forever. Will I ever be a queen again?" (Alem, 2002, p. 47). Because Fatma does not feel free to speak truthfully to a living soul, and because Noor does not subscribe to the patriarchal values of Fatma's society, she confides in him her unconventional thoughts and perceptions that she is unwilling to discuss with anyone. She thus challenges and subverts her husband, who forbade her to speak to anyone. Noor also can be a friend to Fatma, as her husband cannot. "She went along with his playful profundities without troubling herself about what he really had in mind. She wanted their conversation to go on and on, no matter where it led" (Alem, 2002, p. 53). Noor even helps soothe Fatma's worries that her husband may kill her, by shoring up her self-confidence. "The snakes are your subjects—and wise subjects they are—including me, your flag holder. It would take a revolution to topple you from your throne. Don't ever forget

that” (Alem, 2002, p. 51). Noor’s statement here, as Alem seems to indicate, is a pungent irony, since, of course, Fatma’s emancipation is dependent in important ways on Noor, who seems to be a male snake, easily read as phallic and by extension masculine especially when considering Fatma’s impregnation with the snake’s venom which lead to her metamorphosis.

Alem continues to weave Fatma’s odyssey through her encounters with various men and women she meets as she travels through her visionary quest into the history of ancient and modern Arabia. Her journey to the Netherworld takes on the cast of some classical myths, in which the hero, with the help of a magic potion, develops miraculous power, and under the guidance of an older psychopomp figure, must undergo several rites of passage, and must solve a succession of riddles through his/her journey. After being bitten by the snakes, Fatma pursues a mysterious journey to Najran in the southwest of the Arabian peninsula, still guided by Noor, who helps her discovering its local people and rituals of this city, as illustrated in Alem’s description of the dance that “captured a part of Fatma’s soul no dance had ever touched; it was more like a drug or magic potion than a dance. The dancers were floating on air. It seemed she could reach out and touch the spirits the old trainer was taming and hear the strange cries issuing from his flock, the sacred calls rippling across the passive dunes” (Alem, 2002 pp. 78-79).

Fatma reaches this conclusion on her long mythical journey, both figuratively, by acquiring knowledge, and physically, by avenging her husband’s ruthless violence to her person. As a result of her transformation, Fatma is not only able to confound Sajir’s learned expectations that Fatma, like all “those bitten by the Great Horned Black Snake[,] must die,” but she, ironically, “bring[s] a curse on his house” (Cooke, 2007, p. 19) by assuming her husband’s role of looking after his snakes, milking them and extracting their venom (Alem, 2002, p. 17). In this way, Alem attacks the patriarchal structure that denies women control over their own bodies; Fatma’s growing sense of power and progress toward self-definition, which she gains “by immersing herself in her exciting work with the snakes” (Alem, 2002, p. 51), is contrasted with Sajir’s realization of his waning power and his uncertainty about his ability to maintain control over his wife. His eventual realization that he can no longer do so in his repeated acts of sexual aggression against Fatma and his constant accusations that she suffers from mental delusions (Alem, 2002, p. 50). For Sajir, Fatma’s condition is a cause of “blind rage” and requires immediate action. He applies the therapeutic regiment of drowning Fatma in a water coffin, a treatment which involves an obvious magical element and which he is advised by a friend is the surest means of ending her weird behavior—advice representing the voice of male social authority. (The fact that a rational explanation for Fatma’s condition is not made explicit, as well as the fantastical nature of its treatment, intensifies the magical element in the novel.) Ultimately, Sajir is defeated, and rages to see his wife’s body, which rejects this form of treatment, floating like a “forbidden island in the middle of a sea spiked by thunderbolts. The spirit-shapes” of the snakes “hovered around their queen, watching and waiting for the slightest move on the part of the outside world [...]. Sajir was aware only of the blue line floating down the length of Fatma’s body [...]. The line seemed to contain blue demons, and even thunderbolts” (Alem, 2002, p. 64).

Disguised as a “snake shepherd boy,” pretending to be mute since gender segregation in this tribal settings is maintained as a cultural norm, and her woman’s voice will reveal her female identity, Fatma travels to the kingdom of snakes, with her female identity shielded in the shadows of the Netherworld, a place beyond the realm of ordinary human experience “where women do not live with men against their will” (Alem, 2002, p. 101). The real and the unreal are once again counterposed and fused here, as Fatma’s disguise as a boy is emblematic of the new transformation of her identity and sense of herself within her social context, since to become empowered is to become a boy. On the one hand, the disguise exposes the inherent practices of her patriarchal society, thereby indicating that Fatma’s allegedly symbolic muteness is a natural outcome of the long history of patriarchal tyranny. “Sajir told anyone who inquired that his helper boy was a mute, and somewhat touched in the head. This explanation kept anyone from trying to communicate with Fatma, and they were able to proceed without incident” (Alem, 2002, pp. 69-71). On the other hand, it also reveals how Fatma’s exterior guise also serves as a credible sign of her inner self, ready more than ever to face intolerable challenges such as the antagonistic patterns of her patriarchal society. “She had entered a world in which people worshiped her, a world of mesmerized onlookers who stared as if dimly aware of her true sex, and conscious, too, of the great animal lurking inside her, an animal always ready to pounce and paralyze” (Alem, 2002, p. 74).

During her travels, Fatma meets Prince Taray, a melancholic warrior-hero. Her encounter with Taray enables her to explore another unknown facet of her personality—to awaken herself to the sensuality of her body, and to overcome her feminine reserve. “Taray clamped his thighs around her. With one hand, he bound her hands behind her back; with the other, he caressed her braids. This was Fatma’s first true physical contact with anyone” (Alem, 2002, p. 81). Furthermore, Taray encourages Fatma to express thoughts and emotions that she had kept

hidden even from herself, and to be in command of her own body. “[Your] body belongs to no man [...]. I could rip your clothes off right now [...]. And see you as you really are. But I hold you in respect. Not because you’re a guest of the Prince—it’s your choice I respect. You have to come to me of your own free will” (Alem, 2002, p. 82).

The supernatural continues to pervade *Fatma* as she finds herself

in the company of the king, who was introducing her to his subjects. Their images were contained in an enormous jewel. Looking closely at the gem, she recognized the prisoners of the snake farm, all the serpents who had stood by her during her years of marriage. Each snake wore a crown, and all of them were rearing their heads over enormous mounds of treasures. They gazed back at Fatma with kind, knowing eyes. (Alem, 2002, p. 88)

Two sets of events simultaneously occur at the end of the narrative to announce the conclusion of the novel’s two plotlines, the realistic and the magical. On the magical plane, after seeming to take forever because of the many events she encountered on her supernatural journey to Najran, in which she “was beginning to feel free of her limitations” and in which she tried “to reach to [the] horrifying inferno within,” triggered by her awoken sensuality seeking adventures that will assert her power and agency (Alem, 2002, p. 59), Fatma returns home. There, she, Noor, and all the members of the reptile kingdom die in a dramatic scene, thus ending her journey of transformation as queen of the reptile world. On the realistic plane, Fatma, wishing to revolt against her husband, takes revenge on him in a climactic scene showing an ultimate act of defiance by severely injuring his male organ, after which he expels her from her house, a scene that brings the novel’s resolution. “After twenty years of being treated like a thing, trampled [...] of complete acquiescence [...] Fatma’s body”, after giving away her sense of inhibition, “made a decision on its own” to rebel against her husband Sajir and against the conventional value of submissiveness in the direction of resistance and revenge.

Her muscles convulsed, becoming hard as emerald, and gripped his sword. He drew back in shock but was unable to pull out. The soft feminine sinews had taken control. Ignoring Sajir’s curses and threats [...]. Let go of me! He hissed. He grabbed her thighs and punched them [...]. Sajir was crying [...]. But he, for some reason, was withering on the floor clutching his groin. (Alem, 2002, pp. 142-143)

This ending is triumphant and horrifying, positive and negative. On the one hand, it testifies to an alternative supernatural reality that challenges the patriarchy of the society in which Fatma lives. The fact that Fatma physically and psychologically hurts her husband dramatically proves the dramatic power and freedom she has gained from her new experiences. Defying her husband’s patriarchal power, she pursues her own logic in this final scene, and actualizes it as a type of existential freedom. This act of rebellion constitutes a form of action, in defiance of Sajir, that she had, perhaps been reluctant to take throughout the novel. As she clutches her thighs around Sajir’s “sword,” she also defeats his authoritative voice. Renouncing her submissive attitude forever, her new form of action—an action of un-abiding—turns aside the male action imposed on her by the patriarchy. On the other hand, Fatma had to pay the price for the consequences of her un-abiding action. Her expulsion from her marriage house is what leads to her dreadful end, thrown out into the “dark, endlessly dismal” streets of Mecca with “no idea where to go or what to do [...] no one to turn to” (Alem, 2002, p. 2), causing her to lose her security and social status as a married woman, even as a human being.

In both the realistic and magical plots, Alem begins by giving Fatma a wholeness and power that she had not previously been able to find in her life, establishing her as an archetypal representative of women as powerful beings against whom patriarchal notions are ineffectual and must be redefined. Some critics might claim that Fatma’s extraordinary power is shown in her ability to tame the snakes and to communicate with Noor, and that Noor, hazily identified by Alem as a spirit or jinni, is merely part of her overactive imagination and a reflection of her inability to make a conscious choice. It can be argued that the real and mundane elements of the novel are described as unreal and magical in ways that support Alem’s magic feminism project of re-writing the expectations of what a woman can do and be if she has power and agency. Unlike many depictions in traditional feminist literature, in which the woman has very little real power, Fatma is presented as having, or gaining, the power to influence the world around her.

3.2 *Magical Objects and Creatures*

As part of her strategy to create an “irreducible element of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (Faris, 1995, p. 167) and to help Fatma cope with her stimulus-deprived domestic environment, Alem introduces magical creatures, an element typically found in magical feminist texts. Noor, also identified as a shadowy lion-snake (Alem, 2002, p. 46), is an example of such a creature, whose name in Arabic can be given to both male or female, suggests “light” as opposed to darkness, who similar to Fatma,

possesses supernatural powers. He appears to Fatma in the form of a “lion-snake figurine, half human and half animal, carved in metal in her father’s house” (Cooke, 2007, p. 20). The images of “the Seven Heavens, their skies inlaid with silver knights dancing and fighting in various poses,” carved on the figurine become increasingly compelling as she gradually becomes intimate with its designs, which have been Fatma’s only friends “all through her girlhood and adolescence [...] they were the embodiment of power” (Alem, 2002, pp. 11-12). It becomes clearer to Fatma in her magical journey, the point in time at which she can interact with the figure as it alerts her to the alternative reality it provides (Alem, 2002, p. 28). At this point, Fatma’s language becomes bolder; she begins “to talk freely about her doubts and fears and puzzlement” (Alem, 2002, p. 31). Quoting Donald A. Mackenzi in his book *Myths of Babylonia and Assyria* (2005), Al-Sudairy states that Fatma’s mutual interaction with this priest-like, man-lion figure evokes an ancient trace of Babylonian mythology. Noor, supporting Fatma and opening up new horizons to her so that she can escape her limited reality, plays the role of “Nadushu-namir, whom the gods sent to help Ishtar and has a power to go through Hades’ seven gates to save the goddess” (Al-Sudairy, 2013, p. 58). The connection between Noor and Fatma, found in the recurrent images of pre-Islamic mythological past is significant in revealing the deep and unfathomable layers of collective human experiences and accumulative knowledge.

Noor is not entirely inhuman, and is endowed with human characteristics such as devotion, tenderness, and moral integrity, which Fatma’s husband Sajir largely lacks. Noor accompanies Fatma throughout the novel, guiding her through the hardships she faces in her real world and helping her complete her transition to the magical world. Noor, “pleased to keep appearing to Fatma,” “spoke with her regularly about her worries and fears,” “doubts and puzzlements” (Alem, 2002, pp. 30-31). As her companion, Noor not only teaches Fatma the importance of reading as a powerful source of knowledge, introducing her to various important books in Arab culture such as *Book of Dreams* by Ibn Serene and the *Book of the Soul* by Ibn al-Qaem but also becomes her confidante, to whom she addresses thorny philosophical questions. Although the way her questions are phrased embodies stereotypical characteristics of women’s language—tentative, cooperative and non-competitive—at the same time they also reveal a growing strength, subversiveness, and single-mindedness. “Do you think there’s even a small chance [...] that our souls could ask for a way out of the body?” (Alem, 2002, p. 56). Although described in many instances in the novel as a shadow, Noor, as his name suggests helps Fatma transcend “the darkness in herself, a darkness as dark as her friend on the wall” (Alem, 2002, p. 42) by connecting her with divine light through knowledge and experience. Refusing that Fatma is comprehended “according to the cages people invent when they set limits on themselves. Man, woman. Old, young. Human, genie [...]” (Alem, 2002, p. 42), Noor encourages Fatma to meet the Guardian of Visions, the angel who “works day and night to understand the puzzling signs and symbols in our fate-lines” (Alem, 2002, p. 58) and to relocate her identity in another order of being, in which there is no barrier between sexes, the soul. “The closer we can get our bodies to the light, the nearer they come to immortality. What we must do is get our bodies to our temples, to a state of transparency” (Alem, 2002, p. 57). Noor views Fatma as most befitting in this quest. “I see you as the ideal companion on any road [...]. To heaven, to hell, to pleasure or pain. I’d love to escort you, my queen, whichever way you choose to go” (Alem, 2002, p. 56).

Through her magical journey, Fatma is associated with another magical figure: her grandmother Shumla, also identified as the “Queen of Longevity” (Alem, 2002, p. 6). Endowed with supernatural powers, Shumla, like Noor, becomes a source of imaginative power for Fatma: although human, she is presented as a legendary “mistress of magic” who had lived in the desert sufficiently long to “witness the passing of every man in the family”, and who for years had kept “Ezrael, the angel of death, under [her] bed (Alem, 2002, pp. 6-7). Shumla is also known by members of her community for her mysterious relationship with Satan, which began when one day he “invited her to his throne room,” ordered his demons to tie her up, and “held her captive for three years,” during which she bore him a child (Alem, 2002, p. 43). Shumla was then generously rewarded by Satan, who “allowed [her] to fight one last battle with her kidnapper. He permitted her to overpower him and escape back to her tribe” (Alem, 2002, p. 44).

Shumla’s story was immortalized in “drawings on all the rock faces of the mountains,” which illustrated Satan in “weird poses”: overpowered by Shumla’s “cryptic verses” and the “sharpness of her wit” and paying homage to her, or “contorted in struggle with her, ‘forcing himself on her’ and ‘planting his seed in her womb” (Alem, 2002, p. 43). These images, drawn by agents of Satan, also depict

the happy couple, reconciled, embracing under waterfalls of satin which burst into flames, concluding the story with the most charming spectacle [...] ‘the subsequent birth of their offspring [...] a green, feathery infant [...] a mighty spirit, born of Satan’s indomitable passion and Shumla’s equally indomitable inner strength.” (Alem, 2002, p. 44)

It is interesting to note that these drawings, which relate the magical story of Fatma's grandmother, are the same ones that Fatma embroiders on her abaya. They thus not only become representations of Fatma's desire to escape from her reality but also a means to depict the novel's transition from the real to the magical plane. Moreover, the story of Shumla's marriage to Satan who in Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious traditions is the origin of all evil, implicitly draws reference to Satan and Eve as the root cause of Adam's expulsion from Eden, and acknowledges the longstanding association between women and evil, in that the sexual union between them raises the important question of the logic behind implicating a woman as the mother of all evil. However, in the novel's subversive way, their marriage can also stand as a metaphor for the equal status of male and female, in this case equal in their propensity/inclination towards evil as part of their human nature.

From Shumla, Fatma learns all about intimate matters relating to a woman's married life, even "the most sacred rules of cleanliness." "If you think about what kind of smells your lover likes—not to mention other activities—you'll learn a few things that can be weapons for you" (Alem, 2002, p. 8). Shumla passes her knowledge, experience about men, as well as her longevity to her granddaughter, teaching her how to transcend the illegitimate barriers of gender. Although Shumla in her youth enjoyed a beauty and charm that made "[a]ll men dream about her, dream about taming her body and soul, and in their dreams—and Shumla's dreams too—she was a civet cat, a wild, musky mongoose" (Alem, 2002, p. 32), she is presented in the present as a woman who embodies the connection between the world of the real and the spiritual. As a spiritual healer, Shumla used "her potions and secret formulas" (Alem, 2002, p. 9) to treat both physical and spiritual illness in the men and women of her community. "Whenever there was a problem with someone's love life, the old dowager would sit down and mix her magical leaves and powders into a strange-smelling dough. Her potions never failed to purify the heart and other vital organs" (Alem, 2002, p. 8).

3.3 Configuration of Time and Space

In addition to the use of magical objects and creatures, such as Noor and Shumla, mentioned above, *Fatma* relies heavily on interweaving elements of time and space as part of the interplay of the real and the magical. What makes the novel even more improbable is Alem's creation of a universe composed of various times and spaces. *Fatma*, like many magical realist texts, reveals to the reader a world in which patriarchal power identities, such as those represented by Fatma's father and her husband, Sajir, fail to stand in the face of the overwhelming evidence of the ultimate, transcendent truth of time and space. Just as Fatma's body can change into different guises, so she explores her identity in two conflicting spaces that move between her outer, real, domestic life and her inner mental or imaginary world in her husband's house, which, located in Mecca, a sacred city known for its rich historical and spiritual heritage in association with the Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to this holy land, and the multiple cultural identities they introduce to the city, contributes immensely to the richness of Fatma's character. The house remains a space of confinement and humiliation that dominates Fatma's life, a space in which she is held hostage, "treated like a thing" (Alem, 2002, p. 4), and overwhelmed by her husband's abusive character and bizarre occupation as a snake handler. In other words, on the real plane, Fatma's house is a site of intimate terror, sadism, and violence, very much like a prison, in which wives must be kept forever with its suffocating atmosphere, which reflects Alem's view of marriage in her society.

However, as Cooke states, once she "has entered the barzakh of becoming-snake, Fatma becomes a sorcerer who lives on the margins of places, between places" (Cooke, 2007, p. 19). The outer space of her reality, the space of her metamorphosis as distinct from the inner space of her psychological journey, which is the site of Fatma's search for peace of mind from the bondage of ignorance and from restrictions imposed by her patriarchal society, confront her cultural heritage together with and from the perspective of her identity as a woman (and vice versa). This inner space, in which incredible plots unfold and bizarre figures normally found only in fairy stories appear and evince an ability to perceive the outer world, enables her to achieve freedom of choice and action and to act from conviction and internal harmony. Thus, in this inner imaginary space, Fatma travels from Mecca, abandoning her cage-like house with "two rooms, one of which she was forbidden to enter" (Alem, 2002, p. 15), to Najran, "her far away homeland" (Alem, 2002, p. 3), a city traditionally known as "the kingdom of snakes, the ancient walled city that had appeared to her in her dream when she was only ten years old" (Alem, 2002, pp. 68-69). She abandons the oppressive urban environment to achieve an authentic experience of the tribal communities and people such as, Prince Taray, and Balkees, the Yami girl she meets in Najran, and to visit places that open up unto infinity beyond her domestic confinement such as the city of Najran, the River Lar, and Sarwats Mountain. The journey "introduced Fatma to life, to roads she'd never dreamed of crossing and faces she'd never imagined existed" (Alem, 2002, p. 73), as is evident in the second part of the novel when Fatma travels one summer with Sajir to showcase his rare snake collection to "a prince in the southwest" (Alem, 2002, p. 68). To serve as the archetypal figure Alem wishes her to be, Fatma must be liberated from her mundane

“real” circumstances and gain access to a cultural heritage through which she can learn more about herself. Far away from her house in Mecca, Fatma loses touch with reality and enters a timeless world in which she is, like her grandmother Shumla, linked with Mother Tree (Alem, 2002, p. 132), a world that enables her to become cognizant of her true physical and spiritual powers. In Fatma’s travel to Najran, the freedom she enjoys in the mountains, in contrast to her limitations in her house in Mecca, is made clear. “Traveling with the snakes had one great advantage: Sajir left [her] alone. He stuck to his plan of disguising her as a boy, and apparently came to think of her as one. He also seemed to have put aside his anger and determination to destroy her, body and soul” (Alem, 2002, p. 90). Fatma not only “[eats] her first meal [with men] in public” (Alem, 2002, p. 75) and mixes with males in an unprecedented way but also enjoys a new and unknown world that culminates in her brief encounter with Prince Taray, who, standing in sharp contrast to her husband Sajir, offers the ideal image of a romantic lover. In the Kingdom of Najran, in the presence of Taray, Fatma’s “dead embers” are “brought to life,” for “[i]n the desert, love is honoured. All you have to say is yes, and everyone will bless our union” (Alem, 2002, p. 91). Alem’s presentation of this form of social transgression in an open physical space, that contrasts with her former confinement, the desert, adds to the tension between the novel’s contrasting spaces, making it exceed the confining limits of Fatma’s experience. Offering a stark contrast to the space of Mecca, with the overriding power of its culture and taboos that work to marginalize Fatma’s identity, the natural world of the Kingdom of Najran, with its deserts, rivers, and mountains, in fact make her appear as an immortal, a being spun of finer stuff:

Fatma felt trapped in cycles of never-ending life, falling into them. She became a tunnel through which the energy of the universe flowed, and the tunnel became a flute, and the flute began singing magical, intoxicating music. Whatever the music touched turned to light, and everything that was solid flew off into space. She was in a world of light and the light was growing lighter. The energy, the light, and the music were a language. The language comprised the keys to the universe and Fatma was the language. (Alem, 2002, p. 96)

Alem’s representation of time in *Fatma* is another characteristic element of her magical feminism. The first half of the novel, occurring in Mecca, follows a time frame that is true to reality, the better to describe a woman’s traditional married life organized around the stereotypical mechanical and domestic activities in which Fatma involves herself. She spends most of her time either sewing—“She was about to inspect the fabric more closely when she realized she had been left alone again. It was her most familiar feeling, this silky solitude; it was her life” (Alem, 2002, p. 12)—or observing her husband, Sajir, as he prepares food for the snakes. “Married afternoons: Fatma sat watching her handsome, ominously distracted husband. Sajir spent most of his time soaking dead rats in a pail of water” (Alem, 2002, p. 17). The second half of the novel, by contrast, abandons the limitations of realistic presentation to capture the extraordinary adventures and experiences Fatma undergoes during her travels to and in Najran. The story becomes achronological, circular, eternal, blurring between the natural and the supernatural, the living and the dead, and past and present. “Standing in a drizzle of pure musk, Fatma felt drunk with it all. Suddenly, as her eyes wandered over the grassy fields, she was able to see through things, through the white mountains and trees, the white earth, through time itself” (Alem, 2002, p. 89). Another instance of this magical temporal blurring occurs in Fatma’s encounter with the old poet Ibn Madhy, who had been in love with her grandmother Shumla, Queen of Long Life, and her travels with him in a dreamlike journey. In this scene, Ibn Madhy introduces Fatma to the Feathered Green One, a king of whom Fatma is a descendent; he takes her and the readers back to prehistoric times, bringing to the fore collective memories of past glory of women status as goddesses possessing powers that transcend the traditional notion of the “feminine”.

These stories create two juxtaposed timeframes and by extension ideologies, which extend both inside and outside the texts to which Fatma is introduced, the *Book of Dreams* and the *Book of the Soul*, mentioned above, which gradually interlace in a way that, while guiding the mental and psychological state of the protagonist, also makes the reader constantly negotiate the conflicting perceptions of reality that respectively emerge from them. The supernatural events and characters presented in the mythical stories told by Ibn Madhy to Fatma come apparently to merge into or manifest as part of the real.

When the soldiers left, the stones, so dense and rough at night, became transparent and revealed hidden mirrors which seemed, by means of strange letters, to show time in reverse. The writing was vivid, alive; the script pulsed like most exquisite snakes, swelling the rocks like flooding streams and coiling in circles that somehow completed the links between present, past and future. (Alem, 2002, p. 96)

The nature of *Fatma*’s narrative structure is inseparably linked to the manipulation of time as a magical feminist representative strategy in the novel. The “real” narrative strand of Fatma’s life in Mecca with Sajir assumes an outward movement, while the “magical” strand of her journey to Najran assumes an inward movement. These

alternating outward and inward movements in the novel are also reflected in the reverse chronological order of the narrative, which begins with Fatma's real story in the novel's present time and then flashes back to her much younger years to recount the strands of her real and magical story. The novel opens with a brief chapter in which Sajir shoves Fatma down the steps in front of his house and demands the porter take her away: "This woman is a curse! To make his point to the porter, he grabbed Fatma's arm and twisted it sharply. 'Don't you ever let her into this building again. Never!'" (Alem, 2002, p. 1). At this point, the reasons Sajir attacks Fatma might be completely unknown to us due to lack of context, but as the novel progresses they are illuminated, and by the end, a motivation for Sajir's action has been constructed. In this sense, the novel begins in a "now" and then moves back and proceeds forward till we arrive back at the "now". This backwards hop is significant to the novel's subversive project, because it makes both the characters and the reader witnesses to Sajir's ensuing violence towards Fatma and also provides an intensely ironic meditation on the nature of some traditional marriages in her society, commonly devoid of love and intimacy.

3.4 *Storytelling and Narrative Voice*

Alem sets her magic feminist novel within the mythic storytelling framework to allow Fatma to present facets of her character—the logical, the spiritual, and the instinctual—that have been suppressed and trivialized by patriarchal domination. Through its presentation of thematic and symbolic elements the novel juxtaposes what is conceived as conventional/natural/real against the apparently unnatural/supernatural/fantastic. The story telling mode challenges traditional realistic narrative norms by erasing the boundaries between the living and the dead, past and present, revealing, as it were, a journey guided more by a desire for self-knowledge than by any emergent alternative power structure or commitment to such. In other words, Alem uses the tradition of oral storytelling as a feminist strategy to redefine Fatma's world and support her in transcending her real circumstances, personal and social, to achieve a magical or even mythic power and agency.

In so doing, Alem breaks the aesthetic spell of the novel's realistic technique by inserting non-fictional characters into the text. One example is Noor's story about Fatma's grandmother Shumla, who was pursued by "a pilgrim guide named King Molkshah the Khawarizme" (Alem, 2002, p. 32). Flying on her horse, Shumla

shed her clothes until she showed her true body, a hybrid nymph and mongoose. She threw herself against his chest and reached behind him, clutching his spine, jolting him with ecstasy until he fainted with pleasure. Her mongoose cry ripped the storm like lightning. It was at this time that your grandmother Shumla took to wandering. Her rivals among the womenfolk conspired to send her into exile. (Alem, 2002, p. 33)

Akin to Shahrazad's stories in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, Noor tells Fatma stories of how Shumla was the desire and dream of every man in her tribe despite her mysterious adventures and sudden disappearances, which were "enough to ruin any woman's reputation" (Alem, 2002, p. 43).

Telling these nested stories also functions as a self-conscious act of narration dissociating the reader from the reality of the text to introduce several other characters—mythic gods and goddesses such as Venus and angels such as Ezrael and Uriel—who also play key roles in the overall narrative through their participation in the "magical" strand. The angel of death, for instance, is brought into the narrative so that he can equate Fatma's life in Sajir's house with silence and death. Texts written by famous Muslim scholars, such as the *Book of Dreams* and the *Book of the Soul* are also called upon in the conversation between by Noor and Fatma as part of his desire strategy to enlighten her. "Noor brought out the Book of the Soul and began to read: 'The soul, the queen of light, is reluctant to leave its white pastures; it fights to stay where it is. Winged shepherds watch over it, gently but firmly guiding it'" (Alem, 2002, p. 55). Storytelling with intellectual commentary and discussion is presented in many places in the novel as an alternative to didactic patriarchal discourse that can reveal what might be kept hidden or unexpressed in writing, which more often than not embodies patterns that the patriarchal order ignores or dismisses as insignificant or even rejects all together. This emphasis on the act of speaking rather than writing in the novel draws attention to Fatma's alienation from not only "real" action but also writing and intellectual life. Thus, *Fatma* problematizes the relationship between woman and language, a crucial area of feminist writing, which often seeks innovative narrative approaches to escape those imposed by the oppressive patriarchal order.

3.5 *Folk and Mythic Imagination*

In *Fatma*, as in many magical feminist novels, the space between magic and reality is created through the grounding of the novel's events in mythic and folk registers. To impart the sense that something ineffable (at least, in ordinary language) and mystical is occurring in the text, Alem uses mythical symbols and allusion to infuse a sense of mystery and wonder into the novel. The image of snakes is one such mythic motif. With roots

in mythology and folktales, this image has both benevolent and dangerous aspects, and in *Fatma* too, the snake is symbolically both a regenerative and a destructive force, representing the danger inherent in Fatma's self-expression in a patriarchal society, and her transformation into a new liberated self after being bitten by the snake. Although in some mythologies snakes appear evil, tricky and "destructive, having the negative power of [their] venom" (Alban, 2003, p. 67), in other cultures like India and ancient Egypt, they are depicted as good, truthful, and benevolent.

The snake is employed in Alem's novel for its longstanding association with women, an association that reflects how females have been perceived by various societies as dangerous creatures that must be shut off and isolated. This negative link between women and snakes is also often extended into a "triangular" relationship between women, snakes, and the Devil, embodied in women's and snakes' seductive or hypnotic abilities as manifested in their sinuous, curving, sensuous bodies and movements. In Europe, these qualities and relations are found in stories from the Old Testament and in many Renaissance paintings that present a serpent with a woman's head and the lower body of a snake to show the close affinity between the two, suggesting that women either collaborate with evil or are themselves the personification of evil if not its own personification" (Al-Sudairy, 2013, p. 55).

However, keeping in mind Alem's intent to use Fatma to incite subversive feminist thought, one should not forget that the association between her and snakes, with their ancient meaning as guardians of female powers and mysteries, also has an important benevolent component. From the first chapters, Alem establishes snakes as a central symbol for Fatma's (re)birth as a new self. The strong connection Fatma develops with Sajir's snakes bespeaks their archetypal significance as symbols associated with cosmic feminine energy and the female role as font of life (Campbell, 1977, p. 56). Snakes are present in the portraits of several female goddesses from different ancient civilizations, demonstrating their connection with the snakes. Examples include the "Babylonian Ishtar wearing a crown with a two-headed serpent," the Egyptian goddess Isis sitting on a throne of a giant cobra in the Pharaonic era, and Metaneira, the Greek queen, wife of king Celeus, handed the first wheat spike by Demeter, the goddess of harvest, with a serpent rising behind her (Al-Sudairy, 2013, p. 56). Like women, snakes represent a "life force that has always been considered a divine animal in ancient religions. Its energy as it spiralled and coiled mak[e] it a powerful sign of regeneration" (Alban, 2003, p. 67) facilitating rebirth, as seen when Fatma in her first moments after being bitten by the snake feels "delirious with pleasure [as t]he burning sensation shot deep inside her" (Alem, 2002, p. 19).

This strong connection, shown in several instances in Alem's novel, reveals how the snakes unite their power with Fatma's, together, and thus expresses the power and autonomy she gains by learning how to tame the large herd of snakes in her husband's house and then her final triumph in taming her husband at the end of the novel. Standing as a mythic phallic symbol, the snake also becomes a Cupid that awakens Fatma to the force of Eros—an idea vividly presented in the scene in which she lies in the waterbed with the spirits of snakes floating around her after being bitten by the Great Horned Black Snake. In this scene, Sajir watches Fatma rolling around in the water as though in an orgiastic union reaching out for eternity, as "the blue line float[s] down the length of Fatma's body, writhing right before his eyes, groping blindly along her limbs. The line seemed to contain blue demons and even some thunderbolts" (Alem, 2002, p. 64). To serve its magical realist function, the novel enforces its mythic valence through the construction of Fatma as a kind of female goddess who travels through an archetypal journey on a quest to redeem the ancient female identity lost to male dominance by associating her with Allat, the goddess who was called upon as Mother and worshiped by the Arabs in the pre-Islamic era (Birnbaum, 2005, p. 65). Like Allat and Ishtar, goddesses of fertility, Fatma develops a close, warm mother—child relationship with the snakes. She takes care of them, feeds them, and creates a nurturing environment for them to thrive and feel secure. Akin to the "ancient Arabian goddess Um Atar, the goddess of fertility" worshipped by the Sabaeans in the southern Arab peninsula, what is now Yemen (Al-Sudairy, 2013, p. 59), Fatma rules over her own kingdom of snakes and receives sacrifice from the Great Horned Black Snake, who gives away his life to transfer his mystic characteristics to her through his fatal bite (Al-Sudairy, 2013, pp. 56-58). Assuming snakelike features, she gains a mysterious, non-human power that makes her "the most dangerous kind of snake"; Fatma's "sapphire skin turned ruby-red, then paled to a rosy glow. Her arms and legs rippled like the limbs of an enchanting nymph" (Alem, 2002, p. 23).

Alem also recalls remnants of Arabic classic literature as a means to blur real and magical boundaries. For instance, she evokes the image of two famous mountain ranges, the Aja and Salma—now called the "Shammar Mountain" area of the Northern Najd—and reminds the reader of the "undying love" story of "two famous lovers who had run away from their tribe—Shumla's tribe—only to be captured and killed, then transformed into the huge mountains" (Alem, 2002, p. 9). Shumla tells Fatma this mythic story, which is often mentioned in

pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Shumla's relating of this popular folk story, with its lore on love, attracts the reader. However, she also inspires a feeling of deep gloom and pessimism as she foregrounds the impact of this archetypal story of unattainable love on Fatma's culture, a culture that perceives love, whether inside and outside the institution of marriage, as a source of suffering that brings about the destruction of the lovers by causing them to breach social and religious strictures. This view, which Alem is attempting to subvert, is reflected in the writings of Ibn Hazm, the famous thinker Alem quotes in the novel, who in his treatise *Tawg Al-Hamamah*, or *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love*, asserts that love is the cause of suffering, for the object of this powerful emotion is outside of the lover's control, and his "destruction will come about when [he] lacks that which gave [his love] existence" (Hazm, 1953, p. 868). In the same vein, the concept of love and separation in the mythical story of Aja & Salma is replicated/emulated in Fatma's magical encounter with Taray—romantic and sexual love remain distant and unattainable due to religious and social rules. Considering romance as the basis of successful marriages, the novel expresses Fatma's sense of disappointment at the way the free, romantic love she desires is equally distant and unattainable for her and might equally lead to her demise and the failure of her marriage. Like typical Arabian love myths, which are often centered on relationships thwarted by societal mores in this way, Fatma's story is also informed by the concept of distance and separation. However, this distance is not like that of Aja and Salma, physical or geographical—she is stranded far from any meaningful love by being married to an emotionless husband. On the real plane, love and desire are unsatisfied, whereas on the magical plane, Fatma has betrayed her husband by allowing herself to be betrothed to another man, Taray, despite being married. This theme of unsatisfied love echoes Aja and Salma's story as well, and further reflections of their archetypal story are found in Fatma's description of the type of love she desires:

She wanted the touch, she wanted to perfect many different touches; she wanted to know the rhythm of touch, hear its soaring, deafening tempos [...] she wanted to tap the mysteries in her soul that had [been] ruined by her father's detachment and her husband's cruelty. It was not sexual contact she was thinking of; it was human intimacy, the closeness of similar souls. (Alem, 2002, p. 83)

As illustrated in the passage, Fatma's longing is for feelings of chaste and romantic love rather than the sensual love desired by the famous lovers.

3.6 Reader Response

It is interesting to note that the elements of magical realism as utilized by Alem involve the reader as well in subverting the already established social views that restrict women's growth and validation in the society as depicted by Alem. The magical or supernatural elements, presented in the novel as basically unproblematic matters of fact foreground the role of the reader in the construction of meaning because they problematize the reader's perception of reality. The reader is expected to accept a world that s/he would normally reject; he is forced to consider realms beyond that of empirical reality. The fluidity of the boundaries between the living and the dead or the human and the animal as Alem represents them should raise questions in the reader about the nature of the worlds presented in the novel, opening its representative space to a multiplicity of interpretations. In Alem's treatment of the caged snakes found in Fatma's house and the events of her exotic journey into the Netherworld with her husband to exhibit these snakes, unspoken cultural restraints such as the story of her forbidden passion for Taray make Alem shift the narrative focus from the author to the reader, who is required to read between the lines, fill the gaps in the narrative, and construct meaning. This pattern of narration jibes with Iser's view that, for the reader to participate in the adventure of the literary text, s/he must abandon the familiar world of his/her experience, thereby achieving a better understanding of the literary experience implied or "intended" in the text (Iser, 1974).

In *Fatma*, the very act of endowing Noor with a narrative voice to supplement the novel's central narrative distorts the received conception of reality that the reader might be expected to acquire if the narrative mode were of formal realism. This idea is elaborated by Ruth Y. Jenkins, who states that the "use of the supernatural" in by women writers in magical realist texts as a "plot device [...] may also serve as a specific rhetorical strategy both to expose and counter the androcentric social and literary scripts that circumscribe 'acceptable' behaviour" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 61). The recurrent interruption of the novel's central storyline by the introduction of ancestral characters, ghosts, jaunts into the past, etc., entails the breaking of a linear narrative prescribed by patriarchal discourse. Thus, the (original) narrator, who remains largely anonymous and begins to appear as unreliable as Noor's alternative narrative voice, relies heavily on the reader to notice the blind spots within the text, fill in gaps and assess the credibility of the novel's major narrator, which is to say the authorial persona.

4. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to analyze how Raja Alem in *Fatma* employs magical realist techniques and narrative elements to express a protest against her (Saudi) society's preconceived notions about female identity, and argued that magical realism is a well-suited means to fulfill her subversive objective of denouncing this gender bias, since it allows the construction of an alternative reality based on a constant blurring of real and supernatural into undifferentiated spaces, with concomitant loosening of received truths. Although the novel remains to a degree grounded in reality, it is "really" more a magical than a real work. By providing a cogent alternative to the subjugated female identity, magical realism suggests that these assumptions are based on inaccurate, loaded, unfair, or even oppressive definitions of what it really means to be a woman in (Saudi) society. Striving to provide new roles to her protagonist and all women in her society other than the traditional roles their oppressive, patriarchal culture expects from them, Alem empowers Fatma with magical powers that allow her to transcend the local and regional limits and universalize oneself not only in place and time but also in thought. The novel constructs a magical world featuring personal and social conditions that a realistic approach would fail to capture, and it does so by means of supernatural evocations: strange, inexplicable experiences, adventures, and dream relationships with animals and spirits.

The multifarious means by which the novel's images are presented, scenes are described, and events are plotted and narrated constitute the novel's display of a simultaneous presence of natural and supernatural cultures, juxtaposing a rational view of reality with indissoluble elements of magic. The fluid boundaries between the real and the dead and between the human and the animal embodied in the novel's characters, the use of time and space, and the implausibility of events and actions all have the effect of evoking characteristically magical feminist associations that are of great importance for Alem's subversive project in *Fatma*.

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