

Gothic and Magical Realism Presence in Ahmad Al-Khamisi's Short Story, "Little White Ducks"

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Abstract—The researcher will try to shed a light on how this Egyptian writer, in his short story, "Little White Ducks," uses the gothic devices—setting/environment, horror, terror, the grotesque and black humour. It also shows the *raison d'être* or the motifs for using such devices. This paper also shows the techniques the narrator has used to highlight the presence of magical realism. This is through the writer's employment of two prominent tools of magical realism—extended metaphor and metamorphosis. The justification for employing such devices is in an attempt to criticise the atrocities of war and its devastating effects on the innocent; together with its negative influence on the people's social life, and the protagonist's is a microcosm in such a case.

Keywords—grotesque, death, fear, horror, coffins, terrifying, bombardment, little white ducks

I. INTRODUCTION

This article delves into the stylistic techniques the author employed in this short story. Partially, to reveal the inner effect on the protagonist of the Israeli war on the Palestinian. This article also shows the interlink between the gothic elements and magical realism devices throughout the text. This has helped the writer to unfold the repercussions of the war atrocities. Magic realism is as prominent as the gothic in the writer's style. It appears as a convenient technique to picture the horrendous downside of the fight. This study will start with the definition of gothic literature, the four elements that have been implemented—setting/environment, terror, horror, black humour and the grotesque. Then, the research moves on to define the term "magic realism", with its two highlighted components—the extended metaphor of the "little white ducks" and the device of metamorphosis. The significance of this study is that there is a widespread study about magical realism in South American and European literature; but, there is almost none about Egyptian short stories.

Despite the existence of few studies of Arabic gothic literature, none has studied Al-Khamisi's short story in this light. Therefore, the researcher's contribution would be of great value for those who are interested in both topics; especially those who are keen to study Arabic literature through the eyes of the aforementioned devices.

II. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The researcher will use theoretical framework of defining the writing styles and their components, which have been used by the narrator. Then, finding the corresponding details from Al-Khamisi's short story. This would be as follows:

III. LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE GOTHIC

Scholars have different definitions of the gothic. For instance, David Blair, ed., defines the first appearance of the gothic in literature as "credited to Horace Walpole and dated to 1764. It was then a means of repressing imaginative and emotional territories which had been largely surrendered in the rational, enlightened culture of the eighteenth century [1]." According to the scholar Robert Harris, the gothic literature as "supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events. Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking, or inanimate objects (such as a suit of armour or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are ultimately given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural. As you might imagine, Hollywood uses special effects to a large degree to provide fire, earthquakes, moving statues, and so forth, often blurring the line between human-produced, natural, and supernatural events." [2] Another point of view by Botting. He recounts gothic as: "[it] resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past. The rejection of feudal barbarity, superstition, and tyranny was necessary to a culture defining itself in diametrically opposed terms: its progress, civilisation, and maturity depended on the distance it established between the values of the present and the past [3]."

From the few elements of gothic literature, what applies to this short story is the setting/environment, terror, horror, black humour and the grotesque. The researcher will define each component and applies it to the short story.

A. The Gothic Setting/Atmosphere

According to Irina Rata, "Gothic relies heavily on atmosphere and settings to incite in the reader uncanny and sublime feelings [4]."

1) The gothic setting of the story

There is stiffness and the inanimate is animated, through moving or flying objects. The protagonist perceives: "The atmosphere in the hall feels heavy—disturbed screams; closed eyes, scattered notebooks, pens, and tiny sandals seem to drift." This atmosphere of stiffness reaches the protagonist as well. He relates: "I stopped keeping up with anything. I went many months without buying newspapers-any newspapers. I no longer switch on the TV, and have stopped signing political protest petitions. I also stopped talking about what is going on around us [5]."

B. Definition of Horror

Horror is accounted for something “more of a physical feeling (bloody,....,gruesome details) [4].”

1) Horror in the story

The author represents another the element of horror as the severe effect of the war in the outside world on the innocent children, through representing the wounded coffins and the displaced jaws of the little white ducks. The protagonist showcases the wounded children as a symbol of the horrors of war. The narrator/protagonist relates: “The children, in their red shirts, felt a bit at ease and took refuge from the chaos [5].” The protagonist goes on in exhibiting the horrific injuries the war inflicted on the children, represented in the metaphor of “little white ducks [5].” Their jaws are heavily injured: “They stumbled between my feet; their heads wounded and adorned with white ribbons that tied their lower jaws to prevent from drooping onto the air [5].”

C. Definition of Terror

According to Irina Rata, terror is looking into what happens to the inner self as a response to the horrors. It is “something more psychological, more disturbing, but in a less brutal way [4].”

1) Terror in the story

Ahmad Al-Khamisi, in his short story, showcases the inner state of confusion and “bitterness” [5] of the protagonist. In other words, the feeling of sheer fear, crippled-ness and disturbance—terror. Moreover, the author reflects on hopelessness, through presenting the inner feeling of the protagonist. He mentions “hope would flee on its fragile wings [5]”, “Bitterness [5]” is another daunting feeling that has been overwhelming the protagonist. Furthermore, the protagonist exposes the anguish and the turmoil in his inner self, as a reaction to what he sees or hears about the war and its catastrophic produce. He says, “For a long time, a hectic feeling has accompanied me [5].” The protagonist’s suffering does not stop even when he goes to work; while working, his mind gets distracted by inner voices, wrenching his heart. He recounts: “While hearing people talk to me as if their voices were coming from underwater, drowned out by the booming of bombs. But I firmly muffle my ears and heart so I don’t make mistakes at work [5].” The protagonist goes on describing his psychological state towards what is happening, especially, the influence of the dead children, represented in the “little white ducks” on him: “A feeling washes over me that I haven’t been going to work but rather fleeing from [5].” The anger, the frustration and the confusion control the protagonist’s feeling to the point that he has started to question himself about bombing the innocent.

He relates, “why do I feel this bitterness while I’m at work, when I meet the few friends I have, or even when I drink a cup of water and see the lines of white ducks gazing at me mysteriously? I gaze back at them, shouting—Is it me who is guilty? Is it me who throws bombs on children [5]?”

D. Definition of Black Humour

Black humour is defined as “writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life. Black humour

often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character [6].”

1) Black humour in the story

The protagonist talks about how the little white coffins of the dead children were begging the protagonist to forgive them for resorting to his flat for protection from the bombs. This is a clear example of black humour as the whole situation deviates from the natural and raises sarcasm with bitterness and shock. Al-Khamisi states: “They [the little white ducks] looked at me with innocent blame, pleading for my forgiveness for taking refuge in my home without asking my permission [5].”

E. The Grotesque is a Key Trait of the Gothic Literature. It Is Defined As

The grotesque in literature focuses on the human body, and all the ways that it can be distorted or exaggerated: its aim is to simultaneously elicit our empathy and disgust. Very much like the uncanny, the grotesque draws its power from the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the familiar distorted. Gothic fiction often has elements of the grotesque [7].

1) The grotesque in the story

The narrator uses the image of “Christmas tree” [5], which is usually a happy event, with pleasant atmosphere to describe death. He recounts:

“The daily bombardment of Palestine has turned it into a grotesque Christmas tree, adorned with tiny houses, whose windows glow with the light of death, leaving me to whisper to myself that nothing has changed for the better [5].”

IV. LITERATURE OVERVIEW OF MAGICAL REALISM

D. James, M. Wendy and H. Danielle, eds. define magical realism as literary approach or style featuring magical elements within ordinary, realistic settings. Magical realism emerged as a response to the nineteenth-century realist movement’s focus on the details of banal, everyday life. Franz Roh, a German critic, coined the term “magic realism” in 1925, but the style did not become a literary movement until it was embraced by Latin American and Caribbean writers in the 1940s. In magical realism, the line between the realistic and magical is blurred, and magic appears ordinary [8].

According to Zamara and Faris cited in S. Rahmat and N. Sri, magical realism is a writing method treading onto all the demarcations—muddle them up; but at the same time, these loose boundaries are liberal in their movement and fabricating new frameworks [9]. Another point of view is revealed by Erik Camayd-Freixas, who argues that “it is important to note that the single characteristic on which critics agree is that magical realism makes the extraordinary seem commonplace and vice versa [10].”

In “Little White Ducks” [5], there is almost a common area shared by the gothic and the magic realist. These two styles of writing work hand in hand to present the gloomy and the deadly effect of the bombing of the innocent in Palestine. Moreover, these techniques reflect the author’s/protagonist’s sense of feeling crippled in such a situation; Furthermore, they enable the author of presenting the political turmoil and the social alienation. Consequently, the reader opt to see the

realist in the eyes of the magical and gothic.

A. *An Extended Metaphor*

A metaphor (= an expression, often in literature, describing a person or object by referring to something with similar characteristics to that person or object) that is developed in great detail [5].

1) *The extended metaphor of "little white ducks"*

Al-Khamisi mentions the first account of the extended metaphor. He relates: "From the TV screen to the table and floor of my hall, small coffins rushed toward me [5]." Thus, the narrator engages the reader with the magical that becomes not an odd occurrence to him/her; but rather, the reader gets familiar with the image, as it involuntarily criticizes the horrible war. The white coffins of the war children are represented in the metaphor of "little white ducks [5]." This metaphor occupies the story as it becomes a character by itself. This is one of the parameters of magical realism.

B. *Metamorphosis*

When a metamorphosis occurs, a person or thing develops and changes into something completely different [11].

1) *Metamorphosis in the story*

There are three occasions of transformation or metamorphosis in the short story. The first one is the transformation of the coffins of the little children into "little white ducks", the second instance is when the protagonist wishes he could transform those little white ducks back to their original form; while the third occasion is when the protagonist himself is transformed into a white duck.

2) *Metamorphosis of children's white coffins into a line of "little white ducks"*

The children, in their red shirts, felt a bit at ease and took refuge from the chaos. They grew accustomed to the space, reluctant to leave my flat because the world outside was terrifying. I got up from my seat to head to the bedroom, and they followed me like a flock of little white ducks. They stumbled between my feet; their heads wounded and adorned with white ribbons that tied their lower jaws to prevent from drooping onto the air. Lines of little white ducks had been living with me for many months. They trailed behind me, as if scared to lose me, moving from one room to another. In the kitchen, they rushed to gather at my feet [5].

The transformation of the white coffins into "little white ducks" that occupy every inch of the protagonist's is another prominent characteristic of magical realism. This transformed creatures look real to the reader, and become part and parcel of the realist narrative. By so doing, the magical and the realist almost mix together in a reasonable way that does not look bizarre to the reader. The motif behind creating this magical phenomenon is to criticize the atrocity of war and the political milieu in a subtle way; but also, in a way that the reader integrates with and become steeped in the plot and accepts the magical as the real.

3) *The wish to transform the "little white ducks" back to their human forms*

For a long time, a hectic feeling has accompanied me—the urge to transform those silent, white creatures back into their original form, to their tender skin, their mothers, and their places standing in front of toy shop windows. I tell myself

that I must, with all my strength, reverse the spell that has bound them in this form [5].

4) *Transformation of the protagonist*

The transformation gets access to another character at the end—the protagonist, whose transformation has two motifs—binding wholly with the innocent war victims and challenging the atrocities of the fight. In addition, inviting the reader to bind with both of them.

I get up and tie my lower jaw to the top of my head with a white piece of cloth, standing frozen among the lines of white ducks. I raise my slender neck in the faint light and walk with them through the empty rooms; silently, hopping, hoping that a human hand will knock the door [5].

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study above, it is clear that Al-Khamisi's short story, "Little White Ducks", is remarkable for its rich figurative style represented in the extended metaphor. It is also a minefield of two prominent stylistic ways of writing—gothic ; with its sub-categories—atmosphere/setting, horror, terror, grotesque, and black humour; and magical realism, represented in extended metaphor and metamorphosis. It is recommended that more Arabic short stories are examined to see if the same stylistic devices are prolifically used in that genre; especially, studying more short stories by Al-Khamisi to find out if his way of writing follows the same pattern.

VI. CONCLUSION

As has been discussed above and as can the reader notice, the author skilfully employed the different stylistic devices of both the gothic—atmosphere/setting, horror, terror, grotesque and black humour; and magical realism—extended metaphor and metamorphosis to picture the downside of war on the innocent people, especially children, and to criticise the political milieu and its huge impact on people's inner lives and social lives. The author Al-Khamisi smoothly conveyed the message to his audience, through mixing up what is magical and what is realist. By so doing, the writer dragged the reader into a shared area, blending both domains—the realist and the magical. This, in turn, helped the reader to be absorbed in what was going on—suffering, dark atmosphere and the wish to have a normal life. In brief, the gothic devices and the extended metaphor and the metamorphosis as being elements of magical realism, worked perfectly well to represent conflict and its disastrous social effect—the protagonist as an example of the confusion, lack of enjoyment, feeling of bitterness and at the end, becoming one with the line of the little white ducks, through transformation. The narrator's style facilitated providing the options for the reader to perceive the realist in the lenses of the magical or the gothic.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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