

ARIANNA TONDI  
(University of Bergamo, Italy)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6777-3812

## **Poetics and Politics of the Fantastic in the Novel *Hātif al-mağīb*, the *Rihla* Towards the Sunset**

### **Abstract**

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, the Egyptian author Ğamāl al-Ġīṭānī expressed his anxieties for the failures of Arab politics in the novel *Hātif al-mağīb* (*The Call of the Sunset*, 1991). In this travelogue, based on the rewriting of pre-modern genres related to creative imagination, the author's alter ego embarks on a visionary and full-of-wonders journey from Egypt to the sunset, which is, symbolically, Morocco and a metaphor for death. In this contribution, we will investigate the construction of the fantastic in the novel, in order to underscore the multiple meanings of the sunset motif, mainly inspired by the mythology of ancient Egypt. Our reading of the fantastic components will be informed by studies carried out by the Moroccan literary critic Šu‘ayb Ḥalīfī in the field. It will turn out that the fantastic re-combines the real, being a means to interpret human experience and the author's inner concern with time and death.

**Keywords:** Ğamāl al-Ġīṭānī, *rihla*, fantastic, marvellous, Gulf War, intertextuality, sunset, death

### **Introduction**

Mythological characters, talking birds, trees that produce every kind of fruit, sexual metamorphosis, flowers that wither after decades, a suspended city, a man breastfeeding his baby, another one marrying a palm tree: an impressive amount of creative imagination populates *Hātif al-mağīb* (*The Call of the Sunset*, henceforth

*Hātif*),<sup>1</sup> one of the few fictional travelogues of the last thirty years by Ḡamāl al-Ġīṭānī (1945–2015). The novel, which belongs to the Egyptian author's later and lesser known production, tells the story of a visionary journey that engages intertextually with Sufism, Pharaonic mythology, folklore, classical travel literature, and the 'aḡā'ib and ḡarā'ib (wonders and marvels) motifs.

When Al-Ġīṭānī wrote this novel between 1990 and 1991, he was not the persecuted writer of the sixties and the seventies, but, rather, one of the most prominent and powerful intellectuals of the Egyptian cultural scene. Nasserism and Sadatism were no longer the core of his fictional world. He resorted to *turāṭ* and allusive language not to escape censorship, as in the previous decades, but because he still believed in the potential of his literary project, based on the creative rewriting of Arab-Islamic cultural heritage. His literary strategies are not a blind imitation of pre-modern texts and genres, but a reinterpretation thereof in order to highlight the authenticity of the Arab novel, to comment on the present, and to rationalise the Arab experience of modernity.

The tension between the real and the fictive is the core of Al-Ġīṭānī's literary project.<sup>2</sup> In many of his novels, he breaks down conventional rules and systems. Yet *Hātif* is *completely* built on the grounds of the fantastic, created through a complex blend of Egyptian, Arab, and Islamic symbols. In this contribution we will analyse the construction of the fantastic in the novel, focusing on specific elements such as place, time, and intertextuality. We will demonstrate that the fantastic re-combines the real, and cannot exist independently of that real world which it seems to find so finite and inappropriate. Our reading of the functions of the fantastic components of the novel will be informed by the critical insights of Šu'ayb Ḥalīfī, a Moroccan novelist and literary critic who has analysed in depth the aesthetics and functions of the fantastic in the contemporary Arab novel, publishing several pioneering articles in this field, as well as the volume *Ši'riyyat ar-riwāya al-fāntāstīkiyya (Poetics of the Fantastic Novel, 2009)*.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, before entering the realm of the fantastic narrative, we will start from some essential reflections on the novel's genre and the significance of time and death in the work.

### Imagining a Travel and Its Travelogue

Aḥmad, an unknown man from the Mashriq, arrives in the Maghreb after a long, exhausting, and incredible journey. Here, he is received by the highest dignitary, and the local ruler orders a scribe, Ḡamāl, to write down the astounding account of the

<sup>1</sup> Ḡamāl al-Ġīṭānī, *Hātif al-maḡīb*, Al-Qāhira 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Yasmine Ramadan, *Space in Modern Egyptian Fiction*, Edinburgh 2020, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Šu'ayb Ḥalīfī, *Ši'riyyat ar-riwāya al-fāntāstīkiyya*, Ar-Ribāt 2009.

traveller in order to preserve it for future generations. Although the scribe has never travelled because of his infirmity, he is able to grasp the profound meanings of Aḥmad's experiences thanks to his profound sensibility and offers Aḥmad new possibilities of interpreting his wondrous travel. The voyager has not undertaken this journey voluntarily. One day, a supernatural and invisible voice, the *hātif* of the novel's title, has given him the command *irḥal* (leave!),<sup>4</sup> thus ordering the man to leave immediately his beloved city, Cairo, in direction of the *maġīb*, a term that in Arabic means both "place where the sun sets" and "absence". But how, and where exactly? Aḥmad, the author's alter ego, does not know. He cannot but obey the imperative of that frightening voice. The intertextual dialectic with *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* (*The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, 14th century) is explicit. *Hātif* parodies the medieval *riḥla* – not the *naḥḍawī* one set in Europe – in scope and content and, at the same time, transforms it to reflect on personal matters and on the present. While the medieval traveller intended to reach the Islamic East, in particular the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Aḥmad has to reach the Arab West.

*Hātif* marks a change in Al-Ġitānī's literary mission. He does not focus on the political, social, and economic failures of postcolonial Egypt, but, rather, he takes a wider perspective, targeting the inexorable fall of the Arab world which he has witnessed, the novel being published in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf war. As stated by Sabry Hafez, "the conflict between the self and the other became the conflict with the self with the Gulf war".<sup>5</sup> The author feels the need to understand why the Arab world has reached such a decline. For this reason, he goes on a fantastic journey in order to try to rationalise the ruinous parable that led to the death of solidarity between the States of the Arab *umma*. The pre-modern genre he chooses to investigate the crisis of postcolonial politics is *riḥla*, the journey in search of knowledge. The voyage through Arab desert lands, crossing intangible boundaries, allows the author to deal with Arab issues, not just national ones. Travel literature is a trans-genre, since it may include different forms of writing such as autobiography, history, geography, fantasy, fiction. Travelogue is also a means to investigate and represent the subjectivity of the author – as a human being and as an Arab citizen – in relation to issues such as pan-Arabism, war, and authoritarianism. As Wen-chin Ouyang affirms, Arab novelists have re-employed the spatial impulse and mobility found in classical geographical and travel writing in order to domesticate the novel

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<sup>4</sup> It echoes *iqrā'* (read/recite!), the Qur'ānic command to seek knowledge reported to Muḥammad by the archangel Gabriel.

<sup>5</sup> Sabry Hafez, 'The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57/1 (1994), pp. 95–96.

and allegorise the affairs of the state.<sup>6</sup> In the case of *Hātif*, the journey in the North African region reveals that borders – may they be political or cultural – separating Arab States are more imaginary than real.

### Between Time and Death

In order to understand the real scope of the journey and its report, we have to take into consideration not only the historical and political context of the nineties, but also the interior world of the novelist, specifically his preoccupation with time and death. Death is a recurrent theme in Al-Ġīṭānī's novels, a major and impelling concern for him. He was exposed to death several times. This made him aware that human life, through instability, transitoriness, annihilation, and extinction, is constantly threatened by death. Consequently, time is the other major concern for him. Art, he stated tirelessly, is the main means to neutralize, if only for a fleeting moment, the compelling passing of time.<sup>7</sup>

In *Hātif*, the author challenges the rigidity of time through the construction of the fantastic. In this novel, the concern with death is stronger than in any other, to the point that the whole journey has, as its final destination, sunset, i.e., death itself. According to Rotraud Wielandt's fine reading of the novel, the "whole travel is an allegorical presentation of a human being's final agony."<sup>8</sup> In particular, the novelist decides to represent the final moments of a human life as a travel through time and space towards the sunset, infusing the experience with several meanings. As the author stated in an interview, "journey to the self is a kind of journey through space. The concept of travel is a central one in Sufism, to which I am very near."<sup>9</sup> Sunset, here, can be associated with death on two levels: the end of a human life and the downfall of a community because of greed and selfishness, i.e., its self-destruction. In order to convey these two meanings, the author has constructed the story of a journey to the *maḡīb* – that is, the sunset and, geographically speaking, Morocco.<sup>10</sup> The association of sunset with death belongs to the mythology of ancient Egypt, where the West was the direction for the afterlife. The god of the sun, Ra, was thought to die

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<sup>6</sup> Wen-chin Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel. Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition*, Edinburgh 2013, p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Ziad Elmarsafy, *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel*, Edinburgh 2012, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Rotraud Wielandt, 'Mystical and Mythical Journeys in Two Novels by Jamāl al-Ġīṭānī', in: *Myths, Historical Archetypes, and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Beirut 1999, p. 476.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Abū Bakr Marzūq, 'at-Tanāṣṣ wa an-naṣṣ at-turāṭī fī ar-riwāya al-Ġīṭāniyya' (PhD diss., Université Alger 2, 2015–2016), p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Different elements suggest that the country of arrival is Morocco in medieval times.

each day at sunset. This unprecedented interest by Al-Ġīṭānī in ancient Egyptian mythology is explained in a 1998 article, where the author praises his ancestors for their determination in facing death, as demonstrated by their funeral practices and architecture.<sup>11</sup> The relation between travel and death can be also found in other motifs that shaped the writer's identity as an Egyptian Arab Muslim: the voyage of Isis to reunite the parts of Osiris; the celestial ascension of the Prophet; and the imaginary journey held by the Abbasid poet al-Ma'arrī to Heaven and Hell.<sup>12</sup>

*Hātif* may represent, in a sense, Al-Ġīṭānī's personal surrender to the force of death, motivated by his disenchantment with the ongoing alienation of the Arab subjectivity and the loss of the pan-Arab '*aṣabiyya* (social solidarity) after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Personal destiny and national fate converge.

### The Fantastic Mode in Contemporary Arabic Literature

By the sixties many Arab writers had abandoned the logic of social realism in favour of flights into fantasy, dissolution of time, and a high degree of experimentation and innovation; all being done in order to pursue a battle in the name of freedom and democracy.<sup>13</sup> After *Naksa*, Ḥalīfī states, the fantastic has been a powerful means to express the nightmares caused by individual and collective traumas, as well as the fear of the erasure of identity, constantly threatened by internal and external forces such as the American presence in the Gulf and in the Middle East in the nineties.<sup>14</sup>

In the Arab world, the fantastic literary mode started to be an object of research in the last thirty years, when Ḥalīfī published his first studies in the nineties, and Tzvetan Todorov's influential essay, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, was translated into Arabic. Discussions on the fantastic in Arabic literature raise two fundamental issues. First of them is the definition of this mode, which cannot be reduced to a narrow categorization; second of them is the issue of its authenticity.

Concerning the second point, the complex relation with the Western fantastic mode clearly emerges in the issue of the nomenclature of the genre, marked by a high degree of confusion. About twenty neologisms have been coined; the most recurrent in critical studies are '*ağā'ibī*', derivative of the plural noun '*ağā'ib* (marvels), and *fāntāstīkī*, the Arabized form of the English equivalent. While the first recognizes the

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<sup>11</sup> Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī, 'Muwāğahat al-fanā', *Fuṣūl* 17/1 (1998), p. 209.

<sup>12</sup> Ziad Elmarsafy, *Sufism*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> Hafez, 'The Transformation of Reality', p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Ḥalīfī, *Ši'rīyyat*, p. 53. Just to name some authors of fantastic novels and short stories, there are the Moroccan author Aṭ-Ṭāhir Ibn Ġallūn, the Egyptian Mağīd Ṭūbyā, the Syrian Salīm Barakāt.

specificity of the Arab fantastic and sees its roots in the classical marvellous tradition, the second considers the Arab fantastic narrative as a mediation between pre-modern works based on creative imagination and the fantastic Western writing.

The literary term “fantastic” includes many categories of texts such as the gothic, horror, fantasy, the marvellous, and science fiction. Scholars have proposed numerous definitions of the fantastic, which share the principle of the disruption of established doxas by a new event which is inexplicable in terms of accepted norms. The most influential definition is that suggested by Todorov in the seventies, which focuses on the hesitation felt by characters and readers between realistic and supernatural explanations of a strange event. The fantastic is positioned between the uncanny (strange events explainable by the laws of nature) and the marvellous (the truly supernatural). The work that remains in hesitation without rational explanation for its existence constitutes the fantastic.<sup>15</sup> Applying a Marxist and Freudian approach to the study of the fantastic, in the eighties Rosemary Jackson challenged the polarization purposed by Todorov, suggesting that the fantastic is a mode placed between the marvellous and the mimetic. Instead of considering the fantastic as a literary genre showing specific narratological features, she focuses on the social, political, and ideological implications of literary forms. The fantastic, Jackson states, is the literature of subversion, since it acts in direct contrast to the boundaries set by the cultural order of the period when a work has been produced.<sup>16</sup> Subverting social norms, the fantastic mirrors the desire for great social change. In other words, the fantastic does not escape the real, but rethinks it.

Halīfī combines the narratological and cultural approaches. The centrality of hesitation is accepted by the critic, who – drawing from Todorov – states that the fantastic mode mixes the real with the supernatural in a disturbing way that makes the reader hesitate between two interpretations of an event.<sup>17</sup> Ḥalīfī aims at underscoring the specificities of this literary mode in Arab writing, emphasizing that it is deeply grounded in the marvellous of *turāt*, mythology, Sufism, and in a despicable reality marked by hate and violence.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it has originated in a social and political context different from the Western one, where the first fantasies were produced within a capitalistic economy, in order to express the violent and horrific psychological effects of living in a materialistic culture.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Western fantastic is usually populated by strange, abnormal, and dreadful creatures,

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<sup>15</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (trans.) Richard Howard, Ithaca 1973, pp. 25, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy. The literature of subversion*, London–New York 2007, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ḥalīfī, *Ši ‘riyya*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 52, 117.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 4.

the Arab fantastic became, instead, more concerned with the fear and meaning of worldly experience.<sup>20</sup> The latter stands out with its themes and aspirations, and the manner in which they are developed, but at the same time it shares enough essential features with its Western counterpart,<sup>21</sup> which is the reason why the Moroccan critic chooses to use the bridge term *fāntāstīkī* to denote this kind of narrative.

Consistent with his whole literary project, Al-Ġīṭānī has produced a pure Arabic fantastic in *Hātif*. He has relied upon pre-modern types of writing that are deeply rooted in creative imagination and transgression of the real. The analysis of the ways the fantastic is constructed will indeed demonstrate that the novel is nearer to the marvellous fantastic theorized by Todorov. Al-Ġīṭānī applies the medieval concept of wonder to a fantastic vision of narrative spaces and times. The result of this re-configuration is a fantastic mode totally based on Arab and local cultural heritage, where – as a rule in fantastic texts – classical units of time, space, and characters are dissolved.

### Wondrous Topographies

In a fantastic narrative great attention is reserved to description of place, which does not have a mere decorative function, since the narrator intends to emphasize its strangeness.<sup>22</sup> The extravagance of the marvellous and the normality of the mimetic are combined to pull the reader from the security and familiarity of everyday life to a world whose eccentricity is clearly unreal. The cartography of Aḥmad's journey mixes the real with the imaginary, provoking a permanent tension in the traveller's conscience and personal experience.

The journey has a point of departure, four stations, and a point of arrival. The traveller leaves a place only when the voice orders him, terrified by it and by his dark fate. After leaving Cairo, Aḥmad enters the realm of the unknown. During his journey through the infinity of the North African desert, he embarks on four completely different experiences, in legendary places that do not exist on any geographical map. First, he joins a caravan (*qāfila*) in the South-Western Egyptian desert, a sort of tribal and nomadic society whose composition is obviously always changing. Secondly, he reaches an unknown oasis (*wāḥa*), where he finds a matriarchal society whose organization is overtly primitive: knowledge is orally transmitted and wood sticks are used as weapons. The number of the inhabitants has not increased for centuries because when someone is born, someone else has to leave

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<sup>20</sup> Ḥalīfī, *Ši'riyya*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 24, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ḥalīfī, 'Mukawwināt as-sard al-fāntāstīkī', *Fuṣūl* 12/1 (1993), p. 80.

the oasis without opposing resistance. Thirdly, he arrives at a magnificent kingdom (*mamlaka*), a wide region with an opulent capital which brings to mind the medieval capitals of the Arab world. The last station is the land of the crutches (*arḍ al-‘akākiza*), a place inhabited by people who linger in a level of immorality, partaking in every kind of sexual pleasure due to their fear of imminent death.<sup>23</sup> In a carnivalesque-like atmosphere, men are dressed as women and some people adopt an animal-like behaviour. Finally, the traveller reaches the country of the absence/sunset (*bilād al-maḡīb*), a clear allusion to Morocco, and the Sea of Darkness (*baḥr aẓ-ẓulūmāt*), as the Atlantic Ocean was called by medieval Arabs, since the unreachable parts of the world were considered to be enveloped by a fearful darkness. Contemporary places are mixed with medieval settings, thus contributing to the textualization of a fantastic space and creating an enduring sense of estrangement.

As observed by André Miquel, in geographical works of the medieval Islamic world the human being was not only an object but also a subject, a reflection of the universe.<sup>24</sup> Human geography, which investigates the multiple relations between man, place, and environment, is grounded in the novel in the multisensorial experience with the natural world. Nature elicits different feelings in the subject, such as terror, trepidation, delight, surprise. An empathetic and idyllic relation between man and nature is emphasized in the oasis, whose nature is lush and delightful, and its small population lives in harmony with fruitful palm trees and the transparent waters of Al-‘Aḍāra spring that cures all kind of illness. In the kingdom, the focus is on power: Aḥmad is appointed ruler and treated as an absolute sovereign who can do literally anything he wants with his people, behaving *à la Zaynī Barakāt*. He lives in luxury and is venerated as a divinity in Pharaonic style, to the extent that he is called *Ibn aš-Šams* (Son of the Sun). Aḥmad adapts his behaviour to the place in which he lives, without expressing resistance, but he is always in the balance between the real world and the marvellous dimension since he feels alienated and exiled.

### Elusive Times

Chronography is another focal point in the construction of the fantastic, where time is distracted from its regularity and definition.<sup>25</sup> Past, present, and future do not follow a historical sequence and tend toward an eternal present. As we have seen, time is a major concern of Al-Ġīṭānī. In *Hātif*, he challenges death

<sup>23</sup> This land is inspired by a Maghrebi heretical sect appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 2013, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ḥalīfī, ‘Mukawwināt’, p. 81.

and the peremptoriness of life by breaking its regularity, offering a very dynamic construction of this category. Time constantly fluctuates between past and present, and its rigidity is shattered on multiple levels.

The time of the narration is circular, like the movement of the sun, which rises and sets day after day. The novel begins with the end, since the narration starts when the journey has been concluded. The journey is undertaken on the 9th of May, 1945, Al-Ġīṭānī's date of birth. This historical time is suddenly abandoned, leaving in place the fantastic time which spans fourteen centuries of Arab history. Events which happened in pre-Islamic, Islamic, Mamluk and Ottoman eras intersperse the narrative. We find references to a future dominated by technology as well. The realistic spatial and temporal axis established by Aḥmad before the calling of the voice is thus violated by new types of times and spaces, which cannot be explained in terms of the protagonist's first universe.

Perception of time is not realistic, either. During the journey, the protagonist gradually loses his connection to time. In the kingdom, Aḥmad perceives as hours what are counted as years by the local inhabitants. Before entering *bilād al-mağīb*, he completely loses any time perception, he is unable to move his extremities, becomes sucked in by fog, his memories are confused. The sunset and the Sea of Darkness are indeed nearer.

The inability to measure time and to know the geographical location of places is the result of what Ḥalīfī defines the "nightmare chronotope" that distinguishes the fantastic narrative. It is nightmarish because it arouses perplexity, wonder, and uncertainty, and leads toward disappearance and death.<sup>26</sup> The fantastic reconfiguration of the two elements of the chronotope provides new visions of the world and presents improbabilities. The alteration of space-time coordinates reflects the author's inner torment, disillusionment, and fear of the future. There are attempts to fight the peremptoriness of time and try to slow its flow. For example, in the first two stations Aḥmad is guided by a mult centenarian character who is able to perform miraculous acts.

### **Intertextuality of the Fantastic**

As pointed out by Ḥalīfī, the Arabic fantastic narrative is grounded in the Arab pre-modern tradition of the marvellous and the astonishing. A strenuous defender of the domesticity of the Arab novel, al-Ġīṭānī chooses to deal with indigenous genres and literary modes related to the wondrous.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

As we have seen, he chooses travel writing as a medium that can help to find reasons behind the failures of Arab modernity. Travel itself goes on to create a transnational experience, void of any borders. Moreover, he is inspired by the imaginary dimension of the medieval *riḥla*.

Descriptions of places such as the Sea of Darkness or the great attention toward half human and half bird creatures and miraculous plants are inspired by treatises such as *Āīār al-bilād wa-aḥbār al-‘ibād* (*Monuments of the Lands and Histories of the Peoples*) by Al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283). The author re-thinks the main aim of the classical *mirabilia* tradition. In the Islamic Middle Ages, wonder was a positive force prompted by the strange and the mysterious, for example, the wonders of creation or the marvels created by past civilizations in antiquity.<sup>27</sup> Wonder was also a cognitive experience: describing the marvels of the world in ‘*aḡā’ib*’ literature was not a way to amaze the reader, but a call to contemplate God’s creation and to explain an apparently inexplicable natural phenomenon through what is visible. Instead, Al-Ġīṭānī employs wondrous tales to rationalise a chaotic and alienating reality that is the Arab fall. Besides that, while medieval authors focused exclusively on external reality, Al-Ġīṭānī concentrates on feelings, interior struggles, and human desires as well.

*Hātif* is a geographical *riḥla*, but it is also a Sufī one, since it implies the search for a spiritual knowledge and it is constructed as the Sufī path whose elements are like *maqāmāt* (stations) and *ḥālāt* (states of mind) experienced by an adept through the guide of a master. The last part of Aḥmad’s journey, when he loses physical sensibility, marks the passage from the sensitive world to the spiritual one, and his probable disappearance in the sea can be read as *fanā’* (annihilation) in God, besides death.

### **Conclusion: Functions of the Fantastic in the Novel**

In *Hātif*, the fantastic is not an escape from reality or a refusal of it by taking refuge in a marvellous dimension, but a way to understand it from a new and distanced point of view. Considering the centrality of the psychological component of the fantastic, Ḥalīfī states that this mode can arise from a personal reaction to violent events or from a state of mind.<sup>28</sup> What are the hidden meanings suggested by the fantastic components of *Hātif*? Keeping in mind the indeterminacy of the fantastic in general, in our opinion this mode serves two main purposes in the novel,

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<sup>27</sup> Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics. Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 7–8.

<sup>28</sup> Ḥalīfī, *Ši’riyya*, p. 93.

one related to the intimate concerns of the author and another – to the political anxieties of his time.

Concerning the first purpose, many elements in the narrative – not only the sunset symbology – imply that Aḥmad's journey is towards death. The moment when he leaves Cairo looks like a dramatic farewell to his beloved city. During the voyage, the traveller constantly feels alienated, he perceives himself as a stranger and is perceived as such by others. In the first station, Aḥmad is still attached to life and dreams of exploring the world. In the second station, he loves a woman and wants to stay there to see the birth of their baby, but the voice forces him to leave: no one can escape death. In the desert, Aḥmad experiences the fear of death, when he finds himself in the middle of a sandstorm and he has absolutely no idea of which direction to follow. Before entering *bilād al-mağīb*, he loses his physical perception of the world.

In our opinion, the entire journey may also be read as an allegory of the life of a state, or, to be more precise, of a transnational community such as the Arab world. In the nineties, the Gulf war – an Arab State against a brother State – was intolerable to Al-Ġīṭānī, thus demonstrating that the Arab world was threatened not only by Western powers, but by itself. The four stations – from the nomadic society of the caravan to the corruption and immorality of the land of the crutches – may be a contemporary revision of the five phases of Ibn Ḥaldūn's theory of cyclical history that leads to the collapse of a state. It is significant that in 1990, the Moroccan writer Binsālim Ḥimmīš published his novel *Mağnūn al-ḥukm (Power Crazy)*, where he represents allegorically the despotism in the Arab world. In the same year, an Egyptian and a Moroccan writer reinterpreted Ibn Ḥaldūn's theory to deal with a common Arab experience that is the permanent state of crisis of the Arab subject, always divided between his tyrannical inclinations and the aspiration to freedom.

The arrival of the voyager to the Maghreb sounds like an appeal to Arab unity. This is confirmed by the fact that characters that have appeared in the East are encountered again in the West, or that the Moroccan Ġamāl and the Egyptian Aḥmad turn out to be the same person at the end of the novel, the first being another facet of Aḥmad's personality. Moreover, the author registers many similarities between his country and the Maghreb throughout history, poignantly in contrast with contemporary divisions that led to the Gulf war.

*Hātif* is the domain of uncertainty, impossibility, hesitation, polysemy, which are the result of the breaking down of accepted rules. There is no definite truth: we are in front of an open text. If we look at the poetics and politics of the fantastic in the novel, we can see a fierce battle against the forces of time and death, and, at the same time, the emphasis on the destructive power of time on human life and the self-destructive power of the human being.

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