# PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

# MAGICAL REALISM IN IBTISAM AZEM'S THE BOOK OF DISAPPEARANCE

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Intisar Rashid Khaleel, Zainab Abdullah Hussein, Awfa Hussein Al-Doory: Magical Realism In Ibtisam Azem's The Book Of Disappearance) -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(6), 1-14. ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: "Magical realism, Ibtisam Azem, " The Book of Disappearance ", Postmodernism, Palestinian literature"

# **ABSTRACT**

Magical realism is an inimitable literal movement which is linked with authors from the Latin American background. The world is grounded in the actual world, with fantastical factors considered normal in the world. Just like fairy tales, magical realism novels and short tales distort the line distinguishing truth and fantasy. The traits of magical realism are realistic settings containing supernatural elements. Most books have speaking objects and lifeless characters. Telepathy is also a frequent function in these stories. The authors of magical realism deliberately fail to provide an explanation for the magic in their words, which normalizes it making it appear like an everyday part of everyday life. An author makes use of magical realism to supply a critique to society and specifically the politics and moves of the elite. The style has expanded in reputation over the years. Therefore, this analysis pursuits to explain the magical realism in "The Book of Disappearance" by Ibtisam Azem. Following the characteristics of magic realism genre as a method of analysis is to achieve the aim of the paper. The paper starts with an introduction to the subject and the genre, the synopsis of the novel, the discussion and the analysis will be presented in the second part, then it ends with the conclusion that sums up the results of the analysis.

#### 1.Introduction

Magical realism is a unique literal movement witnessed high derived and fashionable in the very beginning of the eightieths. Zamora(2012) argued that magical realism is a literary genre that depicts the world as having magic and fantasies(31). The reason why 'magical realism' is so hard to define is because the word "realism" is pretty worried to use when we talk about literature. We believe in different things and so when we are writing fiction we are writing period, but let us say it is about fiction, we are creating a new world. No expectations. The way we describe characters, events, thoughts and feelings, it's always our own way, so no fiction can be described as 'realism'. This is the one thing that most of the critics agree upon that term is notoriously to define.

The term of 'magical realism' is coined in the fifties and related to the Latin American fiction, the novelists argue that this term refers to all the types of narrative fiction that contains magical events happen in realist world, whereby, "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence- admitted, accepted, and integrated into rationality and materiality of literary realism" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, 3)

Though all the three literary concepts of magic realism, marvelous realism and magical realism have become very popular, but 'the magical realism' has the most critical consideration by the majority of the critics works, regarding to the realist tone of the narration way through submitting the magical events. The relation of the literary realism is considered a feature that distinguished this term from the magic and marvelous realism(Bowers,2004,3). What distinguish this reality concept from the reality itself is the using of two opposing oxymoron's together and the realist by breaking down the opposing terms of the magical and the realist, to form new one perspective suited to "exploring...and transgressing...boundaries, whether the boundaries are onto logical, political, geographical, or generic" (Zamora & Faris: 5)

Attacking totalitarian regimes was a theme and a means for the writers of magical realism to write about colonialism and its systems. "magical realism as its best opposes fundamentalism and purity; it is at odds with racism, ethnicity and the quest for tap roots, origins, and homogeneity" as Brenda Cooper, the postcolonial critic adapted(1998,22). This unique feature gives the chance, to such mode of fiction, having its recent popularity in the postcolonial English speaking world like Ibtisam Azem "The Book of Disappearance". The works of magical realism deal also with themes such as extraordinary or supernatural happenings, or mystery, and it can be also influenced by the variety of religious beliefs.

As a mode of narration, magical realism cannot be restricted to one location. Though Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Toni Morrison have located magical realism in countryside and ruler areas; yet one can see that many of the magical realist texts have witnessed political or social disputes. For this reason, magical realism have originated in many of the postcolonial countries that suffered from colonial and political power. This mode of narratives located in the areas that their population suffered from political, cultural and social power and

colonial system: such as Muslims in UK, Native Americans in USA, or even women writing from a feminist perspectives.(Bowers:31-32)

# 2. Synopsis of "The Book of Disappearance"

"The Book of Disappearance" is a masterpiece that prompts a reader to reflect on Nakba's historical foundations in 1948 and the intentions of the Zionists in the proper cleansing of Palestinians from the land within which they belong (Āzem, 2014). Notably, Nakba refers to the Palestinians' exodus in the year 1948 (Somun, 2015). The journey occurred when over 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled from the homes during the Palestine war (Farag, 2017,73). The novel is fictional and revolves around the past and the present. Azem tries to find answers to a hypothetical question focusing on what would happen if the Palestinians residing in Israel would disappear. Primarily, Azem utilizes magic, mystery, fantasy, imagination and reality to explain the occurrences in the narrative.

Importantly, the novel revolves around two primary narrators, Alaa and Ariel. Alaa is a freelance cameraman from the Palestinian descent while Ariel is a settler from the Israeli background. The two reside in the same flats and are best friends, more like brothers, as shown in the next parts of this analysis. Alaa's grandmother is one of Nakaba survivors. She retells the story of the occurrences of the Nakaba that occurred in 1948 to her grandson. Alaa believes that the grandmother represents a link between the rupture of what he terms as "two Jaffas," the one that occurred in 1948 and the one described in Azem's novel (Āzem, 2014). In contrast, Ariel is a liberal and questions the military occupation of the Israelis though with limits. As the book progresses, a reader can familiarize himself or herself with the characters who have normalized the Israelis' narratives and is willing to participate in appropriating the memories of the Palestinians (Eid, 2017,42).

Alaa records his thoughts and experiences in a notebook that he leaves behind after he disappears with the other Palestinians. The Israelis experience different reactions from the occurrences since essential services are disrupted (Ibid, 43). From this, one can conclude that the Palestinians worked as slaves for the Israelis. Some acted as drivers, newspaper vendors, and others in different professions. Thus, their disappearances affected the flow of services in the area. The prisoners from Palestinian descent disappeared, and insecurity became an issue of concern. Primarily, the book provides an account of Nakba and the reaction of the Israelis following the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. It also explains what would happen to Palestine people's history and memories following the disappearance of their guardians.

Alaa, as seen in his red notebook, is conscious of the Palestinian memory of Nakba and appreciates the prevalence of its occurrence. About his grandmother's memory, Alaa writes, "Sixty years later and you would still feel a tightness of breath when you talked about the Nakba, your Nakba and Jaffa's" (Āzem: 13). Alaa's concerns about the Palestinian memories can be well understood and appreciated by a reader, especially after his mysterious disappearance. The aftermath represents the presence of settler-colonials on the Palestinian land and territory. Ariel transitions from being a friend to an

appropriator of the friend's apartment. He tries to find answers to the Palestinians' disappearance and makes himself comfortable in Alaa's apartment. Ariel moves from being a friend and an appropriator to a settler-colonial. In effect, the memories of Alaa preserved in his notebook are grievously affected.

### 3.Discussion

Ibtisam Azem is a Palestinian writer who wrote the novel "The Book of Disappearance", which utilizes magic realism. The book provides questions about what would happen if Palestinians residing in Israel disappear and how the Israelis would react. The novel is a powerful and imaginary set in modern Tel Aviv about 48 hours after Israelis discovered that their neighbors have vanished. The story revolves around the experiences of two narrators, Alaa and Ariel. Alaa is a young Palestinian who talks with his dead grandmother in a journal, which he left behind after disappearing. Ariel is a journalist who struggles to understand the traumatic circumstances that resulted. The novel shows the confrontations existing between the two memories. Ariel is a Zionist who is critical of the occupation of the military. However, he believes in the project of the Israelis and the national myth. In contrast, Alaa is haunted by the memories of the grandmother and Nakba. The memories of being displaced from Jaffa to becoming an expatriate in her homeland are retold in the story. Ariel tries to find clues towards the secret of collective disappearance, and his reaction reveals the clefts of the incidences presiding the vanishing.

Accordingly, the premise of the novel revolves around an unexplained disappearance of the Palestinians. The vanishing symbolizes a colonial fantasy motivated by exploring the possible occurrences if it became a reality (Lentin, 2014, 16). Although the disappearance takes place in West Bank, Israel, and Gaza, Azem focuses on Jaffa/Tel Aviv due to the significance and symbolism. The vanishing that occurs in the novel appears in various dimensions. The first one is a literal disappearance, which is the primary productive theme. Literal disappearance refers to what happens in states and individuals whose identities are based on racial denial and violence exclusion (Ibid,17). People seek a new identity due to violence and racial incidences hence explaining the literal disappearance in the novel.

Azem's novel contains magical realism where impossible scenarios of millions of Palestinians vanish to explain the mystery behind the Zionist mythology on the establishment of Israel (Ibid,17). The author writes, "state of maximum emergency...because the Arabs have declared a general strike. ... All of the Arab inhabitants of Israel, Judea and Samaria, and Gaza have disappeared" (Azem: 47). Varieties of scenes in the novel are familiar, primarily to those people who have experienced Nakba. Nakba is the disappearance of the Palestinians who leave their homes characterized by plenty of uneaten food, televisions that are switched on, empty rooms, and house keys on the doors. Such houses look as if the residents disappeared in the form of a spirit. The silence depicted in the novel is similar to that witnessed in 1948, where millions of Palestinians vanished. Azem has a colonial way of magical thoughts portrayed in the book that he utilizes to explain the migration from the

native land. One can presume that the inspiration behind the book is to show what happens in Palestine. The sudden disappearance of the enemy, Palestinians, provokes an array of reactions among the Israelis left behind. Confusion and anger are imminent, and commuters are stranded when the buses they use do to arrive, newspapers are not delivered, and garbage is left uncollected. In addition to that, teachers, doctors, and cafes owners do not show up in workplaces. The point that the author tries to make is to show the importance of Palestinians in the life of the Israelis.

Alaa and Ariel, the primary narrators in Azem's novel, live in the same apartment in Tel Aviv. They have many similarities, including the fact that they are attractive, sophisticated, bilingual, and single. Alaa and Ariel are inseparable and often hang out with each other. Their friendship can neutralize their different ethnicities. Azem imagines the relationship between the two friends depicting them as intimate like brothers since after Alaa disappears, Ariel moves to his friend's apartment smoothly. According to Foster and Scerbo, "Magical realism is a worldview of transformation, a way of seeing the world as it is and transforming it with our imagination" (2019,44). The reason for moving to Alaa's house is unclear since his apartment is just as good as Alaa's. The mother seeks to upgrade her lifestyle. Hence, she moves to one of the Arab flats to view the sea. From this, one can see that the author shows that after the disappearance, the people left took advantage of having whatever they admired since it was at their disposal. Ariel preferred Alaa's apartment to his while his mother preferred an apartment with a sea view. With this in mind, the disappearance imagined by the author inevitably enabled Ariel and his mother to live up to their fantasies hence showing an instance of magical realism in the novel.

Notably, Alaa left for a place nearby Jaffa to take care of his ailing grandmother, Tata. Jaffa was the place where Alaa grew up. On one occasion, Alaa found his grandmother sited dead on a bench that overlooked the sea. Azem claims that Tata had a light smile on her lips at the moment when Alaa found her (Azem, 2014). The death of the grandmother stimulated him to start keeping a journal in a new red notebook. Alaa's journal is Azem's book, The Book of Disappearance. The book is more oriented to Tata than to him. Besides, her grandmother was more interested in Jaffa as it existed before the ethnic cleansing in 1948 (Abu-Sitta & Palestinian Return Centre, 2000, 21). Since then, Jaffa has been treated like a shadow of the Zionist-built Tel Aviv. The journal shows that even in death, Alaa's grandmother pulls him closer to her. Alaa is connected deeper into the spirit of the old port city of the Palestinians. Alaa writes letters to his grandmother, which depicts her as a strong and witty person who showed immense affection for his grandson. Alaa's messages to his grandmother are a fantasy and imagination that makes Alaa feel his grandmother's presence around him.

Tata's family fled the ethnic cleansing in Jaffa in 1948 (Āzem, 2014). However, her father and herself could not escape since she was pregnant with Alaa's mother. The family members who left could not return. From the book, Tata once told Alaa that people left, the country strayed, and their souls became

loose. Alaa notes, "All the Jaffans who stayed here see a shadow walking next to them when they walk through the old city" (Azem, 2014: 66). Primarily, this means that all the Jaffans are frequently monitored. In one of Alaa's letters to his grandmother, Alaa claims that he longs for her, a feeling that he compares to an individual holding a thorn of roses (Azem, 2014). He remembers how the grandmother was full of life and how she missed the city people. Tata had told Alaa that she walked in the city, but it could not recognize her (Ibid). Moreover, she complained that the city streets were empty even though there were many people.

During the disappearance, the Israelis wonder why the Palestinians have not shown up to work making many people wonder whether they are on strike or not. Azem indicated,

"It is worth noting that neither the Arab leaders in Israel nor the Palestinian Authority had declared their intention to stage a strike" (66) The act of disappearance, which is a fantasy, is juggled with reality after Israelis start questioning the whereabouts of the Palestinians and relating it with a possible strike. The Israelis do not get any explanation, but they are accustomed to the reality without the Palestinians. Magic realism appears where Azem does not explain the disappearance. Notably, "Magical realism authors deliberately leave the magic in their stories unexplained to normalize it as much as possible and reinforce that it is part of everyday life" (Foster & Scerbo, 2019: 45) They start appreciating the rebirth of their nation. No one would blame the misfortunes of the Israelis on the Palestinians. However, the Israelis opted to take a decree that required the residents to register within 48 hours. Those who failed to show up would lose their properties to the state.

Ariel is caught up in the anxiety and excitement that is felt among the Israelis after the Palestinians' disappearance. He wonders how the country would thrive without the Palestinians. He misses Alaa and is curious to find out where his friend and other Arabs went. Ariel starts reading a red notebook found in Alaa's apartment in the mission to search for clues. From the notebook, a reader can understand that Ariel once wrestled with Alaa angrily. The notebook contains not only stories about the grandmother but also lamentations and rage he experienced in life. At one instance, Alaa denotes the frustration he shares with his Israeli friends. Alaa asked Ariel what he would do if he were to scream in the ears of his friends. In this case, one can see the use of reality since arguments are frequent among friends.

In another instance, a reader can see Ariel strolling around the city of Tel Aviv as he takes some rest from his reporting. As he walks, he wonders, places have memories. He thinks that his modern city is about dreams instead of memories, which shows imagination, a critical element of magical realism. The town that Ariel imagines is beautiful, big, clean, and has the beaches of his dreams. Asides from that, Ariel's thoughts wander around, and he focuses on the right of the Israelis to exist. Alaa called the Israeli Jews white and, in other circumstances, settler-colonials. If people were to view the Israelis the same way Alaa did, Ariel thinks that most people would pack their belongings and leave the land. All these are instances of imagination depicted by Azem in the

novel. Suddenly, Ariel is hit by reality and is angry with Alaa and the disappearance issues.

In trying to move on regardless of the happenings, Ariel comforts himself with the thoughts that Israel had fulfilled their dream that existed over three thousand years ago. The memories of the strong Zionist faith demonstrated by his grandparents boost his convictions that achieving the goal would require the disappearance that had just occurred. In this case, the author juggles up magic and fantasy with reality. The magic is seen in the mysterious disappearance of a group of people. "While accepting the rational view of reality (in this case Nakba), it also considers the supernatural as a part of reality" (Busse, 1999: 6) Truth is demonstrated when a mysterious disappearance is the cause of dream attainment for the Israelis. By thinking this way, Ariel feels that there was no other way for the Israelis to achieve their dream and that the disappearance was inevitable (Nammar, 2012,9).

Ariel has too many thoughts, and one of them is the friendly advice he gave to his friend, Alaa. He once told him that he should not become a prisoner of the past. By being a prisoner of the past, one misses the chance to enjoy living a modern life characterized by the freedom not experienced in Arab countries. In this flashback, one can notice the existence of reality since laws restrain most people in Arab countries. Ariel meant that Alaa's past should not hinder him from enjoying the freedom he experienced in Israel. Alaa had numerous thoughts on Jaffa, and its memories, which Ariel believed were tales of the defeated myths of Alaa's past (Azem, 2014). Ariel enters one of his favorite bars since he believes that life must go on. Ariel contemplates his hometown and poetically claims that the region is awash with desire and a city of sins. One of the steps that he undertakes of moving on is translating into Hebrew a part of the book under the title, "Chronicle of Pre-Disappearance" (Ibid).

Amidst the use of realities as depicted in the sections above, something mysterious and magical happens. According to Neslen (2011), things become strange when Alaa's notebook entry finds him writing to his dead grandmother in Jaffa. Alaa tells her that for the first time, he smiled as he missed her. The reason for smiling was that she realized how much he loved her and how much his grandmother loved life. Alaa continued writing, claiming that the grandmother was alone in Jaffa, but she loved the place in the same way a woman loves a man (Ibid). Alaa tells the grandmother that he repaired the house. Alaa wrote the book while in Jaffa since he says that he has learned to love the place since he has rediscovered it. The journal's timing in the narrative deepens the mystery, hence becoming an essential component of magical realism in literature. Ariel found the notebook in Alaa's apartment and makes a reader wonder how Alaa wrote the notebook in Jaffa (Ibid). Ariel goes to sleep in Alaa's apartment, the night that follows. He hears some rattling. He hears a whisper from a distance and searches around but does not find anything, which is also part of the mystery. Before 3 a.m, Ariel falls asleep in Alaa's apartment, which is the exact time of the first Arab disappearance. He sleeps with the thought of changing Alaa's door lock. Ibtisam Azem writes, "Changing the door lock. He has to change the door lock" (Azem, 2014, 55)

Similarly, while at Alaa's apartment, The Tell-Tale Heart by Poe comes to Ariel's mind. In particular, he imagines a situation where a murderer hears the heart of the victim beating loudly every minute. The imagination is a form of magical realism employed in the model. It also depicts the fact that Ariel has some guilty feelings. It remains unclear to a reader how Alaa wrote the book while in Jaffa, as explained earlier. The red notebook has lots of blank pages, and a reader is left wondering whether it is still being written. Azem's plot in the narrative is wisely designed and has lyrical layers of irony and insight. The author seemingly predicts the nightmare that awaits the disappearance's beneficiaries, hence showing the connection between magic or mystery and reality.

In the novel, the memories of Palestinians are often threatened. From Alaa's notebook, one can identify the differences in discourse about Palestine. The grandmother used to speak of a year, what happened before, and after about Nakba. Alaa writes that the grandmother's memory has loopholes showing how the Palestinian memory is affected. The disappearance of the Palestinians that were left created a more significant gap, including manipulating the collective memory of Nakba. The settler-colonialists transition to appropriation after their disappearance. One settler-colonial asserts, "Our brave soldiers who carried out a clean operation to rid us of the fifth column and terrorists who were around us everywhere" (66). The houses previously resided by the Palestinians are opportunities for the Israelis who grab them. Azem primarily evokes the Palestinians' dispossession in modern society and the way the assimilation of Zionist is common in the settler-colonial country, which is an example of realism used in the narrative.

The fact that the Palestinians are no longer in Israel stops bothering the Israelis. By showing how fast the Israelis moved on after the disappearance is a form of realism since it reflects how the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians during Nakba was normalized as a necessity. It justifies the myth of barren and infertile land that awaits the people without a land to facilitate its fertility (Nammar, 2012,58). Ariel is not an exception since, even though he sought clues behind Alaa's disappearance, he transitioned quickly to become one of the settler-colonials. He justifies being in Alaa's apartment with realistic claims, such as the fact that he is too tired to go to his apartment on the fourth floor. Azem writes, "He is too tired to go up to his apartment on the fourth floor" (Azem, 2014: 45). However, in the real sense, Ariel's presence in Alaa's house is similar to that of the Zionist's false entitlement and claims on the Palestinian possessions.

The disappearance of the Palestinians is realism since it depicts the ultimate aim of colonialism. The novel discusses the past to show the psyches of the Israelis and Palestinians. In addition to that, it also shows the differences between the colonized and the colonizer. The disparities are imminent in the way Azem decided to leave the disappearance unsolved and unexplained. Towards the end, a reader can see that settler colonialist is not preoccupied with eliminating Palestinians, which is not explained.

Nevertheless, just like in real life, the Palestinians are annihilated from the narrative, and the colonial and Zionist presence wins. Azem depicts the disappearance, which is a magical and fantastic element, as usual hence explaining why he does not describe it in the narrative. Magical realism is a chance that authors employ to show an alternative to an accepted reality. It can be a powerful tool against a robust political and colonial regime, as seen in Azem's book.

By moving to Alaa's flat and using his notebooks, Ariel betrays his friendship. The betrayal concludes Israeli's narrative on what to do with the Palestinian story that has no narrator. The Zionists' history is bound with moments that include the theft of a report, and Ariel's actions after Alaa's disappearance is not an exception. Ariel harms his friendship the moment Alaa's absence is confirmed. The disappearance makes Israel a step closer towards achieving their long dream of being a more generous nation. Notably, the disappearance that occurred during Nakba can be explained. Alaa's grandmother told him, "The bullets were everywhere. They used to shoot at us whenever we went outside our houses" (Azem, 2014: 34).

In contrast, the sudden disappearance that took away Alaa and the other Palestinians cannot be explained since the colonialists, in this case, the Israelis did not have a hand to do with it. Aside from the mystery of disappearance, other obscurities exist, including why Alaa's grandfather left a pregnant wife behind. The strange occurrence echoes the book's bigger mystery on why the Palestinians have disappeared for a second time.

The relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians residing in historic Palestine is governed by power disputes and exists in a settler-colonial setting. Regardless of the different legal situations, the Israelis have forced work on the Palestinians residing in the other parts of Palestine. The relationship between the two cultural groups is unequal. It is not expected since love, hate, and disappointment exist among the two groups. Alaa, at one point in the novel, poses a question that any individual under the colonial rule would ask. He questions how he can sweep their memory from his, which is the first step towards liberation from colonial rule (Abu, 2016). Living under colonial rule is not easy and is one of the realism seen in the book. Liberating oneself from colonial influence requires changing of relationships and trying to reclaim one's homeland.

Eventually, magical realism uses elements to talk about reality. According to Busse (1999:8), magic realism is an unexpected alteration of reality. Magic realism is different from stories solidly in the fantasy or science fiction genres, which are distant from reality. The book has distortion effects, including the mysterious and unexplained disappearance that makes a reader wonder what is real or not. It opens up an avenue of reality that readers may not have thought it possible. The realities question in Azem's book is societal and entails colonial influence on society. The Nakba is an ongoing process, and the refugees from Palestinian descent cannot return after seven decades. They are often killed, besieged and their homes destroyed hence explaining how Azem's book mirrors reality. Palestine is a settler-colonial country where the natives are

coerced to forget their past and move on (In Abdo-Zubi & In Masalha, 2018). The main aim is teaching the Palestinians of the importance of not being chained to the past. A section of individuals often internalizes the relayed narrative in such countries.

#### Conclusion

"The Book of Disappearance" by Ibtisam Azem focuses on the Palestinians and Israelis' lives in a settler-colonial country. The narrative revolves around two narrators, Alaa and Ariel. Alaa is a Palestinian while Ariel is from the Israeli descent. Magical realism, which uses magic and fantastic elements to depict the world's reality, is employed significantly in the novel. The fact described is Nakba, which is the disappearance of the Palestinians from the home countries. In the book, the Palestinians disappear in a mysterious and unexplained manner. The fact that it symbolically represents a real event makes it one instance where magical realism is employed in the narrative. After their disappearance, the settler-colonial country's activities are disrupted since the Palestinians would provide critical services. The Israelis decided to possess the properties and land occupied by the Palestinians. The conclusion derived from this analysis is that the book has opened channels of reality that a reader may not have imagined. Magical realism differs from science fiction since it is close to reality.

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