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Fantasy and Fear in the Novel of “The Land of Zikola” by Amr Abdelhamid

Abstract

The term "fantasy" has a history rooted in ancient languages and has sought to carve its path within modern critical studies, asserting its presence there. It is a creative imagination that addresses everyday reality in an unfamiliar manner, immersing the recipient of the literary work in an atmosphere of wonder and astonishment that can reach the point of hallucination. This is because what the narrator recounts is far removed from reality, a quality we observed in the novel “Ard Zikola” by Amr Abdel Hamid.

Keywords: *fantasy, fear, horror, hallucination, astonishment, imagination*

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Fantaziya və qorxu Amr Abdelhamidin “Zikola Diyarı” romanında

Xülasə

"Fantaziya" termini qədim dillərdə köklənmiş bir tarixə malikdir və müasir tənqidi tədqiqatlarda özünə yer tapmağa çalışaraq orada mövcudluğunu təsdiqləmişdir. Bu, gündəlik reallığı qeyri-adi bir şəkildə əks etdirən yaradıcı təxəyyüldür və ədəbi əsərin oxucusunu heyran və təəccüb atmosferinə qərq edir, bu da bəzən hallüsinasiya həddinə çatı bilər. Çünki nəql edilən hadisələr reallıqdan çox uzaqdır və bu xüsusiyyəti Amr Abdelhamidin “Zikola Diyarı” romanında müşahidə etdik.

Açar sözlər: *fantaziya, qorxu, dəhşət, hallüsinasiya, təəccüb, təxəyyül*

Introduction

The novel “Ard Zikola” (The Land of Zikola) is considered the debut artistic work of the creative Egyptian novelist Amr Abdel Hamid. It was first published in 2010 and achieved significant success. It is a quintessential fantasy novel in which the author narrates the story of the young protagonist, Khaled Hosni, who lived in the village of Al Bahow Frik in Egypt with his grandfather. Khaled graduated from the Faculty of Commerce and met a girl named Mona, whom he proposed to multiple times. However, each proposal was met with rejection from her eccentric father. Despite this, Khaled never gave up and seized every opportunity to propose, though the response remained the same.

The protagonist, Khaled Hosni, persisted in proposing to the girl for the eighth time, only to face rejection once again. After each rejection, he would retreat into solitude, questioning the reasons behind it, but to no avail. He often spoke to his grandfather, who would console him and remind him that he should be used to it by now. During one of these conversations, his grandfather jokingly suggested that Khaled "bury himself in a crypt," mentioning that he once tried to enter a crypt in an abandoned house with a group of friends but could not go further because it was too dangerous.

Research

Khaled's eyes lit up as if he had recalled something... the crypt

He continued: “Grandpa, do you remember when I was little and used to cry, and you’d tell me the story of the crypt?”

He asked his grandfather to tell him more about it. The grandfather explained that the crypt truly existed in the village, inside an abandoned house, with a large rock behind its door. He added that it was inhabited by ghouls and that no one could enter it because anyone who tried would inevitably die. He also revealed that Khaled’s parents had entered the crypt and died there, which is why Khaled lived with him. Khaled returned to his room, pondering his grandfather’s words about the crypt, which seemed like a legend to him. Yet, he knew it was real and that his grandfather never lied. Talking aloud to himself as if debating with someone, his grandfather overheard him say he would descend into the crypt, believing there might be treasure inside. But he quickly remembered that it was supposedly haunted by ghouls and ghosts—what treasure could he be talking about then?

This is where the novel’s events begin. The Egyptian novelist Amr Abdel Hamid masterfully crafted the story with a brilliant fantastical narrative, leaving readers perplexed. He skilfully drove the protagonist toward a mix of madness, hallucination, astonishment, and confusion. Before delving into these events, we must first understand the concept of fantasy (Abdel Hamid).

1. The Meaning of Fantasy:

Translating terms from foreign languages into Arabic often results in multiple terms that converge under a single framework, given the vastness of the Arabic language and the challenges of translation—whether literal or interpretive. The term "fantasy," like other foreign terms, has been translated into Arabic in various ways, including:

1.1. Creative Imagination (Fantasia): This refers to the process of forming mental images that do not exist in reality or the ability to conceptualize them.

1.2. Fantastic Literature: This is distinguished not only by its rhetorical features, narrative structure, and language but also by offering an alternative perspective on things, one that leaves the reader transformed. In Kamal Abu Deeb’s book “The Literature of the Marvelous and the World of Wonders”, he describes marvelous or supernatural literature as a creative imagination that transcends the boundaries of reason, logic, history, and reality, subjecting everything—natural or supernatural—to the sole power of innovative imagination, roaming existence with an absolute sense of boundless freedom (Abu Deeb, 2008).

When we say it transcends the boundaries of logic and reason, it means it departs from the familiar, shifting into an entirely different world governed by astonishment, wonder, surprise, fear, terror, and hallucination. These terms indicate the presence of a fantastical event within the literary text, captivating the readers’ imagination, as Majdi Wahba has noted (Wahba, & Al-Mohandes, 1984).

The term "fantasy" pertains to literary works that break free from the constraints of realistic logic and truth, amplifying the enchantment of the readers’ imagination. This is precisely what we find in “Ard Zikola”.

2. Fantasy in the Title, Events, and Setting of “Ard Zikola”:

- Ard Zikola (The Land of Zikola: Choosing a title that serves as the threshold to the text’s world and unlocking its semantic depths through decoding is no easy task. With a fantastical approach, the ingenious novelist made the title a focal point that grabs the reader’s attention. "Zikola" carries an air of strangeness and wonder, prompting readers to ask: What does Zikola mean? Where is it? Is it a real place or a product of marvels and oddities? Why did the novelist choose this title in the first place? Through this clever technique, it is as if the author compels the reader to dive into the text’s world, seeking answers to these questions through suspense. The title immediately captures attention, turning it into something extraordinary, unbound by limits.

Now that the novelist has succeeded in drawing the reader into the text’s universe, and since the title is “Ard Zikola”, Zikola becomes the setting where the novel’s events unfold, featuring main and secondary characters. Through the interplay between the setting and characters, the title fragments throughout the narrative, forming the events and giving rise to its fantastical nature (Halifi, 2009).

Due to the girl Khaled Hosni loved—Mona—whom he proposed to multiple times, only to be rejected each time, he discovered the Land of Zikola. This is no ordinary land; it defies the norm. It is a place that uses intelligence units instead of paper currency—an astonishing and bizarre concept.

One of its laws involves sacrificing the poorest person each year, where the "poor" are the unintelligent who lack intelligence units, and the "rich" are the clever ones who possess them. The rule in Zikola is: preserve your intelligence, work hard, and you will not be judged by money; your intelligence units increase. But if you buy something, they decrease.

In this fantastical tale, the novelist transports us to another world and time, entirely different from the reality we know. The story begins when the protagonist, Khaled Hosni, who resides in Bahu Frik village in Egypt, decides to enter the Frik crypt, hoping it holds treasure—an idea that seems far-fetched and hard to believe.

He leapt from his bed, pulled out a photo of Mona, and said, "I am going down into that crypt... no matter what happens. If your father is crazy, sometimes I'm crazier."

Unbeknownst to him, his grandfather was listening from behind the door but showed no reaction. The next morning, Khaled asked his grandfather, "Can you live alone?" Realizing Khaled intended to enter the crypt—not just to prove himself to Mona's father but for a deeper reason tied to his family's legacy, an inevitable urge to uncover the unknown—his grandfather told him to inform him when he planned to descend so he could bring someone to tell him more about it. Khaled asked to meet this person, and an old man who had been eavesdropping entered. The grandfather introduced him, saying, "This is the crypt madman, Khaled."

This man had information about the crypt and was waiting for someone to descend into it so he could share what he knew. He explained that he and Khaled's grandfather had once entered a tunnel leading to the crypt—a path requiring a certain distance to traverse—but when they descended, the light suddenly went out. He claimed it was haunted by ghouls, and everyone fled, though he later laughed and said, "The oxygen in the tunnel was low" (Saliba, 1982).

He then pulled out an old book and said:

"This book is one of a kind, written by someone who entered the crypt before."

He found it among his mother's books, but it contained only ten pages about the crypt, the rest having faded. On the last page, he had written: "I thought the real treasure was the wealth stored within, but I discovered something far more valuable—greater than the treasures of Frik."

Here, the fantastical story begins. This single sentence was enough to compel the reader to continue and push the protagonist toward adventure, entering a fantastical world filled with wonder, strangeness, and hallucination. This struck Khaled as he transitioned from his natural world to an imaginary one, where the fantastical plot truly takes shape.

He asked the old man not to descend that night if he wanted to uncover the mysterious secret in the book. According to the writer, the full moon would be shining brightly that night. Khaled descended with an overwhelming desire, continuing downward without looking below, his only goal being to pass through the tunnel as quickly as possible. When he reached the end, the path was dark and terrifying, and he began to lose oxygen. The further he went, the darker it became, and his heartbeat quickened with fear and dread that the crypt might not even exist. But then he noticed a spot of light. Crawling toward it, he pushed himself through a door, regained his breath, and found everything the book described. Suddenly, the crypt's walls began collapsing behind Khaled, intensifying his fear and panic. In an instant, he found himself sprawled across a vast desert. At first, he thought he had returned to his village, but he soon realized he was in another world, and the crypt he had come through had vanished (Halifi, 2009).

The fantastical movement in setting occurs when the protagonist finds himself in an imaginary world, with the crypt itself disappearing. He questioned himself, trying to find answers: "Wake up, Khaled! Are you dreaming or what? How did this desert get here?" His bewilderment grew when he encountered two young men fleeing, dressed strangely. He couldn't understand their dialect, nor could they understand him. His astonishment deepened when they asked him for food, and he handed them paper money, only for one of them to eat it. They told him, "The desert here is better than the Land of Zikola," and when he asked where it was, they pointed downward. His confusion increased when they called him "rich," and his amazement peaked when he arrived at a grand city with stunning scenery—various buildings interspersed with green spaces resembling farmland and bodies of water (Todorov, 1993).

Could such a sight exist in a desert? Here, a new realm was created, with the crypt serving as the transition point between the real and fantastical worlds. It became the stage for the novel's

events. The fantastical effect wasn't confined to the setting alone; it seeped into the protagonist's consciousness. Khaled remained in a state of wonder and imagination that grew with every new sight, eventually reaching the point of hallucination. This began when he saw the Land of Zikola from above and wondered, "Why did those two abandon it and prefer living in the desert? It's so beautiful—truly strange."

It's worth noting that the protagonist no longer remembered the real world he came from, not even Mona, the girl he loved to the point of madness—the very reason he was in this situation. This indicates his full transition into the fantastical realm, leaving him with endless questions sparked by the extraordinary sights. This is natural, as anyone entering a world of marvels, oddities, wonder, and astonishment—a world of imagination so unlike reality—would experience this. It is an unknown realm, completely at odds with his real world (Nora, & Ezz El-Din).

Khaled's wonder and confusion continued as he gazed at Zikola from above. "Where is this place in relation to this world? Where exactly is the Land of Zikola?" He met a young man named Yamen, and together they entered Zikola. It turned out Yamen was from Zikola, while Khaled was dubbed "the stranger"—a term that perfectly captures the divide between the real and unreal worlds. Yamen replied, "Don't you see, brother, that we're in Zikola, the Land of Intelligence?" Khaled was puzzled. "Intelligence?"

He asked. "What country or continent does Zikola belong to?" Yamen didn't understand him and simply said, "It's Zikola, that's all." Truly, this world was shrouded in mystery. Wonder and astonishment fragmented within Khaled's psyche as he observed its people, their clothing, and their ways—so different from his reality. Now fear joined his wonder and confusion—the fear of staring at anyone, unsure of their reaction, as they were so unlike him. It is human nature to be drawn to anything contrary to one's reality, sparking curiosity, thought, wonder, and sometimes even hallucination.

Among the events that heightened his astonishment was what he saw hanging on shop doors: numbers and units. What did they mean? He ate and bought clothes, but they didn't take his money. Truly astonishing. Everyone greeted him with, "We're honored by your visit, O rich one," as if it were a city of dreams.

Despite the late hour, everyone was awake, as if celebrating. A young man told him, "It hasn't started yet. Tomorrow it begins, and everyone will rejoice when they sacrifice the poorest person in Zikola—that's what sets it apart." At that moment, Khaled's tension and fear spiked, thinking he might be the poorest, but he was reassured when the young man said the poor person was already known. He explained how the process worked among the three poorest, noting that two had escaped. Pointing to the poor man's house, Khaled was shocked to see it was the home of the richest man in Egypt. His bewilderment grew when he learned that Zikola was in the year 2009—the same year as in Egypt. Overwhelmed by astonishment, Khaled lost consciousness. Was he in the past, or what?

Khaled met Eyad, and they met on Zikola Day. Eyad explained that they dealt in intelligence units instead of money, but Khaled was confused—he had eaten and bought clothes without paying. His friend clarified that as long as he saw numbers and units on shop doors, he had agreed to buy, and the intelligence units transferred automatically to the shop owner. Khaled needed to work hard to earn more units. At that moment, Khaled realized, "I must have traveled through time." It was as if he were living real events—or perhaps a contradiction, a product of the fantastic narrative woven with linguistic harmony (Belkacem, 2012).

The protagonist tried to escape Zikola, terrified by what he'd heard, but the door was locked. He returned, trying to calm himself, wondering how he could survive a full year. Later, he met a doctor named Asil, and a love story blossomed between them when she smiled at him, captivating him for a moment. He began working in Zikola, and the character gradually adapted to this fantastical reality. Once, he saved a boy from drowning without taking intelligence units. Before that, he was in a traffic accident with Asil's horse, also without units, as these were acts of humanity that required no reward.

Here, the character navigates themes oscillating between love, time, and the dream world's relationship with reality, as Jean Molino has noted in his semantic approach to recurring themes and the evolution of the fantastic. In this world, Khaled experiences love with Asil, unable to bear

parting from her, while existing in a time nearly identical between the real and dream worlds. He tries to transplant truths from his real world into this dream world but fails, trapped in a conflict between the two. He sought paper to document his journey to Zikola and to leave a note for Asil, who promised to return to hear his story but took too long. At a library, Yamen directed him to, the owner told him he'd sold a single expensive book about the Frik crypt to a strange man who loved fantasy. Khaled realized that man was his father (Nora, & Ezz El-Din).

He searched for the book, his only hope of returning to his real homeland and escaping this strange land. After searching Zikola's northern and southern regions, he found it with his brother, Hilal Hosni, who had killed their father, thinking he would inherit great treasure. However, it was just a book. It cost Khaled 500 intelligence units, plus 50 more for a horse he rented. To offset the loss, he hoped the ruler's wife would not bear a son, as Asil had told him the door opened after a year—or sooner if the child was male. When he got the book, he flipped to the tenth page, finding, as expected, a description of discovering Zikola.

In later pages, it described Zikola's people, their use of intelligence units, and the annual sacrifice of the poorest—all things Khaled knew. He turned the pages to a line that read: **"I spent my life searching for this land's secret. If someone comes after me, they must enter Zikola, be like the sun, carve through rock, and find the other crypt door right before the head"*. This riddle filled Khaled with worry, fear, and dread; he had to solve it to escape cursed Zikola (Wahba, 1984).

After long deliberation with Yamen and Asil, Khaled deduced the crypt's path lay in Zikola's western region, which he had not visited. The book's phrase *"be like the sun"* referred to the sun's movement, but *"right before the head"* remained unclear. In the western region, Asil realized *"the head"* meant the outer angle of a triangular design, as they were inside. Near the angle, they found a carved drawing. Khaled recognized it from the Frik crypt before it collapsed drawn by the book's author for whoever followed.

Yamen figured out the crypt's path was inside a two-story house 100 meters from the angle, whose owners were away trading. He offered to dig a tunnel expertly, saying, *"I know I'm betraying Zikola, but I am your close friend now."* The events here mirror reality: Yamen's humane act of helping a friend, even betraying his land, is not fantastical. The narrative straddles the real and imaginary, leaving both protagonist and reader in awe and confusion over the strange events.

As the plot progressed, the character's tragedy deepened. Khaled's search for the final exit intensified after reaching the angle. He lost intelligence units paying workers Yamen brought to dig the crypt's path and silence them—about 300 units. He fell into disarray, exhaustion, and illness.

Asil learned he had lost many units, with barely 100 left. Days passed, and Khaled worked with Yamen in the western region, checking the workers' progress. Once, he told Yamen he did not have much time and wanted to leave with Asil to his homeland if she agreed, confessing his love for her. He gave Yamen papers to deliver to her. Asil was shocked to learn he had loved Mona from the other world, making love a bridge between the two worlds—his love for Mona in reality and Asil in this one.

Asil's emotional state worsened. Where did she stand in this love? Did he still love Mona? She had not read the last paper where Khaled wrote of his love for her after Mona. Yamen later delivered it, having dropped it earlier, worsening and complicating the events. Khaled entered a struggle with fear, dread, and hallucination when soldiers seized him as one of Zikola's poorest, his fear signaling impending doom—slaughter.

Asil, too, faced a psychological conflict between her love for Khaled—confirmed after learning of his love—and saving him from death. Would she lie when Khaled and the other two were presented? As Zikola Day neared, astonishment gripped the ruler's palace when Asil vanished, and Khaled was chosen for slaughter, confirmed by Asil as the poorest (Weiss, 2005).

Unbeknownst to all, she had gone to speak with Khaled before his execution, reminding him why he did not take units for saving a drowning boy or curing a sick child while working with her. She had warned him this was Zikola, as if seeking an excuse to absolve herself of guilt, having decided the truth.

On Zikola Day, drums beat, Asil was missing, and Khaled was brought for slaughter after losing the Zikola game. The executioner raised his sword, about to strike, when the boy Khaled saved from drowning shouted, *"He's rich! He's rich!"* Yamen yelled, *"He's not poor—he's rich!"* The

mother of the sick boy cried, “He’s rich! Take me instead!” Everyone he had worked with breaking rocks shouted, “He’s rich!” Khaled was struck with immense wonder, still in conflict. Another doctor examined him, finding he had vast intelligence units—making him the richest in Zikola.

How could this be, when we know the full story? Was it his humane acts that saved him? Asil was deemed a traitor then. Yamen rushed to embrace Khaled after his release, tears of joy streaming down. The sequence of events unfolded thus.

Conclusion

Khaled raced to Zikola’s door, opening that day, elated—only to find it locked again, plunging him into despair once more. But Yamen shifted this downturn, reminding him of the dug house and revealing he’d paid its owner 200 units out of loyalty, not reward. Khaled hurried there, finding Eyad waiting. He bid everyone farewell, entered the tunnel, slid down its massive walls, and landed amid sand—just like when he left his village. Moments later, he was free of that world, returning home to find his grandfather praying at dawn, asking for his safe return. He learned Mona had convinced her father to agree to their marriage. Khaled and Mona decided to honeymoon in Zikola.

Now Khaled knew everything about Zikola—its land, people, dealings, and life. He solved the book’s riddle, penned by his father in Zikola, the land of dreams and fantasy. This journey was among his hardest, and he chose not to tell his grandfather of his parents’ deaths there. The events unfolded with excitement, suspense, and a mix of real and fantastical characters, thanks to the author’s skill in crafting the narrative and immersing readers with them brilliantly.

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