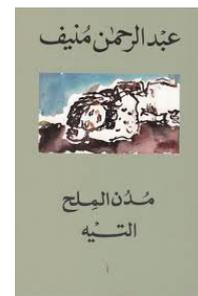
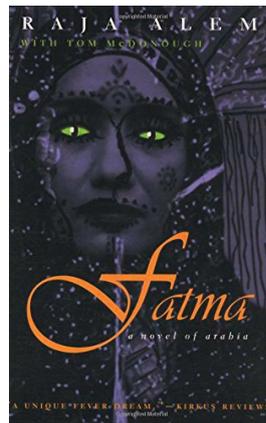
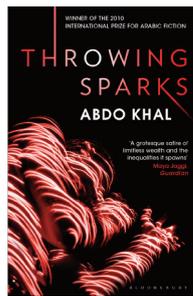


Magical realism as a form of social and political discourse in Saudi Arabia

*Where women turn to serpents
and cats eat human tongues*



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I. Introduction

Hardly any other Arab country has a reputation so full of controversies as Saudi Arabia. Orthodox religious and traditional values and norms meet with externally apparent excessive luxury and modernisation. In addition to topics such as the extremist Islamist trend of Wahhabism, the country's questionable economic outlook and the stability of its political system, international media has paid increasing attention to the different manifestations of social change detectable within Saudi society during recent years, especially since the uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. During this time, even the seemingly paralysed and rigid society of Saudi Arabia experienced a so-called 'day of wrath' – although merely in the form of proclamations and appeals within the sphere of social media channels.¹ Since oppositional political activity is not tolerated and legal political participation often ineffective and a mere façade, political discourse is mostly apparent in written form and on virtual platforms.²

In order to understand the importance of social media platforms within Saudi society – especially among the youth – one has to grasp the entire range of social and political challenges that have confronted Saudi society for numerous years. Saudi Arabia – much like the other GCC countries – has undergone significant changes regarding infrastructure, modernisation and demography due to the discovery and production of oil from the 1970s onwards. The country's population consists of a generation that grew up mostly under very poor conditions in rural areas and one that did not witness life in Saudi Arabia during the days before the discovery of oil. The latter takes luxuries such as certain technological, financial and economic achievements for granted. Hand in hand with these obvious alterations to

everyday life, a feeling of loss of national identity has overcome a large part of the Saudi Arabian population – both among the pre-oil and the oil generation. This feeling is in part triggered by the fact that the country's demography has changed significantly since the 1950s due to the massive influx of foreign – mostly Asian – labour migrants. These have not only altered the composition of the national labour market, but also made many Saudis feel like strangers in their own country: 10 million out of approximately 30 million people in Saudi Arabia do not hold the country's citizenship.³

An important socio-economic factor for general discontent is the rather low quality of education, bearing relation to the scarce employment possibilities. This has led to the situation that an increasing number of Saudi men are not able to provide for their families anymore and is also said to be one of several reasons for the growing activity of radical Jihadist groups in the country.⁴ Quota regulations initiated by the Saudi government in order to employ more Saudis have not brought the expected outcomes and have resulted in many Saudi citizens being officially employed by a company without ever having to actually work there.⁵

Another social reality that massively shapes the everyday lives of Saudi citizens is the doctrine of the Wahhabi legal scholars. Conservative views of the sexes, strict religious rules and ultra-orthodox moral values are not only the cause of massive tensions within society and among the genders, but also the reason for hindrances and difficulties in the job market, which ultimately leads to drawbacks in the country's economy.⁶ In the long run, the country's workforce will not be able to cope without skilled and educated women – an outlook that causes many citizens to face the fact that the traditional gender roles will sooner or later

¹ An exception are the uprisings of Shiite activists in the east of the country, who called for the overthrow of the monarchy in 2011 and were suppressed brutally by force (Perlov et al., *The Social Media Discourse*, 2014, 2). Discussing the issue of the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia and their use of social media as a means of protest would exceed the content of this article and should be studied as a separate matter.

² Sons, *Jugend in Saudi-Arabien*, 2016, 51.

³ Ibid. 52f., 58.

⁴ Ibid. 59.

⁵ Ibid. 53; Perthes, *Geheime Gärten*, 2006, 370f.

⁶ Sons, *Jugend in Saudi-Arabien*, 2016, 54.

also be questioned in Saudi Arabia.⁷ As far as domestic and external politics are concerned, the high expenses of the Saudi military intervention in Yemen since 2015 as well as the effect of the rapidly falling oil price on the national budget have been stirring dissent against the government among the Saudi population.⁸

II. Forms of political participation in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government has created a number of official platforms for its citizens in which critiques of social or economic problems can be expressed – although only to some extent. The best example is the country's political structure itself, which tries to keep up democratic appearances by allowing certain participatory elements. The role that male and female delegates play in the Majlis al-Shūra – the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia, which proposes laws to the king – is merely advisory and completely insignificant from a legal point of view,⁹ as is the position of the local district councils.¹⁰ Important yet discriminated against social groups – such as women or Shia Muslims – are given a minimum of representation and are integrated into the Majlis to a certain degree, yet there has been no considerable improvement of their social status in society.¹¹ Another state-run project is the so-called National Dialogue, a consultation platform which was created in 2003 as the official framework for discussions about political reforms. According to critical voices, it is merely a façade through which the monarchy aims to keep up its appearance as being in direct communication with its citizens.¹²

Since official platforms do not allow for open political discourse, social media has become the favoured tool for expressing various kinds of protest and discontent, compensating for the ban on gathering in public places. For some years now, an active social media community has been growing in the country, discussing topics of social concern such as deficiencies in healthcare or the educational system, the growing unemployment rate and the social status of women. Criticising the royal family, their political decisions or the Wahhabi clerics, however, would mean breaking a taboo and has been punished severely in the past – the most famous case being the one of the internet activist Raif Badawi, who has been detained since 2012 for apostasy and the defamation of Islam. Virtual platforms are not only being used by progressive, modern citizens though, but also to a great extent by conservative clerics and Salafists¹³ – often supported by the government – who try and use these tools to gain the attention of the masses and spread highly conservative, often radical religious content.¹⁴ Within the realm of social media, the three most-followed radical preachers in Saudi Arabia – each have between five and seven million followers – are Shaykh Salmān Al-'Ūda, Shaykh Muḥammad Al-'Arīfī and Aḥmad Al-Shuqayrī. In their posts they focus on sectarian issues (mainly anti-Shia), anti-Semitic and anti-Western polemics, and the issue of the role of women in society.¹⁵ Social media in Saudi Arabia therefore depicts both the conservative establishment of the state as well as the growing number of critical voices, mostly from the young generation.

⁷ Ibid. 56-59.

⁸ Ibid. 55f.

⁹ Ibid. 57.

¹⁰ Ibid. 58; Perthes, *Geheime Gärten*, 2006, 374f.

¹¹ Perthes, *Geheime Gärten*, 2006, 374.

¹² Sons, *Jugend in Saudi-Arabien*, 2016, 57, 59.

¹³ Here, it is important to differentiate between the terms *Salafism* and *Wahhabism*. Salafism is a name most commonly referring to an Islamic reform movement led by Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh in the late 19th century (in part due to being confronted with colonialism and what was perceived as their own society's inferiority). Central elements include the primacy of the revealed text over reason, a rejection of theological discussion, and complete adherence to Qur'an, Sunna, and consensus (ijmā'). Salafism has since then been revitalised by numerous Muslim scholars in various forms and shapes, one of them being Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhāb. His very literalist version of Salafism, promoted by the Saudi Wahhabi school, has become the most prominent worldwide due to its dissemination by the Saudi kingdom since the 1960s. Salafism comprises different trends and movements, political systems and ideologies. While the majority of them can be characterised as apolitical and non-violent, a contemporary phenomenon is also so-called Jihadism, which emphasises violence as a means of construing political identity.

¹⁴ Sons, *Jugend in Saudi-Arabien*, 2016, 58; Perlov et al., *The Social Media Discourse*, 2014, 1.

¹⁵ Perlov et al., *The Social Media Discourse*, 2014, 2.

Social media platforms and networks offer the possibility of remaining anonymous, which in a state exerting constant control and supervision within the public sphere guarantees a certain level of safety and individuality. Political discourse cannot be carried out through gatherings or protests, there are no parties that shape public political discussion and the citizen's opportunity to participate in politics is limited, to say the least. It seems safe to assume that under the given social and especially political circumstances in Saudi Arabia, protest online and in written form is not only safer, but also more effective in changing people's views in the long run than public activism.¹⁶

Blogs and forums, meanwhile, have even exceeded the level of mere non-fictional informational texts, becoming the place of origin for various forms of literature that have emerged online from social or political discourse. Raif Badawi's famous book *1000 Lashes Because I Say What I Think* is a collection of texts he published on his blog and website,¹⁷ and the novel *Girls of Riyadh* by Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea is written exclusively in the form of emails, using a linguistic mixture of Qur'anic Arabic, colloquial Saudi dialect, Lebanese dialect and "Internet language".¹⁸ Though not as frequently used on a daily basis as social media, literature in all its specific genres, forms and shapes offers another tool for expressing political discontent in Saudi Arabia – a phenomenon that has yet to be studied in all its diversity. Since most of this critical literature is banned in Saudi Arabia itself, it is through social media and the internet that it is accessible to the public and finds its way to bypass state censorship. Among the various genres prevalent within the country's literature scene, the genre of magical realism seems to be gaining increasing popularity, as it does in all of the Arab states of the Gulf region. Already famous in large parts of South and North America as well as in India, magical realism

is a highly complex and creative genre that emerges in various forms and shapes and – among other things – offers literary ways of levelling subtle political critique, or at least depicting political discourse in society.

III. On magical realism

Since the term *magical realism* was first coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to a new form of post-expressionist painting during the Weimar Republic, it has never unanimously been defined or made clearly distinguishable from neighbouring genres.¹⁹ Although its use has remained disputed by critics, the term has predominantly been applied to refer to two major periods in Latin American and Caribbean cultural history, namely the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰ Influenced by works from Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka, numerous Latin American writers during this period – among them Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo, and Adolfo Bioy Casares – have produced ground-breaking pieces that are still considered to contain core elements associated with the genre of magical realism.²¹ Whether or not the term can be applied to Latin American writing after the second half of the 20th century – namely to writers such as Gabriel García Márquez or Isabel Allende – still remains an ongoing dispute among literary critics and is a question of its precise definition and concept, although these names are the ones most associated with the genre of magical realism today.²²

Being in itself an oxymoron, magical realism describes a type of writing that merges the seemingly incongruous genres of realism and fantasy in a way that these coincide while neither one of them ever fully comes into being.²³ Within this highly complex interplay of realistic and fantastic elements it is striking that neither one of the narrative modes ever completely dominates over the other²⁴ and that the reader hereby comes to accept both concepts of reality at the same

¹⁶ For further reading see Al-Saggaf et al., *Social media in Saudi Arabia*, 2015. The authors explore the ways social media can be used by citizens in countries in which governments are not democratically elected and freedom of expression is limited, using the example of a case study in Saudi Arabia.

¹⁷ Sollich, *Yes, this book should be published!': Saudi Arabian blogger Raif Badawi's writings go West*, 2015.

¹⁸ Aspden, *Sex and the Saudis: Girls of Riyadh by Rajaa Alsanea*, 2007.

¹⁹ For a distinction between the terms *magic realism*, *magical realism* and *marvellous realism* see Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 2004, chapters 1 and 2.

²⁰ Slemon, *Magic Realism*, 1995, 407.

²¹ Flores, *Spanish American Fiction*, 1995, 189f.

²² Balderston, *Magical Realism*, 2011, 503-504.

²³ Slemon, *Magic Realism*, 1995, 409.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 410.

level – an aspect that distinguishes magical realism from the genre of fantasy.²⁵ Most magical realist texts start out with a common and everyday setting that through the use of various linguistic and narrative tools and techniques is slowly transformed into being supernatural and unreal.²⁶ As literary critic Angel Flores puts it: “It is predominantly an art of surprises. From the very first line the reader is thrown into a timeless flux and/or the unconceivable, freighted with dramatic suspense”.²⁷ Further characteristics of magical realism are its timelessness and a continuous narrative storyline that ultimately leads to one great climax of ambiguity or confusion. Most texts stand out due to a very precise and plain narrative mode as well as – despite all the unreal and fantastic – rather logical plots in which the unreal is taken for granted as part of the real.²⁸ Literature professor Maggie Ann Bowers describes it as follows: “Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits. It is therefore related to realism but is a narrative mode distinct from it”.²⁹ The genre should also not be confused with surrealism, which focuses on exploring the subconscious and the unconscious in the form of dreams or imagination. The magic in magical realism, though, is that the unordinary becomes an unquestioned part of the ordinary.³⁰

As a literary genre, magical realism offers the reader a different approach to reality, as it deconstructs what we perceive as real. By doing so, it shakes the very foundations of our concept of truth and our outlook on life.³¹ It aims to be an alternative to a world dominated by science and pragmatism, often associated with Western imperialism³² – the best example being the way magical realist texts approach history. History, for most authors of this genre as well as for post-modernist writers, is a concept shaped in exactly the way in which the person or institution elaborating on it wants it to be told, claiming it to be the only existing truth.

Magical realist texts often present different perspectives towards history, thereby underlining its ambiguity.³³ A work clearly demonstrating this phenomenon is *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, in which the author recreates history through his character's minds and memories and through this gives a unique insight into how local individuals have witnessed historical events.

For a writer, magical realism offers the possibility to question and criticise certain views, values or institutions, whether they be of social or political nature, in a subtle and creative way. For Bowers, the nature of magical realism – making the unordinary ordinary – inevitably creates a certain subversive atmosphere,³⁴ and many critics view magical realism as a form of political resistance as well as a demonstration of non-Western and non-dominant perspectives. The most famous example is the novel *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. In this and in other works the author makes such issues as civil wars or the brutality of a dictator or an army his focus. Magical realism has therefore become a particularly popular mode of writing for levelling critique against totalitarian and racist regimes, specifically within the context of post-colonial countries such as those in Latin America.³⁵ Postmodernist critic Stephen Slemon views the entire genre against the background of postcolonial discourse, seeing it not only as a means of criticising the disruption foreign rule has caused – both physically and mentally – but also as a way to cope with one's identity as a formerly oppressed culture still being patronised by the West in certain respects. According to him, the fantastic elements usually reflect local features that can come in the form of historic connotations, colloquial expressions, indigenous traditions, myths, tales and legends. By weaving them into the texts, they symbolise the way in which indigenous culture has been excluded from everyday life, from reality. Magical realism is

²⁵ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 2004, 3.

²⁶ Flores, *Spanish American Fiction*, 1995, 190.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 191.

²⁹ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 2004, 21.

³⁰ Ibid. 22.

³¹ Ibid. 64.

³² Ibid. 4.

³³ Ibid. 73.

³⁴ Ibid. 39, 64.

³⁵ Ibid. 4, 90.

the attempt to reintegrate local elements into reality again, through which they are still wandering like haunted ghosts of the past.³⁶

Despite the fact that magical realist writing usually has a clearly regional focus – most stories being set within rural areas and small towns – many present-day magical realist writers live a life shaped by globalisation, in between their country of origin and the former colony, such as the Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie. His fiction is characterised by both the local, historical, folkloristic and the global, international elements of modern every-day life.³⁷ A certain *cross-cultureness* as well as multi-lingual narrative aspects form part of what is considered to be the “new” magical realism, namely the period from the 1970s onwards until today.³⁸

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai includes the genre of magical realism and its global, cross-cultural aspects in his anthropological thesis of “the social imaginary” that he states in his work *Modernity at Large – Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* of 1996. According to Appadurai, people’s imagination and fantasies, which in most societies have long been considered residual, have nowadays become a fixed part of social life practices. This is mostly due to the globalised world we live in, in which media opens up new means of discovering ways of life in all parts of the world, offering individuals the possibilities to travel (physically or virtually) and hereby uprooting not only people, but also images and ideas – a concept that Appadurai refers to as *detritorialisation*.³⁹ Imagined lives have therefore become an important part of 21st century reality. Magical realism as a genre is a form of ethnographic writing⁴⁰ for Appadurai, since it links imagination and social life.⁴¹

“Fiction, like myth, is part of the conceptual repertoire of contemporary societies. (...) Magical realism is interesting not only as a literary genre but also as a representation of how the world appears to some people who live in it. (...) Like the myths of small-scale society (...), contemporary literary fantasies tell us something about displacement, disorientation, and agency in the contemporary world”.⁴²

Even though works by Latin American authors have long dominated our understanding of what is to be considered magical realism, the focus of critical studies on this genre has recently shifted from Latin America and the Caribbean to include writers from India, West Africa and even English-speaking regions.⁴³ For a long time, literary critics applied the concept of magical realism only to texts written in languages other than English by authors originating from non-first world parts of the globe. Including writers from Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as well as Native and African American authors in this genre represents an important change of thought within literary studies.⁴⁴ As all of these countries are former colonies or their writers are still in conditions of oppression, magical realist writing has undoubtedly become closely associated with a postcolonial writing strategy.⁴⁵

In recent years voices that claim to have discovered the appearance of magical realist texts in the Arabic countries of the Gulf have grown louder.⁴⁶ As their historical, political and social contexts – at first glance – differ immensely from those of Latin American countries and the literature in the Gulf forms a unique genre even within modern Arabic fiction, this literary phenomenon deserves special attention and closer study.

³⁶ Slemon, *Magic Realism*, 1995, 408-411.

³⁷ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 2004, 50f.

³⁸ Ibid. 57.

³⁹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 1996, 31, 53f.

⁴⁰ Ethnographic writing or an ethnography in the field of anthropology refers to a systematic and holistic study of certain groups of people or a so-called culture. It may come in form of field studies, case reports or monographies and analyses empirical data mostly acquired through interviews and detailed observation. Appadurai especially emphasises global, macro and translocal ethnographies, capturing the impact of his concept of *detritorialisation* on the imagination of local lives.

⁴¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 1996, 55.

⁴² Ibid. 58.

⁴³ Durix, *Magic Realism in Midnight's Children*, 1985, 57-63, quoted in Slemon, *Magic Realism*, 1995, 407.

⁴⁴ Weisberger, *Le Réalisme Magique*, 1982, 45, quoted in Slemon, *Magic Realism*, 1995, 408.

⁴⁵ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 2004, 46.

⁴⁶ See for example Shu’ayr, *Introduction to the Emirati Short Story*, 1998, who has coined the term *al-wāqi’iyya al-sihriyya* for magical realism in Arabic.

IV. Magical realism in the Gulf

The modern literary scene in the Arab states of the Gulf differs in many aspects from that found in the Maghreb, the Levant or Egypt and is comparably young. According to the Swedish professor of Arabic Gail Ramsay, the introduction of modern literature to the Gulf encountered very different conditions than when modern styles of expression were introduced to the rest of the Arabic-speaking world at the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1970s, when modern poetry and prose began to prosper in the Gulf, writers could benefit from other Arabic authors' experiences with these methods of writing. Innovative Western works had already been translated into Arabic and many citizens from the Gulf had a good command of foreign languages, which eased the transition to modern narrative styles.⁴⁷ However, new styles and techniques appeared at approximately the same time, meaning that in the Gulf – even less so than in the rest of the Arabic-speaking world – it is impossible to speak of a chronological development of different narrative forms, but much rather of a colourful mix of genres.⁴⁸ Western narrative forms such as the novel, the short story, free verse and prose poetry all became increasingly popular styles of writing from the 1970s onwards.⁴⁹

With regard to new topics and content, one has to acknowledge the far-reaching social and political changes that occurred in the entire Gulf from the 1970s onwards. In this very short period, the GCC countries evolved rapidly from Bedouin, tribal communities, into modernised, urban, high-tech societies. This was mainly a result of the exploration of oil and gas reserves, which led to an economic boom attracting foreign investors and accelerating the formation of nation states.⁵⁰ These economic and political processes as well as the massive influx of migrant workers raise the question of how local identity is to be preserved. Although the ruling political elites have increasingly invested in projects for the preservation of cultural heritage and

Bedouin tradition in recent years, it is precisely this political interference which complicates and often prevents the formation of a truly autonomous art and literary scene in the Gulf.⁵¹

Furthermore, when it comes to societal modernisation and economic development, the Gulf political elites are often criticised for merely importing the outward forms of Western civilisation, such as consumption habits, without enabling a change in attitudes or beliefs.⁵² This phenomenon has been described by the Palestinian historian Hisham Sharabi (1927-2005) in 1988 in his socio-political thesis of *Neopatriarchy*.⁵³ He then referred to the Levant and North Africa, but nowadays his concept is often applied to the Gulf countries' societies as well.⁵⁴ This thesis mirrors the state of mind of a generation that while having grown up in an industrialised country, still lives by traditional norms and values.⁵⁵ Sharabi argues that the patriarchal structures of society in Arab countries of the 20th century have not faded, even post-economic boom and political change, but have merely been transformed. Neopatriarchy for him therefore is not a modern, but a modernised form of the patriarchate.⁵⁶

All of the above-mentioned topics and phenomena, all the social and demographic changes in the Gulf, have been covered in the content of local poetry and prose since the 1960s. Modern poets and writers discuss for example the effect of the oil boom on the traditional way of life, modernisation and urbanisation, the emergence of class distinctions or the new, evolving role of women in society.⁵⁷ In so doing, they try to capture the feeling of confusion and forlornness between tradition and modernity while also criticising the increasing decay of moral values.

Due to political restrictions, the possibilities of a literary rebellion – as it has occurred in the rest of the Arabic-speaking countries – is much more limited in the Gulf than it has ever been in countries such as Lebanon or Egypt, and it therefore appears differently. Gail

⁴⁷ Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006, 246f.

⁴⁸ Al-Ḥağrī, *Ḥafrun fī muḥaiyalat*, 2007, 21.

⁴⁹ Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006, 250.

⁵⁰ Commins, *The Gulf States*, 2012, 197f, 294f.

⁵¹ Al-Bazei, *Tension in the House*, 2001, 269f.

⁵² Kazan, *Mass Media*, 1993, 209.

⁵³ Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, 1988.

⁵⁴ See for example Willoughby, *Segmented Feminization*, 2008, 184-199.

⁵⁵ Ramsay, *Aspects of Intertextuality*, 2006, 163; Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006, 260.

⁵⁶ Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, 1988, 3f.

⁵⁷ Torstrick et al., *Culture and Customs*, 2009, 46.

Ramsay argues that the question about the form of expression dominates over the question about the content within the literary scene in the Gulf.⁵⁸ According to Wolfhart Heinrichs, for any type of Arabic text, the form of expression has always been the criteria for its quality, not the content – a thesis that has become known as the *content-form dualism*.⁵⁹ Saudi professor Saad al-Bazei states in his paper *Tension in the House* that the identification of society with the classical forms of Arabic writing on the Arabian peninsula has ever since been exceptionally strong when compared with other Arabic-speaking regions.⁶⁰ It therefore seems plausible that for writers in the Gulf countries, breaking with the traditional forms of narration – whether they be poetry or prose – equals a revolutionary act that exceeds literary boundaries and cannot be pursued politically or banned officially.

This phenomenon may explain the success of non-Arabic forms of writing in the Gulf countries: by writing in Western forms such as the short story or free verse, poets and writers avoid using classical forms of Arabic writing and hereby are not exposed to the criticism of wanting to change and modernise local tradition. Literary critics have detected three main narrative styles in contemporary Gulf-literature: realism, modernism and magical realism. Realist works cover – very much the same as in the eponymous European genre – transformation processes in society from a critical angle, as well as the still remaining patriarchal structures. Modernist writing does treat present-day issues, but at the same time uses old Arabic forms of narration as well as such complex metaphors and wordplays that this genre is almost impossible to translate. Gulf magical realism is known to play with local popular beliefs and superstitions, such as *jinn*s,⁶¹ and transfers these into a modern setting.⁶²

While realism and modernism are originally Western styles of narration, it is interesting to see that magical realism enjoys parti-

cularly great popularity in the entire Gulf. Ramsay ascribes the appeal of non-Western literary inspiration to the often anti-Western attitude prevailing in the region – a phenomenon that the literary scholar Abu Shu'ayr named "hasāsiyyat al-hadātha" (modernism allergy)⁶³ This in turn she identifies as a result of the above-mentioned hypocritical lifestyle, in which the concept of modernity for many goes hand in hand with slowly trading in one's local identity for Western ways of living.⁶⁴ The genre of magical realism seems to correspond to the needs of many in the Gulf, as it weaves nostalgia, myth and folklore into a non-Arab and non-Western form of narration – a literary strategy that is a clear-cut reaction to the challenges of modernity and referred to by Al-Bazei as the revisionist literary trend.⁶⁵ As several papers have already discussed magical realist texts in the United Arab Emirates and in Oman,⁶⁶ this paper shall examine the specific case of Saudi Arabian magical realism. The two approaches towards this genre – by social anthropology as well as literary studies – shall be combined in order to attain a comprehensive picture of what magical realism in this country actually incorporates, and how and for what purposes it is used by Saudi authors.

V. Magical realism in Saudi Arabia

Modern literary forms and narration styles were used sporadically in Saudi Arabia from the early 20th century onwards – mostly through contacts with other Arab writers from Egypt and the Levant – and have been gradually consolidated ever since the foundation of the kingdom's first university in Riyadh in 1957. To this day, the short story and the novel are the genres that seem to dominate the modern literary scene in Saudi Arabia. Much the same as in all other Arab states of the Gulf, the development of journalism as well as the establishment of literary clubs has added to the increased use of short narrative forms, such as the short story or the essay. The first Saudi short

⁵⁸ Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006, 244.

⁵⁹ Heinrichs, *Arabische Dichtung*, 1969, 69, 75.

⁶⁰ Al-Bazei, *Tension in the House*, 2001, 268.

⁶¹ A jinn, – also djinn or genie – refers to a supernatural creature in Arabian mythology and Islamic theology. They are believed to be able to take physical shape, interact with human beings and share human emotions.

⁶² Torstrick et al., *Culture and Customs*, 2009, 46f.

⁶³ Shu'ayr, *Introduction to the Emirati Short Story*, 1998, 43.

⁶⁴ Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006, 253ff.

⁶⁵ Al-Bazei, *Tension in the House*, 2001, 271, 268.

⁶⁶ See for example Shu'ayr, *Introduction to the Emirati Short Story*, 1998; Ramsay, *Cross-Cultural Writing*, 2006.

stories were published in the literary journal *Al-Manhal* and the newspaper *Sawt Al-Hijaz* in the late 1930s.⁶⁷ Novels emerged after the short story, but immediately enjoyed great success in the country. The number of Saudi novels written and published in the 20th century exceeds 200, more and more of them also having been translated into foreign languages and having gained an international reputation.⁶⁸

In Saudi Arabia too, 20th century literature included realist and even romantic streams, before in the 1970s writers started to turn to the modernist genres of symbolism, imagism and surrealism, focusing on moments of extreme emotion and psychological experience more than on the depiction of social reality.⁶⁹ Typical themes of Saudi fiction in the second half of the last century did not differ much from the rest of the Arab states of the Gulf, also including social and cultural alienation as well as nostalgia for the life before the oil boom. Up until the 1990s, critical works of fiction usually used other Arab countries such as Lebanon or Egypt as their settings, in order to avoid censorship. With the proliferation and increased diversity of the media, though, almost no topic remains untouchable in 21st century Saudi fiction – whether it be politics, sex or religion – and state censorship is not able to control the entire outreach of social media platforms. Contrary to the widespread image of Saudi society as being the quintessence of conservatism, rigidity and “backwardness,” numerous fictional pieces have been circulating in recent years laying bare hidden features of life and society as well as shattering social and religious taboos.⁷⁰ Topics include for example exorcism, the discrimination against the Shia minority, migrant labourers, the enforcement of the death penalty and corruption.⁷¹

Among the most prominent Saudi writers of the last decade to develop experimental styles and rebellious attitudes in their narration are Gazi Al-Gosaibi, Turki Al-Hamad, Mohammed Hassan Alwan, Yousef

Al-Mohaimeed, Seba Al-Herz, Zaynab Hifni, Raja Alem, Abdo Khal and Abdulrahman Munif – most of them publishing outside of Saudi Arabia due to the ban of their works inside the country. Al-Gosaibi, Al-Hamad, Alwan and Al-Mohaimeed address highly sensitive topics surprisingly directly in their writings; they explore issues of sexuality, political underground movements and the expression of religious freedom. Seba Al-Herz and Zaynab Hifni are two Saudi female writers that have attracted international attention due to their open depiction of sexual activities (both hetero- and homosexual) and of sexual abuse, rape and domestic violence. Although these writers’ texts tackle the issue of Saudi identity and contain both global and local elements as well as an explicit political and social subversiveness, their fiction clearly falls into the genre of realistic writing. The three most famous Saudi writers fulfilling the criteria for magical realism – each in their unique way – are Raja Alem, Abdo Khal and Abdulrahman Munif.

Raja Alem’s fiction – both short stories and novels – is exuberant with the characteristics of magical realism while maintaining a specific connotation to Saudi Arabia. The author was born in the holy city of Mecca in 1970, studied English literature and currently resides in Jeddah and Paris. She has written novels, short stories and plays and won several internationally renowned literature prizes, among others the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. In her work, she creates a mysterious and unique universe, weaving together the real and the fantastic in a way that leaves the reader stunned by the multi-layered times and spaces that occur simultaneously. Almost all her texts are marked by an ahistorical and achronological approach, all the while not losing themselves in various storylines. A clear rejection of science and logical reason becomes evident when her characters overrule the boundaries of physical laws and possibilities. Alem, who states Gabriel García Márquez as an influence as well as medieval Sufi mystics Rumi and Suhrawardi, clearly accentuates

⁶⁷ Michalak-Pikulska, *Modern Literature of the Gulf*, 2016, 9f., 12; Al-Sebail, *New Voices of Arabia*, 2012, Introduction.

⁶⁸ Aboud, *Universal Elements in Saudi Novel*, 2015, 55.

⁶⁹ Michalak-Pikulska, *Modern Literature of the Gulf*, 2016, 23-30; Al-Sebail, *New Voices of Arabia*, 2012, Introduction.

⁷⁰ Al-Sebail, *New Voices of Arabia*, 2012, Introduction.

⁷¹ For an overview of modern Saudi short stories consult for example Bagader et al., *Oranges in the Sun*, 2008; Bagader et al., *Voices of Change*, 1998; Al-Sebail, *New Voices of Arabia*, 2012.

her texts with notions of Islamic mysticism, Islamic history and religious practices. Thus, in her short story *The Great Serpent* the reader travels between centuries and locations – from the life of the Islamic scholar Ibn Tufail in the 12th century AD at the Muwahideen court of Cordoba up until a modern-day Mecca – and from inside the famous philosophical work *Hai Ibn Yaqzan to Tuba*, a blessed tree believed by many Muslims to grow in heaven. *The Great Serpent* tells a story from the perspective of a “vapour,” a mysterious substance which chooses to inhabit living and fictional human as well as animal bodies for a certain amount of time – such as the body of a pigeon living in the Holy Mosque of Mecca. It has a consciousness that is able to influence the behaviour and actions of the body it inhabits.

As the narrating voice of the vapour starts to feel lonely within the body of a little Meccan girl, a serpent grows out of “its” hand and becomes an inherent part of the vapour’s “life”. Whether there is actually an animal growing out of the girl’s hand or whether this is happening in the vapour’s imagination has to be left open to interpretation. It is certain, though, that the vapour’s presence within the different bodies causes astonishment and chaos in their social environments. It is at this point that explicit criticism of Saudi society becomes apparent. When a pregnant neighbour in Mecca goes into labour, she suddenly collapses and is unable to give birth. Neither the midwife nor the bystanders know what to do and leave her for dead. However, the narrating vapour within a girl’s body – having previously lived in the body of the famous physician Ibn Tufail during the Middle Ages – knows how to perform an incision that could save the woman’s and the baby’s life. Just as the girl is about to cut open the pregnant woman’s body, “the net of wailing women [...] woven by spasmodic sobs and screams, entangled me and they tied me up”. As a result, the girl is declared mad, possessed by a *jinni*,⁷² and is locked up for many years in a room “long as a mummified serpent and attached like a parasite to the women’s guest room”.⁷³ At the end of the story, the little girl that can grow a serpent and various other animals out of her hand is married to a man who claims she is fright-

ening him and making him physically ill. As he dies, she is charged with having practiced sorcery that killed him. The narrator merely mentions that she could have resurrected her husband, but chose not to: “For every existing creature has a particular reason for his existence, and my own *raison d’être* has been to remove the stones that blocked the free flow of the animal river in all creatures. And, alas, my husband was always inimical to my river...”.⁷⁴ Both passages show clear-cut criticism of a superstitious and conservative society, refusing to open itself to innovation or any form of the extraordinary. Any unconventional behaviour is declared mad and grounds to be locked away. Very bluntly, the traditional role models are denounced and the husband is being accused of holding his wife back from freely unfolding through her true character. Tradition and folklore seem to represent backwardness in Raja Alem’s story – not (Islamic) religion and scholarship per se. It is ancient Islamic knowledge, for example, that could have saved the pregnant woman. Rather, Alem seems to criticise the way in which society has stagnated mentally and is ignorant to all other forms of life and reality than the one they claim to be right.

Alem’s 2002 novel *Fatma – A Novel of Arabia* serves as an excellent example of how the genre of magical realism is often used for the articulation of feminist purposes and to denounce the normative patriarchal discourse in certain male-dominated societies.⁷⁵ Therefore, in her paper on *Fatma*, Laila Al-Sharqi refers to Alem’s style of writing as *magical feminism*.⁷⁶ The novel tells the story of a young woman’s loveless marriage and her constant search for identity, growth, knowledge and independence.

Fatma, a young peasant girl, is married off by her father to the cruel, abusive snake-handler Sajir. Magical and realist aspects of life merge together in Fatma’s character and hereby project the numerous fluid identities Saudi women assume in their everyday lives. As Fatma is bitten by one of her husband’s snakes, she is slowly transformed from an ordinary woman into a creature that seems to be half human, half snake, bearing certain supernatural powers. Ironically, the deadly

⁷² The term *jinni* – or genie – refers to the female *jinn*.

⁷³ Alem, *The great serpent*, 2012, 328.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 334. Original emphasis.

⁷⁵ See for example Allende, *The House of the Spirits*, 1982.

⁷⁶ Al-Sharqi, *Magical Realism as Feminist Discourse*, 2016, 59.

snake's bite for her does not mean death, but the beginning of a new life. Not only do her snakelike features and abilities frighten and intimidate her husband – which entails a gradual shift of power distribution within their marriage – but being part of the world of her husband's serpents gives her a sense of belonging, liberation and independence, since until then she had to remain alone and isolated in Sajir's house. She communicates with the snakes, takes care of them and even starts to sleep in the same room with them. The fantastical elements most obviously come to effect when Fatma travels to a magical snake kingdom with her new companions and has several encounters which compare to a rite of passage – a point at which the distinctions of human and animal, life and death and physical and spiritual are ultimately confounded. The novel ends in a climactic scene showing an ultimate act of defiance by Fatma, who – as Sajir once again tries to rape her – uses her newly acquired physical strength and animalistic fury to crush his genitals between her legs. The ending may seem like a triumphant tribute to feminism, although it leaves Fatma cast out of her household, without social status or relations, wandering through the nightly streets of Mecca.

Besides broaching the issues of domestic violence, rape, erotica, homo-erotica and unhappiness in marriage, the author clearly uses magical realist techniques to depict the simultaneously existing spheres of reality in current-day Saudi Arabia, i.e. what is perceived from the outside and what forms the private lives of Saudi men and women. First and foremost, Alem plays with the negative female image prevailing in Saudi society – and many other Arab societies – namely accusing women of being the evil of the two sexes, seducing men and leading them into disaster. The link between women and Satan, evil and seduction can be traced back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament and is found likewise in Jewish, Christian and Muslim societies. By turning the female main character from an obedient, scared housewife into a liberated, self-conscious snake-woman, Alem seemingly meets the expectations of the Saudi readership and thereby affronts them with their own sexist prejudices. Turning into a serpent is Fatma's journey to her true inner self that until then had been suppressed by patriarchal domination.

The major tools used by Alem to construct an alternative reality in her protagonist's life are features of the genre of magical realism. The author lays a major focus on the use of local expressions, traditions and beliefs, such as legends, myths and the superstitious belief in genies, demons, divination and sorcery. Cultural heritage, including rituals, dances, the recitation of poetry and the worshipping of ancestors, all play a crucial role in the identity-finding process of the novel's main character. The novel also includes numerous intertextual references to works such as the Qur'an, the Old Testament and pre-Islamic and classical Arabic literature, and especially to the story-telling sequences of *Thousand and One Nights*. Much as in the short story *The Great Serpent*, the narration in *Fatma* is also characterised by ahistorical elements and the lack of chronology, as throughout the story Fatma increasingly starts to travel through epochs and begins to lose all sense of time and place.

Alem's fiction harshly denounces current-day Saudi patriarchal society and focuses on the local traditions that still play a role in certain spheres of Saudi lives but seem to get increasingly marginalised in a superficial society that appears to lose its local identity within the globalised world of today. A Saudi writer whose magical realist fiction can be interpreted on a more political level than Alem's is **Abdo Khal**. Although his most famous novel *Throwing Sparks* – which won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2010 – makes no direct remarks about Saudi politics, it can most certainly be read as an analysis of the relationship between the individual and the Saudi state, both its political and religious components, condemning the vicious circle many citizens find themselves trapped in on their way to escape life's sorrows and troubles. Khal, who was born in rural Saudi Arabia in 1962, studied political science and currently lives in Jeddah. Although he continues to be the editor-in-chief of a Saudi newspaper, most of his novels are not sold in the country. *Throwing Sparks* was banned in Saudi Arabia until the day it officially won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, which is partly funded by the kingdom.

Magical realist features in *Throwing Sparks* appear to the reader only at a closer look and are certainly not as prominent as in Raja Alem's fiction. But it is the overall undertone of his enraptured fiction and the fact that

logical questions bound to be stirring within the reader never get answered that make it valid to classify his novel as magical realist. At first glance, *Throwing Sparks* may simply be the story of Tariq, who at 50 reflects on his childhood in the poverty-stricken coastal suburb of northern Jeddah and on his later decision to leave this neighbourhood in order to work for the cruel and powerful owner of a magnificent marble palace built by the sea during his youth. The 31 years of his life that Tariq works in this palace seem to the reader like a nightmare, filled with indescribable violence and perversion. He is forced to sexually assault and torture the palace owner's enemies, a task that over time seems to deprive Tariq of human emotions and leaves him hollow and hopeless in the end. Tariq's character is ambiguous from the very start though: having grown up in very poor surroundings he begins roaming the streets early on and discovers alcohol, drugs and crime, including the raping of young boys. During the novel his feelings of regret are very limited and the extent of what his character has become unfolds in a horrific scene in which he cuts off his aunt's tongue with a razor blade and feeds it to a cat.

When looking at the novel from a different perspective, one finds a second narration and feels slightly reminded of the Egyptian prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz's groundbreaking novel *Children of the Alley*, an allegory of the spiritual history of humankind. The setting of *Throwing Sparks* comprises an almost mystical house, throughout the entire novel merely referred to as 'The Palace', inhabited by a man whose name, profession and origin remain completely in the dark. Neither does the reader learn the reason for his numerous enemies nor why he needs a 'punishment squad' for anything other than sadism. The owner of 'The Palace' is simply called 'The Master' by everyone. The mysticism that surrounds this palace and its inhabitants is further consolidated in the abstract way it is described and in the detailed depiction of the orgies of violence taking place in it. The fact that the poor neighbourhood of Tariq's childhood is called 'The Firepit' and the people of the town name the palace's district 'The Paradise', as well as the omniscience of 'The Master', suggest an association with a Qur'anic (or biblical) setting of the human in

between hell and paradise observed by an omnipotent god. Further evidence of the novel's strong religious connotation is its title – "Indeed it [the hellfire] throws sparks as huge as a fortress" is a part of Surah 77 and refers to the Day of Judgement – as well as its paratexts, which contain a larger part of Surah 77 and an excerpt of the Old Testament, namely The Song of Solomon. Taking further textual evidence into consideration – such as the strikingly numerous mentions of Tariq as a "fallen" person, which reminds one of the fallen angel Lucifer – one can read *Throwing Sparks* as a parable on the human that tries to flee from his life in hell to paradise, only to find that the promised wonders and riches take the shape of a terrifying, almost supernatural scenario of horror from which there is no escape.

Khal manages to write in a realistic style, but at the same time creates an atmosphere of non-reality that leaves the reader lost in reverie as to place and time and to the degree of depicted reality. He merges criticism of religious institutions, politics and the superficiality and corruption of the Saudi upper class – all of which form the ruling elite in current-day Saudi Arabia. His bluntness when it comes to these topics is surprising: "Lust, blood, victims: the unholy trinity that contravenes the teachings of every religion and sacred tradition. It is this alternative trinity that delineates the parameters of human endeavour. This is how history is made. [...] Religion is a long, dark tunnel: we pick and choose our way through it to justify our goals, both honourable and immoral. [...] I have been struggling with my beliefs day after day for fifty years."⁷⁷ The subversive attitude typical for magical realism also clearly finds expression in passages such as the following: "Slavery has not been abolished. It exists in many guises and lurks hidden behind all sorts of facades. How I yearned to be my own master. Wealth and power are the foundations of sovereignty: throughout history these alone have determined whether one belonged to the master class or to the mass of slaves. Without wealth and power, we are slaves even if it does not feel like it."⁷⁸ Last but not least, it should be mentioned that the English translation of Khal's novel fails to capture his distinctive linguistic style, which merges Qur'anic Arabic with dialectal Hijazi Arabic –

⁷⁷ Khal, *Throwing Sparks*, 2014, 8, 9.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 248.

a narrative feature that can certainly be deemed characteristic of magical realism, aiming to depict life in rural areas.

Abdulrahman Munif's fiction caused a stir within Saudi Arabia in the 1970s since it includes blunt criticism of the country's political institutions as well as the ruling elites and the rich upper class. Most of his works were banned in the country and Munif even had his Saudi citizenship revoked. Born in 1933 in Amman to an Iraqi mother and a Saudi father, Munif studied in Baghdad, Cairo and Belgrade, lived in Syria, Lebanon and France and later worked as an economic specialist for OPEC. From the 1980s onwards he devoted his life solely to writing fiction and is counted among the most renowned Saudi authors to this day.

Munif gained international attention for his quintet series *Cities of Salt* (published between 1984 and 1989), the first two out of five novels to have been translated into English so far.⁷⁹ The first and most famous of the novels – *Al-Tih* (The Wilderness) – depicts the transformation of Saudi society as oil is discovered on the peninsula during the first half of the 20th century and the boom sets in, illustrating how life in a secluded and traditional Bedouin village named *Wadi Al-Uyun* is disrupted by American labourers and scientists seeking to exploit the local oil deposits. The novel describes how these foreigners turn from visitors into permanent residents, building first a settlement and then an entire village. The cooperation between local rulers and the intruders soon creates tension among the Bedouin tribes, who are forced to leave their rural villages and whose young men have to take up work in and around the American village. Formerly unknown issues such as displacement, salaried menial labour and the concept of real estate give way to poverty, opportunism and corruption, confronting the locals with an economic and political shift of power taking place within their society.

Though the novel reads realistically for the most part, it includes certain features that are characteristic of magical realism. First of all, neither time nor place are ever specifically mentioned – for all we know, this village could be located anywhere in the Arabian Desert. The assumption that the setting

takes place in Saudi Arabia certainly comes to mind, but in the end is a conclusion merely drawn by the reader. Although the mentioning of certain machines, telephones or cars leads the reader to believe that the story takes place in the early 20th century, the novel at the same time appears as a modern fairy tale. This is most significantly triggered through a character named Mut'ib Haddal, a local resident who is most suspicious about the foreign visitors and repeatedly warns the other inhabitants of *Wadi Al-Uyun* of the intruder's plans. The day the village is levelled by bulldozers Mut'ib Haddal vanishes in a mysterious way. From this point on, he appears as a ghost-like figure in the form of a vision inside certain character's imaginations. He haunts them specifically in moments of sadness and desperation and is widely held responsible for every misfortune in the foreigners' endeavours:

“In this moment a streak of lightning parted the sky that left the people trembling with fear and on the opposite side of the wadi appeared Mut'ib Haddal. From afar, he seemed like a fierce giant, dressed in white. He held in his right hand a staff and pointed with it towards the people gathered on the shore. He appeared so clearly, that it almost seemed as if he wasn't standing on the other side of the wadi, but in the middle of the water. His voice was strong and drowned out the thunder, the sound of the water and the screams of women and children. ‘Do not fear, not of what you are seeing now!’ he called, and the crowd of people fell silent. In anguish the people waited for what would happen next, and once more he raised his voice: ‘This is the end of the good times’. [...] ‘That, what the future will bring to us, will put the fear of God into the bravest ones!’⁸⁰

This mystical tale of Mut'ib Haddal runs like a continuous thread through the story and adds to the plot the atmosphere of the past feverishly haunting the present. Another highly important feature of the book is the fact that the story – unfolding over a period of time that was pathbreaking for the further development of Saudi Arabia – is told entirely

⁷⁹ New York Times, *Abdul Rahman Munif, 71, Novelist*, 2004.

⁸⁰ Munif, *Salzstädte*, 2005, 136f. Author's note: Translated by the author from German into English.

from the perspective of the inhabitants of *Wadi Al-Uyun* and depicts all players from the official side as disruptive factors. It is through their eyes exclusively that we witness the transformation of Saudi society into what it has become today. Through this, Munif deliberately creates a new view of the country's history as opposed to certain ways in which it has been depicted at the official state level. The creation of a parallel – or even an alternative – history being a prominent feature of magical realism, Munif seems to be aiming to offer the Saudi readers a better understanding of their individual place in the country's history as well as within present-day social, political and economic circumstances. With its magical features and subversive attitude toward the evolution of Saudi elites and rulers, Munif uses magical realist writing techniques to merge issues of national identity with the critical aspect of the country's historic development, very much reminiscent of the Libyan author Ibrahim Al-Koni's style of writing – a prominent representative of Arabic magical realism who mostly addresses the problems in Libyan society caused through Italian colonisation. The title *Cities of Salt* may well point to the fragile origins of the current Gulf monarchy, lacking strong, sustainable foundations – both social and political.

VI. Conclusion and outlook

Although more thorough studies of modern Saudi fiction will have to be made in the future in order to clearly identify specific trends in the kingdom's literature, this short analysis aimed to present three of the most prominent modern Saudi authors representing the genre of magical realism and point out the ways in which this style of writing contributes to the country's social and political discourse. While each author uses magical realist elements in their own way, serving specific purposes, all works discussed here share the characteristic of addressing a specific group of people or a phenomenon in a subversive manner, blaming them for social and political grievances. For Raja Alem, this is a male-dominated neopatriarchal society that prevents women from finding their true identity, while Abdo Khal and Abdulrahman Munif denounce the development and the state of the country's political system and its ruling elite. Magical realist techniques hereby

offer an innovative and critical view of what we perceive as reality. Representing a certain state of mind and outlook on present day life in Saudi Arabia, these magical realist texts can be classified as ethnographic writing in line with Appadurai's description and demands of ethnographies as stated above. Only if we question the reality around us can we shake the foundations of what we consider the truth.

As seen before, magical realist writing is mostly associated with postcolonial fiction, especially regarding South America, India or Africa. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia – as well as all of the Arab states of the Gulf – has never been an official colony, there are several elements apparent in Saudi magical realist literature that are likewise to be found in postcolonial writing. Among these are the way the country's history is depicted – namely in an ahistorical, achronological and sometimes blissful way, mostly through the eyes of characters whose lives are significantly shaped by certain historic events. Other elements include the ambivalent attitude of magical realist literature towards national identity, which is expressed through the depiction of the parallel realities the characters live in as well as the collision of global and local elements and a subversive, reproachful attitude towards repressive political entities. Though not representing colonialism, the oil boom in Saudi Arabia can be regarded as a similarly severe incision in the country's society, causing economic and demographic changes and ultimately resulting in direct interference from foreign players in the national economy and a crisis of identity among Saudi citizens. Much the same as in "classical" magical realist literature, the fiction in question also addresses repressive political regimes in which citizens have no greater say. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there is an existing synergy of worldly and spiritual power which enables the state to penetrate almost every aspect of social life in the country, much more so than in other Arab countries. Therefore, in most works of fiction criticism is levelled against either representatives of politics or religion, or against the social norms which develop due to the authority these institutions have, laying the groundwork for a repressive society stagnating at the interpersonal, sexual and academic levels.

Summarising the discussed works, magical realism as a literary genre offers writers under a repressive regime and in a patriarchal society the possibility to deal with their cultural and national history and identity and level criticism against political systems and social patterns while still being able to write creatively, individually and indirectly. Despite the fact that several of the discussed works are or at least have been officially banned in Saudi Arabia, thanks to social media they are still circulating among Saudi citizens. This rules out the option of

classifying them as works of exile literature and makes them an essential influence on Saudi society. Considering this important contribution of literature to social and political discourse and when categorising magical realism as form of ethnographic writing, it seems indispensable to consult these voices of fiction when analysing Saudi civil society. With regard to literature studies, a highly promising avenue of research would be to expand the genre of magical realism to its appearance in the Arab states of the Gulf as a whole.

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