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Magical Realism and Metafiction in Post-Arab spring Literature: Narratives of Discontent or Celebration?

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I am a doctoral researcher at University of Glasgow, UK. My major interest lies in researching newer possibilities and likes to explore new areas related to the current situation of Postcolonial countries (South Asian and Middle Eastern Countries) and its effect on the contemporary literature. Along with publication in different journals, I have also presented seven papers at different International and National conferences held at Pakistan, UK and USA.

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Abstract

My study is an attempt to examine recent developments in post-Arab Spring fiction by Anglo-Arab immigrant authors. Instead of conforming to the traditional narrative modes and strategies, post-Arab Spring literature provides a bitter evaluation of the so-called Arab Spring and deconstructs the revolutionary rhetoric that heralds a new era for the Arab world by producing a counter-narrative. The selected novels, Karim Alrawi's *Book of Sands* and Youssef Rakha's *The Crocodiles*, use peculiar strategies to portray the fractured and cryptic realities of the Arab world. Written within the framework of realism, utilizing the literary strategies of postmodern literature, these writers unsettle the boundaries of literary genres and give rise to diverse phenomenal trends in Arab fiction. Using magical realism, Alrawi expands the traditional realist narrative style by blending realist elements with magical. Similarly, through persistent self-reflection on his own process of writing, Rakha formally exhibits the precarious scenario of the Arab world. Drawing on the theory of Magical Realism and Metafiction, these works are investigated in order to emphasise how this new writing reflects the unstable reality of the Arab Spring. While it is too early to discern the characteristics of Post-Arab Spring literature, my research is a contribution to developing a framework in which to do so.

Key words: Arab Spring, Post-Arab Spring literature, Reality, Magical Realism, Metafiction.

Introduction

At the end of 2010 and in the beginning of 2011, the world witnessed massive protests across the Middle East referred to as the Arab Spring. By toppling the longstanding regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab uprisings seemed to initiate a democratic journey. However, the results were rather disappointing because the outcome of Arab insurgencies proved to be chaos, fragmentation, and the reestablishment of authoritarianism. The strong determination of people to overthrow the regime turned into an ill-starred reality when the military hijacked the revolution in different parts of the Arab world and crushed it ferociously. This worsening situation of the Arab Spring serves as a trope for socio-political activism in the work of Arab writers. The unprecedented vigor and velocity of the Arab Spring becomes an empowering political aesthetic and therefore a new generation of Arab writers has transformed the nature of Anglo-Arab fiction. From the traditional notion of what Geoffrey Nash calls the Anglo-Arab encounter, a myriad of themes emerges. Post-Arab Spring literature reflects the aftermath of recent events, whether it is chaos, disintegration and mass repression, transition of government or war. It is very hard to capture this sense of uncertainty in the post-Arab Spring scenario and thus many writers 'admit their difficulty of writing about such dramatic changes, and culturally emotively intense events'.¹ Given this context, my research focuses on the particular ways through which Arab literature captures the complexity of the historical events of 2011 in the Arab world.

The two novels, *Book of Sands* by Karim Alrawi and *The Crocodiles* by Youssef Rakha that I discuss here, use peculiar strategies to portray the fractured and cryptic realities of the Arab world. Both writers belong to Egypt and participated in the uprising against Mubarak's dictatorship. Set in Cairo, *The Crocodiles* is a metafictional novel that presents Egyptian society during and after the Arab Spring. *Book of Sands* employs magical realism and opens in the unnamed capital of an unnamed country. Alrawi purposefully keeps the setting of the novel unknown because it allows him to present the worsening situation of all countries involved in the Arab uprising. Written within the framework of realism, utilizing the literary strategies of postmodern literature, these novels unsettle the boundaries of literary genres. I argue that it is 'the realities of power and authority' that inform the work of both these writers.² Consequently, these writers establish their resistance by using diverse literary strategies to portray the present uncertainty and the harsh reality of the Arab world. Building on the theoretical tenets of magical realism and metafiction, I suggest that in the context of the 2011 uprisings, both Alrawi and Rakha are unsettling generic boundaries whilst seeking 'rupture and continuity with the narrative modes and strategies' of both earlier and current Arab writers.³ These two writers produce counter-narratives which undermine the revolutionary rhetoric that has been acclaimed by the new rulers. John Erickson argues that 'all fiction makes things up, the difference is how and to

¹ Alessandro Buontempo, 'The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent: Al-Tabur by Basmah Abd Al-Aziz and Al-Tamsih by Yusuf Raha', *La rivista di Arablit* 9, no. 10 (2015): 38-53.

² Edward Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

³ Buontempo, 'The Egyptian Revolution and its Discontent', 38.

what purpose'.⁴ The reality that a writer aims to portray in his or her fiction depends upon the 'verisimilitude – making things seem real'.⁵ In this regard, magical realism, notes Stephen Slemon, is seen to provide a real social condition and works as a 'speaking mirror'.⁶ Similarly, given the inherent unreliability of language to portray reality, a metafictional text stresses narrative strategies to the extent that it takes its own self as its subject matter and thus, in its highly self-referential form, is able to deliver a new kind of reality. Alrawi's use of magical realism and Rakha's deployment of metafiction not only question the relevance of reality but also interrogate the traditional narrative modes and strategies used in Arab literature.

The Real and The Magic in Alrawi's *Book of Sands*

Magical realism, a term coined by German critic Franz Roh, combines magical and fantastic elements with reality. 'Proximity' is the fundamental organizing principle in the magical realist text in which 'contradiction[s] stand face to face, oxymoron march in locked step --- and politics collide with fantasy'.⁷ Magical realism is a complex literary genre first associated with Latin American writers and later becoming 'a language par excellence', especially for postcolonial writers due to its prioritising of 'non-western cultural system by privileging mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology and tradition over innovation'.⁸ By combining two worlds that are apparently irreconcilable, magical realist texts microscopically reflect the political tension in the colonized and the postcolonial world. In the words of Wen-Chin Ouyang, the trope of magical realism is inherently 'political concerned not only with the continuous influence of empire in the postcolonial world' but also foregrounds the corruption, authoritarianism and despotism of the postcolonial states.⁹ Most magical realist texts are written in response to totalitarian regimes. For example, North American writers use magical realism to criticize North American hegemony in their region. Toni Morrison writes her magical realist novel, *Beloved*, in response to American slavery, while Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* critiques Gandhi's autocratic regime. In this regard, magical realism is an aesthetic expression that is used by Anglo-Arab writers to portray the despotic regimes of the Arab world. By blending magical realism with the austere realities of the autocratic regime, Karim Alrawi shows the regimes of the Arab world as embodying neo-colonial practice that perpetuates bribery, corruption and authoritarianism. He depicts corrupt bureaucracies that are alienated from the social realities of the ordinary people. The corrupt bureaucrats bribe their own people because 'bribery is simply the cost of getting anything done' in the Arab world.¹⁰ Therefore, people, even though if they do not want to partake in corruption, they 'feel complicit in the general state of corruption'.¹¹

⁴ John D. Erickson, 'Magical Realism and Nomadic Writing in the Maghreb', in *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed, Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2005), 247-255.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁶ Stephen Slemon, 'Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 407-426.

⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (see note 6), 1-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Wen-Chin Ouyang, 'The Politics of Magic', in *A Companion to Magical Realism* (see note 4), 153-155.

¹⁰ Karim Alrawi, *Book of Sands: A Novel of the Arab Uprising* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2015), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Book of Sands: A Novel of the Arab Uprising offers an interplay of the real and the magical element which throws light on the harsh reality of the Arab world where ‘babies decide not to be born’¹² and ‘birds [are] flitting and pecking’¹³ everywhere. The real world of this novel is filled with so many magical happenings, yet it does not distort reality or create a fantastic world but intensifies the categories of reality. By creating such an extreme state, Alrawi tries to capture the contested reality of the Arab world. The novel is primarily concerned with the Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring day to day life of the Arab world. Alrawi’s artistry lies in his ability to transform the everyday harsh reality of the Arab world into magical elements. For example, the uprising itself is introduced in a very natural way via the description of the flocks of birds that ‘rise and settle, flutter between buildings, perch on balconies and windowsills’.¹⁴ There is nothing remarkable, nothing marvellous in the fact that to stop people protesting, the Arab government ‘seals the square’¹⁵ but the ‘feathered emissaries’¹⁶ start protesting against them. People are not surprised by this incredible event; instead their reaction towards the hovering of birds is similar to the inhabitants of Macondo in Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where many yellow butterflies arrive in town. People do not marvel at the sight but are annoyed and irritated due to the ‘swarms of birds’ as they cause delay in their daily business.¹⁷ The uniqueness of Alrawi’s protest resides in the fact that it emanates from nature. By showing nature as a protesting agent, Alrawi reflects the deep seated aversion of Arab people to authoritarianism. As the novel progresses, it seems that all its elements are combined in such a way as to signal that something is going to happen, yet no one reads it as an extraordinary event.

Following the lineage of Latin American writers to Rushdie, different writers use this technique for different purposes. From this perspective, Anglo-Arab authors do not simply exhaust the technique of magical realism, instead they blur the magical and the real to reveal the brutal reality of the Arab Spring and the post-Arab Spring’s grievous politics. In addition to politics, Alrawi covers the broad range of issues of the Arab world like religious beliefs, identity politics, and superstition with the help of magical realism and carves out a new vision from the genre. Through the inclusion of magical events, Alrawi offers an allegorical representation of the despotic regime of the Arab world. In the very beginning of the novel, Alrawi denounces the ruthless despotic regime by blurring the boundary between magic and real where ‘mother ceases to give birth’.¹⁸ Alrawi shows the magical occurring as an everyday event and thus no rational explanation is offered for such unusual acts. Instead, the presence of unusual happenings is accepted as being as valid as the natural. For example, the novel opens on a normal working day when a child, Neda takes her father’s ‘hand to cross snarled traffic’ and like a traffic rush on the road, ‘flights of starlings sweep over minarets and cathedral cupolas’.¹⁹ The arrival of a flock of starlings is not considered as something marvellous but a normal phenomenon. By shunning the rational explanation, Alrawi seems to celebrate the magical event and write a story from the perspective of the common man.

¹² Ibid., 1.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

The theme of magic permeates the novel on various levels. In the first form, magical elements are related to a belief system in which a person firmly believes in unseen mysterious forces of nature like ghosts, jinn etc. For example, before marriage, a girl in the Arab world is required to 'spen[d] her days standing over burning censers calling on the *jinn* lords to make her fertile'.²⁰ Similarly, a man is given a kind of magical 'potion of yohimbe' to drink in order to 'strengthen his seeds and [to] ensure he produce[s] a boy'.²¹ People in the Arab world even link natural forces with the presence of spirits and name them accordingly, as they believe that winds along with 'swirls of dust' are 'caused by mischievous sand demons and those that would become great maelstroms whipped up by battles between afrit and jinn with scimitars that flash lightning'.²² Whereas in the second form of magic, a writer goes against natural forces. Considering this, the use of magic in *Book of Sands* opposes natural forces which is ironic as well as symbolic. For instance, Alrawi's use of 'the multitude of flocks' causes 'chaos' in the real world in a way that becomes satirical.²³ On the one hand, authorities are killing their own people (common masses), whereas, on the other hand, creatures like birds stand in solidarity with the people because 'birds on the wing [is] a community like those of humans' and they are 'raised to the heavens by the Almighty'.²⁴ When students come out to protest, police arrest them and demand that they should 'remove [their] watch and empty [their] pockets into a bowl on the desk'.²⁵ They 'slap, and slap [them] again' and then 'knock [them] sideways'.²⁶ They even stub a cigarette 'into the soft underside of [their] arm'.²⁷ These examples show the helplessness of the people at the hands of a brutal regime who is torturing them to the extent that their bodies become 'a locus of pain beyond anything [they] ha[ve] known, beyond any limits [they] could endure'.²⁸ In this situation of utter helplessness when governments build walls to shut down every opportunity for the people, the flock of birds comes out to help them and thus plays the role of emissary. This is reminiscent of the way birds were sent with 'burning stones on Abraha the Abyssinian with his mighty elephant'.²⁹ In such a state of dejection and destitution, when fellow countrymen are killing each other, people stop believing in human beings and call the spirit of the dead. For instance, through by pirouetteing and spinning in 'the city of the Dead', Neda 'ma[kes] a wish' with a belief that dead ones 'have special powers from being in heaven, to make things right' on earth which are no more in control of them.³⁰ Thus through the insertion of magical elements in

²⁰ Ibid., 209.

²¹ Ibid., 214.

²² Ibid., 203.

²³ Ibid., 41.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

²⁵ Ibid., 34.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁹ Ibid., 47. This refers to the story of the governor of Abyssinia, Abraha Al-Ashram, who tried to attack Ka'ba (The Holy place of worship for Muslims). Abraha gathered his army and elephants and marched towards Makkah. However, on his way to Makkah, the elephants kneeled down and refused to march forward. Abraha tried everything to make them stand again but they did not move. Abraha though was still willing to go in the direction of Makkah. Meanwhile, Allah (SWT) sent birds that resembled a hawk having a stone in their beak, legs and feathers. These birds then dropped these stones on the Abyssinians and destroyed the whole army.

³⁰ Ibid., 53.

the real world, Alrawi reveals the animosity of the Arab people and can also show his solidarity with the oppressed against tyrannical rule. It is worth noting here that Alrawi's usage of magical elements has a twofold purpose. Not only does it expose the atrocities of the Arab government but it helps to unveil the superstitious belief of the Arab world too. It also indicates that Alrawi utilizes both kinds of magic: ontological as well epistemological magic.

Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria is the first critic to divide magic in magical realistic narratives into two categories: ontological magic originating in 'native beliefs'³¹ or from 'the cultural context in which the text is set'³² and epistemological magic – stemming from unusual sources which is 'not common to the narrative setting'.³³ Based purely on the writer's intention, epistemological magic can also be termed what Jeanne Delbaere calls 'scholarly magical realism' and a writer uses it 'to produce a particular narrative effect'.³⁴ Magical realist writers usually pick one of these magical effects: Salman Rushdie uses ontological magic by incorporating the magic of Shiva - one of Hindu's Gods in his novel, *Midnight's Children*, whereas Tahar Ben Jelloun uses epistemological magic in his novel *The Sand Child* in which the protagonist keeps on changing its gender to dismantle the universal logic of identity. However, Alrawi employs both of these types of magic in his novel. For example, the frequent appearance of spirits throughout the novel reflects the superstitious beliefs of Arab people and their culture. Alrawi has also incorporated the myth of ghoul and has incorporated repeated references to 'the great lord of the afrit' who can 'separate the ocean into dry land. Turn on and off the light of the sun'.³⁵ These examples illustrate that Alrawi's utilization of ontological magic reveals the irrational belief systems of the Arab. Similarly, with the help of epistemological magic like 'the alley thick with birds' along with the crowd of protestors, Alrawi seems to create the state of urgency against the despotic regimes of the Arab world where even the walls erected by the government 'call for the fall of tyrants'.³⁶

Alrawi's artistry lies in the fact that he materializes both kinds of magic at two levels in the narrative. Gerard Genette analyses different forms of narration and offers a model of narrative levels.³⁷ He identifies three levels of narrative. The outermost level is extradiegetic which is concerned with narration itself. At this level, the narrator tells a story but he remains an outsider and indicates no personal involvement in the story. For example, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is the embedded first person narrator who recounts his story, however, besides Marlow's voice there is another frame narrator who keeps on interrupting and even accosts Marlow time and again, yet that narrator has no personal involvement in the story. The narrating act described within the first level of narrative is intradiegetic and its narrator plays a full part in the main story; finally, events narrated by a fictional character embedded in the intradiegetic is known as metadiegetic. Alrawi employs the epistemological magic in the very beginning of the novel at the extradiegetic level of narration, whereas ontological magic appears at the metadiegetic level

³¹ Jenna Pabalate, 'The Destabilizing Strategies of Magical Realism in Postcolonial Narratives: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Salman Rushdie' (master's thesis, California State University, 2007), 6.

³² Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2004), 86.

³³ Pabalate, 'The Destabilizing Strategies of Magical Realism', 7.

³⁴ Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 87.

³⁵ Alrawi, *Book of Sands*, 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷ David Herman and others, eds., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 359.

of narration. However, later Alrawi fuses the boundary between both narratives and it becomes difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. Instead, the magical elements of both levels assist each other. For example, the novel opens in the real Arab world where pregnancies are protracted and its atmosphere is clouded with 'the chattering swarm' of birds.³⁸ The magical events at the extradiegetic level of narration shows the unusual element of fantasy in a naturalized way, and these fantastic elements do not seem to dominate the real world. Rather, in a very usual and ordinary real world, babies refuse to be born and the city is swarmed by birds. Alrawi then inculcates magical events at the metadiegetic level of narration by using the technique of narrating a story within a story. For example, the story of the wishing rose, which appears to be a fairy tale initially narrated by the protagonist, Tarek, to his daughter, Neda, a child protagonist of the novel. However, later on, readers find out that it serves as a supporting sub-plot for the main plot of the novel because many incidents of this magical story help to reveal the mystery of the main plot and complete its actions. In so doing, the magical element is increasingly linked with the real world and readers ultimately become conscious of magical depth in the real world. At this juncture, Alrawi achieves 'the veritable aim of the magical realist: to capture the magic that palpitates in things'.³⁹

Given this context, I argue that magical realism in *Book of Sands* is a powerful hybrid of the realist and the magical elements. It is at once a realistic novel about the brutal autocratic regime of the Arab world and at the same time a fairy tale of magical incidents where a magical 'wishing rose'⁴⁰ of the fairy world is needed 'to break the spell on babies'⁴¹ in the real world. Alrawi mythologizes his real story by using the myth of the ghoul, considered an evil spirit in Arabic mythology that consumes human flesh. Unlike the magical elements which exists at the extradiegetic level of narration, the story of the ghoul exists at the metadiegetic level of narration as it is narrated by Tarek to his daughter, Neda. Alrawi artistically links the myth of the ghoul with real characters and it has been noticed that characters of the real world are drawn from the magical world. In the beginning it seems as if Tarek is narrating a fairy tale of three sisters to his daughter, Neda, in front of whom 'mother-ghoul' appears and says to them that she 'could gopple [them] all from [their] toes to [their] curls'.⁴² To save themselves from mother-ghoul, all three sisters 'ran as fast as their legs could carry them'⁴³ and then parted on the drastic journey 'searching the wishing rose in the emerald oasis of the amber desert' to 'repel every evil and break any spell'.⁴⁴ However, as the novel progresses, the three sisters are not part of a fairy tale but of the real world and Neda is a daughter of one of those sisters. In this way, Alrawi's novel neither settles completely in the realm of realism nor in the fantastical world of magic. The two realms never claim superiority over another. Instead, by deconstructing the binary between magic and the real, Alrawi does not abandon the world of rational faculty but allows it to exist side by side with the magical world. For instance, in the real Arab world there exists a sanctuary which is 'the tombs of seven angels each covered in a cloth of different colour' where people go to tie, untie and retie different coloured ribbons and threads for their 'wishes [to] come true'.⁴⁵

³⁸ Ibid., 1.

³⁹ Stefan Sperl, 'Empire and Magic in a Tuareg Novel', in *A Companion to Magical Realism* (see note 4), 237-246.

⁴⁰ Alrawi, *Book of Sands*, 27.

⁴¹ Ibid., 185.

⁴² Ibid., 26.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 139.

Magic permeates in the lives of Arab people and they fail to acknowledge the tension that exists between the real and magic in the world they inhabit. It is noteworthy that Alrawi achieves such exceptional hybridity with the help of defamiliarization.

As Scott Simpkins notes, magical realist authors defamiliarize familiar objects in order to ‘prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief’⁴⁶. In so doing, these writers radically stress those elements of reality which are present in the real world but stay invisible due to the hegemonic structures of society. It is through the element of magic that magical realist writers reveal the atrocities of the real world and make it alarming as well. Unlike the fairy tale or utopian fiction, magical realist narratives are drawn from realistic grounds ‘to create an alternative world that corrects often skewed representations of historical events and reality created by the centre’⁴⁷. The presence of the realistic world in the magical realist text ‘requires the reader to look towards reality and not away from it in order to reassess historic and future events from an alternative perspective’⁴⁸. For example, a range of magical and fantastical happenings like swarms of birds that ‘drop in torrents towards congested streets of early morning traffic’⁴⁹ invites us to think otherwise because the protest against the despotic regime has been dispersed by ‘the riot police’ that ‘kept up their attack all night with gas and bullets’⁵⁰ yet could not disperse the ‘silver flights across the sky and flocks in the streets’⁵¹ that ‘induce in [them] feeling of unease’.⁵² The way it disturbs everyday business, the intermingling of magic with the real world in magical realist texts also disrupts narrative logic and creates ‘contradictory understanding of events and unsettling doubts’ which either prompts us to question preconceived societal values and traditions, or creates doubt in readers about the representation itself.⁵³ In any case, magical realist texts encourage resistance to monolithic interpretation and a monologic culture and politics. *Book of Sands* exemplifies contradictions and doubts in an artistic way. For example, the normal nine-month pregnancy is used by Alrawi to unveil the gravity of oppression in the Arab world as described:

She gasps, catches her breath, pants through the slow wave of pain, exhales in short puffs, anticipates the next pulse, leans back into the cushions of the chair, pants, closes her eyes, keeps puffing. No, she does not feel ready – no, not yet – feels a pulse gather as a coil tightens, wants to disconnect from the rhythm strengthening to child birth, wishes it like a sound to fall silent. She pants, waits for the spasm, the wave of pain, pants again, open her eyes, checks her watch. She closes her eyes, puffs and pants for another minute, opens one eye while keeping the other closed, peeks a look at her watch. Still nothing. She puffs for a while longer and then stops, opens both eyes. She calls to Tarek. It’s stopped.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Scott Simpkins, ‘Sources of Magical Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature’, in *Magical Realism* (see note 6), 141-162.

⁴⁷ Pabalate, ‘The Destabilizing Strategies of Magical Realism’, 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ Alrawi, *Book of Sands*, 40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵³ Pabalate, ‘The Destabilizing Strategies of Magical Realism’, 53.

⁵⁴ Alrawi, *Book of Sand*, 131.

This description of a protracted pregnancy is symbolic because it signifies the existence of suffering in the Arab world under repressive regimes. The refusal ‘of babes not being born’⁵⁵ though ‘since sunset the cramps [have been] started and, though intermittent, have become more insistent’⁵⁶ is a critique of the totalitarian regime, the unceasing cramps indicate its presence even after the Arab Spring whereas the undelivered baby manifests the common masses’ resistance to it. These textual references exemplify the domineering situation of the Arab world.

This blending of magic and real can be explained in terms of the conjunction of distinct narrative traditions. Magical realist writers bring the local or native narrative tradition into contact with the western European realistic tradition of the novel. In so doing, magical realist writers erode, if not altogether collapse, the boundary line between the local or the native and western narrative traditions. By bringing together native traditions in contact with western narrative traditions, magical realist writers situate the mythical or fantastical elements in the real world to show the real world with its strengths and frailties. The world we inhabit is full of distinctive traditions and belief systems along with universal laws of science. In every era, everywhere in the world, there is irrational dogmatism and axioms that have badly affected the lives of people. Magical realist texts question realism ‘with its heavy handed narrative irony’ and ‘force the reader to stop and re-examine their ideas and assumption about the real’.⁵⁷ For instance, Female genital mutilation (FGM) in some parts of the Arab world is one such example that adversely affects female sexual lives.

The same strategy, however, when used to narrate historical events would help to re-examine the accuracy of the stated official historical events. For example, through magical incidents, Salman Rushdie gives an entirely different perspective – different from an official historical account of India’s independence in his novel *Midnight’s Children*. Like Rushdie, Alrawi portrays a different version of the despotic regimes of the Arab world. The magic, peppered throughout the entire novel, testifies to the historical account of Arab uprisings from the perspective of all those who have never been given a voice, like villagers, prisoners and travelers. For instance, while passing through one village, Tarek sees the congregation of people and upon inquiry he discovers that these people are gathered ‘to watch the bodies brought up from the excavation’.⁵⁸ Tarek is also informed by one of the villagers that these people are killed by ‘the army, state security, foreign contractors’.⁵⁹ The words of the villager is quite ironic and presents a harsh criticism of common Arab people about their state security and Army. The job of security officers and Army is supposed to protect people but in the Arab world, they are killing their own people and do not ‘care about [them], or how [they] feel’.⁶⁰ Not only are the politics of the Arab world placed under close critical scrutiny, but Alrawi questions many traditional notions of Arab society as well.

To confront the limitations of realism, magical realism is a literary mode that portrays reality with all its strengths and shortcomings. However, there are many other aspects of magical

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷ Pabalate, ‘The Destabilizing Strategies of Magical Realism’, 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.

realism that also ‘programmatically and explicitly call into question’ the realistic depiction of realism.⁶¹ The literary strategy of metafiction overcomes the problems of accurate representation of reality by ‘provid[ing] commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional *mise en abyme* – those miniature emblematic textual self-portraits’.⁶² Metafiction is ‘self-reflexive’ fiction that reflects on its own framing and comments on the ‘self-mirroring imagery and structure’.⁶³ Metafictional dimensions can be categorized as one of the essential ingredients of magical realist texts because in this category ‘the magical power of fiction itself’, means all elements out of which a fiction is drawn, is foregrounded.⁶⁴ Consequently, while reading a metafictional text, readers experience the closeness of words with the world in which and about which the text is written and thus feel a ‘verbal magic’.⁶⁵ Such texts situate and textualize the readers within a text which is ‘a pronounced metafictional dimension’ of a magical realist text.⁶⁶ Such magic is evident in Youssef Rakha’s *The Crocodiles*.

Metafictional Dimension of *The Crocodiles*

Metafictional texts keep the reader aware of their fictional status either by referring to the process by which they are made or by incorporating a story within a story. William Gass first used the term metafiction and described it as ‘fiction with self-conscious, self-awareness, self-knowledge, ironic self-distance’.⁶⁷ Patricia Waugh is of the view that a metafictional novel registers instabilities of the real world and its language clearly illustrates the fact that ‘novels are constructed through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication’.⁶⁸ In so doing, metafictional writers consciously direct the reader’s attention towards the literariness of the text and prompt them to ask questions about constructed reality. *The Crocodiles* is fundamentally a metafictional novel because Rakha continuously reflects on the language of his narratives and shows that reality is constructed. Whilst reflecting on its own process of writing, Rakha locates his narratives ‘within the matrix of historical circumstances, authorial intentions and linguistic specificities’ to expose the constructed nature of reality.⁶⁹

The Crocodiles is an experimental fiction written in the form of a memoir and employing the technique of metafiction. Being a journalist himself, Rakha’s journalistic experience becomes an essential part of his novel. He uses a journalistic style, a kind of reporting threaded through his narratives. Throughout the entire novel, he acts like a reporter and analyst who is reporting and sometimes analysing the event based on his direct observations. For instance, he describes protest a direct observer: ‘Millions streamed out of Cairo’s mosques onto the streets after the Friday prayers to rail against the interior ministry. And I felt that God had happened for real. It

⁶¹ Helmbrecht Breinig, *Hemispheric Imaginations: North American Fictions of Latin America* (New England: Dartmouth College Press, 2017), 228.

⁶² Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherzade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism* (see note 6), 163-190.

⁶³ Herman and others, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 301.

⁶⁴ Faris, ‘Scheherzade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, 175.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁶ Jon Thiem, ‘The Textualization of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction’, in *Magical Realism* (see note 6), 235-248.

⁶⁷ Mark Currie, ed., *Metafiction* (London: Longman, 1995), 1.

⁶⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), 5.

⁶⁹ Herman and others, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 301.

was January 28, 2011'.⁷⁰ By blending fact, like insertion of dates, with the writing style of fiction, Rakha tries to portray the real situation of the story. Many writers like Hemingway use a journalistic narrative style but Rakha dexterously employs this technique with metafiction which makes it an effective strategy for conveying his intended message about the doomed revolution of 2011. The storyline of *The Crocodiles* mediates between fantasy and plausibility. The narrator of the story self-consciously reflects on the process of his writing frequently which disrupts the narrative logic of the story. It contains no chapter, no plot and events occur abruptly and it includes poems and many intertextual references. Written in the form of 405 discrete paragraphs that can be compared with the form and strategies of blog writings, much of the story's content is presented in a 'jumbled and unstructured way' and consequently readers face difficulty in making sense of the story because of its unrelated discrete paragraphs.⁷¹ Like Alrawi's writings where the sudden interruption of magic disturbs the narrative logic, Rakha disrupts the continuity of story and action by writing scattered paragraphs which pull us in unexpected directions. Metafictional texts create a close collaboration of writer and reader, where writers converse with the reader by continuously telling him/her about the writing process and encouraging him/her to ask questions.

Just as the magical realist text combines the magical and the real, here fiction and criticism, and fiction and reality are associated. In the metafictional novel, fiction and criticism assimilate each other and achieve self-consciousness. For criticism, notes Currie 'this has meant an affirmation of literariness in its own language' to the extent that critical insight is formed within fiction, whereas for fiction, it means 'the assimilation of critical perspective within fictional narratives' to become conscious of its construction.⁷² This reciprocal relationship indicates that metafictional narratives challenge the boundary between fiction and criticism. Therefore, in the metafictional novel, 'the roles of writer and critic are often fulfilled by the same person'.⁷³ This leads to the formulation of critical insight within fictional production. By constantly reflecting on his own practice as a critic and being conscious of a literary group, the Crocodiles, Rakha becomes a 'dialectical figure' embodying both 'the production and reception of fiction in the role of author and critic'.⁷⁴ For instance, while introducing his group, the Crocodiles – comprising of three young poets 'younger than the poets who were starting to be published in *Grasshoppers* and *counter-Literature*' – to his readers, he reflects that his group is 'a group to champion what [they] dub secret poetry, and vowed between [them]selves to write nothing else'.⁷⁵ He also comments on his writing process and even on his imagination persistently. Whilst writing about Radwa's suicide, he 'imagines her sitting on the balcony wall's wooden balustrade' but in the next line, he is commenting on his imaginative process in writing that 'why I imagine the balustrade to be made of wood, I don't know'.⁷⁶ Similarly, while introducing Ashraf – one of the characters in novel – he speaks of 'this engineer – whose name I remember, or imagine, to be Ashraf'.⁷⁷ The word 'imagine' in both examples shows that Rakha is highly conscious of his

⁷⁰ Youssef Rakha, *The Crocodiles* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2013), 157.

⁷¹ Larry McCaffery, 'Donald Barthelme and the Metafictional Muse', *Current Trends in American Fiction* 9, no. 2 (1980): 75-88.

⁷² Currie, *Metafiction*, 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

writing process and unlike other novels, this awareness is explicit rather than implicit expertise. Rakha creates fiction by making a statement about his creative process.

Rakha fuses fiction with reality by using the techniques of framing. A frame, in simple words, may be defined as ‘construction’.⁷⁸ It refers to the idea that the material, social and historical circumstances of the real world and the work of art are perceived through frames. Metafictional writers believe that ‘everything is framed, whether in life or in novels’, therefore they draw attention to the framing itself and examine it to unveil that the reality as well as the novel is constructed.⁷⁹ For them no dichotomy exists between reality and fiction. For example, the Egyptian group of poets and artists constitute the main story of the novel. This reflects the literary scene in 1990s Egypt. However, this main plot covers the stories of real people and fantastical tales which confuse the real world and the fictional realm. The abrupt shift from fiction to reality and back to fiction leaves readers in a state of uncertainty where they cannot decide where the real story ends and the fiction starts. For example, the presence of a lion throughout the novel is confusing. Readers are aware of the fact that ‘the lion that appear[s] to Nayf’ is a ‘supernatural event’ and Nayf is simply hallucinating the lion, yet the narrator’s insistence that he ‘never for an instant doubted the reality of the lion’ creates confusion.⁸⁰ Secondly, throughout the course of the novel, while discussing protest, the narrator switches to the fictional world repeatedly, leaving readers confused. For instance, on January 29 the narrator sits ‘in the entrance of [his] building’ and describes ‘the traces of twenty-four hours of sprinting and stopping and squatting on pavements, of cheating tear gas’⁸¹ and then suddenly shifts attention towards the lion that appears to Nayf and says that ‘the lion [is] revolution because the lion [is] God’, and he is even grateful for the presence of the lion: ‘your blessings, O Lion!’⁸² The insertion of the date makes Rakha’s description of the revolution more authentic but his sudden shift towards the description of the lion is confusing. Secondly, the frame of *The Crocodiles* is often interrupted by the intrusive commentary of the narrator. For example, while narrating a story about Nayf and Moon – writers of the Crocodiles group – the narrator breaks the frame of the story and interrupts: ‘it’s time to let you know is that I met with Maher Abdel Aziz’.⁸³ At times, he even starts telling a new story to his readers and then stops abruptly by informing them that ‘this is a tale for later’⁸⁴ or ‘the time for all that is yet to come’⁸⁵ to maintain the interest of readers. Such intrusions on the part of the narrator ‘expose the ontological distinctness of the real and the fictional world’ and it destroys the illusion that it is reality.⁸⁶ Frame-breaking may complicate the text further but at the same time it calls attention to the constructed nature of fiction and reality. This chaos in the form of the novel exemplifies the chaos in the Arab world where people were excited by the prospect that their protest would overthrow the existing regime. However, the revolution soon becomes a ‘post-despair’⁸⁷ for all those who participate in the Arab uprising because ‘military police strip [them] naked’ and ‘the

⁷⁸ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 28.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 14.

⁸¹ Ibid., 157.

⁸² Ibid., 158.

⁸³ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁶ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 32.

⁸⁷ Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 231.

army murder its people in the streets'.⁸⁸ The continuous disappointment at the hands of the military makes people reach the point where they think that their presence in the protest would not matter. Youssef observes: 'I can't see that my presence among the hundred, thousand, million unarmed souls exposed to gunfire, run down, snatched, would either help or hinder. I feel I've run quite far enough in previous months and that all that my death might achieve would not outweigh my sister's grief, though her sadness at my loss might last no longer than a few days'.⁸⁹ This example clearly exemplifies the chaos, disintegration and fragmentation in the Arab world following the insurgency.

In dealing with the issue of disillusionment, *The Crocodiles* has its own peculiar kind of narrative strategies that seem to be more concerned with all those unanswered questions that challenge the intellectual community. On a deeper level, the narrative strategies employed by Rakha express the uncanny reality of the despotic regime of the Arab world. *The Crocodiles* narrativizes the difficulty of portraying the reality of Arab insurgencies at different levels. On one level, Rakha leans towards allegory and presents the post-Arab Spring situation figuratively. For example, many poems of the Crocodiles group symbolically represent the post-Arab Spring scenario as in the poem entitled 'Blood', a poet addresses his government that 'the vivid red poppies' that 'open inside clothes' have a louder voice 'than the swish of speeding car', informing them that their pain is a 'joy' which is 'greater than [their] anatomy can ever comprehend'.⁹⁰ This poem allegorically represents the torture inflicted on the protestors by the Arab government. This poem shows the determination of the protestors and delivers their message to the government that no matter how much blood they spill and pain they cause by torturing them, the pain becomes a greater joy for them (the protestors). The symbol of red poppies is noteworthy because the red poppy is a flower which grows in the fields of France, where many soldiers were killed while fighting in battle, so many people wear red paper poppies to show their respect for those killed in wars. In the history of English literature, the red poppy is a symbol of remembrance for all those who take part in wars. By using this symbol, a writer may want to suggest that the protestors who take part in the Arab Spring would be remembered always because they stand against the tyrannical regime. Similarly, the government asks the protestors 'is the solution to burn the country?' and later on, Youssef repeats the same question ironically which points to the 'killing of people in the streets' by the military.⁹¹

On another level, the events and facts are narrated in a cyclical fashion which complicates the entire plot of the novel and makes it at times unintelligible. The book opens with a scene of the suicide of Radwa Adel, 'intellectual, writer, great thinker'⁹² which signals the 'breakup of The Crocodiles', a group of writers and artists.⁹³ A parallel can be drawn between the experience of the Crocodiles and Radwa Adel's suicide. 'Radwa Adel ha[s] died the day the group [is] announced', and Rakha draws attention to both occurrences by saying that 'no one ha[s] noticed the synchronicity of two events'.⁹⁴ Secondly, the death of Radwa Adel, a leftist activist and a writer of the 1970s generation, symbolizes the end of a writing style. Just like Radwa who locked

⁸⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 231.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁹¹ Ibid., 27.

⁹² Ibid., 1.

⁹³ Ibid., 71.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

herself in the room and ‘went out onto the balcony and jumped over the wall’⁹⁵, the Crocodiles too ‘locked[themselves in] a room’⁹⁶ in an effort to unveil the reality and ‘no one succeeded in entering except three lovers’⁹⁷ with whom they have emotional relationships. However, each of their relationships fail and even their friendships end too. Similarly, a writer’s reference to the nakedness of the emperor foreshadows another episode of the novel that happened during the 2011 revolution, when a young blog writer ‘Alia Al Mehdi published a nude picture of herself on her blog’ as ‘her contribution to the revolution’.⁹⁸ These narrated facts and events constitute a thread which Rakha uses to weave *The Crocodiles* in which one stated fact signals or refers to another episode and cyclically returns to the determined subjects, thus making the entire plot difficult to understand and interpret. Rakha’s use of such narrative strategies reflects the disillusionment in the wake of the so called Arab Spring.

Rakha conveys the subject matter of the novel – the ill-fated revolution and the subsequent disintegration in the Arab world – by experimenting with form. Metafictional writers believe that the power structures of today’s world are invisible and everyday language, as Patricia Waugh remarks, ‘endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently innocent representations’.⁹⁹ By living within the parameters of fictional form and representing social reality honestly, metafictional writers thus turn ‘inwards to their own medium of expression’.¹⁰⁰ In this way, they oppose and resist social conventions and norms through the form of the novel itself. Not only do they write against social conventions but they situate their resistance to social norms through form of the novel. The sense of disillusionment and discontentment of the Arab world is portrayed by Rakha in his narratives. Like his characters, who are struggling hard to make sense of their chaotic lives in the midst of the Arab uprisings, Youssef is struggling with the disintegrated form of the novel.

Metafictional writers set *parole* (individual utterances) against *langue* (conventions) of the novel genre and convert what is considered as negative ‘into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism’.¹⁰¹ For example, when all the revolutionaries in the novel criticize Alia Al Mehdi, who publishes her nude picture on the internet, Youssef appreciates her act because for him this very act of Alia has no ideological basis and it is away ‘from the stomach turning struggle, for a power that would sweep away neither beggary, nor prostitution, nor even the lawlessness of the police’.¹⁰² Similarly, sex, a taboo subject in Arab society, is discussed very frankly in *The Crocodiles*. Rakha offers a disquieting picture of rebellious and frustrated youth who experiment with poetry, drugs and sex. Caught between the wrecked system of their country and their libidos (Logos and Eros), the sense of dissatisfaction in characters’ lives is partly due to their conflict with the system – which has shrunken their lives so that places become ‘too narrow

⁹⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁹⁹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 133.

to hold [them], to hold [their] future'¹⁰³. Thus they develop 'hatred for their supposedly unjust government', partly because of their own erotic desires.¹⁰⁴ Most of Rakha's characters indulge in sexual activities and experiment with it in order to find satisfaction. However, the irony is that the more they engage in sexual activities, the more it leaves them unsatisfied because after sex they face 'a more profound and authentic pain' and they 'lost pleasure' in doing any sort of activities.¹⁰⁵ Simply stated, Rakha's characters become cold and insensible by living under the repressive regime so long that its atrocities do not affect them. Youssef states that he is terrified of the fact 'that the violence, lies and brutality no longer affect [him]; terrified that the murder of innocents in the street no longer move [him], or that [he'd] go on supporting their demonstration despite the fact it meant that they'd be murdered'.¹⁰⁶ These moments clearly illustrate the disappointment of people followed by the Arab Spring in contrast to the resilient spirit portrayed by Tahar Ben Jelloun in his novel, *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2001). In Ben Jelloun's novel, 'millions of ordinary people emerge on the streets' for 'a revolution of a new kind: spontaneous and improvised'¹⁰⁷ but here in *The Crocodiles*, people have 'lost the urge to descend to the battle field of Tahrir Square' and they 'feel no guilt'.¹⁰⁸ Rakha's novel sharply contrasts with Ben Jelloun's novel where poets and writers imaginatively revolt before the actual uprisings. The group of writers in *The Crocodiles* is not at all enthusiastic about the revolution because they have experienced it and witnessed its utter failure. Rakha's novel dismantles the revolutionary rhetoric that claims that the Arab uprisings of 2011 mark the end of 'old phase' and the rise of new one.¹⁰⁹ In so doing, Rakha's novel can be categorized as a counter literature that addresses the consequences of the Arab uprising and claims that the Arab Spring does not yield 'liberal or democratic outcomes'.¹¹⁰

Given this context, Rakha himself refers to the production of counter literature: 'from the start of the nineties something was changing – the same year that saw the first issue of counter-literature released'.¹¹¹ He realizes that with the 2011 revolution, there is a need to revise the various trends of Arabic literature and thus he criticizes the nineties generation writers who 'ha[ve] failed to move beyond the seventies generation in any essential regard and for this reason ha[ve] played no direct, or even significant, role in the events of 2011'.¹¹² Further, he is of the view that the writings of the earlier generation do not portray the reality of the Arab world honestly as 'politically they really [a]re irrelevant – or [will] be utterly crushed'.¹¹³ For this reason, the writers of the Crocodiles group distance themselves from the previous generation of the 70s and 90s decades and start writing about the revolution in a peculiar way.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁷ Rita Sakr, 'Anticipating' *The 2011 Arab Uprising: Revolutionary Literature and Political Geographies* (Kent: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

¹⁰⁸ Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Post-Colonialism* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2012), 84.

¹¹⁰ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolution of the New Middle East* (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 2012), 18.

¹¹¹ Rakha, *The Crocodiles*, 71.

¹¹² Ibid., 92.

¹¹³ Ibid., 121.

Conclusion

Building upon the disillusioned reality of the Arab world, I suggest both novels try to capture the cryptic reality through different strategies. Both novels entail a significant relationship with the unstable reality of the Arab world, therefore both writers use peculiar strategies to narrate it. They rethink the paradigm of the conventional narratives of Arab fiction by experimenting with its form. Even in their fragmented, playful versions and a self-reflexive style, both authors show that the realities of the Arab world are hard to narrate. The technique of magical realism in *Book of Sands* represents the Arab insurgency and its subsequent repercussion by complicating the realist mode of novel. The fantastical and magical events are projected in the very real situation of the Arab world with an indefinite time setting in the narratives. Similarly, in *The Crocodiles*, Rakha discloses the uncertain situation of the Arab world by disturbing genre and form. By mixing fiction, reality and criticism, the novel at once gives us subjective and objective accounts of the Arab uprisings from the marginal perspective of the novel's protagonists.

To sum up, I argue that the 2011 revolution is a major factor of change in literary modes of Anglo-Arab literature. Observing the post-Arab Spring literature in such a fast changing context raises concerns in academics and researchers as to how to analyze such literature, and through which theoretical framework. The post-Arab Spring discourse raises a lot of questions, such as do these texts represent the continuation of the old genre, or are they new? Is the Arab Spring an ongoing phenomenon or has it achieved its goals? It is too early to answer such questions but the analysis of the selected texts illustrates that both novels depict the post-Arab Spring reality in which repression and totalitarianism violently take over the protests. The analysis of both novels suggest that post-Arab Spring literature does not simply mirror the historical events of 2011 and the hope attached to it but it also questions Arab traditions and cultural norms while offering a perspective on the present uncertainty.