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Magical Feminism as Ontological Resistance in Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*

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ABSTRACT

The present article reads Mhani Alaoui's *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* as a foundational text in the emerging discourse of Arab magical feminism. Through a close analysis of narrative strategies, mythopoetic figures, and carceral imaginaries, the study shows how magical realism disrupts hegemonic epistemologies, particularly those grounded in colonial historiography and patriarchal scripture. Central to this inquiry are the intertwined concepts of magical supplementation, or the insertion of the marvelous into empirical reality, and defamiliarization, which estranges normative perception to foreground structures of oppression and resistance to them. The novel's protagonists—Maryam, Zohra, and Sheherazade—are delineated as agents of feminist ontological rupture. Each articulates resistance via embodied knowledge, mythic lineage, and insurgent narration. Meanwhile, the carceral sites of Birsoukout and the demons' lair stand for the symbolic architectures of state violence, with their estranged portrayals challenging official memory and producing affective counter-historiographies. By situating Alaoui's work within transnational magical realist traditions while anchoring it in North African cosmologies, the article argues for the epistemic and aesthetic distinctiveness of Arab magical feminism. Alaoui writes to reclaim the magical as a space of feminist and postcolonial intervention and positions narrative itself as a vehicle for ontological repair, genealogical recovery, and political insurrection.

KEYWORDS

Magical Feminism

Magical Supplementation

Defamiliarization

Carceral Epistemology

Resistance

Introduction

For centuries, women's voices have been systematically excluded from history, theology, and literature through a process rooted in patriarchal scriptural interpretation, colonial historiography, and Eurocentric canon formation. This epistemic violence distorts the historical record while reinforcing hegemonic narratives that delegitimize female ways of knowing. According to Bettany Hughes, although women comprise half of the global population, they "only occupy around 0.5% of recorded history," a statistic that starkly illustrates the magnitude

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of the cultural erasure women suffer (Ansary 13) and the active construction of ignorance that forecloses alternative epistemic and narrative possibilities.

Literature, being both an outcome of social context and an axis of culture construction, has itself historically perpetuated reductive portrayals of women, while elevating the male perspective to universal status (Booker 89, 96). In this sense, the literary canon is seen to function as a gendered technology of exclusion that systematically suppresses female agency and voice.

Feminist literary criticism emerged in response to this imbalance, working along two axes: the critique of canonical texts that reinforce patriarchal ideologies, and the recovery and reimagination of narratives centered on women's experiences, genealogies, and voices. One of the most potent narrative strategies feminist writers employ is magical realism, a genre that merges empirical and metaphysical realities to disrupt such Western binaries as rational versus irrational, history versus myth, and body versus spirit. Wendy B. Faris considers magical realism a "radical modification of dominant realism in the West" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 1), highlighting its decolonial and epistemologically plural potential to surface submerged histories and affective truths. Likewise, Sawsan Malla Hussein and Brahim Barhoun contend that magical realism seeks to redress "the basic norms and données of a European realist representation long associated with erecting and maintaining power relations" (10).

In contexts shaped by colonial and patriarchal domination, magical realism becomes an ontological counter-discourse. Treating myth, memory, and spirit as equally real and politically charged, it channels feminist and postcolonial critique. When deliberately aligned with feminist revindications, magical realism gives rise to what is now called magical feminism. Theorized by Patricia Hart, Abu Shahid Abdullah, and others, magical feminism foregrounds female agency through metaphysical resistance, genealogical re-inscription, and symbolic disruption. It "reacts to specific feminist concerns to subvert homogeneous patriarchal dominance," presenting the magical not as escapist fantasy but as a political mode of ontological repair (Wells 20).

Nevertheless, despite its critical potential, Arabic magical realism, particularly by women writers, remains underexamined. Existing Arabic-language criticism, such as Hamed Abu Ahmed's *Al-Waq'iyyah al-Sihriyya fi al-Riwayah al-'Arabiyyah* [*Magical Realism in the Arab Novel*], focuses almost exclusively on Egyptian male authors. The book's narrow scope overlooks both the geographic diversity and the substantial contributions of Arab women to the genre. This oversight is further compounded by the continued privileging of Latin American and Anglophone writers such as Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, and Helen Oyeyemi, whose works are widely recognized within magical realist and feminist canons. To fully understand the political and aesthetic reach of magical realism, the canon must expand to include Arab women's literary articulations and reframe the genre as a transnational and epistemologically plural form.

Within this critical gap, *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms* by Moroccan writer Mhani Alaoui emerges as a paradigmatic text of Arab magical feminism. Set in postcolonial Morocco, the novel fuses Berber mythology, Islamic mysticism, feminist critique, and postcolonial trauma into a narrative where magic is ontologically mutinous. Its protagonist, Maryam, descended from the mythic figure of Lilith, embodies a feminine genealogy of resistance that traverses memory, myth, and political violence. Guided by a matriarchal network of powerful women, Maryam's journey reclaims female subjectivity and becomes a transformative site of political, spiritual, and narrative insurrection.

This paper argues that Alaoui's novel employs two core narrative strategies, namely magical supplementation and defamiliarization, to enact feminist and postcolonial resistance. Magical supplementation, or the "irreducible element of magic" in Faris's terms, refers to the insertion of magical phenomena as ontologically real interventions that counter historical erasure and

gendered marginalization (*Ordinary Enchantments* 7). It resists realist conventions by asserting the validity of spiritual, mythical, and embodied knowledges excluded from dominant historiographies. Defamiliarization, theorized by Viktor Shklovsky and later adapted by Faris, Christopher Warnes, and others, estranges the familiar to destabilize entrenched epistemic assumptions. In Alaoui's hands, this strategy acquires a distinct political valence: urban uprisings, carceral spaces, and rebellious subjectivities are rendered uncanny, revealing the psychic violence of patriarchy and authoritarianism in viscerally unsettling terms.

Through close readings of character, symbolic geographies, and narrative structure, the study situates *Dreams of Maryam Tair* within a global feminist genealogy of magical realism while grounding it in North African epistemological frameworks. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive critical discourse that underscores Arab women's contributions to magical feminist literature. Alaoui's novel not only reimagines Moroccan history and mythology through a feminist lens but also reasserts literature's capacity to function as a space of ontological reparation, affective remembrance, and insurgent imagination.

Critical Framework

Magical Realism, Magical Feminism, and Arab Cultural Specificity

Magical realism has long resisted reductive categorization, operating at the intersection of genre, aesthetic, and cultural orientation. Its origins can be traced to Franz Roh's 1925 treatise on German post-Expressionist art. However, it gained literary traction through the post-Boom Latin American novel, where it emerged as a distinctive narrative form. Within literary theory, scholars such as Wendy B. Faris, Amaryll Chanady, and Lois Parkinson Zamora have delineated the defining characteristics that differentiate magical realism from both realism and fantasy. In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Faris notably identifies the "irreducible element of magic," or the reporting of "extraordinary … events … in the same way in which other, ordinary events are recounted," to be essential to the genre's resistance against the epistemological dominance of Western rationalism. Its other distinctive features include a "strong presence of the phenomenal world" (14), hesitation or doubt (17), and defamiliarization (23).

Chanady comments on how magical realism encapsulates a non-hierarchical dualism, sustaining the coexistence of the empirical and the magical without privileging one register over the other (25–26). This formal strategy is not merely aesthetic; it performs a political function by foregrounding marginalized worldviews. Zamora and Faris posit that magical realism reconfigures the margins by recuperating historically silenced epistemologies (Zamora and Faris 3–7). That is why the genre holds particular appeal for postcolonial writers aiming to contest Eurocentric narratives of modernity that dismiss myth, affect, and spirituality for being irrational.

Magical realism's global diffusion, from Latin America to the Caribbean, South Asia, and North Africa, proves both its translatability and its capacity for counter-discursive innovation. Malla Hussein and Barhoun affirm that "there is nothing organic about magical realism that should make it the preserve of a specific geographic location alone" (8). In the same vein, Mariano Siskind celebrates the global reconceptualization of the mode, arguing that it should be considered a transnational narrative strategy (24). This repositioning allows works akin to *Dreams of Maryam Tair* to enter the conversation as culturally rooted interventions that recalibrate the aesthetic and political horizons of magical realism.

When magical realism takes on explicitly feminist imperatives and "attempts to give a voice to marginalised women …, it can be labelled magical feminism" (Abdullah 2). Writing on Isabel Allende, Hart defines magical feminism as a hybrid form that channels bodily memory, ancestral wisdom, and intergenerational trauma into a storytelling praxis where women repossess narrative power and ontological legitimacy (14–17). Kimberly Wells expands on Hart's formulation, describing magical feminism as a mode that "reacts to specific feminist concerns to subvert homogeneous patriarchal dominance" (20). Magical feminism insists on its political stakes, particularly in relation to embodiment, sexuality, and historical erasure.

Central to magical feminist aesthetics are tropes of bodily knowledge and mythic genealogy. Valerie Henitiuk enriches this discourse through her reading of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, where the female body—grotesque, mythic, and enchantingly subversive—functions as a locus of radical epistemological rupture. Henitiuk explains that Carter "constructs magical spaces, both physical/actual and metaphorical/imaginary, within otherwise realistic fictional parameters… allow[ing] a web of new, previously unimagined, subversive possibilities" (418). This feminist strategy, she argues, "encourage[s] readers to participate in the deconstruction, rather than validation, of established worldviews that constrict or malign women" (419). Julia Maria Schneider further extends the framework by theorizing a similar genealogy of resistance in Mexican women's literature, wherein women's narratives are informed by matrilineal memory, ritual knowledge, and ancestral spirit work.

In contexts shaped by the twin forces of colonialism and patriarchy, the political potency of magical feminism becomes especially acute. Maggie Ann Bowers stresses the value of magical realism "for fictions written from the perspective of the politically or culturally disempowered," thereby accommodating feminist, indigenous, and diasporic perspectives (31–32). A comparable potential is manifest in Alaoui's narrative, which integrates mysticism and subaltern embodiment to reconstruct female subjectivity into a counter-hegemonic expression of agency. It is a form of feminist authorship that bell hooks qualifies as transformative resistance: "to love and to resist through writing is to radically transform, to imagine new possibilities that do not fit within the traditional binary structures that dominate us" (45).

The cultural specificity of Alaoui's magical feminism is inseparable from Arab literary heritage. According to Abu Ahmed, Arabic literary traditions have long been steeped in magical epistemologies. The roots of these run through "*The One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Book of Wonders of the Kings of Himyar*, popular epics, *The Wonders of India*, *The Voyage of al-Sirafi*, *Stories of the Prophets*, *The Stories of the Qur'an*, *The Book of Songs* ... and many other works that fall into the domain of narrative as we understand it today" (15; my translation). These traditions deem the supernatural integral to the real, a worldview that renders magical realism organic to the Arab imaginary.

Nevertheless, in "From the Inside of Belief: Magic and Religion," Kim Anderson Sasser makes the case that "religion remains one of the most neglected elements in magical realist studies," a lacuna resulting from the dominance of secular frameworks within Western literary criticism (243). The omission is particularly limiting in Islamic contexts, where mysticism, dreams, and esoteric symbolism are foundational knowledge systems. In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Alaoui draws richly on Sufi metaphysics, Islamic cosmology, and Berber myth to create an alternative order of life, one that enables the sacred to be politically subversive.

Brahim El Guabli's theorization of emotional histories as other-archives deepens the analytical lens through which Alaoui's narrative strategies can be read. In his study of post-violence memory cultures in Morocco, El Guabli postulates that histories effaced by state repression, colonialism, and patriarchal epistemologies do not vanish but are reconstituted in sensory, embodied, and spatial registers through oral transmission, spiritual performance, and cultural production that elude official memory (16). Alaoui activates this alternative archival

economy and enacts a mode of feminist postcolonial historiography anchored in trauma, myth, and resistance as sensuous and sacred experiences.

Narrative Resistance: Magical Supplementation and Defamiliarization

Magical Supplementation

Magical realism resists dominant notions of reality by expanding the boundaries of the real through what Faris calls irreducible elements: events that defy empirical logic yet are narrated with the same gravity as everyday occurrences (7). The events are not symbolic metaphors but disruptions to the fabric of reality, "accepted but not explained" (7). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Remedios the Beauty ascends to the sky while folding laundry, and elsewhere, Macondo suffers a plague of insomnia so severe that objects must be labeled to retain meaning. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ghost of a murdered child returns as a fully grown woman. Such phenomena are not treated with surprise or rupture in tone; they exist on the same ontological plane as realistic events (8).

This narrative strategy suspends binary logic by presenting magical elements without authorial commentary or epistemological hierarchy. Chanady clarifies that although the implied author recognizes the supernatural as contradictory to natural law, they adopt the worldview of the represented culture to portray it authentically. The situation generates a narrative structure wherein "two conflicting logical codes" are held in tension, prompting readers to "suspend [their] judgment of what is rational and what is irrational in the fictitious world" (25–26). Olatubosun Ogunsanwo describes this condition, writing "there is no assimilation of one narrative mode by the other ... The intertexts assume parallel status … debunking the mutual exclusivity of centre and margin" (45). Magical realism, in consequence, unsettles the very framework of realism, preserving the irreducible and resistant nature of the supernatural.

Kumkum Sangari complicates the ontological layering of the genre by linking it to historical violence. He posits that the "simultaneity of the heterogeneous" reflects "miscegenation, syncretisation … conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence" (158). Far from being mere textual effects, the conflicting logics are embedded traces of colonial and postcolonial experience which produce a form of historically and culturally corrective work. Eventually, magical supplementation materializes as a form of narrative resistance, "a mode of thought," in Anne Hegerfeldt's words (237). By rendering the figurative literal, magical realist texts recover and revalidate suppressed forms of knowing that empirical rationalism has historically ostracized.

Resistance here is not only narrative but deeply political too. David Young and Keith Hollaman capture how magical realism challenges "the political and metaphysical definitions of the real by which most of us live" (3). The presence of the fantastic revokes the inherited rules of causality, temporality, and perception. In D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, for example, Lisa's psychosomatic pain occurs before the trauma that causes it, collapsing the chronology of memory and event. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Melquíades's manuscript records and predicts events simultaneously, challenging the reader's grasp of fate and agency.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu articulates the geopolitical force of this strategy further. Magical realism, for her, disrupts "the privileging of 'first world truths' over 'third world myths'" (198). In doing so, it recovers marginalized epistemologies and reclaims their narrative authority, no longer subordinating them to Western rationalism. The irreducibly magical thus asserts that marginalized truths do not need to justify themselves in the language of dominant paradigms; they, defiantly, exist. In *So Far from God*, Ana Castillo verifies the reappearance of the dead

Esperanza by noting that she "was also occasionally seen. Yes, seen, not only by La Loca, but also by Domingo who saw her from the front window …. And once, although she had thought at first it was a dream, Esperanza came and lay down next to her mother" (163). This verification underscores the irreducibility of Esperanza's return. It is not a hallucination or metaphor; it is something that *is*, despite the impossibility (*Ordinary Enchantments* 8).

Defamiliarization

In magical realism, the magical does not always arrive as an external disruption; it may grow imperceptibly out of the ordinary, subtly estranging the familiar. This dynamic aligns with the literary strategy of defamiliarization, which reframes reality to expose its limits, habitual structures, and the ideological assumptions that underpin it. Scott Simpkins observes, "Perhaps magic realism's goal is to return our focus to the backdrop of textual reality, its production and function, by defamiliarizing it" (151).

Defamiliarization is most famously theorized by Viktor Shklovsky, who argues that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (12). This is accomplished through techniques that "make objects unfamiliar," slow down recognition, and prolong perception, tactics that serve both aesthetic and ideological ends (12). Shklovsky describes these as "games of nonrecognition," which may involve withholding names, redescribing everyday objects as if newly discovered, or displacing familiar associations. In doing so, art "makes the stone stony," reawakening our awareness of the world's strangeness (12).

Defamiliarization is fundamental to the narrative design of magical realism. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the arrival of Melquíades's gypsies bearing ice and magnets transforms mundane objects into mysteries of cosmic significance. The language does not announce magic; instead, it renders the real surreal and invites the reader to question the boundaries between wonder and fact. *Midnight's Children* achieves similar effects with hummingbirds, while *Shame* treats Omar's three mothers as a narrative given. These texts do not insert fantasy into realism; they realign realism so that its internal limits are exposed and transcended.

Christopher Warnes remarks that defamiliarization reclaims aesthetic agency, returning "freshness and aesthetic appreciation to familiar, ordinary objects" (85). Importantly, this aesthetic reframing carries ideological implications. Shklovsky warns that habitualization "devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (12). By disrupting this automatism, defamiliarization restores moral urgency to things dulled by repetition or normalized by dominant ideology.

The scope of defamiliarization can reshape the contours of historical understanding as well. In magical realism, historical events are not presented as transparent facts but as mythic, grotesque, or implausible phenomena. Readers sometimes find history an unstable, layered, and spectral narrative. They discover that fiction is able to contest the authority of sanctioned memory and forge new epistemological pathways. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie insightfully states, "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups attempt to shape the world in their own image; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying official, politicians' version of truth" (14). The antagonism between narrative and power becomes central to the function of defamiliarization as a counter-discursive trope, reimagining history from the margins and reinserting excluded voices into collective memory.

Timothy Brennan supports this idea, discerning in magical realism "a sense of exasperation, despair and wonder in the face of authority that is so far outside the moral and intellectual constraints of the observer that its actions are 'unbelievable'" (174). Such narrative estrangement reveals how official histories often operate to sustain epistemic and political control. Édouard Glissant similarly writes that historical disclosure in postcolonial literature

"paradoxically, is not performed each time in an open and clear way" (107). Shalini Puri adds that magical realism's "dense web of coded historical reference functions largely without realist exposition as such" (169). These insights emphasize the genre's capacity to stage a kind of indirect historical reckoning, one that exposes the discursive constraints of conventional historiography.

Together, the concepts of magical supplementation and defamiliarization offer a robust critical lens through which to examine *Dreams of Maryam Tair*. The two strategies constitute insurgent modes of knowledge that challenge dominant frameworks of meaning-making. Magical supplementation reclaims occluded histories and suppressed cosmologies, offering a reparative counter-narrative that privileges memory, myth, and feminine epistemologies. In parallel, defamiliarization destabilizes normative perception by making the familiar strange in order to expose the ideological scaffolding of power, whether colonial, patriarchal, or institutional. As this theoretical framework suggests, Mhani Alaoui's novel does not merely represent resistance; it performs it formally, ontologically, and politically. The outcome is a compelling act of re-worlding that opens new ways of sensing, knowing, and narrating the world.

Embodied Resistance Through Magical Supplementation

The following section analyzes three central figures in *Dreams of Maryam Tair*—Maryam, Zohra, and Sheherazade—as agents of magical feminist resistance. Each is imbued with distinct, though sometimes overlapping, magical attributes that reclaim silenced genealogies, subvert patriarchal historiography, and assert alternative ontologies. Maryam's textual transformation renders her an embodied archive of feminist insurgency; Zohra, the revolutionary witch, anchors oral memory and subaltern pedagogy; and Sheherazade, the metafictional narrator, reconfigures storytelling as a sacred and subversive act. Collectively, the three characters enact a core imperative of magical feminism: the reclamation of myth, body, memory, and voice through ontological disruption.

Maryam: The Magical Text

Maryam is the novel's axial grammar of resistance, rupture, and remembrance. She permits the mobilization of various magical elements to incorporate suppressed epistemologies, especially those grounded in feminine pain, memory, and myth. Maryam functions as both character and code, more than body and scent. She is "the completed becoming of the text" (Alaoui 339). From her emergence into the world, handicapped and "conceived in darkness and fear" (Alaoui 114), Maryam is constructed as a threshold figure, situated between presence and absence, trauma and myth. Her very name, "with a multiplicity of meanings" (Alaoui 114), destabilizes static identity. Alaoui defines her as "rebel, bitterness, loved one, killer, saint, guardian" (Alaoui 114). These contradictions remain unresolved, allowing Maryam to be a polysemic portal for submerged histories and a magical conduit for individual and collective memory.

Maryam's fantastic liminality is further materialized through her scent, a continuous trail of orange blossoms that serves as both an aesthetic trace and a force of resistance within the narrative. When Mehdi is held captive in the nightmarish prison of Birsoukout, it is the scent that catalyzes his salvation by suffocating the bureaucratic jailer (Alaoui 144). The same fragrance fills others with "a delightful, singing serenity" (Alaoui 114). The olfactory mark invokes Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, a bodily, affective mode of signification that resists containment within phallocentric logic. The orange scent acts directly on sensory

and psychic registers, dismantling structures of control and inscribing resistance through the body (Cixous 875–880).

Just as her scent maps an alternate sensory grammar, Maryam's enchanted mobility extends her marvelous resistance across space. She rides her magical bicycle, "'Aoud Errih,' or 'Wind-Rider,'" a rusty, moody bike imbued with a soul and personality (Alaoui 167–68), while she navigates the Moroccan terrain with dreamlike grace. The movement dissolves the division between memory and geography, rewriting the landscape through her motion. Her trauma-saturated body becomes a cartographic force that reclaims erased spaces. In Susan Stanford Friedman's terms, Maryam enacts feminist geography: "to move is to resist stasis, to rewrite the map" (28).

This rewriting is part and parcel of her ancestral mythos. Maryam is revealed to be the daughter of Leila, a descendant of Lilith, and Adam, the archetypal patriarch afflicted with forgetfulness. "No one can deny now that Adam had a first wife… and together they had a daughter called Maryam" (Alaoui 321). Like her mother, she "was demonized" for being "too proud, too free" (333). Alaoui reclaims the Lilith myth, long vilified for resisting male authority, and embeds it into Maryam's matrilineal genealogy. The revision undermines the monologic structure of the Abrahamic narrative and re-centers the feminine as sacred origin. Maryam becomes heir to a cosmology once erased, now inscribed anew.

Her radical lineage underpins the political violence inflicted on her body and identity. Maryam's queer embodiment, marked by her refusal of marriage, motherhood, and heterosexuality, exemplifies what Ikram Ben Talha and Barhoun, in the context of Moroccan feminist writing, describe as the repression of gender and sexual dissidence. Their analysis identifies the "inscription of multiple identities in conflict with their body, sexuality, and social context" (2). Maryam's nonconformity thus turns out to be the basis for her indictment, culminating in a symbolic trial at the Grand Tribunal:

> "Death:
> for perverting our sacrosanct history,
> for desecrating the Holy Book and the story of our prophet Adam, his one wife, Eve and their children Cain and Abel,
> for doubting the divine right of the Great Patriarch to rule the land,
> for wanting equal inheritance and marriage laws,
> for feeling outrage where submission is scripture,
> for saying no,
> for being a homosexual,
> for refusing to marry,
> for refusing to have children,
> for wanting to be an individual,
> for reinterpreting good and right,
> for saying no,
> for being provocative,
> for being subversive,
> for saying yes to secularism,
> for saying yes to freedom,
> for saying yes to choice." (Alaoui 270–271)

The state's attempt at erasure paradoxically becomes the crucible of Maryam's transformation, gesturing toward liberation from what Ben Talha and Barhoun designate as "the social and cultural structures that generate claustrophobia of the body" (10). In a courtroom filled with identical mirror-faced judges (Alaoui 337), Maryam turns a moment of annihilation into a

revelation: "She touches her arms, neck, and face and feels… words. She looks at herself and finds that she is no longer herself… She has transformed into something other…. She is no longer flesh and bone, she is word and meaning" (339).

The transformation is not metaphorical but metaphysical. Maryam ceases to be a discrete character and becomes the story's very language, its alternative history. "She is the child, the manuscript, the resistance" (Alaoui 339). The scene literalizes Hegerfeldt's claim that magical realism "revalues figurative language as a mode of thought" (238) and fulfills Cixous's exhortation that women "write themselves" into being: "Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (880). Maryam's textual body asserts that rebellion, healing, and knowledge arise not despite pain, but through it.

Maryam's story concludes with ascension. Rising above the courtroom to merge with the stars, moons, and planets (Alaoui 340), Maryam calls out: "Mother, be at peace. You may rest, for you have made me safe… Who can deny love when they find it?" (Alaoui 340). Her becoming merges the personal, the mythic, and the political; she becomes the archive and the force that propels its circulation.

The novel closes with Sheherazade watching her successor depart: "You are Maryam Tair, and now your tale is told… You are revealed, Al-Batina, hidden and revealed… But the stars and moons and planets alone know how I will miss you, my beloved daughter" (Alaoui 340). In this final moment, Alaoui dissolves the boundary between manuscript and myth, evoking the timeless power of narrative to resist oblivion. As Faris observes, "In Scheherazade's tales … language takes on magical properties to light up the nights verging on nightmares" ("Scheherazade's Children" 163). The same holds true for *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, where storytelling becomes a luminous act of defiance against patriarchal darkness.

Maryam's magical rebellion is not a singular act but a generative diffusion, inked into memory and carried forward through narrative. Like representative magical realist characters Beloved, Tita, or Scheherazade herself, Maryam survives by virtue of transmission and the embodied, resisting force of story.

Zohra: Revolutionary Witch and Matriarch of Subversive Memory

Zohra of the Ait Daoud deepens *Dreams of Maryam Tair*'s commitment to feminist magical supplementation as insurgent pedagogy and epistemological recovery. A roughly 200-year-old revolutionary witch, Zohra is "fed on resistance" (Alaoui 62). Her life is stitched together from the seams of oral history, ritual magic, matriarchal inheritance, and working-class solidarity. Raised in the Central Quarries, Casablanca's most infamous slum, Zohra's shack becomes a womb of radical re-creation. The Central Quarries functions as both a geographical and symbolic center of resistance, a space where "things brought to die breathed life anew" (Alaoui 33). Speaking of her Ait Daoud tribe, descended from ancient Hebrews and Muslim saints, Zohra says: "There, in that magical, mystical land, everyone is a Sharif, rebellion is a way of life, and the outlaw is protected" (Alaoui 34). She is a living archive whose body, spells, and speech destabilize colonial, patriarchal, and epistemic hierarchies.

Zohra's witchcraft is not illusion but radical hermeneutics. When still a child, she steals and disassembles the sacred Green Book, an allegorical stand-in for male-dominated religious text, asserting a subversive claim over language and meaning. "Though she was made to kneel in penance… it was too late, for her mind had already taken in the book's symbols and signs" (Alaoui 37). From this act emerges her unique magical practice: pulling apart sacred text to reassemble it into talismans. "She conjured magic by dismantling the text, cutting words and

sentences out, creating fury out of order" (37). The talismans, inscribed with the very symbols of patriarchal power, become tools for both healing and disruption, an aesthetic and political transformation of language into force. Zohra's textual alchemy embodies a refusal of imposed silence and the reclamation of the female voice as spellwork. To this effect, Gloria Anzaldúa affirms, "I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (59).

Like Maryam, part of Zohra's irreducible magicality lies in her inhabiting a hybrid space:

> She was the kind of woman people go to in times of trouble, but one they chose to avoid. A beggar, a prostitute, perhaps even a rebel or a thief, who would want her? Zeinab, the Nassiri maid, had prepared the small room at the back of the house for this woman who was neither guest nor servant, for this woman they wanted to remain invisible. (Alaoui 61)

Her refusal to marry, her fluid sexuality, and her unapologetic corporeality render her grotesque to some and divine to others. She is rumored to be "Aisha Kandisha" herself, the mythic seductress who lures men to doom (Alaoui 38). Even as her neighbor spits, "You will die and be forgotten like the ugly witch you are," Zohra does not look back (39). She embraces her excess, burping and praying in a dance "between light and dark, sleep and awakening" (62). In this threshold state, Zohra enacts what Anzaldúa terms "borderlands consciousness," a mestiza sensibility forged at the interstices of difference. "The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity…. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode" (79). Zohra's life unfolds between binaries: urban and tribal, sacred and vulgar, mother and monster. She resists categorical belonging and rejoices in multiplicity. Her world is not governed by morality, or its opposite, but by the messy ethics of desire, revenge, survival, and relishing that pleasure of flight on her broomstick, that "forbidden, universal gift of the witch" (Alaoui 196).

Still in the spirit of Anzaldúa's "new mestiza," Zohra participates in the making of "another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet" (103). Her pedagogy is oral, affective, and spectral. She is both character and symbol: witch, trickster, matriarch, and revolutionary. Her healing is charged with political consequence. Her talismans come with warnings: "a talisman once made could unleash both good and evil" (Alaoui 37); she is the one "for whom society's codes are at a loss and risk breaking" (61). A figure of feminist magical realism, she performs what Barhoun qualifies as the unnerving of "the world of classic identity and knowledge" by testing "the very limits … of being itself" ("The Carnivalesque" 45). Remarkably, Zohra does not just survive history; she rewrites it.

One of Zohra's most potent magical interventions unfolds within the realm of dreams. Invoking Ben Okri's concluding declaration in *The Famished Road* that "a dream can be the highest point of a life," Zohra's dream becomes a stage of magical-political intervention. She enters the demons' lair disguised as a bureaucrat to rescue Leila, turning the machinery of the state against itself: "Zohra—dream-Zohra—was now a soberly dressed bureaucrat who ordered the immediate release of one Leila Nassiri Tair" (Alaoui 33). Elsa Linguanti et al. corroborate this idea, arguing that "dream … is itself action" (189). Hence, Zohra's spectral intercession becomes a feminist rewriting of power, where imagination turns into praxis.

Zohra's ultimate act of magical supplementation takes shape in her surrender of the cedarwood box, "the heritage of Solomon and Sheeba" (Alaoui 248), to the butterfly tribe, the Idaid. This magical-political sacrifice costs Zohra her life but catalyzes Maryam's reception of the gift of thought. When she gives up the ancestral treasure, Zohra enacts an insurgent pedagogy where power is not hoarded but transmitted at great personal cost. The loss of the box

seems to be the inevitable price of epistemic rebirth, positioning Zohra as both martyr and midwife of revolutionary consciousness. In this sense, her death is not an unmitigated tragedy but the necessary rupture from which insurgent knowledge is born (Barhoun, "The Carnivalesque" 47). In the spirit of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, her death becomes a source of vital regenerative power, echoing the festive-ritual ambivalence of "the wish for death" and, through it, "a wish for renewal and rebirth: die, and live again" (Bakhtin 245–49).

Sheherazade: Narrative as Magical Supplement and Feminist Ontology

Among the constellation of magical agents in *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Sheherazade is the novel's most mythically and metafictionally charged figure. Drawing from her patrimony in *The Arabian Nights*, Alaoui assigns her the role of a radical narrator. The insurgent matriarch wields storytelling as a feminist mode of survival and resistance. Faris observes, "Scheherazade herself is a popular paradigm of the high modernist narrator—exhausted and threatened by death, but still inventing" ("Scheherazade's Children" 163). Alaoui extends this model, converting storytelling from literary performance to an ontological act of persistence in the face of epistemic and state violence. Sheherazade's role is profoundly intertextual, recalling Clarissa Pinkola Estés's claim that "within every woman there is a wild and natural force, a power, that when awakened will transform the world" (34). Alaoui's Sheherazade smokes her pipe in the Atlas Mountains, critiques the digital age's encroachment on oral memory, names madness her "prized possession," and embraces it as a "tool" to wage "a war against omniscience" (Alaoui 247).

Madness, in cultural and literary discourse, has long been deployed to discredit women's voices and suppress forms of female dissent. Meriem Ait Bbih and Barhoun observe that "patriarchal institutions... are known to associate women with madness as a strategy to curb their agency and limit their subjectivity" (2). In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Alaoui reclaims this trope through Sheherazade, who harnesses madness to destabilize the dominion of the "Great Patriarch" and his patrimony. Rather than signaling a lapse in reason, her madness is meant to be a form of embodied knowledge, rooted in emotion, memory, and ancestral wisdom, that challenges dominant frameworks of rationality. Ait Bbih and Barhoun contend that totalizing systems of knowledge are "deeply troubled by anything which reason/rationality cannot neatly contain or control" (5). In opposing such systems, Sheherazade resists both nationalist and Western patriarchal paradigms that deny multiplicity and marginal voices. Madness, in her hands, transforms into a magical feminist agency that reimagines suppressed cosmologies and alternate ways of knowing into being.

Sheherazade gives Maryam the gift of "heart," a metaphor for moral clarity and affective power, thereby rewriting the conventional arc of the magical guide. She is not only Maryam's narrator but also her midwife and interlocutor, guiding her along a process of transformation that is both ontological and narrative. Her storytelling resists linearity and closure, becoming "a model of magical realist narration: digressive, layered, resistant to authority" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 164). Sheherazade enacts resistance through form—tales within tales, voices within voices—producing a magical supplementation that defies fixity and invites participation.

Furthermore, Sheherazade's dialogic engagement with Maryam, Zohra, Leila, and the unnamed apprentice demonstrates the generative potential of feminist mentorship in magical realist fiction. It is not a pedagogy of hierarchy but of relational transmission. Sheherazade curates narrative inheritance as an ethical act. Her final proclamation, "You are Maryam Tair,

and now your tale is told. It was told to you, for you, and with you" (Alaoui 340), collapses the boundaries between author, character, and reader. This culminates in what might be called a moment of intersectional legibility: a narrative space where layered identities, often peripheral ones, are recognized and affirmed. Overlooking the intersection of race, gender, and class renders the experiences of marginalized women invisible within dominant discourse (Crenshaw 1241). Sheherazade's magical narrative form defies such erasure by privileging multiplicity, embodiment, and intersubjectivity.

Ultimately, Sheherazade stands as a mythic supplement to Maryam's journey and to the very possibility of feminist futurity. She is a recursive force who reactivates forgotten genealogies and restores storytelling as a radical, relational practice. Her function extends beyond narration to metaphysics. Rather than simply preserve the story, she transforms it into a living archive, an insurgent grammar of magical feminist becoming.

Defamiliarizing Violence: Rewriting History Through Estrangement

While the previous section examines magical feminist resistance through the delineation of three marvelous characters, this section turns to narrative form, specifically Alaoui's use of defamiliarization as a strategy of ontological disruption and historical recovery. In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, defamiliarization renders reality strange in order to expose the hidden operations of power. It performs a radical mode of historiographic intervention that reconfigures urban memory, critiques gendered carceral systems, and exposes the monstrosity of state violence. The subsections that follow analyze how Alaoui rewrites urban space and prison architecture through magical realist estrangement, producing what can be read as counter-archives of feminist and queer resistance.

Rewriting the Urban Archive

In *Dreams of Maryam Tair*, Mhani Alaoui defamiliarizes urban Morocco, employing magical realism politically to recover occluded history. Her estranged depictions of Casablanca during the 1981 Bread Riots and the Arab Spring disrupt realist expectations and habitual modes of perception, reframing official historiography through the lens of embodied trauma, mythic time, and affective rupture. Magical realism, in this context, becomes a counter-discourse that distorts causality and produces what Hegerfeldt calls "strategies of destabilization," thus forcing readers to renegotiate their frameworks for understanding historical reality (199). In such cases, "a mere matter-of-fact description of cruelty and violence is not in itself sufficient to convey a sense of horror," so a defamiliarized aesthetic is required (Hegerfeldt 209).

On the eve of the Bread Riots, Casablanca is a spectral and decaying landscape, haunted by time and political neglect:

> Casablanca was a city of shades and shadows aspiring toward forgetfulness and dreamless sleep. Already, since that morning, the cracks on the elegant prewar buildings had deepened, and an ashen residue had settled on the facades. In a matter of hours, a dark green moss had grown on the newly formed crevasses. Soft and inviting from afar, the decaying Centre Ville had aged a hundred years in one day. (Alaoui 6)

The temporal and spatial estrangement literalizes the psychic effects of political repression and historical forgetting.

When violence erupts, the state's coercive apparatus transforms to monstrous figures, turning the riot into an apocalyptic spectacle:

> Leila watched as the central plaza became an arena of violence. A fog descended on the plaza. The sky swirled into a dark grey cloud, and the air thickened… They burned, crushed, and ate whatever they found.… With their massive fists, they hit children, killed with glee, and disappeared men and women into their white vans. The demons grabbed protesters and, flapping their wings of dank wool, rose with them into the sky. (Alaoui 15)

The grotesque eruption is a "defamiliarization brought about by the literalization of metaphor" (Hegerfeldt 237). Alaoui replaces empirical realism with surreal horror to recast state violence in estranged and viscerally felt terms. Hegerfeldt notes that "extreme events call for a treatment that takes their deviance into account," producing "a tension which expresses that the events in question are beyond all belief" (209) and evoking "a paradoxical sense of unreality" engendered by "utterly inconceivable dimensions of human cruelty" (331). This aesthetic move aligns with John Burt Foster's concept of "felt history," whereby a character absorbs the direct pressure of historical events and their dramatic psychic toll (274). The portrayal of the demonic purge during the Bread Riots breaks the linearity of history through emotional temporality, unsettling the teleological structure of official memory and recoding violence by means of affective and symbolic registers.

The same strategy is deployed in the novel's depiction of the Arab Spring, which is not witnessed through news media or rational discourse but sensed as a metaphysical disturbance. From a rooftop in Fes, Maryam and Zohra perceive the revolution in the form of a cosmic shift:

> "Do you see it too, Maryam?" Zohra urged. Maryam nodded, "I felt it. Now I am beginning to see it." A sound like rolling thunder could be heard in the distance. The noise was getting closer, as wave upon wave of protesting men and women, young and poor, hit the narrow streets. "The people have nothing left to lose," said Zohra. (Alaoui 182)

Here, Alaoui collapses linear time into visionary simultaneity, revealing the revolution to be an emotional and temporal dislocation. This supernaturalization of the real offers "idiosyncratic recreations of … events grounded firmly in historical realities, often alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 15).

Alaoui thereby constructs a history that is both descriptive and imaginative, one that decenters conventional renderings and challenges the presumed authority of empiricism in defining historical truth. Zohra and Maryam become mediums through whom history is refracted, blending fact with myth and reportage with dream. In a similar context, Zhu Ying notes, "the novel's historical field is extensively enveloped in a mythic frame" (118). The Arab Spring is not merely narrated but divined. In Alaoui's hands, magical realism becomes a visionary historiography, where the mystical, affective, and insurgent converge to reclaim urban space and collective memory from state-sanctioned accounts.

The Demons' Lair: Temporal Abyss and Gendered Torture

The demons' lair, in which Leila and Adam are imprisoned, suspends empirical logic: "Three months… translated to a thousand and one years in the demons' lair" (Alaoui 31). This temporal

dissonance, where "[Adam's] hair was long and white, and he looked a thousand and one years old" (29), concretizes the emotional dilation of trauma. Such distortion mirrors the necro-temporal condition of prison life in state-engineered abysses designed to erase time itself. Spatially, too, the lair embodies an architecture of despair. "The lair was a labyrinth of stone and steel" (29), and Leila and Adam are described as separated by an "eternity across the sea of darkness and into a lunar mountain range" (30), a mythic metaphor that collapses carceral space into psychic alienation.

It is within this setting that the demons perpetrate their monstrous sexual assaults on Leila. The narrative avoids a realist depiction of the episode, instead abstracting the violence into poetic horror: "Leila … remained our prey for many a long night. A moment of suspended violence, of pure pleasure upon which we fed our crimson delight … Her destruction must be complete" (Alaoui 208). By veiling sexual torture in metaphor, the narrative acknowledges that certain forms of suffering exceed the limits of forensic realism. Alaoui employs a defamiliarizing mode of narration to convey the emotional and bodily truth of trauma while eschewing spectacle or sensationalism. In line with this ethic, Saidiya Hartman warns that the challenge is to represent the violated body without violating it again (3). Eventually, Alaoui's figurative language does not obscure; it actively resists discursive violence.

Adam, meanwhile, is reduced to a metaphysical husk:

> Adam stood beside Leila feeling as old as the world and looking almost as tired. He was a shell licked clean by the demons in the lair. They had gleefully hollowed him out and thrown him to the void. He had not had a single dream since he had been returned. His nights were filled with dreamlessness, and he was left to face the demons, now in full view, forever in front of his pupils. (Alaoui 57)

This evocative image expresses the existential outcome of the prison experience. In fact, both prisoners are subdued through the administration of "poisonous lead," whose grip on them "was now acute" (Alaoui 95), a signifier for permanent ideological and psychological coercion. "It transformed its prey into quiet, unobtrusive beings who went gently through life and let their days crumble into their smallest components without ever puzzling about their meaning" (60). In this light, Alaoui critiques authoritarianism's most insidious mechanisms: numbness, routinization, and psychic dismemberment:

> [The guards] would watch and wait for that moment when the individual would break and the soul would be taken…. They would watch for days and longer days … but all in vain. They would persevere, and their perseverance would pay off. After a lengthy, doubt-filled wait, the prisoner would finally break. There was even a couple they had freed to serve as an example to other hot-headed, naïve idealists. (Alaoui 206)

The psychological disintegration described in the passage echoes what human rights discourse terms psychological torture: the "prolonged mental harm" caused by methods "calculated to disrupt profoundly the senses or personality" (Reyes 597). Such torture erodes autonomy, engenders guilt, and shatters identity. Alaoui's depiction of prisoners who are broken down over time, who dissolve into quiet compliance, aligns with the documented goal of psychological torture: to dismantle the will, leading to a total "disintegration of the personality" (Reyes 600).

Thematically, the lair functions as a gendered counterpoint to Tazmamart and similar infamous prisons. Whereas testimonies of Tazmamart focus largely on masculine political victimhood, Alaoui's feminized carceral imaginary expands the archive of pain into the terrain of patriarchal and state-authored gendered violence, stressing that "[Leila's] suffering was much greater than Adam's" (Alaoui 29). This gendered amplification of suffering resonates

with the feminist criminological imperative to center women's political incarceration within "affective testimony" and "bodily lived experience" as critical tools for understanding carceral violence (Chamberlen and Bandyopadhyay 11).

Alaoui's representation of Leila's degradation through symbolic and somatic registers reflects Anastasia Chamberlen and Mahuya Bandyopadhyay's account of "the disciplining, control, and punitive actions inscribed on the body of the woman prisoner" (10). Moreover, by linking rape, erasure, and psychic ruin to state and patriarchal authority, the novel takes up the two authors' call to confront the "invisibility … of women's … incarceration" (3). Alaoui's depiction of the lair critiques a carceral logic that fractures female subjectivity, much like Chamberlen and Bandyopadhyay's indictment of patriarchal penal systems. The lair becomes a feminist site of exposure which reveals how gendered state violence is etched into memory, language, and flesh.

Birsoukout: Queer Erasure and Carceral Silence

If the lair dramatizes psychic collapse, Birsoukout—literally "the Well of Silence"—enacts epistemic annihilation. It is the culmination of Alaoui's magical realist logic, where metaphor becomes matter and absence is rendered through state architecture:

> The place seemed deserted. The air was too still. Maryam felt the brightness in her heart begin to drain away ... She wondered why the stillness and deserted aspect of the place filled her with such sadness. It was like no place she had ever been to ... The silence was not a full-bodied, heavy one. Instead, it was a silence made of emptiness. (Alaoui 182)

To this secret prison, "whose mere name brought terror to people's hearts and made heroes frail" (181), Mehdi, a queer dissident, is brought to be punished for an act of imagination: "He dreamed the destruction of our absolute power" (Alaoui 177). In Alaoui's political cosmology, dreaming itself is treasonous, a form of insurgent power, recalling Salim's psychic resistance in Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*. Salim declares: "I strove to keep my mind out of reach" (Ben Jelloun 104).

Similar to the literary afterlives of Tazmamart, Birsoukout transforms disappearance into an ontological void where silence is a "business of producing nothingness" (Alaoui 182). Alaoui's "arid silence" (182) invites a dark side of magical realism; it is not a byproduct of repression, but its very mechanism.

The silence at Birsoukout is both physical and archival. Mehdi incarnates "the ontological negation" (Sharpe 16), the fate of those whom "the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable" (Sharpe 22). Mehdi's queerness thus places him beyond the horizon of public recognition, aligning Birsoukout with Years of Lead's political prisons, where "knowledge of what cannot be admitted fosters even more silence" (El Guabli 119). Indeed, Birsoukout is a mythic equivalent to actual political prisons and detention centers such as Qalaat M'Gouna and Derb Moulay Cherif, black holes that disappeared those marked by nonconformity. These sites remained outside the narrative logic of justice and accountability to systematically repress opposition. "Birsoukout lingered in that repressed domain of our beings and our societies, existing to stifle rebelliousness," Alaoui writes (169).

The annihilation in Birsoukout is bureaucratically managed by the prison's spectral warden: the scribe. Neither torturer nor executioner, the scribe enacts a peculiar form of archival

violence: typing incessantly onto a blank sheet of paper, he constructs the very borders of visibility and erasure. He is "the creator of borders and margins" (Alaoui 196). His role incarnates a silent, administrative sovereignty that denies the body even the dignity of trace, making Birsoukout an instance of what Achille Mbembe calls the calculated reorganization of survival: a politics that governs not by killing outright, but by rendering some lives unrecordable. Mbembe contends that sovereignty manifests spatially through "the writing of new spatial relations," the drawing of "boundaries and hierarchies," and the relegation of certain groups to new zones of existence (79). Birsoukout thus stands for a sovereign space of epistemic exile. There, the queer, dissident body is confined to the margins of recognizability, spectrally disappeared through the technics of silence and administration. Explained by El Guabli, the secret prison becomes "an unbridled manifestation not only of the state's ability to erase people from the surface of the earth, but also to deny that they ever existed" (11).

When Maryam confronts "the dead scribe" (Alaoui 186), she shatters his dominion through presence and writing. "Move away from me. Your smell is disgusting, impure. It is...alive," complains the scribe (Alaoui 186). Maryam's scent signifies a subversive vitality that perturbs the sterile logic of the state. More crucially, her presence catalyzes a breach in the scribe's spell: "letters and words began to appear on the blank piece of paper, and the nothingness dissipated to reveal the agony beneath" (Alaoui 186). As Stephanie Galasso posits, "reclaiming the means of representation is the first act of resistance in the face of epistemic violence" (71). Maryam's presence literalizes this act, rendering the invisible visible and the silenced heard.

Nevertheless, what Maryam's incursion into Birsoukout reveals is equally significant:

> Maryam watched as light became shade and shadows replaced the emptiness. Forms began to step out of the darkness. Though they walked and surely breathed, they showed no other signs of life. Their heads hung low, and their clothes floated on their emaciated bodies. They were neither chained nor whipped nor controlled in any way that she could see. (Alaoui 186)

It is a scene of prisoners in spiritual depletion. They are present, breathing, yet emptied of vitality. Their bodies are untouched by instruments of physical control, but their postures betray complete obedience. The absence of overt violence is not evidence of freedom; it is a sophisticated marker of submission. In Michel Foucault's words:

> Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process…: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity. (9)

The bodies before Maryam bear no visible wounds because the punishment they endure no longer operates through flesh; it is enacted via a sustained regime of psychic domination, a colonization of the soul. Another of Foucault's formulations is chillingly apt here: "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (30).

In Birsoukout, the state achieves its most terrifying ambition. The prisoners are disciplined into "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Foucault 138), with no chains or whips being required. They are free to move, yet their will is extinguished. These zombie-like figures are molded by certainty, subdued by the unrelenting pressure of a power that hides its operations yet leaves nothing untouched. The bureaucratic demons themselves admit, "We miss nothing. We are trained in thoroughness. We leave nothing to chance, no stone unturned" (320).

In this way, both the lair and Birsoukout are revealed as continuums of Morocco's real carceral history, transfigured through defamiliarization into critical counter-sites of memory.

Alaoui's novel thereby contributes to the broader project of what El Guabli terms "fictionalized other-archives" (133), not only documenting repressive structures but remaking them within symbolic topographies that challenge the forgetfulness imposed by official historiography.

Conclusion

In *Dreams of Maryam Tair: Blue Boots and Orange Blossoms*, Mhani Alaoui offers a powerful intervention into feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and magical realism. Through formal innovation and mythopoeic characters, Alaoui reclaims narrative as both an ontological and political act, where resistance is not merely represented but structurally enacted. The novel illustrates Arab magical feminism, expanding the epistemic and aesthetic boundaries of magical realism while challenging the exclusions that have historically defined its canon.

Central to Alaoui's narrative is the strategic use of magical supplementation and defamiliarization. Together, the devices unsettle Western realist assumptions and legitimize marginalized, spiritual, and embodied ways of knowing. Magical supplementation resists metaphorical reduction, affirming mythic and sacred truths as coexistent with empirical reality; defamiliarization, by estranging the ordinary, exposes its ideological contours and reactivates our perception of trauma, violence, and power. The two techniques form a counter-discursive grammar that redefines what can be known, narrated, and believed.

This logic is embodied most forcefully in Alaoui's characters. Maryam, the novel's cosmological and narrative center, performs a magical feminist ontology through her fluid identity, mythic ancestry, and final transformation into text. Her enchanted bicycle, matrilineal heritage, and sacred scent challenge patriarchal hegemony, asserting the divine feminine as a mode of knowledge. In becoming word and meaning, she literalizes the act of women writing themselves into being, echoing Cixous and other theorists who view the female body as archive and insurgency.

Zohra, the revolutionary witch of the Central Quarries, deepens the novel's radical epistemology through embodied pedagogy and linguistic sabotage. Her talismanic craft, forged from dismantled patriarchal texts, carries out symbolic resistance on one hand and material reordering on the other. Grotesque and divine, maternal and monstrous, Zohra embodies Anzaldúa's borderlands consciousness, embracing ambiguity as a political stance. Her final act is not death but transmission, a magical inheritance that enables Maryam's becoming. Midwife and martyr alike, she becomes a conduit for subversive knowledge.

Sheherazade, the metafictional narrator, anchors the novel within a transhistorical lineage of feminist storytelling. Reclaimed from patriarchal folklore, she is the narrator of counter-hegemonic cosmologies. Her nonlinear, digressive narration privileges affect, memory, and relational ways of knowing. Her gift of heart to Maryam signifies an ethics of care that resists authoritarian logic. In her final benediction, she collapses the boundaries between narrator, character, and reader, forming a dialogic community held together by the political power of storytelling.

These women are not isolated figures but nodes in an interwoven network of magical, feminine forces that resists erasure and rewrites history. Their stories unfold in estranged urban landscapes and carceral spaces transformed by Alaoui into sites of affective, spiritual, and political remapping. Casablanca during the Bread Riots and the Arab Spring, the demons' lair, and Birsoukout become terrains in which magical realism engages with Morocco's Years of Lead and recovers silenced voices. These haunted spaces, which are marked by temporal rupture and spectral violence, insist that history is not the one written by official institutions but

the one lived through bodies, dreams, and ancestral language. In this way, the novel constitutes an other-archive rooted in sacred femininity and anti-authoritarian imagination.

Dreams of Maryam Tair is not simply a feminist novel using magical realism; it is a magical feminist text that remakes narrative, ontology, and knowledge itself in the image of resistance. Alaoui repositions Arab women's writing at the heart of global magical realist discourse, challenging its geographic and ideological boundaries. Her novel contributes to a transnational, pluriversal aesthetic capable of articulating pain, power, and possibility. In doing so, she affirms storytelling as a reparative act against forgetting and a luminous invocation of worlds yet to be born.

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