

AL-ANSARI'S BASSMA AND PEARCE'S TOM'S MIDNIGHT GARDEN: THE JOURNEY FROM REALITY TO FANTASY

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ABSTRACT: *This study aims at drawing a distinction between the world of fantasy and reality in Al-Ansari's novel Bassma and Pearce's Tom's Midnight Garden. It investigates how the protagonists in both novels travel from the world of reality which is full of hopelessness, despair, and loss to the world of fantasy full of hope, happiness, and maturity. In other words, the study explores how the world of reality makes both protagonists create an imaginary or mythical world to compensate for what they lost in the world of reality and to entertain the freedom of childhood period. The study methodology is based on the comparative close reading analysis, in which some quotes are selected from both novels to illustrate the protagonists' journey from reality to fantasy. The study concludes that in the children and young adult literature, most protagonists travel from the world of reality to fantasy in order to become self-actualized, mature, experienced, and to restore the joyful moments of childhood.*

KEYWORDS: reality, fantasy, garden, loss, self-actualized, loneliness, past memories, childhood

INTRODUCTION

Fantasy has been defined by many critics who agree that it is the opposite of reality. For example, Hume (1984) has defined it as "any departure from consensus reality" (21). Nikolajeva claims that "the best examples of fantasy for children use the fantastic form as a narrative device, as a metaphor for reality" (42). Additionally, Armitt points out that "the fantastic is a form of writing which is about opening up subversive space within the mainstream" (2).

In Allen and Walder's article entitled "Can realist novels survive?," the writers to Barthes's article "the reality effect," in which they notice that realism "is essentially a verbal effect, creating meaning through conformity to conventions of representation, not by reflection of any actual external reality" (216). Watt claims that the word "realism" attempts to "portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it" (qtd. in Walder 230). Furthermore, Levine points out that the word "realism" implies "an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there" (qtd. in Walder 259).

The Analysis of Bassma and Tom's Midnight Garden

Al-Ansari in her novel entitled Bassma narrates the story of an ambitious girl who is upset about not being able to achieve her aspiration to become a fashion designer. She completes her undergraduate with great hopes to find a job and to accomplish her dream. But she faces many obstacles to achieve it. When Bassma becomes desperate of her actual life, her sister Sarah advises her to go to the sea to relax and restore her energy.

What is significant in this story is Bassma's quest to leave this real world through her imagination to find a new imaginary world in which she can live happily and achieve her dreams preserved in her subconscious mind. In other words, Bassma attempts to leave the real world which full of despair and hopelessness to another imaginary world that is full of happiness and hope.

This journey from the real world to the imaginary one cannot be achieved without imagination that is needed to have this feeling. With the help of the coloured flask Bassma finds on the seashore, she can move from the linear time to the mythic time that enables her to create a new world full of happiness to her. What is found in the flask is a magical girl who appears to Bassma to pacify and to help her leave this desperate real world: "Don't get afraid. I am here to help you. I will achieve all your wishes" (Al-Ansari 17). Bassma was afraid of the moment of leaving the real world and thinks that it was a dream to her: "Oh my God! What is this? Am I dreaming?" (17).

Bassma's reaction when she sees the magical girl represents her own fear of the new world she will visit. She is still confused about moving to the imaginary world which is still unknown and unclear to her. But there is a subconscious desire in Bassma's mind that urges her to accept the magical girl's proposal to leave to the magical world in which there will be "justice and equality" (17). Bassma's acceptance to move to the magical or imaginary world represents her own despair of the real world and her aspiration to explore a newly created world that is relevant to her hopes and aspirations.

Additionally, Bassma's journey to the imaginary world is achieved through the magical girl who appears like the shining sun to her. Bassma is in need of finding light and hope to become relaxed and hopeful in life. That is why she accepts to journey with the magical girl quickly to find glimpses of hope to get rid of the depressing life she lives.

Bassma's shock of being in the magical world is due to her loss of her selfhood. She becomes like the magical girl who moves to the imaginary world quickly like the light. The magical girl explains to Bassma how she can move to the imaginary world saying "because you hold my hand so that the magic can transfer from me to you and you can go to any place" (18). Thus, it should be noted her that supernatural power of magic is needed here to make Bassma lose her sense of the real time. It is the needed step by which Bassma can feel that she is free to move from one place to another in the imaginary world.

Bassma's impression about the imaginary world she visits with the magical girl represents her eagerness for freedom and optimism. She describes it saying "it is wonderful! The environment is pure. Everything is green" (18). Thus, she finds this world beautiful and charming. Thus, it

should be emphasized that Bassma's fascination of the imaginary world is a result to her despair of the real world in which she cannot find any glimpse of hope and happiness.

The magical girl's description of her world represents the contradiction between the real world and the fantastic one. In other words, the imaginary world represents the world of freedom and security which Bassma misses. However, the magical girl called Rayan informs Bassma the reasons why the imaginary world is more charming and beautiful than the real one. It is beautiful because Rayan protects it and keeps working hard in that world: "Because if we don't work, our world won't be beautiful. Everyone must work and protect this world. Work is not a shame" (18). Here it should be noted that the author of this story conveys a message to the readers that even in our imaginary world we need to be realistic. In other words, the didactic message is that in the core of fantasy there is realism. Happiness and self-actualization cannot be achieved with a logical reason. So, Rayan's imaginary world is beautiful because of respecting the value of hard work.

It should be noted here that the author wants to root in the readers' minds that in our fantasy we should not neglect reality. They must coexist to make us happy and satisfied. Rayan informs Bassma that she does her job carefully to make her world beautiful: "I work in this garden. I irrigate and take care of the plants" (18). We should note here that both Rayan and Bassma are highly interested in nature. This is due to the day that nature represents to them beauty and purity. They both love nature because it is not corrupted by humans. That is why Bassma expresses her love of flowers like Rayan: " And I also love flowers, Rayan. I hope that everything will change in my world. I hope my world will become like yours" (19). Here it should be noted that Bassma's eagerness to change her real world is due to her despair of not finding the chance she dreams of. She wants equality and hope in her real world.

The advice given to Bassma by Rayan represents the author's message to the desperate readers that any dream can be achieved through determination and work. Rayan tells Bassma "You should start firstly with yourself, then you should help others. I know you are a good girl. You are the ideal one for change" (19). Thus, the advice here is a kind of alert to Bassma not to lose her connection with the real world and to make it happier through change. Rayan motivates Bassma to imagine the beautiful world through viewing it from a realistic view. We can say that this voice of change comes from Bassma's subconscious mind to change her world. It might be her own tool to change her real world through imagination.

The necklace given by Rayan to Bassma as a souvenir from the imaginary world symbolizes as a guide to Bassma to forget about the stressful and depressing real life. To Rayan, the necklace is "a symbol of freedom, giving, and justice" (19). These values are needed for Bassma to overcome her feeling of being pressured and depressed. Bassma expresses her admiration of the imaginary world when she says "Your world resembles our world, but it is purer and more beautiful in its form and content; the people living in your world are purer like it" (19). This means that Bassma is fed up with her real world which is full of hopelessness, unfairness, and unhappiness.

When Bassma returns to the real world, she seems more armed with the strong motivation to change her real world. Rayan's advice to her before going back to the real world makes Bassma more aware of how to achieve her ambition: "you should do the thing you like...Work as a

fashion designer... You should learn fashion design in the relevant place for that" (20). Thus, it seems obvious that Bassma learns from the imaginary world many lessons and information that enable her overcome her feeling of depression.

Furthermore, Rayan's insistence on making her meeting with Bassma a secret that should not be revealed for others represents a special feature of the imaginary world, in which Rayan and Bassma have a special bond or relationship that is kept inside. It is a meeting that is not connected with the real world. It is a meeting that represents to Bassma another world in which she is separated from her depressing real life. In short, the meeting represents the created world relevant to Bassma's hopeful aspirations.

When Bassma leaves Rayan, she starts to work harder on achieving her goal to become a fashion designer. She succeeds in the end and is able to establish her company. But what is significant here is how the imaginary world positively influences her to achieve her aspiration. Here it should be noted that the author of the story draws the readers' attention to the importance of the imaginary world in the real one. The reason behind Bassma's success lies in her ability to create a world of her own that is relevant to what she hopes and her capacity to find the solution for her problems in this imaginary world. All the solutions for Bassma's real problem stem from the imaginary world.

Moreover, we need to investigate closely how Bassma moves from the real world to the imaginary one. It is through the flask she keeps and the night time Bassma can make her journey to the imaginary world. Her selection of the night time to meet Rayan is significant here because this time is relevant to her imagination and to her feeling of calmness that is needed to enter the imaginary place with Rayan. The night to Bassma represents the suitable time to navigate in imagination and find herself and her world.

The last meeting between Bassma and Rayan represents a moment of revision and evaluation of what was achieved by Bassma. The meeting was an imaginary journey in which Bassma visits Rayan's house which is "flying between the earth and the sky, but it is fixed, and all its contents are from the nature" (65). This house is a symbol of Bassma's aspiring soul for optimism and nature. She seems firm in her determination to achieve her goals and her soul aspires for the place where she can feel happy and optimistic.

Bassma's satisfaction of achieving her dreams is still connected with her dissatisfaction of not being able to change the real world: "But I could not change the world" (65). She asserts that she is kind and helpful with her employees. This indicates that Bassma's imaginary world motivates her to become kinder and more positive with the people around her. Additionally, Rayan seems very satisfied with what Bassma has achieved: "you have changed your world... I expect a great success to you" (66). Rayan asks Bassma not to change her treatment with others and to keep changing herself to the best: "promise me not to change [with others] and to change yourself [to the best] all your life in order to make me feel that I have achieved my duty toward you" (66). Thus, it should be noted here that the author wants to convey her didactic messages to the readers through the advice given by Rayan. The significance of Rayan lies in the connection between the imaginary and the real worlds. In other words, the author wants to say that the imaginary world might be a strong motivation to change the real one; it is inseparable from the real world because it is in its core.

The end of the imaginary journey between Bassma and Rayan hints to the end of Bassma's dream, in which she can achieve her aspirations. Rayan tells Bassma that she will not meet her again because she feels that Bassma subconscious dreams are now achieved. Here it should be noted that Bassma's feeling of self-actualization in the real world is the reason behind the absence of Rayan in her world. The disconnection between the imaginary and the real worlds here is due to the satisfying feeling in the real world. In other words, it is important to have a suffering or unhappy feelings in order to connect with the imaginary world. When the real life becomes happy and satisfying, there will be no need to create the imaginary world.

In comparison, Tom in Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* is fed up with his residency in his uncle's house which is boring and gloomy for him. He longs for playing with his sick brother whom he used to play with. Because he was obliged to leave his brother and sent to live with his uncle and aunt, he felt that the house does not belong to him. He detests his real life and wants to create his imaginary world away from the real one in order to feel free. That is why he enters the imaginary garden with Hatty, who was his old neighbor Mrs. Bartholomew in order to find a companion in the imaginary to play with and to learn many experiences. Mrs. Bartholomew becomes that young girl called Hatty who attempts to restore her past memories with her lost parents. Both Tom and Hatty share the sense of loss, in which Tom lost his sick brother and Hatty lost her parents. Tom learns from Hatty's past experiences and matures at the end of the story. However, all his imaginary journey was a dream that compensates him for his loss of his brother: "we're both real: Then and Now" (Pearce 224). Thus, when Tom wakes up of his dream and his journey with Hatty, he recognizes that their fantasy was realistic.

Commenting on the importance of time and place in this novel, Montgomery claims that "Pearce uses a time-shift narrative...Pearce is more concerned with the garden, placing her work within a pastoral tradition of writing which positions the garden as physically and morally redemptive" (qtd. in Montgomery and Watson 204, 205). Additionally, Rustin and Rustin point out that the feeling of loneliness and separation "allow the writer to contrast the time and place in which [Hatty and Tom] live, and thus to provide an imaginative entry into the past for her readers" (qtd. in Montgomery and Watson 211). Furthermore, Nikolajeva claims that the garden in this novel is "a paradise, where there is always summer and fine weather, since it is evoked by Hatty's nostalgic memories...The garden symbolizes lost childhood, and..., it offers the child a temporal retreat" (qtd. in Montgomery and Watson 216). Finally, Natov comments on the journey from the real world to the world of fantasy in the novel and points out that the "time travel serves as a metaphor for the way we need to travel, reflexively between our own childhood selves, held together in our consciousness, or recalled from our unconscious through dreams and recognized by the conscious self upon waking" (qtd. in Montgomery and Watson 223).

Additionally, the feeling of loneliness for both Tom and Bartholomew was the reason behind their journey to fantasy. They were both shocked of their real world and past memories. Mrs. Bartholomew expresses her deep agony and shock when she says:

*My husband and I were very happy in the Fens. We had two children—boys.
They were both killed in the Great War—the First World War they call it now
...Then many years later, my husband died, and I was left quite alone. That was
when I came here; and I've lived here ever since...And since you've come to live*

here, you've often gone back in Time, haven't you? Gone back in Time? Gone back into the past. When you're my age, Tom, you live in the Past a great deal. You remember it; you dream of it (Pearce 223).

Thus, it seems obvious that Mrs. Bartholomew's tragic past memories and her feeling of loss make her able to navigate in the world of fantasy with Tom. She makes a clear distinction between the world of fantasy and reality, in which she informs Tom that whenever he enters the garden (the imaginary place), he will lose his sense of the real world and goes back to the past. Yet Mrs. Bartholomew explains that she enters to the world of fantasy and goes back to the past because she is old and mature; she has many past memories that she wants to restore. Whereas Tom is still a young boy who is not experienced in life and who does not have tragic past memories. Thus, we can notice that both Tom's and Mrs. Bartholomew's journey to the world of fantasy is due to their feeling of loss and eagerness to change the depressing real world.

Furthermore, Tom's recognition of what Mrs. Bartholomew has said about the need to revisit the past in dreams is clear evidence of how Tom understands the importance of time and place in moving from the world of reality to the world of fantasy and vice versa: "he understood so much now: why the weather in the garden had always been perfect; why Time in the garden had sometimes jumped far ahead, and sometimes gone backwards. It had all depended upon what old Mrs. Bartholomew had chosen to remember in her dreams" (223). Thus, it seems clear that Tom has recognized that the imaginary time in the garden which is a place connected with fantasy is related to Mrs. Bartholomew's past memories. In other words, Mrs. Bartholomew attempts to restore her memories of the past in this imaginary time and place.

Furthermore, the existence of the garden in the novel is connected with Mrs. Bartholomew's eagerness and desire to return to the past and to forget about her real time. Through the garden, she is able to return to her childhood and to play with Tom:

Yet perhaps Mrs. Bartholomew was not solely responsible for the garden's being there, night after night, these last weeks. For she remarked to Tom now that never before this summer had she dreamt of the garden so often, and never before this summer had she been able to remember so vividly what it had felt like to be the little Hatty-to be longing for someone to play with and for somewhere to play (224).

Thus, it seems clear that the concept of the garden in this novel reflects the world of fantasy, in which Mrs. Bartholomew can find what she has longed for during her childhood and what she missed in the world of reality. But we should keep in mind here that the world of fantasy and reality are inseparable because they are intermingled together. The existence of the world of fantasy is due to the world of reality.

Similarly, Tom has the same desire as Mrs. Bartholomew's, in which he longs for those enjoyable days when he used to play with his brother. His need to the world of fantasy is a result of his frustration with the real world, in which he cannot entertain his freedom as a child:

But those were the things I wanted here, this summer, said Tom, suddenly

recognizing himself exactly in Mrs. Bartholomew's description. He had longed for someone to play with and for somewhere to play; and that great longing, beating about unhappily in the big house, must have made its entry into Mrs. Bartholomew's dreaming mind and had brought back to her the little Hatty of long ago. Mrs. Bartholomew had gone back in Time to when she was a girl, wanting to play in the garden; and Tom had been able to go back with her, to that same garden (224).

Thus, he finds in his company with Mrs. Bartholomew a kind of compensation for his loss of his happy time with his brother. Mrs. Bartholomew becomes that young girl called Hatty in order to make the harmony between them. Additionally, the garden is the suitable place in the world of fantasy for their meeting because it represents the place of freedom, purity, and happiness because it is rich in the green things that can make both of them become optimistic and hopeful.

It seems obvious that Mrs. Bartholomew is stuck in her past memories. She wants to return to her past memories without returning to her real world: "last night I dreamt of my wedding day and of going away from here altogether, to live in the Fens" (224). Similarly, when Tom returns to the real world and recognizes that the garden was an imaginary place, he feels shocked of returning to the real world. He wants to be stuck in the world of fantasy: "when I went down and opened the garden door, the garden wasn't there any more. That was when I screamed out, I called to you, but I never really thought you could hear me" (224).

Finally, both Mrs. Bartholomew's and Tom's recognition of the real world and that the garden was just that illusionary world which enables them to lose their sense of the real world represent the strong connection between the world of fantasy and reality in which they are both in harmony. The fantasy world for Mrs. Bartholomew and Tom a kind of outlet of their sense of loss. When Tom says "We're both real: Then and Now" (224), this emphasizes the strong bondage between the world of fantasy and reality: the world of fantasy makes Tom mature at the end of the novel because he learns many experiences through his residency in the garden with Hatty, whereas Mrs. Bartholomew who is an old woman can restore her past childhood through playing with Tom. But when she returns to her past memories and her wedding, she becomes stuck in reality because her real world is just her memories.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that both the previous novels reflect the world of fantasy and reality. The events of the novels move from the realistic world which is full of hopelessness and depression of not being able to conform the real world. Such frustration of the real world leads the protagonist to create another imaginary or mythical world full of happiness, hope, and freedom that leads the protagonists to become self-actualized at the end. Although the protagonists' world of fantasy is just a dream, we notice that inside it there is a connection with reality, in which both protagonists return to the real world armed with enough experience and knowledge as what happened to Tom or with that feeling of relaxation and happiness which makes them compensate for what they lost in their real life. In sum, it is noted that in the core of the world of fantasy in the previous novels, there is a reality. Reality is the motivation for creating fantasy which is a preparation to return to the world of reality with the sense of self-actualization.

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