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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/17889
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/17889>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MAGIC AND SPELL IN FANTASY: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN FANTASY GENRE NARRATIONS

Emrah Ozturk

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 16 September 2023

Final Accepted: 19 October 2023

Published: November 2023

Key words:-

Fantasy, Magic, Spell, Supernatural,
Genre, Art, Anthropology, History

Abstract

This paper will examine the usage and functions of the magic concept in fantastic narrations with the consideration of importance of supernatural in history. Magic and spell are different versions of supernatural. They all represent different structures of society in certain historical periods of humanity. While magic highlights the primitive era of civilizations, spell & occultism became important with the invention of writing. Defining and analyzing the supernatural types will also help to understand power relations, consensus reality and dominant ideology in society. With the acknowledgments of supernatural types in history, paper will make a study of fantastic genre in order to find the link between usage of supernatural in narrations and their political – economical relations. Paper will ask the question of “does analyzing the supernatural elements in narration help to understand text’s discourse?” and in the conclusion section it will try to give an answer. As a version of supernatural, magic has a link with matriarchy. Till witch hunt, magic can be accepted as a way of resistance of women against to patriarchy. In this point, paper will investigate of the connection between the usage of magic in fantasy and matriarchal theory.

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Introduction:-

Currently fantasy genre is living in a golden age. Box office statistics and publishing lists provide evidence of the important role of fantasy in today’s culture industry. With novels, movies, comic books, PC games and the emergence of the social media channels, fantasy now represents virtual, imaginary worlds which are available to any modern individual at any time of their choosing. Therefore, fantasy is one of those concepts that difficult to describe. As Darko Suvin states, fantasy is not a *genre* but a group of *genres*¹ which means a complex structure with multiple subgenres such as high fantasy, low fantasy, dark fantasy, sword and sorcery etc. There are various approaches to define the fantasy with different perspectives and values. This paper does not intend to focus on these definitions, nor defense one in particular. Instead, it will consider only one essential aspect of the genre. All definitions of the fantasy share a common point which is; a fantasy narration requires a supernatural element to be a fantasy narration. Without magic, without supernatural events or without extraordinary elements, it is almost impossible to locate the narration into this genre.

¹Suvin, Darko, “Considering The Sense of “Fantasy” or “Fantastic Fiction”: An Effusion”, *Extrapolation*, (2000):01.

The supernatural elements in narrations can be perceived in socio-economic, political and cultural senses. The usage, the function and the purpose of the supernatural all have a close relationship with the discourse of the narration. Marxist paradigm, usually criticizes the fantasy because of being disconnected from social reality. China Miéville describes the general acceptance of the genre by Marxism as “*The usual charge that fantasy is escapist, incoherent or nostalgic (if not downright reactionary)...*”² According to this perspective, fantasy rationalizes alienation, exploitation and discrimination. It provides alternative worlds in which a person can escape, instead of questioning and criticizing the system. It is an apparatus or hegemonic device to legitimize and sustain the values of the dominant ideology.

This approach sees the escapism as a major difficulty in fantasy. “*The problem of escapism is bound to the idea of importing political critique into fantasy as a way of escaping from the strictures of ideology to pose questions to its dominance.*” says Mark P. Williams and continues; “*The distinction between ‘escape’ and ‘escapism’ is important for theorizing the relationship with fantasy to the Real.*”³ Williams’ separation of ‘escape’ and ‘escapism’ leads the discussion to the completely different stage. Escapism and fantasy can be criticized from Marxist or some other perspectives. However, relationship between escape and fantasy is not disconnected from reality, society and ideology. A request of escaping from one reality points out the problems of today.

Since the late 1960’s, fantasy authors and theorists such as Ursula Le Guinn, Rosemary Jackson or Kathryn Hume have claimed that fantasy can be an alternative method of struggling against the modern world. As Le Guinn identifies, fantasy offers “*a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It’s not antirational but pararational; not realistic but surrealistic, superrealistic, a heightening of reality.*”⁴ In this definition, Le Guinn emphasizes the relationship between the genre and reality, and the various forms of reality.

Breaking, changing or creating a new reality leads the discussion through to the conception of supernatural. In this paper, conceptions such as magic and spell will be examined in the terms of anthropological – historical roots of art.

Magic

There can be a distinction between the supernatural elements’ sources. One emerges from the nature, and the other supernatural element invented or practiced by a person. “*MAGIC—the very word seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities!*”⁵ states Malinowski. Of all supernatural words and conceptions, magic is the oldest and most ancient one. There has been much speculation on this concept and yet still disagreements remain over its description. In this regard, Malinowski states that “*Magic never “originated,” it never has been made or invented. All magic simply “was” from the beginning an essential adjunct of all such things and processes as vitally interest man and yet elude his normal rational efforts.*”⁶ This statement is important in order to classify the magic phenomenon.

Researches on magic are limited due to its passive, abstract and mysterious nature. It does not leave almost any mark on societies and this makes difficult to follow its tracks throughout the history. Mostly anthropologists focus on spell, instead of magic. For example, in *Golden Bough* Sir James G. Frazer, classifies magic in different branches, but Frazer’s acknowledgment of magic is actually spell which can be practice or invent. In the same manner, Malinowski and Robert Graves’ works are also studying the usage and functions of spell in primitive stage of humanity.

In order to find and define this primitive stage, J.J. Bachofen’s works can be useful. Bachofen claims that, before the patriarchal system rises people used to live in another type of society form which was matriarchy.

²Miéville, China, “Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy”, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 10:4, (2002): 42.

³Williams, Mark P. “Radical Fantasy: A Study of Left Radical Politics in the Fantasy Writing of Michael Moorcock, Angela Carter, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and China Miéville”, *University of East Anglia, Thesis*, (2010): 10.

⁴Le Guinn, Ursula, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie”, *Pendragon Press*, (1973): 144.

⁵Malinowski, Bronislaw, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Edit by Robert Redfield, Boston, Massachusetts, (1948): 50.

⁶Ibid. 55.

In *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* J. J. Bachofen describes matriarchy as a society which has strong connections with nature and possesses a materialist and biologic perspective. In this system, unconditional love, living in a harmony with nature and equality are the characteristic signifiers.⁷ The world is limitless, mysterious, and undiscoverable. Nature herself decides when it will be cold or warm, dry or fertile, and when there is birth and death. The only way of living in this stage is to surrender to nature and accept her rules. Nature is the mother who provides food, accommodation and protection to her children. According to the similarities between nature and the concept of mother, females have an exceptional status in society. Families and communities are organized and ruled by the mother. A woman can conceive a baby (give a life to a human) in a similar manner to trees, plants, flowers and animals. This solid connection between females and nature affords them the right to control the community.

Departing from Bachofen's works, Erich Fromm emphasizes the equality concept in this type of society.⁸ Fromm claims that the reason for the equality in matriarchy is because of the mother's unconditional love. Not only in families but also in society, unconditional love has a dominant distinctive role. In *The Forgotten Language: Understanding Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths*, Fromm mentions that in matriarchy, this way of relationship has a domination⁹, but he demonstrates this point in greater detail in his other book: *The Art of Loving*:

“I am loved. I am loved because I am mother's child. I am loved because I am helpless. I am loved because I am beautiful, admirable. I am loved because mother needs me. To put it in a more general formula: *I am loved for what I am*, or perhaps more accurately, *I am loved because I am*. This experience of being loved by mother is a passive one. There is nothing I have to do in order to be loved—mother's love is unconditional. All I have to do is *to be*—to be her child. Mother's love is bliss, is peace, it need not be acquired, it need not be deserved.”¹⁰

When this type of feeling and perception is adapted into the relationship between authority and individual, the equality and unconditional love in society becomes clear as well. Magic was explicitly not meant to be used to obtain or curse something, to acquire more power or vanquish an enemy, to impress the majority or to become a ruler, but magic is a part of the unknown and the mysterious Mother Nature.

Spell

Sigmund Freud comes with the idea of the first men intervened with magic due to powerful (and impossible) wishes; “*Magic must serve the most varied purposes. It must subject the processes of nature to the will of man, protect the individual against enemies and dangers, and give him the power to injure his enemies.*”¹¹ However, the magic concept is not related to wishes or any personal desires. The idea proposed by Freud is connected with the conception of spells.

After the invention of writing and with the beginning of the Chirographic Culture, powerful and prosperous civilizations emerged, such as the Sumerians, Babylonians and Ancient Egypt. With the development of alphabets, language systems and effective functions of writing, this paved the way for reason, logic, curiosity and causality. From that point, philosophers begin to consider how nature (and how magic) works. Additionally, the development of the concept of property, revolutions in agriculture and destructive wars made male more important than female in the community. This new system required masculine power, knowledgeable leaders and reasonable – strategic politics for sustaining the existence of the society.

As opposed to the matriarchal paradigm, patriarchy aggrandizes the soul, tends towards divine powers and demotes nature into a less important position. Conditional love, discipline and hierarchy are all newly considered. A

⁷Bachofen, Johann J. “Myth, Religion and Mother Right”, Princeton University Press, Trans. by Ralph Manheim, (1861) 1992.

⁸Fromm, Erich, “The Significance of the Theory of Mother Right Today”, The Erich Fromm Reader, Edit. by Rainer Funk, Humanities Press. (1985).

⁹Fromm, Erich, “The Forgotten Language: Understanding Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths”, Henry Holt & Co, (1951) (1976).

¹⁰Fromm, Erich, “The Art of Loving”, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, (1956) (2006): 39.

¹¹Freud, Sigmund, “Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between The Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics”, George Routledge & Sons, Translated by A.A. Brill, Ph. B., M.D., (1919): 56.

person's punishment or reward depends on his/her efforts, obedience and service. Nature is still a mother, but now she is also an enemy. She can be controlled and used as a source.

The father image as a righteous controller, a clever ruler and a powerful male is the center of this stage.

Firstly, it can be seen in mythologies where gods become more mighty and divine than goddesses. Fromm gives an example from Babylonian mythology: Marduk defeats Tiamat and becomes the only almighty god.¹² Robert Graves considers the defeat of Tiamat as a symbol of the power shift from matriarchy to patriarchy.¹³

Similar events occur in *King Oedipus' Tragedy*. Laura Mulvey quotes that when Vladimir Propp studied this tragedy to find a different reading instead of Freud's interpretation, he reached the conclusion that there is a conflict between the systems of matriarchy and patriarchy.¹⁴

These mythologies follow the same path; there is a riddle that Marduk must answer to defeat Tiamat and also a riddle set by the Sphinx that must be solved by Oedipus in order to save his kingdom. It is possible to find more similar examples in various mythologies and folkloric tales. Here, the most important aspect is that a mystery is represented by a riddle – a game of words – and this mystery is solved by a reasonable - intelligent male character. After this phase, almighty gods such as Zeus, Baal or Odin and their holy sons such as Hercules or Thor come to the fore.

Masculine ideology focuses on the 'word's charm to create its own supernatural order. In oral culture, men do this by using collections of words with rituals and building a second reality ("cast a spell", "put a spell", "binding spell" or "unspoken spell"). With the invention of writing, this ritualistic activity transferred into books and was called *grimoire* (general name of the occult books), the first version of the word *grammar*.¹⁵ Moreover, the word *spell* also originates from the same root. Today, these words are used in linguistic terms.

In *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* Bronislaw Malinowski describes the spell as "*the knowledge of the right words, appropriate phrases and the more highly developed forms of speech, gives man a power over and above his own limited field of personal action.*"¹⁶

Grimoir and *spells* were the signifiers of a particular intention: magic can be formulated, analyzed, studied and written in books. These books represent the idea that magic can function with certain rules, can be disciplined and identified.

Spells are not like the magic concept in matriarchy. They do not come from nature, nor do they exist in the world by themselves. They require effort and certain rules to be useful. They have systems, equations, descriptions, rituals and formulas. Instead of living in harmony with nature, spells intend to break the balance between people and the world. Consequently, as Freud defines it, they serve personal (or a particular group's) wishes and requests. S.J. Tambiah expresses that "...the power is in the 'words' even though the words only become effective if uttered in a very special context of other action."¹⁷

Witch Hunt

The magic and the paradigm that it represents were neglected due to economical and political reasons. "*Magic was also an obstacle to the rationalization of the work process, and a threat to the establishment of the principle of*

¹²Fromm, Erich, "The Forgotten Language: Understanding Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths", Henry Holt & Co, (1951) 1976.

¹³Graves, Robert, "Greek Myths", rev. Ed. (1960): 4.5.

¹⁴Mulvey, Laura, "The Oedipus Myth: Beyond the Riddles of the Sphinx", "Visual and Other Pleasures", The Macmillan Press, (1989): 189.

¹⁵Dell, Christopher, "The Occult, Witchcraft and Magic: An Illustrated History", Thames and Hudson Press, (2016): 11.

¹⁶Malinowski, Bronislaw, "Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agriculture Rites in Trobriand Islands", Dover Publications, (1978): 235.

¹⁷Tambiah, Stanley J. "The Magical Power of the Words", RAI Press. (1968): 176.

individual responsibility. Above all, magic seemed a form of refusal of work, of insubordination, and an instrument of grassroots resistance to power. The world had to be "disenchanted" in order to be dominated."¹⁸

Before the Typographic Culture emerged, science and spells, occultism and alchemy were all perceived as one. Men of religion were accepted as scientists, philosopher and artists as well. Peter Kingsley studies on Empedocles¹⁹ can be examples on this matter.

With the onset of the New Age, with Renaissance and Reform, science differentiates itself from the religious point of view, removes 'superstitions' and all disciplines that cannot provide scientific facts in its investigation frame. Therefore, patriarchal ideology promotes a new language to inspire and rule the masses. Witch hunt is a clear indication of the development of this ideological language.

According to Silvia Federici, there has been insufficient research on the witch craze in Europe history and generally, available studies do not focus on this organized massacre of women from the aspect of politics. *"The political nature of the witch-hunt is further demonstrated by the fact that joined both Catholic and Protestant nations, at war against each other in every other respect, arms and shared arguments to persecute witches. Thus, it is no exaggeration to claim that the witch-hunt was the first unifying terrain in the politics of the New European nation-states, the first example, after the schism brought about by the Reformation, of a European unification."*²⁰ What was the hidden meaning of this unification? Why people were like Thomas Hobbes, Francis Bacon, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei and William Shakespeare interested in this issue, subsequently writing demonologies and declaring witchcraft as a 'despicable crime'? These questions are important in the process of understanding this traumatic massacre in Europe history.

Occultism had been happening before the witch-hunt but princes, lords and the church did not make any laws to forbid it nor transform it into a social phenomenon. There was no connection with a culture or belief. Victims were old, lonely women who were peasant farmers or poor village people. Also, the accusers were lords and people from the higher classes. Federici quotes from Henry Kamen and states the relationship between the witch-hunt and economic aspects; *"The coincidence between the social-economic crisis and witch-hunting has been noted by Henry Kamen, who has observed that it was "precisely in the period when there was the main price hike (between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th) [that] there were the greatest number of charges and persecutions"*"²¹ Additionally, according to Michael Taussig, all the devilish beliefs were prevalent in places where a particular economic structure was replaced with a new one.²²

It is possible to say that the reason for the unification of almost all European countries against the witches was because the economic – politic structure was being transformed from feudality to capitalism. Therefore, contrary to the general assumption, the executioners of the witches were not merely the Orthodox Church or Courts of Inquisition but were the Protestant Church and secular courts. In short, the witch-hunt was not directly connected to a fanatic religious reaction; the primary active role was connected to the capitalist – secular – liberal authorities.

In the sense of this economic replacement, it can be clearly observed why old, solitary and poor women were the victims of this social – economic crisis. Over the centuries, women had always been involved with magic, rituals, healing and fortune telling. Subsequently, they assumed an active role in revolts against feudal lords and their liberalization threatened the authority; furthermore, the association with paranormal activities made them a threat for the dominant ideology.

The general definitions of witches are that they are devilish, dark, dangerous beings who make contracts with Satan. They are believed to have sinned in heinous ways. Here, it can be clearly seen that this image belongs to the patriarchal imagination. As mentioned previously in this paper, magic and femininity have a relationship with

¹⁸Federici, Sylvia, "Caliban and The Witch: Women, The Body and The Primitive Accumulation", Autonomedia Pub. (2004): 174.

¹⁹Kingsley, Peter, "Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition", Oxford University Press, (1995).

²⁰Ibid. 169.

²¹Ibid. 174.

²²Ibid. 171.

nature. Even though witches live in mountains (in nature), they still write charms and spells into books, they prepare potions in big black cauldrons, they follow particular rituals and charm formulas. They can read the future and consume human infant children with the desire of being immortal.²³ This description of witches is incompatible with matriarchal magic. It is related to the patriarchal sense of the supernatural and represents the fear or disturbance of the liberalization of women, of the matriarchal system.

Feminine Aspect of Fantasy

With the replacement of the new economic structure, spells – with the sense of the ‘word’s power and affect’ – blend into ideological discourse; nevertheless, magic, was identified with witches (with women) and was suppressed history. However, after the Dual Revolutions, magic and the supernatural re-appeared in the form of art. With the consideration of the magic concept, it is possible to conclude that fantasy and femininity have strong connections.

The creative spirit’s feminine nature can be considered as one of these connections. Carl Gustave Jung was the first psychoanalyst to claim that the human psyche has a double sexuality (hermaphrodite). Contrary to Freud and his followers, Jung does not accept subconscious as ‘a depressed place’, but a ‘first nature’, an area that can only be discovered through the unity of male and female souls. In his autobiography, Jung says that in day-dreams he often found himself in his childhood and a voice spoke to him. The voice that communicated with him belonged to a woman, to anima:

“I was greatly intrigued by the fact that a woman should interfere with me from within. My conclusion was that she must be the "soul," in the primitive sense, and I began to speculate on the reasons why the name "anima" was given to the soul. Why was it thought of as feminine? Later I came to see that this inner feminine figure plays a typical, or archetypal, role in the unconscious of a man, and I called her the "anima." The corresponding figure in the unconscious of woman I called the "animus.””²⁴

According to Jung, anima and animus both exist equally in the male and female subconscious. Anima, the feminine side of the soul, is the source of imagination, poems, songs, mercy, compassion and love, while animus represents the masculine side and it is the power of justice, discipline and hardworking. Thus, anima is the guide that designs the imaginary worlds and animus provides balance to this dreamlike universe.

Jung’s theory inspired Gaston Bachelard and he developed poetics for day-dreaming. According to Bachelard, day-dreams and imagination must be feminine. Anima with feminine instinct and aesthetic creates the secondary world. Bachelard claims that the language, the structure and the time and the space of the dreamland created by the feminine soul anima and this texture must be protected by the artist. This creative power must convert to set a universe, a different reality in order to give the opportunity to express unconditional love and liberty.

Conclusion:-

The unification of anima theory, Bachelard’s poetics and the conception of magic makes the connection between fantastic narrations and matriarchal system clear; why there is magic in the secondary world, why these narrations have an anti-technological perspective, why these narrations locate themselves in the pre-modern era, why nature is represented as a limitless, mysterious, unknown place. Fantasy indicates the period of the world without patriarchal logic and domination, and deals with consensus reality. “A feminist use of fantasy, however, ought to challenge the very idea of consensus reality, exposing supposedly gender-neutral concepts such as objective reality and subjective experience to critical scrutiny.”²⁵

Fantasy approaches reality from different perspectives. It asks questions such as how a revolution, an advancement, a social development can be possible in the modern world? *Fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates it.*²⁶ Also, as Miéville says; “We need fantasy to think the world, and to change it.”²⁷

²³Ibid. 177.

²⁴Jung, Carl G. “Memories, Dreams, Reflections”, Translated by Richard and Clara Winston, Vintage Books, (1962) (1989): 224.

²⁵Lewis, Alison, “Poetics and Politics of Feminist Fantasy: The Novels of Irmtraud Morgner”, University of Adelaide, Thesis, (1990): 41.

²⁶Baker, Daniel, “Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy”, Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, vol. 23, no. 3, (2012): 445.

Marxism and fantasy share the same thoughts on the concepts such as ‘alienation’, ‘active contribution’, ‘collective exertion for better society’ and “a class consciousness”. Fantasy is not about yesterday or a fictional world, but it addresses today. For this reason, the magical element is the signifier of fantasy’s reaction to fictional history or ‘designed yesterday’.

As Daniel Baker identifies “*We see and hear history’s traces, its echoes, but as it speaks to us, we cannot truly understand its voice or comprehend its face, nor can we completely reach back to grasp.*”²⁸ Fantasy is a form of language for this unknown history, which focuses on the ‘fault’ of the present and intends to return to its origins. With the contribution of feminist studies, fantasy has become more complete in every aspect.

Additionally, Rosemary Jackson’s description of fantasy’s function is purposeful; “*Indeed, the portrayal of the strange, dark, twisted, and invisible forces of the unseen, is an example of how fantasy is able to bring light ‘all that is hidden, secreted, obscured... (and) to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight.*”²⁹

When of the track of the magic concept is considered, it becomes clear why fantasy ignores history, and reverts back to a particular period in time - to the matriarchal era with pure nature. Magic is designated as the main problem of the patriarchal system, the consensus reality, and can be clearly seen in narration. For instance, in a narration where is observed to fly ‘naturally’ – without any reason or any cause – it can be accepted as a magic. This is a way of connecting to nature or describing the relationship between nature and humans. Nevertheless, if on the other hand the character achieves this activity using formulas from occult books or with various efforts, then it cannot be considered as a form of magic but a spell which belongs to masculine ideology and patriarchal reason.

Therefore, this does not mean that a narration must choose one of the supernatural types and use only that specific one. For example, in *Lord of the Rings* or *A Song of Ice and Fire*, both types of the supernatural are involved in the text. These two acknowledgments of power can enter into conflict or can collaborate in unity. On this point, the important factor is the narration’s presentation, its purpose and its discourse. The determination of the supernatural in the narration can be useful to understand its masculine / feminine roots.

Magic develops a connection with an anti-technological and nature-centered universe utopia. Here, the most vital point is that the matriarchal system must not be regarded as the ‘good old world’ with nostalgic feelings. Praising or missing this era will not help to solve the problems that exist in the modern world. On the contrary, this type of attitude in fact supports the ideological discourse. ‘Returning into the arms of mother’ must hold answers or at least ask the correct questions.

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²⁷Miéville, China, “Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy”, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 10:4(2002): 48.

²⁸Ibid. 440.

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