

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SUPERNATURAL UNCANNY IN *AL-FIL AL-AZRAQ*: AN ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARAB WORLD AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

*This study examines the manifestation of the supernatural uncanny in *Al-fil al-azraq* by Ahmad Mourad, focusing on how supernatural elements generate psychological unease and challenge perceptions of reality within an Arab-Islamic context. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny as the return of the repressed, the research analyses how the novel blurs the boundary between the real and the unreal through motifs such as doubling, repetition, and ambiguity. Employing a qualitative methodology based on close textual and discourse analysis, the study examines key scenes involving the character of Sherif to demonstrate how uncanny effects are constructed narratively and psychologically. In addition, the study explicitly maps an Islamic perspective by engaging concepts such as jinn possession, spiritual affliction, and the unseen (*al-ghayb*), as articulated in classical Islamic thought, to interpret behaviors that may otherwise be pathologised within Western psychiatric frameworks. The findings reveal that the supernatural uncanny in the novel operates as a dual interpretive space where psychological disturbance and spiritual explanation coexist, thereby destabilising fixed notions of reality, identity, and rationality. The study argues that this interplay not only deepens the representation of existential and psychological conflict but also reflects broader tensions in Arab societies between modern psychiatry and religious epistemologies. Finally, the research contributes to scholarship on Arabic fiction by demonstrating how the uncanny, when read through both psychoanalytic and Islamic lenses, offers a more culturally grounded understanding of fear, belief, and human consciousness.*

Keywords: Uncanny, Freud, *Al-fil Al-azraq*, Supernatural, Psychology

Introduction

The uncanny is a phenomenon where something appears simultaneously familiar and foreign, invoking fear and discomfort. Sigmund Freud's (1919) theory of the uncanny defines it as the return of the repressed, where hidden fears and subconscious elements manifest in ways that disturb the rational mind. The uncanny describes the eerie sensation that arises when something familiar becomes disturbingly strange. This concept is often intertwined with supernatural elements, especially in literature where characters exhibit psychological disturbances perceived as otherworldly. In Arab narratives, the supernatural frequently coexists with religious and cultural beliefs, shaping perceptions of mental illness, identity, and the unknown (Oladosu, 2019). In *Al-fil Al-azraq*, the character of Sherif, with his dissociative tendencies and supernatural encounters, serves as an exemplary case of how the uncanny manifests in an Islamic-Arab context.

In literary studies, the uncanny remains central to Gothic and psychological fiction, where it functions as a mechanism for exposing hidden fears and unconscious tensions. Recent studies of diasporic and postcolonial literature (Rasheed & Abdulhamed, 2023) show that the uncanny is increasingly linked to themes of displacement, identity crisis, and socio-political instability, thereby extending Freud's original formulation into broader cultural and existential domains.

Despite these advancements, much of the existing scholarship remains grounded in Western epistemological frameworks, often treating the uncanny as a purely psychological or cognitive phenomenon. This limitation becomes particularly evident when examining non-Western literary traditions, where supernatural beliefs and metaphysical worldviews are integral to narrative meaning.

Within Arabic literature, recent studies have begun to foreground the importance of supernatural and cultural frameworks in shaping uncanny experiences. For instance, Hurley and Hojeij (2023) demonstrate that the figure of the jinn functions as a central Gothic trope in Arab narratives, embodying collective fears, gender anxieties, and cultural tensions. Further research into Arab Gothic imaginaries (Hurley, 2025) highlights how contemporary narratives continue to reinterpret jinn and supernatural figures within modern and digital contexts, suggesting the persistence and transformation of the uncanny within evolving cultural environments.

These studies indicate that, unlike Western traditions where the uncanny is often co-opted as a psychological phenomenon, Arabic narratives frequently situate it at the intersection of the psychological and the supernatural. This intersection is further reinforced by Islamic epistemology, which distinguishes the existence of unseen entities such as jinn and affirms the concept of *al-ghayb*. Classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah have discussed the potential influence of jinn on human behaviour, while contemporary research (El-Zein, 2009) emphasises an integrative approach that accommodates both mental illness and spiritual affliction.

Recent scholarship has also begun to explore the uncanny in Arabic fiction through specific authors and texts. In this regard, Bisiriyu and Akewula (2025), in *Echoes of the Uncanny: Psychological Disorientation and Political Anxiety in Ahmad Mourad's Firtijo*, demonstrate that the uncanny in Mourad's work can reflect psychological fragmentation and socio-political instability. The study shows how disorientation, paranoia, and identity breakdown function as key mechanisms through which the uncanny is produced.

However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the psychological, political, and cultural dimensions of the uncanny, they often underexplore its supernatural and religious grounding within Islamic thought. In particular, there remains a gap in examining how Islamic epistemology – especially concepts such as *al-ghayb*, jinn, and spiritual affliction – actively shapes the experience and interpretation of the uncanny in Arabic fiction.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing *Al-fil al-azraq* by Ahmad Mourad through an integrated framework that combines psychoanalytic theory with Islamic theological perspectives. It argues that the uncanny in the novel emerges from a dual interpretive structure, where psychological explanations coexist with supernatural possibilities. By situating the uncanny within this culturally embedded framework, this study extends existing scholarship and offers a more nuanced understanding of how fear, identity, and reality are constructed in contemporary Arabic literature.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach through literary analysis of the novel *Al-fil Al-azraq*. By examining dialogues, character development, and thematic elements, the study deconstructs how Sherif's experiences align with Freud's theory of the uncanny. Additionally, cultural and Islamic theological

perspectives are incorporated to contextualise supernatural elements. Primary data is drawn from the literary text, with secondary sources including psychological theories, Islamic theological interpretations, and relevant literary critiques. The study employs discourse analysis to examine how language and narrative structure contribute to the construction of the uncanny.

Theoretical Framework

The Uncanny

The concept of the uncanny has its roots in German philosophy and psychology, with early considerations appearing in Nietzsche's "The Will to Power" before being examined more formally by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (Miller, 2015). However, it was Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche") that provided the most influential and comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon, defining it as something "that belongs to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" and as something "undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror" (Windsor, 2019: 149).

At its core, the uncanny describes the disorienting experience when something is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. This duality creates a psychological tension, as Freud explains that the uncanny is an occurrence in which something can be unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. The term derives from the German word "unheimlich" (literally "unhomely"), which Freud contrasted with "heimlich" ("homely," "familiar," "belonging to the home") (Miller, 2015). The linguistic analysis reveals that "heimlich" can paradoxically merge with its antonym "unheimlich," contributing to the concept's inherent ambiguity (Rahman et al., 2022).

Freud proposed that the uncanny arises from two primary mechanisms. First, it emerges when repressed issues resurfaces in consciousness, described as a familiar situation that has been repressed and then reappears. Specifically, Freud theorised that repressed infantile sexual complexes, when revived in the subconscious by some impression, generate uncanny feelings. Second, the uncanny can manifest when surmounted primitive beliefs appear to be confirmed i.e. when experiences seem to validate animistic or magical beliefs that most people have ostensibly outgrown (Windsor, 2019).

The uncanny has a distinctive artistic function, particularly in Gothic and horror literature, where it “designates how the uncomfortably acquainted is rendered comfortably bizarre or how the unfamiliar is brought to light and becomes familiar” (Karam, 2020: 236). It creates an ambiguous emotional response of both attraction and repulsion – the uncanny generates both fear and allurements.

Since its formulation, the concept has proven difficult to precisely define, with scholars acknowledging that the word itself is untranslatable *qua form* and content. Nevertheless, its fundamental characteristic remains consistent: the uncanny represents “the unsettling revival of what was once familiar, now transformed into something strangely unfamiliar” (Balkaya, 2024: 8).

Synopsis of *Al-fil Al-azraq*

Al-fil Al-azraq is one of the most renowned novels by Egyptian writer Ahmad Mourad. Following the commercial success of his previous works, *Firtijo* and *Turab al-Mas*, Mourad published this novel through Dar Al-Shorouk in 2012. Spanning 443 pages, *Al-fil Al-azraq* is a psychological thriller that delves into the complexities of the human psyche. The novel follows Yahya, a psychiatrist grappling with intense emotional and psychological turmoil. After the tragic death of his wife and daughter in a car accident – an incident for which he blames himself – Yahya withdraws from his profession and social life, seeking solace in meaningless physical relationships. Having surrendered to the emptiness of his existence, he is unexpectedly compelled to return to work at Abbasiya Hospital’s notorious Ward 8 West after a five-year hiatus. This ward houses criminals awaiting psychiatric evaluation to determine whether they are mentally ill or merely feigning insanity.

Yahya’s return takes an unsettling turn when he discovers that one of the patients is Sherif, a former close friend and psychiatrist. Their history is marred by conflict, as Sherif had once prevented Yahya from marrying his sister. Now, Sherif stands accused of murdering his wife, and it is Yahya’s responsibility to assess whether he acted under the influence of a mental disorder or with full awareness. As Yahya investigates, he is drawn into a web of eerie occurrences that challenge his perception of reality. Simultaneously, his past resurfaces, forcing him to confront unresolved emotions, unrequited love, and professional rivalry. Torn between duty, guilt, and personal desire, Yahya is ultimately faced with an unsettling question – does he, too, suffer from the very affliction he is meant to diagnose?

A masterful blend of psychological depth, mystery, and supernatural elements, *Al-fil Al-azraq* captivates readers with its intricate narrative and compelling exploration of the human mind.

Sherif and the Uncanny: A Psychological and Supernatural Duality

The concept of the uncanny, as defined by Freud (1919), refers to something that is strangely familiar yet deeply unsettling. In the case of Sherif, his behaviours and experiences blur the boundaries between reality and delusion, making him a vessel for the uncanny.

The uncanny often emerges through characters that exist on the threshold between reality and the unknown. In *Al-fil Al-azraq*, Sherif's character represents a compelling case where the supernatural intersects with Islamic beliefs on the unseen, mystical numerology, jinn possession, and mental health. Sherif embodies this liminality through his ambiguous mental state. Sherif, previously a psychiatrist was accused of killing his beloved wife Basma, this event led to his admission in Abasiyyah psychiatric hospital, a popular hospital in Egypt to ascertain if the crime had been committed intentionally or under the influence mental disorder. However, his file case was handled by his classmate Yahya who was in great shock. Thus, as Yahya interrogates Sherif with regards the crime he was accused of, to ascertain if he had committed the crime. His responses are mysterious as depicted below:

أنا ما قتلتش.

جميل ..مين اللي قتل؟

هو.

هو مين؟

استغرق ثواني ليجيبني:

اللي قاعد جنبك دلوقت.

التفت إلى يساري حيث أشار.

هو فيه حد ثاني معانا في الأوضة؟!!

رمقني بغضب لإنكاري ما يدّعي وجوده، فتصديق المريض ضلالات مرضه جزء لا يتجزأ من أعراضه..

أنا بس مش شايف حد.

حدق شريف في وجهي بعيني تمثال فرعوني زجاجية.

أنت سامع صوته دلوقت؟ سألته.

شريف.. أنت دكتور.. خلي عندك وعي بالحالة بتاعتك..

تفتكر لجنة دكاترة، عقر هتصدق بسهولة دكتور حافظ الأعراض؟

خليك منطقي..

ليس ينبس بكلمة! أحتاج لبداية جديدة (Mourad, 2012: 53).

Translation:

I didn't kill.

Nice... who did?

Him.

Who is "him"?

He took a few seconds before answering:

The one sitting next to you right now.

I turned to my left where he pointed.

Is there someone else in the room with us?!

He glared at me angrily for denying what he claimed to be real, as believing a patient's delusions is an inseparable part of their symptoms...

I just don't see anyone.

Sherif stared at me with glassy, pharaoh-like eyes.

Can you hear his voice right now? I asked.

Sherif... You're a doctor... Try to be aware of your condition.

Do you think a panel of doctors would so easily believe a doctor who merely memorised the symptoms?

Be logical...

He didn't utter a word! I need a fresh start.

One of the most unsettling aspects of Sherif's character is his apparent ability to perceive things that others cannot. When confronted about a murder, he insists that the real killer is "the one sitting next to you". This assertion immediately introduces a sense of dread and uncertainty – does Sherif possess supernatural insight, or is he suffering from a psychological disorder? His refusal to acknowledge that he is alone, despite Yahya's insistence, aligns with the Freudian uncanny because it suggests a hidden reality that exists beyond ordinary perception (Freud, 1919).

Yahya's response -"I just don't see anyone"- further amplifies the uncanny effect. The doctor, although trained in psychiatry, hesitates when confronting Sherif's conviction. His internal struggle is evident when he states, "Try to be aware of your condition." This moment underscores Freud's idea that the uncanny unsettles not only the subject experiencing it but also the observer, who is forced to question their own perception of reality.

Yahya's insistence that Sherif is a doctor and should be aware of his condition ("Sherif, you're a doctor... be conscious of your state") suggests that his affliction is not merely psychological but something more enigmatic. This self-awareness, coupled with his apparent descent into the unknown, makes him a figure of both horror and fascination.

Also, Sherif's character presents a dichotomy between psychological disorder and supernatural possession. His ability to switch between personalities is depicted in the following excerpt:

ما تقعد يا شريف

لم يستجب لندائي

شريف

نظر لي ثواني ثم أجابني

شريف خرج

نعم

خرج

مين اللي خرج؟

شريف

يدا شريف منبسطة بجانبه منفرجة اصابع ووجهه مسترخ ظاهريا
هو لا يكذب

أمر عادي فقط هو يفتي وجود نفسه

أمال أنت مين؟

صديق

وصديق ده ليه اسم؟

ممکن تناديني نائل

نائل (Mourad, 2012: 100)

Translation:

Wont you sit down, Sherif.?

He didn't respond to my call.

Sherif.

He looked at me for a few seconds and then
answered me.

Sherif left.

Yes,

He left

Who left?

Sherif.

Sherif's hand resting on his side, fingers relaxed and a relaxed face, apparently not lying.

An ordinary thing, he just denies his presence.

So who are you?

A friend.

And does this friend have a name?

You can call me Nahel.

Nahel.

Furthermore, his engagement with unseen entities, and his obsessive writing of numbers reflect symptoms that could be medically classified as schizophrenia or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as reflected in the conversation between Yahya and Lubna as they searched Sherif's house for evidences on the cause of Sherif's mental disorder.

والتفت للبنى التي وقفت تتأمل الأرقام على الحائط:

مش دي نفس ال...؟

هي واضح إن شريف بتزاوله فكرة OCD“، ”وسواسي قهري، بيلح عليه بكتب أرقام...بببقى لها عنده مدلول إحنا ما نفهموش.

حتى لو دكتور ما يقدرش يحس إن دي هلاوس؟

ممكن يحس لو هلاوس، جاستين كهربا، وأدوية نقدر نفصله عنها واحدة واحدة، المشكلة لو Delusions.. ضلالات.

Translation:

And she turned to Lubna, who stood staring at the numbers on the wall:

Isn't this the same...?

She: It's clear that Sherif is obsessed with the idea of OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. He compulsively writes numbers... They must have a meaning for him that we don't understand.

Even if he's a doctor, can't he realise these are hallucinations?

He might, if they are hallucinations. Two electroshock therapy sessions and some medication can gradually disconnect him from them. The real problem is if they are Delusions...

This conversation explores Sherif's compulsive fixation on numbers, positioning his mental state within the Freudian uncanny where the familiar (numbers) takes on a disturbing, incomprehensible significance. The dialogue also contrasts hallucinations and delusions, accentuating the eerie persistence of delusional belief systems.

Lubna's staring at the numbers signals recognition that something feels disturbingly familiar. This moment aligns with Freud's (1919) theory of the uncanny, where a familiar object (numbers) becomes unnervingly mysterious because its true meaning remains elusive.

Sherif's compulsive number-writing reflects the uncanny power of repetition, which Freud associates with the return of the repressed. The numbers seem meaningless to Yahya and other doctors investigating Sherif's mental health, but they have a secret significance to Sherif, making them both familiar and alien-an unreadable code that only he understands.

Sherif's obsessive number-writing symbolises his inability to control his own thoughts, a hallmark of the uncanny. The fact that he is a psychiatric doctor makes this all the more disturbing-he should understand what's happening to him, but he remains trapped in it.

This reflects the theory of the uncanny as intellectual uncertainty – when someone who should “know” reality can no longer distinguish it from delusion, their condition becomes terrifying.

Ultimately, Yahya was summoned to present his findings on Sherif's case. His submission amused the panels as it contradict the medical practices as depicted below:

في المكتب كانت دكتورة صفاء على كرسيها، ...

اقعد يا يحيى.

قعدت في مواجهة اللزج أرتقب أول غيث التحقيق، دقيقة مُملة قبل أن تترك أوراقها وتلنت لي.

احكي لي يا يحيى عن الحالة اللي معاك؟ شريف الكردي.

بداية غريبة لم أتوقعها.. اتخذ الأمر مني ثواني تابعت فيها وجه سامح قبل أن أجيبها:

شريف الكردي عنده أعراض مركبة يا دكتور، سكيذوفرينيا OCD، سكيذوجرافيا، وفي آخر يومين لاحظت...

ازدواج! د. كيلاني حكى لي عن آخر كلام دار بينكم. طبعًا آخر حاجة دي مش محتاجة أقول لك إنها عاوزة قاعدة يا يحيى.

يا دكتورة شريف بيقاله يومين بيتكلم معايا بشخصيتين منفصلتين. أنا عارف إن ده صعب.. بس ده اللي حصل.

شريف يقدر يتكلم بشخصيتين في أي وقت لو حب يا يحيى.

ده دكتور..

أنا عارف يا دكتور إن الازدواج نظري، بس شريف لو بيمثل ما كانش حاول ينتحر، أنا شفت شخصيتين، وبينهم خناقة..

محاولة الانتحار دي تدخله في خانة الاكتئاب، لا سكيذ، ولا ازدواج يا يحيى، وده ما بعفيهوش من المسؤولية.. (Mourad, 2012: 144)

Translation:

In the office, Dr. Safaa sat in her chair,

Sit down, Yahya.

I sat facing the slippery character, anticipating the first drops of the interrogation. A tedious minute passed before she set down her papers and turned to me.

“Tell me, Yahya, about the case you’re handling – Sherif El-Kurdi.”

An unexpected opening. It took me a few seconds to glance at Samah's face before responding.

Sherif El-Kurdi exhibits complex symptoms, Doctor – schizophrenia, OCD, schizography. And in the last two days, I've noticed...

Dissociative identity disorder? Dr. Kilani told me about the last conversation between you two. Obviously, this latest development requires a proper session, Yahya.

Doctor, Sherif has been speaking to me in two separate personalities for the past two days. I know it sounds unbelievable... but that's exactly what happened.

Sherif can switch between two personalities anytime he wants, Yahya.

That's a doctor speaking...

I know, Doctor, that dissociation is theoretical, but if Sherif were faking it, he wouldn't have attempted suicide. I saw two personalities – fighting each other!

A suicide attempt places him under depression, not schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder, Yahya. And that doesn't absolve him of responsibility.

This passage explores the blurred lines between mental illness, deception, and legal responsibility, creating an uncanny atmosphere where reality itself is unstable. The clash between medical rationality and psychological horror echoes Freud's (1919) concept of the uncanny – when something familiar (identity, sanity, medical authority) becomes disturbingly unfamiliar.

Dr. Safaa and Yahya's discussion revolves around whether Sherif is experiencing genuine dissociation or fabricating symptoms. Yahya insists that Sherif's personalities are fighting each other, which contradicts conventional medical classifications. Dr. Safaa dismisses Yahya's observation, reinforcing the idea that Sherif's condition is either manipulable or misunderstood.

This creates an uncanny fear of the instability of identity – is Sherif truly fragmented, or is he a master of deception?

Freud (1919) posited that the uncanny often arises from the “double” (Doppelgänger) – a psychological division where one’s sense of self is duplicated, leading to existential horror. Sherif embodies this uncanny doubling-if he has two personalities, which one is real?

Yahya points to Sherif’s suicide attempt as proof of genuine dissociation, but Dr. Safaa immediately reinterprets it: “A suicide attempt places him under depression, not schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder.”

The uncanny arises because one medical act (suicide) can be interpreted in radically different ways, shifting between classifications without a stable reality. This also reflects the institutional control over identity-mental illness is not defined by the patient’s experience but by the doctor’s authority to categorise it.

This uncertainty aligns with Kristeva’s (1982) concept of abjection – when the boundaries between the self and the other break down, causing existential dread. If Sherif is both victim and manipulator, how do we classify him?

Yahya’s inner conflict mirrors his power struggle with Dr. Safaa: He is being pushed into a specific interpretation of Sherif’s case, yet he instinctively resists. The exchange feels like a calculated game, where each move – whether a medical diagnosis or a legal classification – determines Sherif’s fate. This reflects the uncanny fear of being controlled by unseen forces, whether institutional, psychological, or legal. The ambiguity of Sherif’s condition is weaponised – if he can switch between personalities, does that mean he can control them at will? This raises a disturbing question:

Is Sherif a victim of his own mind, or is he using his mind to manipulate reality itself?

Sherif’s “two personalities” act as an uncanny rupture in reality, where the boundaries between genuine mental illness and deception dissolve. The medical discourse itself becomes a tool of power, deciding not just how Sherif is perceived, but what he is allowed to be.

However, from an Islamic perspective, these signs could also be interpreted as supernatural afflictions such as jinn possession or divine punishment. The juxtaposition of these interpretations enhances the uncanny effect, as it blurs the

boundary between reality and delusion. Sherif's experiences blend psychological distress with supernatural perception, making his condition an ideal representation of the uncanny. His ability to perceive an unseen entity, engage in dual-personality conversations, and exhibit obsessive behaviours aligns with Freud's assertion that the uncanny arises when repressed fears surface (Freud, 1919). In an Islamic context, this can be linked to the concept of Jinn possession, where mental illness and supernatural explanations intertwine (Al-Ashqar, 2003).

Sherif's Deterioration and the Uncanny's Climax

Sherif's descent into madness intensifies when he isolates himself, refuses to engage with his wife, and ultimately commits acts of violence. However, Sherif's wife, Basma perceived Sherif's madness was caused by infertility as depicted below:

تكلمت ثانية بعدما كانت يتعيط، وقالت إنها حاسة إن فيه واحدة. تأخر الحمل هو السبب عازل نفسه وبتغيب كثير ولما بيبيجي. ما بقتش تعرف أي تفاصيل عن حياته. ثانية (Mourad, 2012: 68). بقی عنيف جداً During Sex بيقفل على نفسه بالمفتاح بالأيام في أوضة،

Translation:

The reason was delayed pregnancy. She spoke again after she had been crying and said that she felt there was another woman... She no longer knew any details about his life. He isolated himself and disappeared a lot, and when he returned, he would lock himself in his room for days. During sex, he became very violent.

In Basma's perception of Sherif's sudden change, her unease stems from the feeling that the man she married has become someone entirely unfamiliar. Her description of his isolation, secrecy, and violent tendencies aligns with the uncanny's core principle: the disruption of identity and the eerie sensation that something or someone is not as they should be. Basma's words reflect a fear that Sherif is no longer the person she once knew:

"She felt there was another woman... She no longer knew any details about his life."

This reflects not just emotional detachment, but a deeper transformation in Sherif's identity. The idea that her husband is present yet absent-physically the same but mentally and emotionally distant – aligns with Freud's notion of the

double (Doppelganger), where an individual appears to split into two distinct versions of themselves, creating an eerie experience for those around them (Freud, 1919).

In literature and psychology, the double often symbolises an unconscious force taking over, leading to erratic or even dangerous behaviour (Royle, 2003). Sherif's sudden mood swings and prolonged disappearances reinforce this uncanny effect, making Basma feel like she is living with a stranger rather than her husband.

Also, Basma's most disturbing observation is Sherif's increased aggression during intimacy:

“During sex, he became very violent.”

This shift from tenderness to aggression is particularly unsettling because it turns an act of love into an act of fear. In Basma's case, her husband's behaviour no longer aligns with her understanding of him, making even their most private moments feel foreign and dangerous.

Violent shifts in sexual behaviour are often associated with themes of possession and loss of control-both in psychological and supernatural interpretations of the uncanny.

In the Arab world, sudden personality changes and unexplained violence are sometimes linked to jinn possession, (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000) adding a folkloric dimension to Basma's fear. While a medical diagnosis might point toward psychological disorders like schizophrenia or trauma-induced dissociation, cultural beliefs could lead Basma to suspect that something beyond the natural realm is influencing Sherif's transformation.

Another key aspect of Basma's experience is Sherif's growing isolation: “He isolated himself and disappeared a lot, and when he returned, he would lock himself in his room for days.”

Isolation is a major theme in uncanny experiences, as it fosters fear and speculation. When someone we love withdraws completely, leaving behind an emotional void, the absence itself becomes haunting. In Basma's case, Sherif's secrecy transforms him into a mystery, making her suspect infidelity at first but later leading her to deeper anxieties about his mental state.

By shutting himself away, Sherif creates an air of mystery around his condition, reinforcing Basma's sense of powerlessness and fear.

Furthermore, Sherif's mental deterioration led to violent acts as depicted below:

فجأة شريف طرد بسمة وغير كالون الباب.. راحت عند مامتها محاولش يكلمها أسبوع،
ويعددين أتصل بيها واترجاها ترجع. راحت له، فتح لها الباب عريان وراسم
Tattoo أكيد شفته.. همّا

الاتنين مجانين تاتوهات أصلا.. تخيل يعمل إيه؟ He raped her.. بمنتهى العنف

اغتصاب.. اغتصاب؟

ده اللي قالته في التليفون وهي منهارة 69-70 (Mourad,2012:

Translation:

Suddenly, Sherif kicked Basma out and changed the door lock. She went to her mother's house, and he didn't try to contact her for a week. Then, he called her and begged her to come back. When she went to see him, he opened the door naked... and had a tattoo – you must have seen it... right here.

Both of them are crazy, covered in tattoos... Imagine what he did? He raped her – he raped her with extreme violence... Raped her?

That's what she said on the phone while she was breaking down.

Sherif's sudden transformation, from a loving husband to an unpredictable, violent figure, embodies Freud's (1919) concept of the uncanny – the unsettling experience when something familiar becomes disturbingly strange. His actions, particularly locking Basma out, changing the door locks, and then later luring her back with a dramatic shift in behaviour, evoke a sense of dread and unpredictability that aligns with key aspects of the uncanny.

The narrative initially establishes Sherif as someone who deeply loved Basma. However, his sudden cruelty and erratic behaviour create a psychological rupture. Freud (1919) posited that when something known and safe (a husband) becomes unknown and threatening (a violent aggressor), it produces the uncanny effect. Sherif's actions are disturbing because they betray the stability of identity – the same man who once cherished Basma now physically and emotionally torments

her. His dramatic swings between rejection and desperate pleas introduce an unsettling ambiguity: is he fully aware of his actions, or is he losing control of himself?

This instability mirrors Gothic horror narratives where characters struggle with fractured selves, reflecting a psychological Doppelgänger – a dual identity where one side is familiar, and the other is monstrous (Rank, 1971).

Sherif's nudity and the tattoo serve as visual manifestations of his transformation. The act of opening the door naked can be seen as an aggressive display of dominance, rejecting social norms of decency and exposing an altered version of himself.

Tattoos, in Arab and Islamic contexts, carries negative connotations, often associated with outsiders, rebellion, or even demonic possession (El-Zein, 2009).

The rape scene adds another layer of horrific uncanniness – it is not just an act of brutality but an act committed by someone Basma once loved and trusted. Sherif's transformation into a sexual aggressor is particularly unsettling because it fractures the expected boundaries of love and violence. The dialogue stresses Basma's shock and psychological breakdown – her trauma reflects the uncanny horror of being unable to recognise someone you thought you knew (Royle, 2003).

In Freudian terms, this could be seen as the return of the repressed – deeply buried fears (about masculinity, dominance, and control) emerging in their most violent form.

From an Islamic and Arab cultural perspective, Sherif's behaviour becomes even more disturbing. The idea of demonic possession (jinn) is often invoked in cases of extreme personality changes or violent behaviour, (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000) making Sherif's sudden shift almost supernatural in its horror.

The narrative also challenges traditional masculinity- Sherif, once a protector, becomes a monster within the household, embodying the uncanny fear that safety within domestic spaces is an illusion.

Sherif's descent into unpredictable, violent madness aligns with the uncanny theme of the double and the loss of identity. His split self- loving husband and violent aggressor - turns him into a figure of terror. The scene is particularly chilling because it plays on deep-rooted fears about control, masculinity, and trust,

making Sherif's transformation one of the most disturbing manifestations of the uncanny in the text.

His unexplained tattoo and obsessive numerical inscriptions further highlight his detachment from reality. Yahya was frustrated with Sherif's response; however, he decided to deploy another technique to reveal the murderer of Basma which also ends in frustration as depicted below:

ابتسم..

أنا مش فاهم أنت بتضحك على إيه؟

الشخص اللي قتلها تقدر ترسمه؟

لم أمهله وقتًا للتفكير، قرّبت الورقة منه ودسست القلم بين أصابعه.

ارسم يا شريف.. أي حاجة.

لم يرسم.. يكتب ٩٠٠٢٠٠١١٠٠١٠٠٤..

لم أتمالك نفسي غضبًا.

شريف مش كلام ده! أنت كده بتعجزني!! (Mourad, 2012: 56)

Translation:

He smiled...

I don't understand, what are you laughing at?

Can you draw the person who killed her?

I didn't give him time to think. I moved the paper closer to him and pressed the pen between his fingers.

Draw, Sherif... anything.

He didn't draw... He wrote: 91002001104...

I couldn't hold back my anger.

Sherif, this isn't making sense! You're just stalling me!!

The above has continually been the response of Sherif in respect to the crime he committed. During the interrogation of medical experts, Sherif forcefully wrote the above numbers as the perpetrator of the crime. Sherif's initial reaction – a smile – creates an immediate sense of unease. Laughter, typically associated with amusement, is rendered uncanny in this context because it emerges in a situation where distress and clarity are expected. Freud (1919) notes that the uncanny arises when something seemingly normal is rendered abnormal, not limited to inappropriate emotional responses in tense situations. Sherif's smile suggests either detachment from reality or an internal logic that remains inaccessible to Dr. Yahya, aligning with Freud's notion of the uncanny as an encounter with the inexplicable.

The second uncanny element lies in Sherif's refusal to directly engage with Yahya's command to draw the killer. Instead of producing an image, he writes a string of numbers: 91002001104. This deviation from expected behaviour introduces an eerie ambiguity. According to Jentsch (1919), intellectual uncertainty plays a central role in the uncanny, where the observer (Dr. Yahya) is left unable to ascertain whether Sherif's response holds hidden meaning or is purely nonsensical. This numerical sequence, devoid of context, functions similarly to cryptic messages in horror and thriller narratives, heightening the sense of unease and defamiliarisation.

Furthermore, Yahya's frustration - "Sherif, this isn't making sense! You're just stalling me!!"- reflects the uncanny disruption of logical progression. The anticipation of a clear answer is subverted by an enigmatic response, reinforcing Freud's claim that the uncanny often emerges from "something repressed which recurs" (Freud, 1919, p. 241). Here, the act of writing numbers instead of drawing could signify a subconscious defense mechanism, where Sherif, rather than confronting the trauma of identifying a killer, resorts to a coded or dissociative response.

The eerie ambiguity of whether his actions stem from psychosis or an external force aligns with Freud's notion of the uncanny: the fear of an unresolved, hidden truth. The moment when he is seen smiling in court, detached from the gravity of his actions, is the culmination of this uncanny horror.

The Arab Cultural Lens: Between Religion and Mental Health

In many Arab societies, the supernatural is deeply embedded in cultural and religious narratives. Mental illnesses are often viewed through the lens of

spiritual disturbances. Sherif's case, where his erratic behaviour and hallucinations are met with both medical and mystical explanations, reflects the tension between modern psychiatric understanding and traditional beliefs. Islamic teachings acknowledge mental disorders but also recognise the influence of unseen entities. Islamic teachings present a nuanced and non-reductive understanding of human behaviour by acknowledging both psychological disorders and the possible influence of unseen metaphysical entities. On one hand, the Qur'an affirms human cognitive and emotional vulnerability, underlining that, individuals are not burdened beyond their capacity (Qur'an 2:286), which has been interpreted by scholars as recognition of mental and emotional limitations (Rassool, 2015). Classical and contemporary Islamic thought therefore does not deny the existence of mental illness; rather, it encourages care, compassion, and treatment for those experiencing psychological distress (Awaad & Ali, 2015).

At the same time, Islamic epistemology affirms the existence of the unseen (al-ghayb), including jinn, as explicitly stated in Surah al-Jinn (Qur'an 72:1–15). Within this framework, jinn are understood as sentient beings capable of interaction with humans and, in some interpretations, capable of influencing human perception, emotion, and behaviour (El-Zein, 2009). This dual recognition creates a broader interpretive spectrum in which unusual or disturbed behaviour may be attributed either to internal psychological conditions or to external metaphysical interference.

Classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah argue that cases of possession (sihr) or spiritual affliction can manifest in ways that resemble what modern psychiatry classifies as mental illness, including altered consciousness, voice changes, or erratic behaviour (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2005). However, he maintains that not all such cases should be reduced to supernatural causes; rather, careful discernment is required to distinguish between physiological, psychological, and spiritual conditions. This position reflects an integrative approach in Islamic thought, where medical treatment and spiritual intervention (such as ruqyah) are not mutually exclusive but can operate concurrently (Awaad & Ali, 2015).

This epistemological openness complicates the boundary between pathology and metaphysics. Behaviour that may be clinically diagnosed as schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder within Western psychiatry can, in an Islamic context, also be interpreted as possible evidence of jinn influence or spiritual disturbance (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Consequently, the subject is situated within a space of interpretive ambiguity, where multiple explanatory models coexist without one necessarily invalidating the other.

Sherif's descent into a state of duality, where he speaks as two different personalities and claims to see an invisible presence, challenges the boundaries of psychological disorder and supernatural interference. Western psychology might diagnose schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder, yet within the Arab world, his symptoms might also be interpreted as spiritual affliction or divine punishment (El-Zein, 2009).

Islamic scholarship differentiates between mental illness and supernatural afflictions. The Quran highlights that the mind is a divine trust (Amanah) and must be cared for (Quran 2:286). However, the belief in supernatural forces, such as possession by jinn, is also prevalent (Quran 72:1-15). In Sherif's case, his actions – locking himself away, hearing voices, and engaging in violent behavior – could be interpreted as either a psychiatric disorder or an external supernatural force. The inability to distinguish between these realms creates an unsettling feeling, reinforcing the uncanny.

Sherif's hallucinations and violent tendencies could be interpreted through the lens of possession or divine test. Unlike Freud's secular explanation of the uncanny as a psychological disturbance, Islamic thought allows for both spiritual and medical interpretations.

This dual framework intensifies the uncanny effect. The inability to definitively determine whether a character's experiences stem from internal psychological fragmentation or external unseen forces produces a sustained sense of epistemological instability. Thus, Islamic teachings do not merely provide an alternative explanation for abnormal conduct; they actively contribute to the construction of the uncanny by legitimising the coexistence of the rational and the supernatural within the same experiential reality.

Conclusion

This study examines how the supernatural uncanny operates in *Al-fil al-azraq* by Ahmad Mourad, with particular attention to its psychological effects and its interpretation within an Arab-Islamic framework. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny, the analysis has shown that the novel constructs unease through recurring motifs of doubling, repetition, and ambiguity, which blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. These narrative strategies are most clearly embodied in the character of Sherif, whose fragmented identity, perception of unseen entities, and compulsive behaviours create a sustained atmosphere of uncertainty that subverts both characters and readers.

In line with the study's objective, the findings further demonstrate that the uncanny in the text is not confined to psychological interpretation alone. Rather, it emerges from the tension between psychiatric explanations and Islamic conceptions of the unseen (al-ghayb), including the possibility of jinn influence as articulated by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah. This dual interpretive framework produces a persistent epistemological ambiguity, where neither the rational nor the supernatural fully resolves Sherif's condition. It is precisely this coexistence of explanatory systems that intensifies the uncanny effect in the novel. This study concludes that the supernatural uncanny in *Al-fil al-azraq* functions as a narrative and conceptual space in which psychological disturbance and spiritual interpretation intersect. By demonstrating how these overlapping frameworks shape the representation of fear, identity, and reality, this research affirms that the uncanny in Arabic fiction is deeply mediated by cultural and religious contexts, rather than being solely a product of universal psychological processes.

This study extends the application of the uncanny by integrating psychoanalytic theory with Islamic epistemology, thereby offering a more culturally grounded model for interpreting supernatural phenomena in Arabic literature. It also highlights the importance of reading mental disturbance in literary texts through multiple knowledge systems, particularly in contexts where religious and metaphysical beliefs remain influential. This approach opens pathways for further interdisciplinary research at the intersection of literature, psychology, and Islamic thought.

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