

# The Logic of the ‘nonsensical’: a comparative study of semantic concepts in Arabic literary criticism

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## Abstract

This research critically examines the elusive concept of "nonsensicality" within Arabic literary criticism, exploring its semantic domains and the methodological challenges of defining and employing the term in scholarly discourse. Despite frequent appearances of the "nonsensical" in both classical and modern criticisms, its boundaries are often blurred by adjacent concepts such as the marvellous, the fantastic, the strange, and the supernatural. This study adopts a descriptive-comparative method, drawing on both Arabic and Western critical traditions to examine the complex semantic network underpinning nonsensicality. It argues that the persistent ambiguity surrounding this concept stems from overlapping and sometimes contradictory terminologies that have evolved across intellectual traditions and translations. Through a meticulous analysis of linguistic, philosophical, and critical sources, the current research delineates the core semantic nuclei of nonsensicality, proposing that it serves as a root concept with distinctive logic diverging from conventional rationality and realism. The study further synthesizes synonyms and related terms to nonsensicality into three principal semantic circles: the marvellous, the fantastic, and the strange. By clarifying the boundaries of

these terms, the research enables literary critics to more confidently utilize "nonsensicality" as a distinct analytical tool, avoiding conceptual conflation and enhancing interpretative clarity. Ultimately, this inquiry enriches the understanding of nonsensicality not as mere irrationality or absurdity, but as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that organizes and transforms meaning in literature and intellectual thought.

**Key words:** the nonsensical, the amazing, the strange, the supernatural, the fantastic.

### Introduction

It is difficult to imagine any human culture – whether ancient or modern – as completely devoid of manifestations of the nonsensical, no matter how far a people's rational faculties may reach. Indeed, it may be argued that the nonsensical emerges at the limits of intellectual production—whether artistic or scientific – making it a characteristic of any rational act that attains an extreme level of perfection in human endeavours. Within the scope of what this article aims to study, we find numerous examples of the presence of nonsensical in many Arab intellectual works, such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī's (d. 565 AH) *Tahfat al-Albāb wa Nukhbat al-I'jāb* [Masterpiece of Minds and a Selection of Wonders]; al-Ma'arrī's (d. 449 AH) *Risālat al-Ghufrān* [The Epistle of Forgiveness]; an-Nabahānī's (d. 1350 AH) *Jāmi' Karāmāt al-Awliyā'* [Compendium of the Miracles of the

Saints]; Ibn al-Wardī's (d. 749 AH) *Khurīdat al-'Ajā'ib wa Farīdat al-Gharā'ib* [A Rare Pearl of Wonders and Unique Marvels], and numerous Sufi writings such as Ibn az-Zayyāt at-Tādilī's (d. 617 AH) *at-Tashawwuf ilā Rijāl at-Taṣawwuf wa Akhbār Abī al-'Abbās al-Bustī*, among others.

Although the profusion of these works with aspects of the nonsensical did not undermine the intellectual originality of the works, "nonsensical" in them did not achieve the level of acquiring a distinct name encompassing the various semantic components pertaining to it and excluding anything irrelevant. The best explanation for this might be the very nature of these texts, which suggests a close kinship between nonsensical and certain other terms that mirror it in describing everything deemed "strange" or "extraordinary." These terms thus implicitly represent the nonsensical but

do not explicitly name it. The current study, therefore, aims to find: (i) what are these synonyms that compete with nonsensicality in its concept within the Arabic critical text?, and (ii) Is it possible to arrive, from these various uses and intersections, at a precise definition of nonsensicality that could be employed in literary-critical research without the fear of conceptually slipping into other terminological realms?

Most modern critical studies suggest that the term "nonsensical" continues to be closely tied to other conceptual terms, as a part is tied to the whole. Critics interchangeably use terms such as 'the marvellous', 'the strange', 'the supernatural', and 'the fantastic' to describe a certain situation or scene without paying attention to any potential semantic difference among these terms. This phenomenon does not affect "nonsensicality" alone; it also extends to many other concepts that appear in literary criticism to the point of conceptual chaos at times. A clear example of this is found in the book *Shi'riyyat ar-Riwāya al-Fantāstikiyyah* [Poetics of the Fantastic Novel] (Ḥalīfī, 2009), in which the author strives, to the best of his ability, to define "the fantastic" by critically examining much of what has been said about it, especially

Todorov's conceptual approaches. Despite the significance of this book, it does not lead the reader to a conclusive conceptual definition of the fantastic, nor does it address the questions raised by the conceptual relationship of this term to other closely related terms, from the standpoint of literary criticism. The author only points to the wide scope of the term "fantastic" and how its components meet or overlap with those of other concepts—such as 'the wondrous' [al-‘Ajā’ibī], 'the strange' [al-Gharā’ibī], and 'the magical tale'—in a complex network of interconnections. This has left a measure of obscurity surrounding the term, leading the author to state that,

it must be noted that the critical judgment that sought to pinpoint the fantastic precisely has remained relatively inadequate in clarifying this concept. This is what has compelled a group of theorists to take a keen interest in arranging the map of the fantastic, and their justification lies in its importance as a technique that enriches modern narrative. (Ḥalīfī, 2009, p. 21)

He added that this is because, the fantastic draws upon "other realms close to its own, transcending its boundaries to explore new but connected horizons that form a map and ground from which it draws" (Ḥalīfī, 2009, p. 70).

The researcher in this study confirms that 'the fantastic' remains attached to these other terms, which – despite being clearly delineated – still share aspects of meaning with the fantastic, either closely or from a distance. Thus, this indicates that "the expansive scope of the fantastic and its inclusiveness, embodied in its capacity to retain other elements that strengthen its presence as a literary form with a discourse that stands apart from realistic discourse" (Ḥalīfī, 2009), making it "a meeting place for multiple forms of the imaginary" (Ḥalīfī, 2009).

Consequently, in *Poetics of the Fantastic Novel*, the author follows the paths of the concept of the fantastic as it multiplies and intersects with other concepts in ways that inevitably prompt questions not addressed in extant works –namely that, when a concept's scope expands so greatly, it can no longer remain pure. From there arises attraction and absorption between it and other concepts, leading to either its dissolution into the other concept or its absorption of that other concept. This scenario raises

other questions for the current study: must these terms remain trapped by this "broad scope" and their interrelationship of synonymy, never to be severed? and is the Arabic language destined never to assert clearly the boundaries of the things it names, nor to recognize a clearly mapped out, distinct realm for each term?

### The Chaos of Boundaries

A reading of relevant scholarship reveals that defining the "nonsensical" becomes more difficult when some scholars casually label it with terms that merely refer to it or define its field of usage without clarifying the domains of such terms in relation to the actual domain of nonsensicality. One scholar, for instance, calls it a "doctrine," then reverts to calling it an "art," and on many occasions refers to it as a "method," seemingly unaware of the significant difference among these words. The difference is such that these terms cannot easily converge to form a single concept without shattering that concept. For instance, the author states that through examining general issues covered by the doctrine of nonsensicality, he finds, "it encompasses in its perspectives or its treatment the most important universal issues arising from every form of human creative activity" (Al-Ḥāfiẓ, 2003, p. 7).

After recognizing nonsensicality as a "doctrine," he returns to affirm that:

when we study the art of the nonsensical through analysis, criticism, and application, it does not mean we seek to reinforce an unreal, irrational aesthetic experience that merged into the abyss of existentially absurd art from the moment the features of artistic consciousness and human imitation of outward nature emerged. Rather, we seek to uncover the term 'nonsensical,' both the word and its meaning, its experience and results, through analysis and application. (Al-Ḥāfiẓ, 2003, p. 8)

He insists that nonsensicality is a term requiring experimentation, analysis, and interpretation. He also sees it as an art, because it "contradicts everything that is irrational in our real lives" (Al-Ḥāfiẓ, 2003, p.8). Evidently, the lack of a stable definition of the nonsensical in his mind led him to casually rename it in multiple ways, thus creating a somewhat confused attempt to define the nonsensical that is

not yet fully refined. He even states that "It would be suitable for us to call it [the nonsensical] 'the art of transformation,' since it does not merely pursue nonsensicality; it also explores the major rational issues in life, in order to eliminate everything irrational" (Al-Ḥāfiẓ, 2003, p. 14).

While only increasing the ambiguity of his approach, he declares that he finds in "the method of nonsensicality a logical interpretation" (Al-Ḥāfiẓ, 2003, p. 83), in which the spirit is the consciousness of what exists. This further compound the terms already dark circles of meaning with the circle of consciousness, spirit, and being.

It is hardly surprising that the presence of nonsensicality in our Arab culture raises several questions, such as:

Should the current status of nonsensicality be attributed to the confusion of the intellect, which has intensified to the point of being one of its main traits? Or should we see the nonsensical as a danger threatening humanity in the aftermath of the twentieth century, which was driven insane by

the new millennium?  
(Būḥdībāh, 2000, p. 5).

Confronted by such questions, one researcher produced a critical work entitled: *In Search of the Rational in Arab Culture*, in which he writes "It seems, sadly, that we Arabs have resigned ourselves to withdrawal from life, precisely when we have gone to excess in discussing the nonsensical and accepted it as a constitution for our lives" (Al-ʿIrāqī 2003, p. 9).

The reader of that work will note the author's insistence on the "nonsensicality" of Arab culture, reflecting the conflicting views on whether the achievements of Arab culture are rational or irrational. This disagreement has prompted a group of modern critics of Arabic literature to revisit the Arab cultural corpus, searching for what might be described as "nonsensical," following the example of the abundant manifestations of nonsensicality in Western literature. Thus, when writing on the nonsensical — whether creatively or in Arabic translations of Western works — these critics vacillate among various synonyms for nonsensicality. Sometimes they mention, in a single work and context, terms like the "nonsensical," "impossible," or "mythic," etc (Al-Aṣam, 1984, p. 13).

On other occasions, a single term is chosen and used throughout the entire text, as with Najwā ar-Riyāḥī al-Qasāṭīnī, who, in her Arabic translation of the first chapter of Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, equates "fantastique" with "nonsensicality" so completely that she renders the title of Todorov's work as *Madkhal ilā Adab al-lā-Maʿqūl* [An Introduction to the Literature of the Nonsensical]. Indeed, throughout an entire chapter, she insists on defining "the fantastic" as "the nonsensical." For instance, she translates the title of Louis Vax's *L'art et la Littérature Fantastiques* (Todorov, 1998, p. 30) as *al-Fann wa'l-Adab al-lā-Maʿqūlān* [Art and Nonsensical Literature] without explaining why she chose "nonsensical" as a synonym for "fantastique" or justifying this choice. Meanwhile, Shuʿayb Ḥalīfī preserves the term "fantastique" in its Western original (Ḥalīfī, 2009), whereas Sanā Kāmil al-Shaʿlān equates the "marvellous," the "strange," the "unreal," and the "extraordinary" in her book, analysing the sources of the strange and the marvellous in the novel and short story in Jordan during the second half of the twentieth century (Ash-Shaʿlān, 2004). She does not, however, notice potential semantic distinctions among these terms.

Likewise, in Kāmil Abū Dīb's critical edition of *The Literature of the Marvelous and the World of the Strange* in *Kitāb al-ʿAẓama* and the Art of Arabic Narration, we find frequent interchanging of words such as "marvellous," "supernatural," "unbounded," without any effort to clarify or ground them by analysing their semantic interrelationships. This undermines the author's argument that 'the fantastic' is actually of Arab origin – an argument contradicting Western scholars' views – since he merely dismisses Todorov's insistence that the fantastic emerged in the West in the eighteenth century as "absurd" and claims that such attribution is arbitrary (Abū Deeb, 2007, pp. 8-20).

Although it is methodologically challenging to distinguish among various conceptual fields, given that concepts inevitably inform each other semantically as part of their mutual enrichment and interrelationship, it does not prevent the exploring of the nature of the synonymy among some of them and tracing them back to their common roots by searching for potential shared features that may unite them under one concept, or at least make it possible for researchers to navigate more easily through the scope of their usage.

### The Negative Connotations of the "Nonsensical"

Apart from the issues already mentioned, another obstacle to defining the "nonsensical" is its generally perceived negative connotation in an era when technology has reached unprecedented heights and the mind governs almost every aspect of daily life – often extending to our emotional realms – through the breath-taking scientific discoveries emerging since the early twentieth century. This dominion of reason over humanity's destiny has organized the framework for human life, such that machines and their mechanisms control our existence, prompting the American writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) to question the value of science by asserting that:

life is hideous; from our limited knowledge, glimpses of truth—demonic in their revelation—make it a thousand times more hideous. Science, which continually asphyxiates us with astonishing discoveries, could very well destroy the human race in the end, because the as-yet-unknown forms of horror it may uncover

might be unbearable for our mortal minds. (Zayn al-Dīn, 1998, p. 81)

‘Abdus-Salām al-Masaddī reinforces Lovecraft's view, explaining that today's human thought is:

recording its major reassessments, nearly documenting its accumulated failures over the past two decades. Modern man has drawn on a cumulative historical legacy that gave rise to a grand human culture: the philosophy of the Greeks, the laws of the Romans, Islamic civilization, the European Renaissance, the Enlightenment, liberation movements, the people's right to self-determination, and the Charter of Human Rights. But now, such assumptions have been shaken. After the general consensus on the relativity of truth, there came the call to disregard its various gradations. After the consensus that criminalization and the prerogatives of

condemnation cannot be monopolized by any absolute authority, we see such a monopoly returning to the domain of competition; and after humanity settled on 'survival of the fittest,' we have reverted to the logic of 'survival of the strongest.' Thus, the relationship of the self and the other is confined to a single system, and the creative richness of human diversity is lost. (Al-Masaddī, 1995, pp. 5-6)

It is clear that many researchers' descriptions of nonsensicality draw heavily upon their personal views on contemporary realities, in which we see a strong resurgence of chaos in the midst of the current broad scientific revolution – implying humanity's regression to the law of the jungle, once governed by unrestrained savagery. This resurgence was illustrated by the outbreak of the First World War, which used humans and civilization as its fuel, followed by the devastating Second World War, which killed indiscriminately. Symptoms of this resurgence have also persisted through the Cold War, during which humanity

was split into 'Western' and 'Eastern' camps. This sowed fears, phobias, and physical deformities resulting from chemical warfare experiments, causing a precipitous descent into real danger as we witnessed the live detonation of "smart bombs" and satellite-guided missiles that tear into human flesh.

Hence, we can ask three questions here: first, can all the irrational phenomena plaguing humanity today be traced back to the intellect's confusion at the immensity of its achievements in every aspect of human life? Second, can we accept the presence of rational expressions of human intelligence side by side with irrational phenomena as an opposite pole that adjusts the global balance of power? Third, what is the reason for the overwhelmingly negative sense attached to the word "nonsensical," given that some of the greatest scientific discoveries emerged during the most brutal moments in history, when human thought illuminated the darkest realms obscuring truth?

### **From Multiple Meanings to a Single Semantics**

We believe that the negativity attached to nonsensicality primarily stems from a failure to realize that "rational" and "irrational" are two poles that together shape much of our conscious experience,

colouring our endeavours in different ways. Through their interplay, humans have waged battles against epidemics, emerging victorious over most of them, and reached their own potential beyond familiar limits — even walking on distant celestial objects. This convergence between rational and irrational situates the latter within the former in a variety of human pursuits, enabling fantasy to surge into reality and reality sometimes to become saturated with the imaginary. Indeed, this is because, as one scholar puts it "A person cannot let go of his desires, nor the possibility of satisfying them. Therefore, one tends to imagination, which sustains those desires and invests them with a major role in the process of envisioning" (Mwayqin, 2005, p. 136).

Indeed, the relentless dominance of technology may well be what spurs humans to flee into the realm of imagination to escape the pressures of daily life. This prompted one writer sarcastically to remark thus:

In our era, many people claim that it is an age of nonsensicality, despite its many sciences—or perhaps because of them—since those sciences have produced machines that

have stifled humanity,  
prompting us to seek fresh  
air in the realm of the  
irrational and the  
unscientific. (Maḥmūd,  
1981, p. 372)

Accordingly, the claim that rationality and irrationality are intertwined in the human experience on this earth is grounded in our civilizational heritage. Our acceptance or rejection of what is rational, or irrational, may favour one side while still acknowledging the other. Often, we try to grant primacy to the first (rational) over the second (irrational), all the while harbouring some suspicion about that primacy and seeking to make reason dominate unreason. This is illustrated by the viewpoint of Rajā' al-‘Atīrī, who states that:

the disappearance of the  
irrational assumes that the  
human mind is capable of  
explaining everything that  
happens in nature,  
psychology, society, and  
reality at large. Is it truly  
possible for the human  
mind to explain everything  
without any residue or  
resistance from reality?  
Clearly, the mind's capacity  
to understand everything

and eradicate the irrational  
once and for all is limited  
and relative. The process of  
rationalization is unending,  
and the very function of  
the mind is to organize  
thought and discourse,  
build coherent knowledge  
for individual and  
collective action, and  
diminish the strangeness  
and danger of the  
irrational. (Al-‘Atīrī. 2001,  
pp. 6-7)

While Rajā' al-‘Atīrī deals with most of the questions raised by the relationship of the rational to the irrational, her inquiry remains overshadowed by semantic ambiguity due to an inadequate grasp of the core terms, leading to rather scanty and not especially illuminating answers.

In light of the above, we might ask: if reason is what opposes the nonsensical and limits its strangeness and danger, is it not feasible to say that reason, in delineating the boundaries of rational matters, also discloses the irrational and identifies it for people? In other words, is reason not the actual history of the irrational? It is essential that human consciousness in any society discriminate among all intellectual and cultural

elements, whether rational or irrational, clarifying their interrelations and acknowledging the potential influence of the irrational on our mental contexts.

This is because:

the greatest relevance to our topic is to differentiate between the rational and the irrational so that we might be clearly aware of where each one ends and the other begins. This is precisely what philosophers keep focusing on when they distinguish between two forms of perception: one by reason, which is the path to science and related knowledge, and the other by intuition, said by Sufis and the like to be their way to the truth. (Al-‘Atīrī. 2001, p. 381)

However, because many attempts to define the "nonsensical," such as the example just cited, have not reached the conceptual depth needed to capture its core, we returned to every source we had at our disposal in search of a definition of the irrational that could be used with confidence. Our reading uncovered various terms that indicate a shared

meaning with irrational — indeed, their conceptual domains often intersect with its own. Consequently, we often find critics, when discussing the irrational, listing numerous synonyms or oscillating among different labels for this same signifier in the same context, just as we have observed thus far.

Given that in Arabic there is no single word we can rely on with complete assurance to convey all that is opposed to "reason," defining "nonsensicality" becomes methodologically problematic. The term itself is complex and potentially open to other formations like supra-rational, meta-rational, supra-natural, etc., further complicating or narrowing its semantic fields depending on the communicative context and the purpose of usage.

Since "things sometimes become clearer when viewed through their opposites," as the Arab saying goes, we have chosen to rely on the procedural technique of "definition through contradiction," Lalande considered "an operational and logical form of direct deduction" (Lalande, 2001, p. 906), to help us get a handle on the meaning of *al-Lā Ma'qūl* ['nonsensicality'] by beginning with what dictionaries — based on linguistic and philosophical definitions — say about reason and rationality, believing that the

linguistic sense of a word remains latent in it regardless of the variety of contexts in which it appears. In *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Ibn Manẓūr, 1981), lists several meanings for "reason" (‘aql), including restraint, confinement, binding, clemency, discrimination, understanding, elevation, nobility, ornamentation, arrangement, refuge, and escape. *Tāj al-‘Arūs* does not differ much from *Lisān al-‘Arab* in defining reason, stating that it is:

the knowledge of the qualities of things—whether they be good or bad, complete or incomplete—or it is knowledge of the better of two good things and the worse of two bad things, or any concept that includes an awareness of what organises objectives and interests. It is also a praiseworthy condition of a person in speech and movement. (Al-Zabīdī, 1976)

From these definitions, we infer that reason is a faculty that enables one to understand material and intellectual phenomena, discerning their causes through systematic, logical reconstruction of occurrences by

stripping away misleading similarities so that one may discriminate between the good and evil, and between beauty and the ugly, via a sober cognitive effort that aims to detect the phenomenon's system and ascertain its coherence in relation to other phenomena.

Thus, from what we said regarding the domain of rationality, nonsensicality appears to span all domains marked by strangeness, and incompatibility with the laws of reason. In Western dictionaries, it coincides with what philosophical encyclopaedias describe as "anything strange or even contradictory to reason... anything that surpasses our reason in matters of knowledge" (Al-Zabīdī, 1976, p. 709).

It is also that which "deviates from logic or rejects or distorts it" (Auroux, 1998). According to the Philosophical Dictionary, the word "nonsensical" has four connotations:

- a) that which contradicts or lies outside reason, opposed to the reasonable;
- b) that which goes beyond the limits of reason, or at which rational explanation ceases;
- c) that which is incomprehensible, which the mind cannot grasp or

interpret in acceptable logical terms; d) finally, the irrational is that which is illogical. (Ṣalībā, 1982, p. 275)

From these proposals regarding the definition of nonsensicality, we see that "the irrational" is essentially the negation of the rational (non-rational) or the negation or inversion of reason.

In summary, nonsensicality is the domain of everything the mind, armed with its established logical tools, cannot apprehend. It resists causal, rational explanation and stands outside the bounds of rationality, constantly at odds with it. More precisely, it is a descriptor for events and things whose meanings escape the logical mind and surpass the explanatory power of reason. Yet this does neither mean, however, that the irrational is entirely random or totally lacking in any aesthetic or conceptual coherence—nor does it mean that creators or thinkers indulge in it merely as a frivolous distraction. The best evidence for this is found in literary and philosophical texts by Arab authors of the past — al-Ma‘arrī, al-Qazwīnī, Ibn az-Zayyāt at-Tādilī, among others — as well as by authors of the "absurdist" trend in early twentieth-century Europe, all of which exhibit a coherent intellectual

system built into their meaning-making, far from unstructured creativity.

Indeed, many texts in Arabic literary criticism and philosophy speak of nonsensicality and absurdity synonymously, often placing the two words side by side for extra clarity. This raises an important question: what explains and justifies this correlation? It appears particularly common in texts translated into Arabic, where translators often render Absurd in Western philosophy and literature as both "absurd" and "nonsensical," as with Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960), translated into Arabic under the title *Drama al-lā-Ma‘qūl* [Drama of the Nonsensical], without any logical justification other than the observation that:

since these critical terms derive from European concepts going back to Greek and Roman civilization, and from the body of European literature since the Renaissance, their Arabic translation cannot be definitively stabilized as is often the case with their European forms derived from Greek or Latin. Therefore, it is

inevitable that we resort to coining, derivation, and Arabization, alongside direct translation, and here the translator's linguistic sense, individual taste, and knowledge of languages, as well as his cultural background, come into play in carrying out such work. (Esslin, 2009, pp. 7-8)

Accepting this explanation, one still wonders about the nature of the semantic overlap between "absurd" and "nonsensical," and whether it is possible to reduce one to the other so that we might legitimately treat them as synonymous.

In Arabic, the root 'a-ba-th' (عبث) [absurdity] denotes "playing with something and mixing it up without system," as *Lisān al-ʿArab* states:

He acted absurdly (ʿabitha bihi), i.e., he played, paying no attention to it, for it is no concern of his. Absurdity is playing with a thing.' It also adds: 'al-ʿabītha: coffee beans mixed with barley; ʿabītha: a flock of sheep that is

intermixed. (Ibn Manẓūr 1981)

Ibn Fāris's *Muʿjam Maqāyīs al-Lughā* defines it similarly as 'an action lacking correctness, done heedlessly':

Al-ʿAbīth is any mixture. They say 'there is an ʿabītha in this valley', that is, a mixture of two tribes. By analogy, al-ʿabath is an action not executed with deliberation or correctness. You say, 'He did ʿabath', [meaning]: acting without care for what he was doing. (Ibn Fāris, 1979)

From these definitions we see that "absurdity" is 'playing with' or mixing things in an unsystematic manner—i.e., reconfiguring the components of an existing reality in a new way — while the agent remains indifferent to the outcome.

By contrast, most Western dictionaries give 'absurd' the sense of 'defying reason'. The nonsensicality that strays from rational standards or normal logic, describing it as "something contrary to reason and to common sense, said of the insane or the deviant" (Larousse, 1994, p. 35), or "something not true for logical reasons," (Robert, 1992, p. 43), or "the general idea of acknowledging relations

among statements that are mutually contradictory from a logical standpoint" (Auroux, 1998).

In our view, translating 'absurd' as "nonsensical" in most works rendered into Arabic stems from two factors: first, translators' methodological reliance on Western philosophical dictionaries, which emphasize that the meaning of 'absurd' contradicts rationality; and second, their inattention to a major paradox: classical Arabic dictionaries indicate that "absurdity" ('abath) entails 'playing', 'mixing', and indifference to the action in question, whereas many sophisticated works in our Arab intellectual heritage – especially Sufi writings and novels – exhibit manifestations of nonsensicality, which cannot simply be regarded as trivial mixing or playful rearrangement of things without direction; despite their imaginary spaces that do not recognize or submit to rational principles. Hence, these imaginative works provided fertile ground for nonsensicality to flourish and grow.

Thus, we would argue that "absurdity," in the sense we have gleaned above, is not exactly synonymous with "nonsensicality," since it does not entail delving into the metaphysical, the supra-natural, and related worlds of imagination. It primarily distorts our

perceptions of how things exist, rather than altering the things themselves. Consequently, it covers only a small subset of what is encompassed by the dictionary definitions of "nonsensicality," so that if absurdity relates to it at all, it is as a part relates to the whole – recognizable as belonging to it but not serving to define it. This invites us to refine further the meanings of concepts sometimes equated or associated with nonsensicality in literary and critical texts.

Upon consulting all the sources available to us, we identified more than twenty terms comparable to "nonsensicality." Some of these contain a particle or element suggesting negation or transcendence, such as "lā-" or "mā-lā" [not/no], or the adverbs "fawq" [above] or "mā warā'" [beyond], combined with words referring to the possible, natural, logical, habitual, or rational. Others preserve the foreign term "fantastique." Below is a list of these terms – grouped into two categories – together with the connotations we attribute to them after concluding that they serve our analysis. Among these synonyms are:

- **That which cannot be explained (mā lā yufassar):** From the verb *fassara* [to clarify, explain], it refers to anything whose meaning remains locked,

resisting all attempts at clarification (Ibn Manẓūr, 1981).

- **That which cannot be accepted (mā lā yuqbalu):** Qabila [to accept] means "to believe it or be satisfied with it," so this refers to anything that cannot be believed or accepted at all.
- **Absurd (al-‘Abathī):** From ‘abatha, meaning "to do something pointless from which no benefit ensues" (Khalīl, 1995). The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard used "absurd" to assert that "Christianity is absurd because there is no one capable of providing a purely rational explanation for its doctrines; faith is beyond the narrow boundaries of reason" (Al-Aṣṣfar, 1991).
- **Illogical (al-Lā-Mantiqī):** Mantiq [logic] this is a branch of philosophy dealing with forms of thought and valid modes of argument. Thus, the illogical cannot be proven or justified by reason.
- **Unreal (al-Lā-Wāqī‘ī):** Wāqī‘ is from waqa‘a, meaning "what has happened or is real;" the opposite is "imagination."
- **Exceptional (al-Istithnā‘ī):** From istathnā, "to exclude something from a rule or from what is customary."
- **Above cognition (al-Fawq-Idrākī):** Adraka means "to see, grasp, or

understand," as in the Qur’ānic verse "No vision can grasp Him, but He grasps all vision" {al-An‘ām (6): 103}. Hence, al-fawq-idrākī is that which eludes seeing, understanding, or conception.

- **Supernatural (al-Fawq-Ṭabī‘ī):** Ṭabī‘ī [natural] this denotes that which belongs to nature and is not man-made. It is also the doctrine explaining everything in terms of nature. Therefore, the supernatural lies outside of or transcends nature’s laws.
- **Miraculous/Extraordinary (al-Khāriq):** From kharaqa [‘to tear or rend’]. In Islamic scholastic theology, "supernatural" (khāriq li-l-‘āda) refers to something that surpasses the capacity of created beings, such as miracles and saintly wonders [karāmāt].
- **Marvelous (al-‘Ajā‘ibī):** From ‘ajab, denoting wonder or amazement at something unfamiliar or outside one’s habitual perception (Ibn Manẓūr, 1981). The Qur’ān references this in "أَلَيْدُ وَأَنَا عَجُوزٌ وَهَذَا بَعْلِي شَيْخًا إِنَّ هَذَا لَشَيْءٌ" "عَجِيبٌ" {Hūd (11): 72}
- **Strange (al-Gharā‘ibī):** Gharuba (to be strange), meaning "to be obscure, hidden, or distant from understanding."

- **Fantastic (al-Fantāstik)** (Halīfī, 2009, pp. 17–71): From the Greek 'phantázein' [to make visible to the mind], to the Latin 'fantasticus', which refers to supernatural phenomena and the products of the imagination such as ghosts and phantoms. The French term "fantastique" was used in the Middle Ages and became popular in the nineteenth century with the poet Nerval. In Littré's dictionary of 1863, "fantastic narrative is concerned with tales of genies and supernatural wonders, which emerged with the German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann, giving the supernatural an important role" (Steinmetz, 1993, pp. 3–4). Tzvetan Todorov (1970) discussed this extensively in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*.
  - **Boundless (al-Lā-Maḥdūd)**: From ḥadda [to define or demarcate]. The boundless is that which cannot be delimited or circumscribed.
  - **Invisible (al-Lā-Mar'ī)**: Belonging to the unseen world [ʿĀlam al-Ghayb], not accessible except through imagination.
  - **Unfamiliar (al-Lā-Ma'lūf)**: That which people are not accustomed to.
  - **Astonishing (al-Idhāshī)**: *Dahisha* [to be astonished or bewildered] out of fear, amazement, or shyness.
  - **Metaphysical (al-Mā-Warā'ī)**: From warā', referring to what is concealed from direct perception, whether behind or in front. In philosophy, mā-warā' al-ṭabī'a (beyond nature) is the metaphysical, the unseen that we can only reach through imagination.
  - **Imagined (al-Mutakhayyal)**: From khayyala ['to present something as if real'], as in the Qur'ānic "It was made to seem to him through their sorcery that they were moving" {*Tā Hā* (20): 66}. It is a mental image that imitates external reality, even if it does not correspond to anything actually existing.
  - **Illusory (al-Mawhūm)**: From wahama ['to imagine or suppose something'], or to fall into illusion. It is anything enveloped in illusion.
  - **Bewildering (al-Muḥayyir)**: From ḥāra ['to be puzzled or at a loss'] hence, 'al-muḥayyir' is that which causes confusion, hesitation, or perturbation.
  - **Impossible (al-Muḥāl)**: That which cannot exist or cannot be proven to exist.
- From these definitions, we see that these synonyms at times diverge, but they also intersect frequently, with each definition sometimes referencing the content of another. This raises a crucial question: can these definitions be grouped into

clear semantic categories, so that we might outline their overall sense without letting them proliferate and blend into one another indefinitely?

Accordingly, we will propose a synthesis of these synonyms, based on their semantic interconnections, to explore whether they can be classified into major semantic groupings. Our aim is not to claim that one group's definitions are entirely distinct from another's, based on their dictionary meanings; rather, we intend to gather and rationally arrange these synonyms — ones that recur frequently in the Arabic critical corpus — into major categories in hopes of identifying their semantic nucleus. This, in turn, may allow us to arrive at a definition of nonsensicality that can be used with some assurance.

With this in mind, we may propose three major semantic circles for the synonyms of nonsensicality, discernible in the writings of Arab critics and in Western critical studies: the "marvellous," the "fantastic," and the "strange." We note that the Western critical corpus we have consulted, like its Arabic counterpart, contains an abundance of terms pointing — explicitly or implicitly — to the irrational, sometimes functioning as synonyms, and sometimes as near

synonyms. Summarized, these three circles are:

### One

#### **The Marvelous (al-‘Ajīb)**

In *Le Petit Robert* (Rey, 1970), we find two main meanings of the marvellous: first, that which — within its category — triggers the highest degree of wonder, admiration, astonishment, extraordinariness, and supernaturalness; second, that which cannot be explained according to the laws of nature, thus belonging to a realm beyond nature. This is what Tzvetan Todorov suggests in his discussion of narrative genres, distinguishing between the marvellous and the strange: "When the reader decides that we are forced to acknowledge the existence of new natural laws by which we can explain the phenomenon, we enter the realm of the marvellous" (Todorov, 1970, p. 46). Todorov divides the purely marvellous into three types, illustrated by phenomena in older texts predating the modern scientific age and explorations:

- **The Hyperbolic Marvelous (al-‘Ajīb al-Mubālagh Fīhi):**  
Phenomena that appear supernatural solely because of

their colossal sizes or magnitudes, such as Sindbad's accounts in *The Arabian Nights* describing whales measuring a hundred or two hundred cubits.

- **The Exotic Marvelous (al-‘Ajīb al-Gharīb):** Mentioning supernatural phenomena without detailing them precisely, such as Sindbad's description in his second voyage of a bird so large that it covers the sun and has a leg thicker than a tree trunk.
- **The Instrumental Marvelous (al-‘Ajīb al-Ālī):** Involving small objects that perform impossible tasks, such as the flying carpet in the story of Prince Aḥmad from *The Arabian Nights* (Rey, 1970, p. 684).

## Two

### **The Fantastic (al-Fantāstikī)**

Its origin is the Greek *phantázein*, leading to the Latin *phantasticus*. According to *Le petit Robert*, it has three main meanings: first, something produced by the imagination and lacking a real counterpart, i.e., a supernatural fantasy; second, an extraordinary, astonishing phenomenon; and third, something unrealistic (Rey, 1970, p. 684). Tzvetan Todorov offers this definition:

"The fantastic is the hesitation felt by a being who knows only the laws of nature when confronted with an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov, 1970, p. 29) This definition implies that "the fantastic" persists as long as the reader (or character) hesitates, unable to explain the phenomenon through known laws of nature yet drawn toward accepting supernatural laws for its explanation (Halīfī, 2009, pp. 19–44). If one consults the genre classification Todorov presents in *Introduction à la Littérature fantastique*, they will see how effectively this technique produces meaning, as Irene Bessièrè suggests that "the fantastic tale seems the ideal device for a type of storytelling that produces a distinctive aesthetic effect [on the recipient]" (Bessièrè, 1974).

## Three

### **The Strange (al-Gharīb)**

In *Le Petit Robert*, (Rey, 1970, pp. 636–637) the word '*étrange*' historically means "anything that is not understood and lies outside the norm," whereas in modern usage, it denotes that which is surprising and outside the customary, prompting wonder. Todorov says, "When the

receiver (or the narrative character) decides that we must accept new natural laws enabling us to interpret the phenomenon, we find ourselves within the realm of the strange" (Todorov, 1970, p. 46).

Hence, from our survey of synonyms for nonsensicality in the Arabic critical corpus, alongside references to relevant dictionaries, and from our consultation of the Western critical corpus and its dictionaries, we reach several preliminary conclusions. The strongest of these conclusions is that concepts like the marvellous, the strange, the supernatural, the imaginary, and so on exist in both Arab and Western thought with broadly convergent definitions. One may thus observe an overarching similarity in how humanity conceptualizes these ideas, as if there were a unity in the human mind's capacity to shape rational concepts, and indeed a resemblance in the labelling and meaning assigned to phenomena. Some of these facts may be traced back to the common human essence, or "thinking spirit," as well as to the role of translation in facilitating cultural exchange between East and West — where the Arab mind once functioned as a bridge when it undertook the translation of Greek writings.

However, this conceptual alignment should not obscure certain differences uncovered by our comparative reading of synonyms for nonsensicality. Specifically, the semantic domain of the "irrational" in Western thought appears more conceptually refined than in Arab thought, likely due to each worldview occupying different civilizational contexts, each with distinct features in terms of contemporary global engagement and alignment with the conditions of the present moment. Thus, we can cautiously suggest that the irrational in Arab intellectual production is predominantly mythical and illusionistic, roaming freely in purely imaginative realms, whereas Western irrationality is more precisely formulated, perhaps driven by the influence of technology on real-world details, leading to the possibility of testing and implementing theoretical concepts — once deemed impossible — in practical domains.

### **Toward a Definition**

Martin Esslin asserts that:

A term such as 'the theatre of the absurd' must be understood as a kind of intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities

in treatment, method, tone, and shared artistic and philosophical premises—whether consciously recognized or not—arising from a common cultural heritage. As such, this label facilitates understanding, and its utility is measured by how far it helps us comprehend and absorb the artwork. (Esslin, 2009, p. 3)

While this illustrates the complexity of defining the irrational and the frequent presence of analogous concepts in Western creative works — so abundantly that a philosophical trend emerged in the 1930s, asserting that human beings live in a meaningless, irrational, and chaotic universe; — it also underscores the necessity of formulating nonsensicality as a clear, distinct concept helping us to identify particular types of creative texts in which it is present, as well as to situate them within their intellectual and cultural contexts.

This perspective prompts us to conclude that the concepts we have examined as partial definitions of nonsensicality collectively reveal its complexity. It is multifaceted, shaped by various factors, among them the nature of a given cultural-intellectual tradition, the

prevailing social mentality, the diversity of contexts in which the concept is employed, and the new, derivative notions that emerge under its umbrella — such as the marvellous, the fantastic, the strange, the supernatural, etc. — and how these notions converge semantically to convey certain states of being or developments in time.

Based on the synonyms discussed, we propose the following working definition: nonsensicality, as glimpsed from linguistic and philosophical definitions, is an attribute of any entity or event that is obscure and impenetrable in meaning, encircled by illusion on all sides, never yielding its intended purpose, and thus remaining impervious to the mind's efforts at rational justification or proof. It stands beyond truth/falsehood and beyond common sense. And even if it insists on imitating phenomena of the real world, it does not express any genuine, existing reality, because it is always shaped by logic that deviates from the laws of nature — as in miracles, saintly wonders, mysticism, and the realms of demons and spirits. Its imaginative aspect penetrates the reality of things and beings and reshapes their forms, causing confusion, hesitation, and bewilderment. Indeed, these traits make it a semantic crossroads that merges

multiple concepts, thereby elevating it to the level of a "comprehensive concept" comprising a semantic structure grounded in formal and thematic elements.

### Findings:

- Nonsensicality is a classificatory concept that, when realized in texts, forms an organisational framework encompassing various ideas. It acts as a "root concept" branching into subsidiary notions, each with its own distinctiveness in a given context that differs from the meanings of the other notions in that same context, even as these individual subsidiary concepts, in a broader usage, converge to convey a comprehensive significance: that is what we term the "nonsensicality" in literature, art, and other intellectual activities.
- Nonsensicality is a concept with its own "logic," defining everything that diverges from established norms of social, moral, and cultural behaviour in a given society, as well as that society's conventional perceptions of time, space, beings, and objects.
- Within nonsensicality, things and beings are contrary to the laws of thought and reason in their conditions, actions, and utterances. They form unprecedented relations, ignoring the natural order. They reject

the principle of identity, and instead, create a new aesthetic logic that governs their presence through a consistent narrative construct, readily discernible in literary texts.

- The very eloquence of nonsensicality, its freedom from the rational rhetorical system, grants it special status as an effective narrative technique favoured by many Arab novelists eager to transition from depicting empirical reality to forging an imagined reality. By doing so, they enjoy the latitude to shape both the form and substance of meaning in their narrative experiments.

### Research Results:

The study establishes that nonsensicality in literature is not a monolithic or marginal notion but a foundational concept underpinning multiple critical categories.

Nonsensicality operates as a root concept, generating a network of related terms – such as the marvellous, the fantastic, and the strange – each contributing unique nuances but collectively enriching literary interpretation.

The research demonstrates that semantic confusion surrounding nonsensicality arises from overlapping terminologies,

both within the Arabic tradition and in translation from Western thought.

The negative associations with nonsensicality are historically contingent, influenced by periods of scientific advancement and intellectual upheaval, but these do not diminish its positive aesthetic or creative role.

The classification of synonyms into three primary semantic domains clarifies conceptual boundaries and enhances critical precision.

The study finds that nonsensicality facilitates a shift from mere depiction of empirical reality toward imaginative transformation, granting authors and critics new expressive possibilities.

Comparative analysis reveals that while both Arab and Western traditions recognize similar semantic fields, Western critical discourse tends to exhibit greater definitional precision due to different cultural and historical contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The exploration of literary nonsensicality presented in this study demonstrates the remarkable complexity and theoretical richness inherent in the concept as it has evolved within Arabic and Western literary-critical traditions. The persistent

ambiguity and multiplicity characterizing the term arise not from a lack of intellectual engagement, but rather from the very nature of nonsensicality itself – a phenomenon that resists stable categorization and perpetually straddles the boundaries between reason and unreason, reality and imagination, order and chaos.

Throughout this research, it has become clear that nonsensicality is far from a marginal or trivial literary phenomenon. Instead, it acts as a central organizational axis for a wide array of related concepts, including the marvellous, the fantastic, the strange, and the supernatural. These concepts, while frequently conflated, each possess their own semantic integrity and historical trajectory, necessitating a critical approach that is both precise and contextually informed. By situating nonsensicality as a "root concept," the study elucidates its capacity to generate subordinate notions that, while contextually distinct, ultimately converge to form a larger semantic field unique to the irrational and the extraordinary.

The study further reveals that the negative connotations historically associated with nonsensicality are products of both cultural and philosophical attitudes towards reason, technology, and the unknown. In the

modern era, dominated by rationalist and scientific paradigms, nonsensicality often appears as an aberration or a symptom of intellectual crisis. Yet, as the research demonstrates, it is precisely in moments of greatest intellectual or artistic achievement that the nonsensical emerges most vividly, serving as both a counterbalance to rationality and a catalyst for new forms of creativity.

A key outcome of this research is the proposed classification of the synonyms of nonsensicality into three principal semantic circles – marvellous, fantastic, and strange – each with its own defining features but all fundamentally linked through their resistance to rational explanation and their capacity to produce wonder, hesitation, and imaginative transformation. This classification not only clarifies the semantic confusion that often surrounds the term, but also provides a robust framework for future critical investigations into the role of the irrational in literature and thought.

Ultimately, the study calls for a more nuanced understanding of nonsensicality – one that moves beyond simplistic binaries of rational versus irrational or sense versus nonsense. It invites scholars to recognize nonsensicality as a dynamic and generative concept in literary and intellectual history, one that organizes

meaning, provokes thought, and opens up new horizons of interpretation. By refining the critical vocabulary and conceptual tools available for the analysis of nonsensicality, this research paves the way for more rigorous and imaginative scholarship, fostering deeper engagement with the complexities of human creativity and cultural production.

### Recommendations:

- Scholars and critics should refine and clearly delineate the boundaries among the concepts associated with nonsensicality (e.g., marvellous, fantastic, strange, supernatural) to prevent terminological confusion and enhance analytical precision.
- Comparative research is encouraged to trace the semantic and functional intersections between nonsensicality and the absurd in global literary and artistic traditions.
- Future studies should examine the influence of cultural and civilizational contexts on the articulation and deployment of nonsensicality in Arabic and Western literature.
- Educational curricula in literary studies should incorporate systematic modules on nonsensicality, emphasizing its conceptual richness and critical relevance.

- Translation projects should prioritize the contextual and semantic accuracy of key terms related to nonsensicality, with critical apparatus explaining their historical and philosophical backgrounds.
- Interdisciplinary studies are recommended to explore nonsensicality across literature, philosophy, and the arts, thereby broadening its scope of inquiry and enriching critical discourse.

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