

Negotiating the Fantastic: Urban Fantasy Elements in Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (2023)

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Abstract:

This paper examines Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* as a work of urban fantasy, focusing on how the novel draws on and modifies the genre's established conventions. Drawing on the genre fiction formula by Wyatt and Sarick, this study employs qualitative textual analysis to identify the key feature of urban fantasy: the coexistence of human and non-human entities in recognizable contemporary settings. The analysis reveals that the novel retains the core structure of urban fantasy while deliberately modifying its formula. Instead of featuring familiar Western non-human figures, the novel foregrounds Malaysian and Southeast Asian mythological creatures, thereby situating the fantastic within local tradition. In addition, the novel shifts from the genre's typical urban or metropolitan setting to the forest as the main site for encounters between human and non-human entities. The paper concludes that *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* demonstrates how urban fantasy can be adapted to non-Western contexts by reworking the genre conventions. Such modifications suggest the genre fiction's flexibility and highlight the role of local myth and space in expanding the boundaries of contemporary fantasy narratives.

Keywords: urban fantasy; genre fiction; genre formula; local myth

INTRODUCTION

Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (2023) is a contemporary fantasy novel that centers on the journey of a thirteen-year-old Malaysian girl mediating loss, memory, and responsibility through encounters with supernatural beings rooted in local folklore. Set during the COVID-19 pandemic, the novel combines elements of adventure, coming-of-age narrative, and the fantastic, situating its protagonist's emotional struggles within a world where myth and everyday life coexist. *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* continues Alkaf's commitment to producing Malaysian narratives for younger readers, emphasizing local cultural references, mythological figures, and landscapes while highlighting universal themes such as grief, care, and identity. The novel's narrative structure, which brings supernatural forces into contact with a recognizable contemporary world, invites analysis through the lens of genre fiction. In particular, the interaction between human and non-human entities, set in Langkawi Forest, positions *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* as a productive site for examining urban fantasy conventions beyond their commonly assumed Western frameworks.

Within genre studies, urban fantasy is commonly understood as a subgenre of fantasy (Wyatt &

Saricks, 2019). It brings fantastical characters and concepts into real-world urban environments, often in the present day (Crow, 2023), where mythical or non-human beings coexist with humans (Glatch, 2025b). Drawing on the genre convention proposed by Wyatt and Sarick in their book, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (2019), urban fantasy is typically set in a recognizable world, most often in cities or urban environments, where supernatural beings intermingle with humans in narratives frequently centered on political or cultural power struggles.

Critical discussions of urban fantasy have largely centered on Western texts. This tendency raises questions about how urban fantasy operates when transplanted into non-Western contexts and when its spatial and mythological assumptions are reconfigured. In *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*, the supernatural does not separate from everyday life nor remain confined to distant mythic realms; instead, it intersects directly with the protagonist's lived reality, though not within the cityscape but within forested landscapes shaped by local belief systems. Such a narrative choice complicates conventional understandings of urban fantasy and suggests that the genre's defining characteristics may be more flexible than previously assumed.

Despite the novel's critical visibility since its publication, scholarly engagement with *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* remains limited. To date, only a small number of studies have directly addressed the novel. The book review published in *SARE* by Sharifah Aishah Osman (2023) focuses on the novel's thematic concerns with memory, caregiving, and cultural representation, as well as its intertextual engagement with Malay folklore and fairy-tale traditions, particularly *Little Red Riding Hood*. While the review offers valuable insights into characterization, mythological references, and emotional resonance, it does not approach the novel from a genre-based perspective. Meanwhile, the sole academic article identified to date examines the novel through the framework of literary cartography, analyzing the Malaysian rainforest as a spatial and metaphorical landscape that shapes the protagonist's psychological and cultural development (Yang & Rahman, 2025). Although this study provides a detailed spatial reading of the text, its focus remains on geography, space, and identity rather than on genre classification or convention. In addition, Alkadi (2025) discusses the novel within the Islamic pedagogical framework and the local cultural context to foreground moral education. While this reading highlights the novel's ethical and spiritual dimensions, it likewise does not consider its positioning within contemporary genre fiction.

Notably, none of these studies addresses *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* as a work of urban

fantasy, nor do they examine how the novel adopts and modifies genre formula associated with that subgenre. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how Alkaf's novel employs key characteristics of urban fantasy while modifying its conventional reliance on urban settings and Western mythological figures. By foregrounding Southeast Asian mythological creatures and positioning the forest as the primary site of supernatural encounter, the paper argues that *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* demonstrates the adaptability of urban fantasy within non-Western cultural and spatial contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Genre fiction has long been understood as a category of literary production that follows specific genre conventions, using tropes, structures, plot points, and archetypes to advance the story (Glatch, 2025a). As Wyatt and Sarick (2019) argue, genre operates as an appeal-based framework that enables writers to work within established conventions while selectively modifying them. Genre therefore does not exist as static classifications but as flexible systems shaped by reader response, cultural context, and evolving narrative expectations. From this perspective, genre fiction is best approached not as a rigid taxonomy but as a dynamic mode of storytelling structured around recognizable patterns of appeal.

Fantasy is one of the major genres within genre fiction and is defined by the presence of magic as the narrative's ordering principle. Wyatt and Sarick (2019) outline that fantasy novels explore magical worlds in which supernatural forces structure the logic of events, whether in secondary realms or within the primary world. The genre is closely associated with myth, legend, and folklore, drawing upon cultural reservoirs of the supernatural to articulate questions of identity, morality, power, and belonging. Central to fantasy is immersive worldbuilding, through which richly imagined settings draw readers into coherent, if magical, environments. While early discussions of fantasy often privileged epic and secondary-world narratives, the genre also encompasses works in which magical elements intrude upon contemporary realities, provided that the fantastic remains structurally central to the narrative.

Within this broader genre, urban fantasy emerges as a distinct subgenre characterized by the intersection of the supernatural and the contemporary world. Urban fantasy is typically set in a recognizable real-world environment, most often a city, where non-human beings such as vampires, werewolves, demons, or witches intermingle with humans within shared social spaces. According to Wyatt and Sarick (2019), the subgenre frequently stages plots centered on political or cultural power struggles, sometimes escalating into open conflict, and is often marked by a gritty, dark atmosphere and fast-paced, action-driven narratives. The city functions

as a liminal space in which the boundaries between rational modernity and mythic systems are blurred. At the same time, the emphasis on metropolitan settings and Western mythological figures reflects the genre's historical development within particular cultural traditions.

However, the term 'urban' suggests a reliance on metropolitan environments. The defining feature of urban fantasy lies less in the city itself than in the embedding of supernatural forces within a contemporary social world. The structural intermixing of human and non-human agents, the negotiation of competing systems of belief, and the presence of conflict-driven narrative momentum are central to the genre's appeal. In a non-Western context, these elements may operate through alternative spatial and mythological configurations while retaining their core functions. The intrusion of the supernatural into contemporary life and the tension between inherited belief systems and modern realities need not be confined to Western cities or familiar creature traditions. From this perspective, genre modification does not signal rupture but demonstrates the adaptability of urban fantasy across cultural contexts.

This study adopts Wyatt and Sarick's framework as its primary theoretical lens to examine *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* as a work of urban fantasy. By attending to the subgenre's appeal structures, including setting, creature typology, and the interaction between human and non-human realms, the framework allows for an analysis of how the novel both conforms to and revises urban fantasy conventions. In particular, the study focuses on the novel's use of Southeast Asian mythological beings in place of dominant Western figures and its relocation of supernatural encounters from urban environments to forested landscapes. Through this approach, the paper positions urban fantasy as a flexible genre mode capable of accommodating culturally specific mythologies and spaces without losing its generic coherence.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (2023) as a work of urban fantasy. The research design focuses on interpreting genre characteristics as they appear within the narrative. The main data source is the novel itself, supported by academic articles, book reviews and others. The primary data consists of selected narrative passages that depict the characteristics of urban fantasy. Data collection was conducted through close reading of the novel. Passages relevant to urban fantasy characteristics were identified and organized according to three analytical categories: Setting, non-human entities, and human-supernatural interaction. Data analysis was guided by Wyatt and Sarick's framework of urban fantasy. The analysis compares points of conformity and deviation to determine how the novel retains the structural logic of urban fantasy while adapting it through

Southeast Asian mythological figures and forest-based settings. The emphasis is interpretative, aiming to describe the novel's genre positioning within a non-Western cultural context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Negotiating Urban Fantasy Conventions in Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories*

Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (shortened to *Hamra* with italic font for the next to differ from Hamra, the main character in the novel) opens with a narrative telling that Hamra, the protagonist of the story, "lived in a crooked house on the edge of the tangled Langkawi jungle" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 1). A cluster of ninety-nine islands, Langkawi is a district of the state of Kedah in northern Malaysia. Two-thirds of Langkawi's main island is dominated by forest-covered mountains, hills and natural vegetation (*Geography*, 2015). In this house, Hamra lives "with a mother and father who told her what to do, a grandfather who told her stories, and a grandmother who told her truths (Alkaf, 2023, p. 1).

The novel situates Hamra's daily life within a recognizable Malaysian environment shaped by family routines, local geography and contemporary social reality. This contemporary setting is further reinforced through references to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for mobility and economic conditions: "The pandemic, as Hamra understood it, meant closed everything: closed businesses, closed schools, closed doors, closed ranks" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 51). It stole Hamra's family business and kept tourists from coming (p. 91) since all tourist objects in Langkawi are "CLOSED DUE TO COVID-19" (p. 138). COVID-19, or coronavirus disease, is an infectious disease that first emerged in Wuhan, Hubei, China, in late 2019. The disease then spread rapidly around the world, causing a multiyear pandemic that resulted in millions of deaths (Krishnan et al., 2021). The references to the pandemic place the narrative within a specific sociohistorical context rather than in an entirely fictional or detached fantasy world.

The jungle near Hamra's house was not an unfamiliar place for her. Indeed, it was a part of her daily life. The jungle was where Hamra went to find fresh leaves and herbs when Opah, Hamra's grandmother, requested to have *nasi ulam* for breakfast. *Nasi ulam* is a fragrant, herbed rice dish popular in Malaysia. This easy, authentic recipe combines steamed rice with fresh herbs, dried shrimp, and toasted coconut for a delicious, aromatic meal (Low, 2025). Opah wanted the one with "leaves plucked fresh from the tree or bush" because it "tasted best," unlike the one from the supermarket that was "full of nasty chemical things" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 7). Consequently, Hamra has no other choice but to enter the jungle to gather the ingredients herself.

Later, the jungle becomes the primary narrative space in the novel. It was where Hamra first

met Pak Belang, "the weretiger of Langkawi" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 44), after she broke all the Rules of the jungle. Pak Belang was once born a man. He became a were-tiger by committing some dark, unspeakable acts because he craved the power it held. At first, Pak Belang was able to shift back and forth between human and tiger form. However, addicted to the "strength rippled just beneath [his tiger] skin," he began staying longer in his tiger form until someday he was stuck and forgot how to turn back (pp. 42-43). Being promised that Pak Belang would cure Opah's dementia, Hamra agreed to help Pak Belang in his quest to be a human again. Later, they learned that the only way to restore Pak Belang to his human form is to strip him of his magical gifts of sight, hearing, and strength (p. 159).

Besides Pak Belang the were tiger, Hamra encountered some other mythical beings during her journey inside the jungle. One of them is Langsuir. Langsuir, or Langsuyar, is one of the Malaysian folklores referring to the ghost of a woman who dies while pregnant or during childbirth. Beautiful, with long hair and long nails, wearing a white or green robe, Langsuir is similar to a vampire and seeks the blood of the living. Her favorite is that of a newborn male (Hernandez, 2022). In the novel, Langsuir was told as "the flesh-eating demon woman" who inhabited "Gua Langsuir, or the Cave of the Banshee" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 94). She emerged in long with rope, "a tall figure, deathly pale, with long, long black hair that trailed along on the ground behind her. Her eyes were black from side to side, and each one of her teeth ended in sharp points..." (pp. 100-101). Hamra needed to meet Langsuir because her screaming could strip Pak Belang's magical hearing (p. 106).

Another non-human being that the trio – Hamra, Ilyas, and Pak Belang – encountered during the mission is Pari-pari. In the novel, Pari-Pari was described as "no higher than Hamra's waist, with long, long black hair that glinted with gold highlights as she moved, pulled back in a dark ponytail that showed off ears tapering to slender points at the tips. She had dark skin that seemed to glow in the warm light of dusk and dark eyes that stared intently at Hamra as she moved. She was dressed in soft shades of green so that she almost melted into the jungle shadows" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 154). Pari-pari that Hamra and friends met were referred to the fairies at Telaga Tujuh waterfall and known for not being friendly to humans: "They are beautiful and charming, but they can also be cold, and vengeful, and calculating, and cruel" (pp. 160, 162) that made even Pak Belang afraid of them. Still, they had to meet the fairies to help them shed Pak Belang's supernatural strength and his teeth before the Bunian king caught up with them (p. 177).

The last mythical being Hamra and friends interact with during their mission is the Bunian. Orang Bunian, or simply Bunian, are supernatural beings commonly found in Malay folklore

and are widely known across Malaysia, Indonesia, and other parts of Southeast Asia (Hidayati et al., 2025; Nurmadiyah, 2024). They are often described as invisible, human-like beings inhabiting forests, mountains, caves, and remote natural spaces that exist in parallel to the human world (Suyuti & Hendrokumoro, 2025). Bunian possess supernatural abilities and are believed to move freely between the visible and invisible realms. In many traditional stories, encounters with Bunian involve individuals becoming lost in the forest, entering hidden settlements, or crossing unknowingly into a world that resembles but differs from ordinary reality (Nurmadiyah, 2024).

Hamra's first contact with the Bunian was when she got lost in the night market. She was surrounded by crowds of creatures whose "faces so bright and beautiful she could barely look at them before turning away, eyes burning" (Alkaf, 2023, p. 70). Hamra grew up with all the stories about them, about "The Whispering Ones, the old folks called them, or the Slight Ones, or the Hidden Folk; the ones who stole children away for their own amusement, who confused errant hikers with the sound of their laughter so that they strayed from paths and were lost, only to be found days later, dazed and confused, almost exactly where they had been last seen" (p. 111). At first, the Bunian seemed to target the children – Hamra and Ilyas – who came along with Pak Belang, yet their actual aim is to get the weretiger, or, to be exact, his teeth. The weretiger's teeth were very famous for their supernatural power: "just one of those teeth can grant their wearer all the strength and powers of the weretiger himself," and the Bunian king wanted the teeth for himself (pp. 112-113).

The findings indicate that *Hamra* maintains one of the fundamental characteristics of urban fantasy by situating supernatural events within a recognizable contemporary world. The references to the COVID-19 pandemic, the decline of tourism, and everyday family routines situate the narrative in present-day Malaysia. This finding aligns with Crow's (2023) argument that urban fantasy is set in real-world environments, often in contemporary settings. Likewise, Glatch (2025b) notes that urban fantasy is distinguished by the coexistence of magical and ordinary life. However, *Hamra* departs from conventional urban fantasy in its treatment of space. Rather than set in metropolitan environments, the novel places its supernatural encounters in the forests of Langkawi. This spatial modification challenges Wyatt and Sarick's (2019) observation that urban fantasy is most often set in cities or urban environments. Nevertheless, the forest in *Hamra* serves a function similar to that of the city in conventional urban fantasy, functioning as a liminal space where the boundaries between the ordinary and the supernatural are continually negotiated.

The novel also modifies urban fantasy conventions through its selection of supernatural beings. According to Wyatt and Sarick (2019), urban fantasy commonly features non-human entities, such as vampires, werewolves, demons, and witches, that intermingle with humans in shared social spaces. Similarly, Glatch (2025b) identifies the interaction between humans and supernatural creatures as a defining characteristic of the subgenre. Although *Hamra* preserves this structural feature, it replaces familiar Western creatures with figures derived from Malaysian and Southeast Asian folklore. Pak Belang (weretiger), Langsuir, Pari-pari, and the Bunian all possess supernatural abilities and directly interact with human characters, yet each originates in local mythological traditions rather than Gothic or European folklore. This finding demonstrates what Crow (2023) describes as the evolutionary nature of urban fantasy, a genre that continuously adapts by incorporating diverse cultural materials and local narrative traditions. Instead of reproducing established formulas, Alkaf appropriates the structural logic of urban fantasy and repopulates it with mythological figures that are culturally meaningful within the Malaysian context.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the defining features of urban fantasy lie not in specific locations or predetermined sets of supernatural creatures but in the interaction between contemporary reality and the fantastic. Although *Hamra* removes the metropolitan setting and substitutes Western mythical figures with Southeast Asian beings, it retains the genre's fundamental premise of embedding supernatural entities within a recognizable social world. This observation supports Wyatt and Sarick's (2019) proposition that genre conventions function as adaptable frameworks and resonates with Glatch's (2025b) view that urban fantasy derives its appeal from the intermingling of the magical and the ordinary. Consequently, *Hamra* and *the Jungle of Memories* demonstrates the adaptability of urban fantasy by showing that its formula can accommodate alternative cultural spaces and local mythologies without losing its generic coherence.

CONCLUSION(S)

This study demonstrates that *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* conforms to and modifies the formula of urban fantasy. On the one hand, the novel sustains the subgenre's fundamental structure by embedding supernatural encounters within a familiar contemporary world and by facilitating direct interaction between human and non-human entities. The references to the COVID-19 pandemic, everyday family routines, and identifiable Malaysian locations firmly situate the narrative within present-day social reality. Likewise, the presence of Pak Belang, Langsuir, Pari-pari, and the Bunian preserves the urban fantasy convention of supernatural

beings coexisting alongside humans.

On the other hand, the novel reconfigures two of the genre's most acknowledged conventions. Rather than locating the fantasy elements in metropolitan environments, Alkaf places the forest at the center of the narrative and transforms it into a liminal space where ordinary reality and supernatural forces intersect. Similarly, rather than employing familiar Western figures such as vampires, witches, and werewolves, the novel foregrounds mythological beings drawn from Malaysian and Southeast Asian folklore. These modifications suggest that urban fantasy should not be understood as a fixed set of narrative ingredients tied to specific locations or given supernatural figures. Rather, its defining characteristic lies in the negotiation between contemporary reality and the fantastic, a structure that accommodates diverse cultural traditions and spatial configurations.

The findings therefore position *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* as an example of how genre fiction remains flexible and adaptive across cultural contexts. By repopulating urban fantasy with local myths and relocating supernatural encounters to the Malaysian rainforest, Alkaf expands the possibilities of the subgenre beyond its Western formulations. Future studies may further examine how urban fantasy conventions are adapted in other Southeast Asian fantasy narratives or compare the use of indigenous mythological traditions across different non-Western urban fantasy texts. Such studies may contribute to a broader understanding of how global genre formulas are continuously reshaped by local cultural imagination.

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