Trouble in La La Land: Arab Utopian Science Fiction in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: This article examines the topic of utopia in Arabic science fiction (SF), with a special emphasis on Egyptian SF. The argument here is that utopian SF came late to the corpus of Arabic SF because the notion of utopia itself is foreign. The social and political developments in European history that gave birth to utopia in modern political philosophy did not take place in the Arab world, with a few notable exceptions from the distant past in philosophy, poetry, and folktales. Even when Arab SF authors began writing about utopia they continued to wrestle with the notion, focusing too much on mundane considerations of everyday life, and isolating their utopias. Thus, they created an unnecessary standoff between the ideal community and all others. Under closer inspection we discover that similar problems perplexed Utopian literature even in its European birthplace, relying on H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* as a model. The ups and downs of Arab politics—i.e. the Iraq War and the Arab Spring revolutions—have also impacted Arab SF authors. Nonetheless, Arab authors have been tackling the learning curve, especially since the turn of the new century, while also making an original contribution to the corpus of utopian SF through relying on their literary heritage and religious traditions. Comparisons with SF produced in other non-Western cultures, as well as older literary and poetic traditions across the world, helps bear this out.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Arabian Nights, Plato, Islam, Farabi, Ibn Khaldun, Atlantis

Lovers
O lovers, lovers it is time
to set out from the world.
I hear a drum in my soul's ear
coming from the depths of the stars.

Our camel driver is at work;
the caravan is being readied.
He asks that we forgive him
for the disturbance he has caused us,
He asks why we travelers are asleep.

Everywhere the murmur of departure;
the stars, like candles
thrust at us from behind blue veils,
and as if to make the invisible plain,
a wondrous people have come forth.

--- Rumi

Sedentary culture is the goal of civilization. It means the end of its lifespan and brings about its corruption.

-- Ibn Khaldun

Introduction

Arab utopian SF almost seems to be a forgotten concept nowadays, certainly since the democratic backlashes that beset Egypt and Tunis following the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions. Dystopia is now in vogue, with a seemingly endless list of novels like Mohammad *Rabie's Otared* (2014) and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013) coming out of Egypt specifically (Kanbergs, 2018; Machado, 2016). The truth of the matter is, however, that utopia has always been a problematic notion in Arabic literature. Prior to the Arab Spring, and in some ways prefacing it, Ahmed Khaled Tawfiq's dystopian *Utopia* (2008) portrayed the poor as preyed upon in bloodcurdling hunting trips to liven up the drab, hedonistic lives of the residents in a walled-in compound of the super-rich in Egypt (Campbell, 2015). Two novels of the 1970s, Ahmad `Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli's *The Blue Flood* and Muhammad `Azīz Lahbābī's *The Elixir of Life*, feature utopias turning into dystopias. *The Elixir of Life* depicts an Arab society,

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Morocco, that falls apart in a war between haves and have-nots when an immortality treatment is invented (Campbell, 2015a); the *Blue Flood* is dealt with extensively below.

To better make sense of this early apprehension over utopia it must be understood that utopia itself is *not* an SF invention (Jameson, 2005; Raymond Williams, 1978). To begin with, it wasn't even an entirely literary construction (Fitting, 2009; Beauchamp, 1977). Utopia is a "political" construction (Houston, 2007; Sargent, 1982). Thomas More's seminal *Utopia* (1516) came first, to be followed by Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), technically a work of fiction. While the notion of an ideal state goes as far back as Plato's *Republic*, it only took root in the modern world with the journeys of discovery and colonization of the New World. The enterprise of building entirely new communities abroad while also coming into contact with the Native Americans, with their symbiotic relationship with the land and what seemed to Europeans to be a relatively carefree life, inspired a whole generation of 16th- and 17th-century thinkers into building new and ideal worlds (Geraint Williams, 1992; Sanderlin, 1950). From that point onwards, fiction as social commentary took over, including Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon: or, Over the Range* (1872), and William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), among other early contributions.

This faith in social engineering a human future finally made its way into the realm of hard-core SF literature through H.G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Wells, however, also critiqued all the formative literature on utopia before him, identifying inherent flaws in the existing literature—an obsession with isolation that went as far back as Plato, among other problems—and set out a whole new schema that allowed for a cosmopolitan utopianism that went beyond the more mundane concerns of everyday life. This represented a significant evolution of the concept, an evolution that Arab utopian SF has struggled with repeatedly over the years.

Highlighting this background is key because the political experiences that helped spur the notion of utopia never took place in the Arab world. The one exception is Al-Farabi's *Al-Madinah al-Fadila (The Virtuous City)*, an extended treatise on political and moral philosophy. *The Virtuous City* was a reaction to Plato, with some original contributions (Mousawi, 1989: 95-102; Badawi, 1997: 268-269).[1] It has even been argued that the whole reason Farabi was the exception to the rule was because he was not an Arab to begin with (Bakhsh, 2013) but most likely an Iranian. Mohsen Rezaei, a professor at the University of Tehran and Arabophile himself, confirms this as Iran has a long and proud utopian tradition predating its conversion to Islam, and chronicled in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) during the Islamic period (Rezaei, 2017).[2] King Jamshid is supposed to have built a paradise called Varajamkard and King Khosrow (known as Anoshirvan) is said to have turned the whole of Persia into a cosmopolitan utopia of justice for all. There is the legendary city of Gong Dezh, described in ancient Iranian texts as a paradise and also the birthplace of a religious cult in Persian history that fought a war for justice (Rezaei, 2017). Nonetheless, even this rich and diverse literature did not make its way into Iranian literature in the modern period (Hadidi, Abdelzadeh and Alishah, 2013), let alone influence Arabic classical or modern literature.

As for the Arab world specifically, the concept of utopia had to be *introduced*, via translation in the modern context. An early example is Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's *Land of Dreams* (1939), a compendium of European utopian literature, with translation and commentary on a series of thinkers like More, Beckett, and Wells.[3]

Nonetheless, it is the argument of this paper that utopia is working its way into Arab literary circles and artistic consciousness, however slowly. The process of evolution that the notion of utopia went through in European history is taking place on Arab soil, but with an added twist. In the process, Arab authors

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are making an original contribution to the corpus of utopian literature. It could even be argued that they are going beyond the dominant Western tradition by incorporating meta-history, religious consider- ations, and fairy tale tropes into SF, utopian and otherwise.

This article is divided into three sections. The first deals with tracing the historical and literary origins of the current backlash against utopian SF. The second deals with an earlier phase of Arab SF in which utopian notions were actually taken up wholeheartedly, realizing the limitations that restrained earlier generations of Arab SF authors, coupled with some distinctive cultural contributions. The third section deals with the latest generation of young SF authors and how they are handling utopia in their works, critiqu- ing and upgrading the concept, and in light of their cultural heritage as Arabs and Mus- lims. This is followed by a summary conclusion.

The Past as Present: Problems of Scale and Scope in Utopian Arab SF

One of the first to try to make sense of the characteristics of Arab SF, and utopia as a sub genre was Egyptian author and literary critic, Yousef Al-Sharouni. He began his study, howev- er, with an extended analysis of a story in *The 1001 Nights*–the story of the two Abdallahs, one a landlubber and the other from under the sea (Al- Sharouni, 2002: 190-191). The human Abdallah is tak- en underneath the sea to witness the magical king- dom of the mermaids. In this world, people live in caves dug out of the rock by certain sea-creatures who are paid in fish; all are at the beck and call of the aquatic king. When people marry, men have to pay the *mahr* (bride price), also in the form of easily available fish. The residents of this underwater world are mixed–Muslims, Christians, and Jews–with the proviso that the Muslims do not implement the *sharia* (Islamic codex). When a woman commits adultery, she is banished to the city of womenfolk to give birth. If she gives birth to a girl, then the girl

has to live out all of her days in that city, an outcast. If a boy, then the king has the boy executed.

Al-Sharouni notes that the storytellers of the past were concerned with constructing a world in which the most basic human needs were provided for, namely sex, lodging, and food. (Abdallah the land- lubber eventually gets tired of eating raw fish and asks the other Abdallah to take him back to the surface). We can add that even Iranian literature, with its rich history of utopians, took a turn for the worse in the modern era. In contemporary Iranian poetry, utopia was, as in Arabic history, identified with the more "human basic needs such as food and clothing, make up the priority," along with a strong religious element emphasizing humility and spiritualism (Hadidi, Abdelzadeh and Alishah, 2013: 1732).[4]

The focus on mundane concerns has made itself felt repeatedly in Arab SF. Al-Sharouni cites Sabri Musa's *The Master from the Spinach Field* (1987) in this regard. In this world, sex is no longer about love or procreation and is readily available to all who seek it, while marriage is bureaucrati- cally controlled. Free speech and protest are just hollow acts because there is no individu- al creativity anymore. Life is one giant vaca- tion. Food, typically, is bland and boring. People are only allowed to cook their own meals once a month. The vast majority of what they eat is piped to them through tubes. (Al-Sharouni sees a likeness here with the situation in Plutarch's depiction of Spartan society, in which King Lycurgus ordained that people could only eat certain kinds of meats, while eating at home–let alone hiring a cook–was strictly forbidden; Al-Sharouni, 2002: 220).

Ada Barbaro, author of *La fantascienza nella let- teratura araba* (*Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*), explains that Sabri Musa's novel is actually meant to be *dystopian*, possibly a reaction to dictatorship. Decadent pleasures are used to distract people away from their political rights. The title itself is meant to signify this: "... the main protagonist is a

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man working in a spinach field and I suppose that the author wants to communicate the idea of a man considered merely as a mechanism working in a system, without importance to his personality. He's considered a thing" (Barbaro, 2017).

For a *far* more contemporary example we have a self-published dystopian novella, *2063* (2017), authored by young Egyptian writer Moataz Hassanien.[5] The story is set in a future Egypt that lives under foreign military occupation. Surveillance cameras are everywhere, curfews are always in effect, and neighborhoods are walled-in; even a coastal city like Alexandria is cut off from the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the population is actually quite content. The country was occupied because the previous military regime that ran the country failed to pay off the country's debts and dropped a nuclear bomb on Cairo to stop a popular rebellion led by the young. (The young people were protesting against the transfer of authority from the local military junta to the foreign occupiers).

The foreign occupiers, however, have done a good job balancing the budget and guaranteeing jobs, decent income, and a steady stream of products for consumption. Sexual freedoms and all manner of drugs and prostitution are allowed as well. The occupiers are so concerned with the happiness of the people that they have special centers where they 'measure' levels of satisfaction as a way to sniff out and abort potential troublemakers. But if you fail the test with a measurement of 95% satisfaction or less, they put you to sleep.

The hero in question, Yousef Ali, is warned by a sympathetic female employee (Heba Ismail) at the satisfaction center that he failed the test. They escape and take refuge in an underground residence run by a movement also concerned with making people happy—in exchange for all of his life-savings. In answer to a query, Moataz explained that the underground movement is very much a mirror-image replica of the foreign occupation

(Hassanien, 2017a). They are just a bit more considerate, even getting hold of Yousef's books for him. (Reading was banned by the occupation and Yousef had inherited them from his father, a former revolutionary who witnessed the Arab Spring revolutions. Yousef wakes up every day, remembering the sound of his father shooting himself, driven to suicide after witnessing the failure of all his political dreams).

From our own readings of Arab literature, we can add that a second problem perplexing Arab utopia is isolation. In the formative period of Arabic SF, in the 1960s-70s, two interesting novels were penned that position humanity on a collision course with the ideal communities that are meant to be mankind's future. One was Nihad Sharif's *The People of the Second World* (1977), in which the ideal city established by the dreamers is deep at the bottom of the ocean (Al-Sharouni, 2002: 33, 190). The scientists in this ideal city (from different races and religions) want to save the world from itself—i.e. the threat of nuclear annihilation. But they carry out this task with threats, believing that it is morally acceptable to use the same savage methods as the powers that be. They attack the navies of the world at first, then detonate a nuclear weapon from the US arsenal in Death Valley, as a last warning.

Once they finally receive cooperation from the superpowers in the UN Security Council, they also ask for a piece of desert land in Australia. They hope to colonize it and show the world the miracles that they have been able to engender at the bottom of the ocean. Then the world powers cheat them and kill the scientists heading to this desert patch of land. Some survive and return to the still-secret underwater colony, holding out some hope for the future.

The other similarly themed novel was *The Blue Flood* (Al-Sharouni, 2002: 198). Here scientists set up their kingdom on top of a mountain that is, by pure coincidence, where Noah's Ark was supposed

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to have come to rest in North Africa. This location is meant to signify that they are a metaphorical island of the saved. Then the scientists make the mistake of building a supercomputer to fuse their sciences together and incubate an indoctrinated future generation. After a time, the computer becomes self-aware and concludes that it is better to wipe out the remainder of the human race instead of waiting for mankind to mature and reach the utopian aspirations of the colony. It also starts eliminating the scientists who are opposed to this "option," by means of a blue flood reenacting its Biblical predecessor (with more modern radioactive tools, of course). Fortunately, one scientist destroys the supercomputer, only to find themselves fleeing the computer's zombie-like followers. The only catch is that when he is rescued, the world powers investigate the location and find nothing there.

In other words, the erstwhile hero had *imagined* everything, suffering from shock and thirst, after his plane crashed in the desert. Al-Sharouni considers this to be a copout from dealing with the dangerous implications that come with technological utopias.[6] But, more to the point, isolation places you into a cataclysmic struggle with the rest of mankind, with the utopians often firing the first shot.

In an earlier novel by Nihad Sharif, *The Lord of Time* (1972), there is an isolated mountain castle in which people are frozen to be revived in the future, when cures are found for their diseases. But, in the closing scene, a fight breaks out between the revived subjects and the facility is destroyed, robbing the world foreer of the scientific breakthroughs made in the castle. The problem of isolation reappears, in subtler form, in modern works like *2063*. Note that Yousef is, at first, impressed by how roomy and well-furnished the underground paradise is, just as his original life was. So, at first sight, the novella fits into the pattern identified by Al-Sharouni, suggesting

that satisfying basic needs is the most people can aspire to; in the Third World setting that is their humble idea of paradise on earth–even if it means being cut off from the rest of the world. (Egypt itself is cordoned off in the novella, to prevent Egyptian migrants making their way illegally to the First World).

Even so, under closer inspection, *2063* is struggling to break out of this way of thinking. With time, Yousef and Heba get bored and agitated from being cooped up for so long, despite all the creature comforts afforded them. (There is a nearly identical scene in the *People of the Second World*, in which a journalist visiting the undersea colony begins to pine for wide open spaces and the sun and stars. Not coincidentally, he thinks these things while falling in love with one of the undersea scientists, in the tight confines of her room). At the end of *2063* the authorities find the location of this secret township. The residents escape by riding a train in the middle of the night and heading out into the open desert. The hero and his girlfriend are happy to be out in the open once again and gladly trust their fates to the unknown: a fitting ending that *could* portend well for prospects of the literature in the Arab world.

The great tragedy is that *2063* actually represents a setback, written after the democratic clamp-downs that followed the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Ironically, exaples of Arab utopian literature penned at the turn of the new century were actually more uplifting.

Out of Bounds: The Wellsian Revaluation of a Constricted Literature

The afforementioned literary reversals in Egyptian SF make sense in the context of the times in which they were written. The optimistic period came at the turn of the century with three Egyptian novels by Dr. Hosam El-Zembely that were published in 2001–*The Half-Humans, America 2030*, and *The Planet of the Viruses.* These works help illustrate just how

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optimistic Arab SF used to be, not so long ago, because this was prior to the publication of Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia* (2008), let alone Moataz Hassanien's *2063*. In the case of Tawfik's novel, which is in some ways more dystopian than *2063*, we have an Egypt divided into a world (almost two countries) of haves and have-nots, with haves protected by so-called Marines (Khayrutdinov, 2014). The explanation of the term "Marines" is that even before the Arab Spring fell on hard times, there was the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since that date, "Marines" has become a derogatory term in the Arab world, affixed to regimes or intellectuals who collaborate with Western imperialist powers in the 21st century.

Note that *America 2030* was written just before September 11th, when there was a new sense of possibility for the Arab world and Egypt at the beginning of the new millennium. *The Half-Humans, America 2030*, and *The Planet of the Viruses* are not utopian, as such, as the main topic of the stories isn't the building of a new world with alternative social and political systems. The novels instead present near-perfect futures in which Muslims have already legitimized their communities by reuniting, solving many of their economic and political problems and so becoming world leaders in science and exploration once again. In *The Half-Humans* and *The Planet of the Viruses,* the Union of Islamic States is explicitly modeled on the European Union.

America 2030 describes an Arab-Islamic Union, but in all cases Muslims are united, scientifically advanced, and democratically governed. More important still is the fact that Muslims aren't isolated from the rest of the world. They share their scientific knowledge with the other nations, and are humanity's saviours in some instances. In *The Half-Humans*, the Islamic Union is helping Earth terraform to and colonize Mars and Venus, and to explore the solar system, making the first manned mission to Titan. In *The Planet of the Viruses* the Islamic Union is at the forefront of researching a

cure for a pandemic threatening the human race. In *America 2030*, the Arab-Islamic Union is trying to stave off a nuclear confrontation with the United States, leading the other nations not allied with the US.

In these three visions of the future, the emphasis is on states or blocks of states cooperating with other blocks of states and international bodies like the UN or World Health Organization, a far cry from *The Blue Flood* or Nihad Sharif's novels. (At one point in *People of the Second World*, the youthful scientists even contemplate destroying the whole world, fearing that this outcome is inevitable anyway). In El-Zembely's hands, Muslim utopias are turned into a tool for dialog and acceptance of the Other.

Breaking out of the isolationist straightjacket is an important antidote to religious extremism and cultural exclusivism. (It is explicitly stated that Christians have equal rights in the Arab-Islamic Union in *America 2030*, a topic not always touched upon in other Arab-Islamic examples of the genre).

Without even knowing it, El-Zembely's writings actually harken back to H.G. Wells' observations about utopia. Wells (2009), while introducing his own utopian novel, noted that isolation simply *cannot* be a criterion for either success or happiness, at variance with all those before him. What good was it to have an idealistic community if it cuts itself off from the world and is constantly at war, forever fearful of the hordes of primitive outsiders?[7] Even at the level of the individual, part of being happy is seeing the world, having the freedom to travel and expand one's horizons. People should get their fill of traveling before settling down to get married and raise a family, Wells adds, hardly feasible if one is hiding behind the walls of a city-state or on an uncharted island.

Even a country wasn't big enough for Wells. He wanted a whole planet, and one united in terms of language, currency, education, and rules stipulating that people could go anywhere, whenever they felt

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like it. He understood, it seems, the kind of moral and practical dilemmas that would appear in *The Blue Flood* and *Second World*, let alone the boxed-in world of *2063*.

Wells, moreover, was explicitly opposed to the mundane needs kind of utopia painted in *The 1001 Nights* and *2063*. There is a parallel story of the two Abdullahs in Japanese literature in which a nondescript boy fisherman gains access to the Sea Palace, where he marries the princess and lives a life of luxury. But when he returns to the human world, he "finds that three hundred years have already passed. He dies shortly after of old age while opening the souvenir brought back from the Sea Palace" (Ho, 1991: 205). This resembles Greek tragedy, in which a mortal suffering from hubris–thinking he can be equal to the immortal gods–gets his comeuppance through some cruel trick of fate. Therefore, as if anticipating Yousef Al-Sharouni's analysis, Wells states in no uncertain terms: "The State is to be progressive, it is no longer to be static, and this alters the general condition of the Utopian problem profoundly; we have to provide not only for food and clothing, for order and health, but for initiative" (2009: 100). Wells also prescribes a healthy disdain for life's little pleasures, such as "tobacco, wine, or any alcoholic drink, all narcotic drugs" and even meat and tasty foods consumed for their own sake (2009: 316). The thrill of creativity, for Wells, would more than compensate for the lack of all these pleasures that only serve to dull men's wits and distract them from individual initiative. (In his view, class distinctions should also apply mental rating systems for choosing who should lead and who should follow). choose those who lead change and those who follow).

Even when Arab authors toyed with the idea of a planetary utopia, in the earlier days of Arab SF, they still fell into the trap of isolation. This is the case with Hussein Qadris' novel *Escape to Space*, published in 1981 (Al-Sharouni, 2002: 207).[8] In this novel, a human news crew goes to an idealistic planet where, not coincidentally, the very human-looking dwellers know everything about Earth and its people while nobody on Earth knows anything about those they have encountered. (The language they speak is a compendium of all the human languages, their religion a mixture of human religions, and their only televised entertainment is to occasionally watch how miserable and laughable life is on Earth). The planet has no capital and no leader and nobody has to work for a living; computers do everything for them. There is equality between the sexes and, interestingly, inhabitants are granted a measure of privacy. Houses have walls that can either let you see what is going on outside or become completely translucent. Marriage, that perennial concern of Arabs and Egyptians, is determined by computer. (Boys and girls sit in booths and are mentally scanned to see if they are compatible).

Al-Sharouni (2002) doesn't consider this to be a proper utopian novel because it offers no explanation of how people can stand the boredom and where they put their creative energies. (Qadri was an expert at travel literature, not an SF or fantasy author to begin with). What is more, when the human news crew are on their way home–in deep sleep–one of them turns the ship round, guaranteeing again the 'isolation' of the planet. (Another human delegation made it there during the story, and they commit a crime, finally livening things up on the utopian world).

Thus, Hosam El-Zembely's novels represent a movement up the utopian learning curve by doing away both with the debilitating effects of isolation and the overemphasis on mundane needs. This is implicit in *America 2030,* as it is almost a dystopian novel. (*The Half-Humans* is more explicit in this regard; see below). Central and South America united to free themselves once and for all from US hegemony. China, Korea and Japan unite to put their past conflicts and wars behind them. The EU is dedicated to the spiritual betterment of mankind. The Afro-Asian Union is built on the principles of Nehru and Gandhi; the Union's President is named

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'Mandella' Singh, no doubt a nod at Nelson Mandela. Yet despite all of the collective, heroic efforts put forth by the nations of the world united against the American empire in *2030*, war nevertheless eventually breaks out, undermining the accomplishments of the different Unions.

The closing scene of the novel portrays what is left of mankind after a prolonged nuclear war, taking an Arab-Islamic Union spacecraft to look for greener pastures on another world, hoping to rebuild humanity–united despite race and religion–to avoid the mistakes of the past. Only a different planet will suffice and since Earth is dead and gone, there is no fear of damage from interstellar war.

The Wisdom of Ages: Fairy Tale Elements Re-Enter the Scientific Fray

All that being said, Wells's ideas are not the end of the road for utopianism. Arab authors seem to have understood something that Western authors haven't always realized. Isolation is often a self-inflicted wound, a function of the role of time and decay in undoing utopias.

Note that the United States in *America 2030*, despite its wealth and power, become a corrupt pariah state. There is even a scene set in the Statue of Liberty, where one of the heroes laments the passing of America's founding democratic principles. The influence of the great Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun is evident here, in the emphasis on the role of ethics in the rise of kingdoms and the evolution of nations from nomadic to sedentary or stationary life in the fall of these same kingdoms. The purity and ferocity of the nomads gave way to the opulence and luxury of urban life and was accompanied by military weakness, political disunity and moral corruption. These were phenomena he witnessed firsthand in Muslim Spain as successive nomad conquerors rescued the Muslim city folk from crusaders, only to be corrupted by city life themselves. This is much more

explicitly stated in *The Half-Humans*, when the human heroes are confronted with the ancient race of the Land of the Seven Hills. The noble king of this world tells them how his people built a glorious utopian world–Plato and the Virtuous City are mentioned by name–only to fall into decline because of this self-same 'glory'. ("Majd" in Arabic has grander connotations than in English).

This world described in *The Half-Humans* is democratically governed–decisions are made through majority vote by a Council of Elders, not by royal decree–which is nonetheless arrogant and corrupt. Crimes driven by lust and envy, a long-forgotten memory, creep back into the fray as this world cuts itself off from the rest of the universe, seeing the influence of other cultures almost as a contagion.

During an interview, El-Zembely explained that science alone can never advance a nation because ethics are called for in order for science itself to advance. Religion and science have a positive, reinforcing relationship here. The catch is that once a nation advances scientifically and materially, a parting of paths occurs and religious sentiments go into decline, which in turn will spell the ultimate doom of a nation (El-Zembely, 2017). Scientific advancement in the Land of the Seven Hills comes to a standstill when the rot begins to set in; when the human heroes are apprehended, they are told explicitly that emtotion, sympathy, and faith are all primitive qualities that have been banished from their world. El-Zembely also confirmed Ibn Khaldun's influence during his talk. We can add here that the Arabic phrase for utopia is "the virtuous city," constantly drawing the Arab imagination *backwards* to some pristine past of city-state isolation. Nostalgia is an openly acknowledged facet of much Arab literature. The first time-travel story in Arab history, penned in Egypt and published in serial form in 1898, depicted a government official from the court of Muhammad Ali pasha (who reigned from 1805-1848) visiting Egypt

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30 years later; i.e. during the British occupation (Cooperson, 1998:172).[9]

A less known utopian short story—"Al-Baraka" by Egyptian SF author Mohammad Naguib Matter—tells the story of a disgruntled man who comes across a mysterious place in the middle of the night (Matter, 2015). The place is full of natural greenery and consists of plush villas housing warm and kindly people who would invite complete strangers to dinner. When the erstwhile hero goes to the shops, he finds that groceries are free, paid for by the state from the country's export revenues. The man discovered this place because he had run away from his miserably materialistic life. He couldn't get ahead in his work because his diligencemade others who weren't nearly as industrious look bad, and even his wife and kids didn't appreciate him, proving to be as selfish as everyone else. The place, moreover, is called a city, but is also described as a large *village*. (Overlaps between urban and rural virtues are an all-too-frequent occurrence in modern Arab poetry on ideal cities as well; Abu Ghali, 1995: 95-97, 221-222). The story clearly celebrates traditional values of countryfolk, if in a modern and more sophisticated setting.

Utopia, insofar as it exists in Arabic non-SF literature, is often explicitly backwards looking. There isthe City of Brass in *The 1001 Nights*, a deserted ghost town populated by giant brass statues, automatons of a bygone glorious era (Hankins, 2009; Nuruddin, 2006). There is the Quranic story of the city of Eram and the people of Aad, which was a glorious city that sank into decadence and was destroyed by God after its inhabitants rejected His warnings. According to Arabic legend, Eram was founded by Shadad Bin Aad in a direct challenge to God, hoping to outdo the gardens of paradise by building its palaces and walls out of gold and silver and decorating its sands and trees with pearls and precious stones (Badawi, 1997: 259-261).

What is more, Eram has *continued* to be used as a utopian motif by Arab poets, well into the modern era, along with other magical cities they have created (Abu Ghali, 1995: 225, 227, 238, 280-283). These cities are almost always impossible for travelers to find except by accidents of fate (pp. 283), either because they are at the top of a secluded mountain (pp. 289), or because they are invisible (pp. 284). Likewise, in *The Blue Deluge* a cloaking device is used to hide the already isolated city from prying eyes and radar, while Nihad Sharif's underwater colony is also sheltered by a wall of waves. Magical cities in modern Arab poetry, moreover, are always described as both new and old simultaneously (Abu Ghali, 1995: 290-292). This is a recognizable pattern in non-Western utopian literature. Utopians in Serbian SF, for instance took the city of Belgrade as a model for the rest of the society they hoped to create; prosperous, just, and independent of the surrounding great powers, but still true to its traditional cultural distinctiveness (Đergović-Joksimović,2000:5-6,13).

The same holds true of Matter's story; Baraka means blessing or 'blessed' in Arabic. This is because the hero *wakes up* at the end of the story and discovers he's been in a car accident, leaving open the question of whether the city/village really existed at all. The only thing we know for certain is that Matter's hero left the 'big' city he was residing in early in the story and spent a long time on the road, half lost, before happening upon the ideal community. Did he fall asleep at the wheel and have an accident then, or at the end of the story? It's almost as if the village is too good to be true.

The dream element also appears in *The Half-Humans*: "The king sat atop the throne. The king of the World of the Seven Hills. To their amazement he looked much like kings on earth did, in legend. A noble, wise man with grey hair and beard. He had white skin, was tall and thin, and wore fabrics that had no equivalent on earth. It was so hard to describe, but at best you could say it was a cross

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between fur and silk. The flaming throne gave him a legendary aura. That was for sure. The three of them felt they were witnessing a bizarre dream" (El-Zembely, 2001: 104).

Arab-Islamic heritage is clearly making a comeback, lending a distinct flavor to the field and making a welcome contribution on the part of Arabic SF to the corpus of Utopian literature. As a people steeped in mystical traditions, Arab and Muslim authors seem to have an instinctive sense of apprehension for the world of modern technology and material advance. For a contemporary example, we have Ammar Mahmoud Al-Masry's *Shadows of Atlantis* (2017). The story begins in a distant future-Egypt where the Arabs are democratic, prosperous, world leaders in science once again, helping mankind explore the cosmos.[10] Everything looks fine at first, but then an invading alien race turns mankind's servants—robots—against them, and the world is nearly destroyed. It was those very mechanical servants that were responsible for the wealth and leisure enjoyed by all, Arabs included. (There is a scene in which this is explicitly stated by the human resistance—all that is left of the `Egyptian army). The one city (again) left standing in the whole world is New Atlantis, a modern Egyptian city built close to the archaeological remains of a grand ancient city predating the Sumerians, and believed to be the original Atlantis of legend.

The aliens are after the secrets of that ancient city, which will give them the power to control the universe. The story is heavily influenced by fairy tale literature, as it depicts a young man (Nour) who finds himself locked in a tower, learning magical powers to create things. When he exits the tower he finds his country in ruins, with the robots hunting mankind.

This is all reminiscent of mythological Pygmalion's power and the imagery and themes in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in which magic allows inanimate objects to take on a life of their own and rebel against their human creators. Speaking to the youthful author,

Ammar (2017a) confirmed that he deliberately used this fairy tale format, hoping to produce a new synthesis of SF with fantasy, relying also on Arab mythology.

Concluding Remarks

Arabs, it seems, are mistrusting of social engineering. They don't like to tamper with the natural order of things, as they see it. Past accomplishments, however mythical, are more comforting. So be it. But there is something to be learned from this. Utopia is not the only branch of SF. There are also dystopia, apocalypse and post-apocalypse, time-travel, robotics, cloning and genetic engineering, space exploration and colonization, cyberpunk (which tends towards dystopia), steampunk, and so many more. As Arab SF takes its tentative steps towards international stardom, with increasingly frequent translations into English amongst other languages, it is good to take stock of what has been done so far by Arab authors and rethink the very notion of utopia itself.

It is not just that Arabs are taking the same path as Western authors before them. They're setting their own agendas, as it were, like their brethren in the non-English speaking world. A quick look at Ammar's novel makes us wonder: Why does he dredge up Atlantis specifically, although it's not part of Arab-Islamic mythology? Surely the choice, like Thomas Bacon's, was utopian. Upon querying the author, I was told quite bluntly that the novel was about building a utopia, describing Atlantis as the "best city mankind [has] created." True to form, it was a wondrous place not just because of the "technology, etc., but also in manners and principles. The city is what I see to solve all the problems of our world" (Ammar, 2017a).

The youthful protagonist, Nour, also finds his initially soft life boring and wants to explore the stars, as is often expected in utopian settings. The only fly in the ointment is that there are still wars between the blocks of nations ruling the Earth—another reason he wants to leave the planet. Another central character in the novel is a

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European spy, originally sent to Egypt to prevent the Arabs from developing a secret nuclear device in their contest with Europe. So, most unverally, we learn that utopias don't work if you keep the good life to yourself. Only a planet will do, if not a *universe*.

The band of heroes here are, not coincidentally, drawn from all over the world (including the European spy) and they must learn to cooperate if they are to be mankind's saviors against this foreign threat.

Utopia may be an oversized ideal that no one can never fully manifest in this world, but not aspiring to it's manifestation will only consign one to persistent underachievement. The trick is not to *overachieve*, in the process turning utopia into dystopia, and eradicating yourself and all living things out in the meantime. If Arab SF laced with mythical reservations can help prevent this eventuality, so be it!

Notes:

[1] All the Arabic translations here are the author's own. For the benefit of Western readers, PBUH is an honorific meaning Peace Be Upon Him (see below).

[2] All the Arabic translations here are the author's own. For the benefit of Western readers, PBUH is an honorific meaning Peace Be Upon Him (see below).See also Masroori (2013) and Khosravi (2017).

[3] The book was a smash hit in Egypt at the time and reprinted in the 1950s, after the Free Officers revolution in 1952, then reprinted again in 1977, albeit in abridged form. (The chapters on Plato, Farabi and Bacon were removed for brevity's sake).

[4] In *The 1001 Nights* story cited above, the Abdullah of the seas actually gives the other Abdullah a present to take to the grave of the Prophet Muhamad (PBUH), so religion in the sense of the spiritual bond with God is a theme. *The 1001 Nights* is also as much part of Persian literature as it is Arabic literature, if not more so (Pinault, 1992).

[5] The work was penned in September 2016. Moataz Hassanien had to resort to self-publishing because the political 'allusions' in the novella scared off publishers, even those he had worked with before.

[6] Waking up from dreams and nightmares was a common technique used in early Arabic SF; a sign of hesitancy in the face of disturbing implications. The same, it must be said, is true of utopian and dystopian stories in early Serbian SF (Đergović-Joksimović, 2000: 7-8).

[7] For the relationship between utopias and their neighbours in political thought, see Shephard (1995).

[8] All the authors cited by Al-Sharouni, apart from Ahmad `Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli, are Egyptian.

[9] The story was Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's Hadith Isa ibn Hisham.

[10] Please see https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36388411 for a quick synopsis and review.

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