

## Books in Review

Ian Campbell,

*Arabic Science Fiction*

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*Arabic Science Fiction* responds to the growing interest that both readers and scholars have been experimenting towards for the last two decades of non-Western science-fiction. Anthologies and studies such as *The Apex Book of World SF* series, Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (Palgrave, 2011) and the essay collection *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004) show a general concern for how sci-fi has been cultivated, adapted and transformed by writers of speculative fiction with South-Asian, African, and other ethnic backgrounds. The present volume explores the particularities of Arabic science fiction (ASF from now on) in the light of postcolonial frameworks.

*Arabic Science Fiction* is an in-deep academic analysis that follows up Ian Campbell's previous work on 20th century Moroccan literature and, more specifically, in Muhammad 'Azīz Lahbābi's 1974 novel *The Elixir of Life*. His article "Science Fiction and Social Criticism in Morocco of the 1970s: Muhammad 'Azīz Lahbābi's *The Elixir of Life*", which was published in *Science Fiction Studies* in 2015, marked the beginning of this line of research within Campbell's production and was soon to be expanded by incorporating 'Ahmad Khālid Tawfīq's 2008 *Utopia*, 'Abbās and Bahjar's 2013 *HWJN*, 'Ahmad 'Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli's 1976 *The Blue Flood* and Nihād Sharīf's 1972 *The Conqueror of Time* into the analysis. Arabic science-fiction as a field of study is rather new. It started in the 1990s with Muhammad Najīb al-Talāwi's research and arrived in the Western world a decade later. There are still few works focused on ASF, with Ada Barbaro's *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (Caroc-

ci, 2013) being one of the major works in the field, with even fewer translations of relevant ASF fiction into English and other languages. Campbell's work, therefore, intends to add to present studies regarding the origins, characteristics and evolution of ASF.

The book is aimed at "scholars of SF, of Arabic literature, and of postcolonial literature and theory" (p. viii) and deals almost exclusively with the foundational works of 20th century Arabic science fiction, when the genre becomes self-aware. It has a total of eleven chapters, including the introduction (Chapter 1) and the conclusion (Chapter 11). Three chapters are devoted to discussing theoretical aspects of the genre ("Postcolonial Literature and Arabic SF", "Arabic SF: Definitions and Origins", "Criticism and Theory of Arabic SF"), while the rest of the chapters dissect works by specific authors: Nihād Sharīf's *The Conqueror of Time* (Chapter 5); *The Spider and Man Below Zero*, by Mustafā Mahmud (Chapter 6); *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field*, by Sabrī Mūsā (Chapter 7); *The Blue Flood*, by 'Ahmad 'Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli (Chapter 8); *Beyond the Veil of Time*, by Tālib 'Umrān (Chapter 9); *The Pale Person, The Multiple Person and The Extinction of Man*, by Tiba 'AHmad Ibrāhīm (Chapter 10).

As for the methodology employed, Campbell relies greatly on analysis of the specificities of the Arabic terminology used both in scholarly analysis and also ASF literary production to convey its message. The author states that "I believe that word- and sentence-level analysis as a means of showcasing and critiquing the characteristic tropes, concerns, and themes of the genre will serve first and foremost to firmly anchor these attributes in the texts them-

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selves” (p. 11). Another important contribution Campbell makes in his book is the analysis of ASF through the conceptual frame of “double estrangement.” As he puts it, “estrangement reflects society in a mirror that distorts, and thereby focuses on, a particular aspect of society in order to render the work of SF a medium for social comment through an examination of contemporary social reality” (p. 4). ASF uses both hybridity and ambivalence to reflect upon the impact of colonialism on Arabic society and tradition: it is hybrid because it adopts the colonizers’ language, motifs and cultural viewpoint to criticize dominance from within; it is ambivalent because it navigates between the attraction and the repulsion towards colonizers and their culture. In Campbell’s perspective, the estrangement process that is common to most SF becomes double in ASF, since “not only does it engage in the estrangement of its own societies by means more or less familiar to scholars of Western SF, but it also estranges its own societies’ reaction to technology, especially insofar as that reaction denies or defers the human consequences (for good or for ill) of technology or tries to combat it by means of reactionary ideas or policies” (pp. 110-111). It is also relevant that ASF is written in Modern Standard Arabic, a literary form of the language that is removed

from everyday common language and therefore helps deepening the sense of double estrangement.

All in all, *Arabic Science Fiction* constitutes a valuable contribution to the growing field of science fiction postcolonial studies, opening the path for more widespread exploration of the genre, and perhaps eventually encouraging the translation of a body of fiction unheard of in the West. While the public has been able to enjoy the postcolonial, English-written science-fiction visions of Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Nnedi Okorafor, Silvia Moreno-García, Aliette de Bodard, and Vandana Singh, just a few works in Arabic such as Ahmed Khaled Towfik’s *Utopia* (2008) and Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) have been recently translated into other languages. Even though Campbell focus on the foundational works of Arabic sci-fi, which was produced by Arabic authors and aimed at Arabic audiences, we hope that the production of authors of Arab descent who write science-fiction and fantasy in English will be considered in future work. This could be a further step to take in order to see whether the concept of “double estrangement” applies to the production of authors like Saladin Ahmed and Basma Abdel Aziz.