Reflections

Science Fiction, Rational Enchantment, and Arabic Literature

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The Arab world is known for pioneering a plethora of literary genres and forms: one reflexively imagines the couplets of pining ghazal from the seventh century that rippled across the Asian continent, or the fantastical stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* that mutated through eighteenth-century Orientalism from low-brow and largely oral entertainment to European romanticism and gothica. One could also consider the annual Ramadan soap operas radiating from the film industries of Cairo and Damascus; genres not invented in the region, but indigenized and ritualized across the Middle East, with the inks of many sheikhs spilling to censure the televisual commercialization of the holy month.[1] One generic mode that Arabic literary and popular culture is not well-known for, however, is science fiction—a genre more closely associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, in the wake of the scientific revolution.

Debates about the "real" and "first" Arabic origins of and influences on Western science fiction are rife; al-Farabi's tenth-century *Opinions of the Residents of a Splendid City*, Ibn Tufail's twelfth-century *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, and Ibn al-Nafis' thirteenth-century *Theologus Autodidactus* are sometimes described as prototypes of science fiction, due to their emphases on spontaneous generation and utopian futurism. At the same time, Zakariya al-Qazwini's thirteenth century tale of *Awaj bin Anfaq* and the stories of *Sinbad the Sailor* engage in imaginations of interplanetary travel or alien life. But these retrospective debates over origins, fascinating as they may be, are not my primary interest. Rather, it is the genre's essentially futuristic questions that prompt me to ask: how does Arabic science fiction deviate from the entrenched themes and tensions of its Western counterpart? What historical relations to science, technology, and dystopia lead modern Middle Eastern writers to diverge from or complicate the generic expectations of traditional science fiction?

While there is no easy or exhaustive answer to these questions, a wealth of Arabic science fiction texts explicitly or implicitly grapple with the paradoxes of Middle Eastern modernity. Emile Habibi's 1974 *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Pessoptimist*, suggests that the only solution for the Palestinian caught under Israeli occupation is alien abduction—an escape route that serves as an inspirational precursor for the 2019 futurist anthology, *Palestine +100*, whose twelve authors likewise displace the conflict onto parallel universes, digital uprisings, and VR technology. Meanwhile, Egyptian writer Nihad Sharif uses aliens in "A Woman in a Flying Saucer" (1981) as a way to contend with colonial invasion and extraction, while Sonallah Ibrahim's *The Committee*, published the same year, transforms multinational corporations into a type of omnipotent, omnipresent, non-human entity that brings about an Egyptian dystopia, a theme also picked up in Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013) and Ahmed Naji's *Using Life* (2014). In the Gulf, *Iraq+100* (2016) escapes Iraq's dismal present through time-travel and robots, while Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), which I discuss later in this piece, does so through the possibility of becoming undead. What these and other such works have in common is that they deal with the paradoxes foisted upon the modern Arab world and what may be termed as Arab modernity's ample and ambivalent rational enchantments.

Though modernity was first characterized by Max Weber as a "disenchantment" that goes hand-in-hand with the decline of religious belief and practice and the rise of secular forms of life and management (such as bureaucracy and the state), postcolonial theorists have long contested this thesis, pointing to the increase in religious observance in modernizing states around the world. However, these scholars have adamantly insisted that the type of religious observance in these states is not a "backward" relic of the past, stubbornly lingering in the present,[2] but something entirely new: a hybridized, modern spirituality, inflected by technological advancements, print capitalism, digital media, postco-

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lonial nation-state ideologies, and capitalist globalization. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1999) describes the voting citizen-peasant in India, the largest democracy known to history, as inhabiting a modern political sphere, but one that does not follow the same "secular-rational calculations inherent to modern conceptions of the political" (p. 11); instead, his political sphere is enchanted, and many of his political actions are motivated by spirits, gods, and local religious traditions. Such an enchanted sphere "pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universalist narratives of capital" or stages of history within which the peasant is "anachronistic" or "premodern." The same can be said of the Middle East, in which modern religious manifestations are just as rooted in seventh-century Quranic scripture as in viral WhatsApp memes, Western narratives of linear historical progress, petroleum colonization, and Coca Cola.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the literary genre of science fiction has proven to be an apt tool for making sense of lingering, shifting, and increasing enchantments in the modern Middle Eastern world. Even in its Western forms, the genre harnesses utopic or dystopic imagination to follow a rational train of thought to its extremes, engaging with the fascinating or horrifying futuristic consequences of scientific experimentation, technological advancement, or extraterrestrial life. Building on Darko Suvin's infamous definition of science fiction as principally a dialectic of "estrangement and cognition," Carl Freedman (2000, p. 17) insists that the genre, as compared to fantasy, must "account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world." Insufficient as all generic definitions may be, one can easily see the resonance between Suvin's "estrangement and cognition" and the aforementioned "rational enchantment." Arriving at the miraculous through a meticulous scientific method, using step-by-step "research" as a means of uncovering an otherworldly truth—these are the trappings of the genre; ones perfectly suited to postcolonial subjects grappling with a supposedly sterile, secular, and scientific Arab modernity, only to arrive at its absurd limits.

In its Arabic iterations, science fiction rationally accounts for its "estrangements" from empirical reality, but does so in a doubled form: an embodied estrangement from the modern real, and the modern real's estrangement from "modernity" as an aspirational ideology or developmental project. Arabic science fiction is thus quintessentially postcolonial because of this "double estrangement."[3] Informed by its empirical position in the Global South, it uses the estrangement baked into the genre to interrogate not just the modern, dysfunctional reality, but also the paradoxical "modern" values (linear march of progress, industrialization, economic development, statehood, independence, human rights) through which that dysfunctional reality came to exist. In the words of Talal Asad (2003, p.14), the question one must put to modernity is not why it is a misdescription, but rather why it has become "hegemonic as a political goal." Modernity as a civilizational goal is a target of critique and satire just as much as the miscarriages of that goal on Arab soil.

A useful example through which to explore this double estrangement is a comparison between Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, held by many to be one of the founding texts of science fiction, and Ahmad Saadawi's 2013 retelling of the story, *Frankenstein in Baghdad.* In Shelley's text, the Blochean novum or "radical novelty" that estranges the reader from her nineteenth-century Europe and inducts her into a new, science-fictional world is the biotechnology of electricity as the source of life (Freedman, 2001, p. 79–88). The young scientist Victor Frankenstein is seized by the diabolical desire to create, and upon stitching body parts from disparate graves together into a ghastly whole and running a current through it, his undead Creature draws breath. The worlds of science, bioethics, theology, and fatherhood are ruptured by this act: what does one owe to the life that emanates from a laboratory? And if science is a form of rational enchantment as opposed to an objective, rational truth, perhaps it, too, should be subject to checks, balances, and taboos?

The stakes of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are equally high, but the new, science-fictional world it creates produces a doubled estrangement from the postco-

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lonial reality of Baghdad after the US's 2003 invasion and subsequent civil war. The counterpart to Victor the scientist is Hadi the junk-dealer—an impoverished social outcast who loses his best friend Nahem to a suicide bombing. When he goes to the morgue to collect his friend's body, he is callously told to pick whatever assortment of fleshy pieces he would like, as the daily volume of suicide victims' fragmented corpses makes it impossible to identify bodies or return them to their families. It is here that Hadi begins collecting exploded limbs and stitching them into a whole. His Creature, or "Whatsitsname," comes to life and embarks on a mission of revenge against the cause of death for the original owner of every dead part constructing its monstrous body. There is no emphasis on electricity as the operating novum here, nor is routine bombing perceived as a shocking advancement in technology—rather, the radical novelty lies in the potential for bombings to create life. Though one is estranged from modern Baghdadi reality when one witnesses the Whatsitsname rise as a whole, drag its stitched, rotting legs off of the bed and ambling through the streets, one is not estranged from its fragments, or from the modern circumstances that rendered it fragmentary in the first place. One's estrangement through some extreme elements of the text is thus meant to shock one as much as one's lack of estrangement by others; in other words, one is estranged from estrangement itself, forced to realize the disastrous conditions one has accepted as normal and familiar for modern Iraq.

Thus, Arabic science fiction is a continuation and, in some ways, an intensification of the Western genre. Its double estrangement from the present questions not just the world at hand, but also the ideal world that is promised through modernity. Often, the dark Middle Eastern present is escaped by seeking refuge in a darker but (at the very least) less predictable future: a future in which laws, governments, and peace talks may not be as intransigent and painfully unchanging. "Hope" in these books is not optimistically figured in utopic transformation, but in difference: a novum by which to raise new questions, imagine new landscapes. But what newly anticipated answers might this genre give us? And how do they overlap with recent surges in

science fiction elsewhere in the Global South and diasporic culture, like Chinese and Indian science fiction, or the generative Afrofuturistic genre? Are these science fictions postcolonial in intersecting ways, or do their relations to modernity diverge? Are they estranged from one another in their dialogue with a historically Western genre, or do their uses of high-tech, galactic travel, and posthuman subjects make space for equally innovative solidarities? These are promising South-South interconnections for future scholarship to explore.

Of course, "gaiety" signifies both joy and queerness, and *Blackfish City* is not only fun but inclusive. *Blackfish City* features a lesbian couple, gay men (more than one of whom has the breaks, a clear analogue to AIDS), and a nonbinary person. Perhaps more importantly, the novel treats them as a regular part of the world, and these characters' identities are normalized without being erased. This is not a story primarily about LGBTQ identity, then, but one featuring people with a variety of identities and desires. *Blackfish City* does not posit queer identities as merely problematic nor does it rely on queer saviors. It's not that only LGBTQ people could change the world, but also that the openness that makes room for them spills over into an openness to alternative ways of being and thinking in other arenas as well—including challenges to capitalism and colonialism.

The queerness embedded in the novel also involves engaging deeply with nonhuman beings. Nanobonding, which irrevocably ties a human to an animal, is central to *Blackfish City*. This process creates deep and meaningful cross-species relationships, but it is also dangerous—especially if the connection is disrupted. For instance, one of the main characters was nanobonded to a polar bear as a child and then separated from his animal, which caused him psychological pain for years. Without knowing of this past, he thinks of himself as an animal: "He was amphibious. He was a polar bear" (Miller, 2018, p. 21). He carries the strength and power of the polar bear in his sense of self, but he is not able to understand this or feel whole. In the end, the bonds between human and nonhuman are crucial to revolution within the city itself and to finding

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a way to fix what has been broken in the larger world and environment. The novel tells a story of hope in a damaged world, and this story cannot be told without the embrace of queer relationships, both human and more-than-human, demonstrating that "certain queer affects and sensibilities […] are not just *compatible* with politics but *inseparable* from them" (Seymour, 2018, p. 123).

Miller's novel indicates that environmental SF can be more than dystopian but must still acknowledge the dangers we face going forward. Allyse Knox-Russell describes "*a futurity without optimism*—that is, a futurity cleared of fantasies projected from the (patriarchal, anthropocentric) past and thus a futurity radically open to difference and change" (Knox-Russell, 2018, p. 218, italics in original). The hopefulness of *Blackfish City* is located in this kind of futurity, which functions by rejecting heteronormativity and anthropocentrism and creating a space open to both queerness and reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world. This openness also makes room for a more joyful encounter with environmental SF itself. There is a lot to be afraid of, but—as both Miller and queer environmental futures more broadly indicate—there's also a lot to live for.

Notes

[1] This critique is fairly widespread, as it is thought to distract from religious observance during the month. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2011) discusses the opposition of daiyas, or female religious leaders, in 1980s Cairo to the watching of Ramadan series in favor of pursuing piety. Walter Armbrust (2006) has also written a relevant chapter titled "Synchronising Watches: The State, the Consumer, and Sacred Time in Ramadan Television."

[2] Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) strongly repudiates a "subtraction" thesis about religion; Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha, and many others from the Subaltern Studies group insist on forms of religious belief and practice that are quintessentially modern.

[3] Ian Campbell, in his book *Arab Science Fiction* (2018), uses the term "double estrangement"—while I borrow it from him, I do not agree with his definition of the two estrangements as (1) estrangement from Western science and technology which is perceived as entering nefariously from without, often in colonial forms and (2) estrangement from one's own "stagnant" Arab culture and religion from within. While the book has worthwhile insights and rightfully seeks to fill a gap in Arabic science-fiction analysis, it sometimes falls back on stereotypes of Arab societies.

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