Arabic Science Fiction

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Editor's note: Ian Campbell is the managing editor of SFRA Review. *I confirm as editor that he had no involvement in the preparation of this review for publication.*

SF scholars who are interested in how SF in Arabic may differ from or critique Anglophone SF may at first wonder why Ian Campbell has such a sustained emphasis on Darko Suvin throughout *Arabic Science Fiction*. Suvin certainly is a formative figure in genre theory discussions about science fiction, although he is not quite as in vogue in contemporary science fiction studies as he once was. Nonetheless, Campbell sees Suvin's conception of cognitive estrangement as significant for understanding Arabic SF and for Arabic-language SF scholars. As a result, Campbell's project is an examination of the manifestations of cognitive estrangement in Arabic Science Fiction (ASF), and one of his central arguments builds off of Suvin directly.

Campbell presents his conception of ASF as working off "double estrangement," which reflects the "total lack of legal protections for freedom of expression in the modern Arabic world" (6-7) and that consequently "Arab writers in all genres, especially the canonical literary fiction to which ASF aspires, have learned to conceal their critique under layers of story in order to provide plausible deniability in the face of scrutiny by the regime" (7). ASF aims toward social criticism in order to be taken seriously as art. The "double" in "double estrangement" deals with the perception of science and technology; that is, ASF "draws attention to the drop-off in scientific and technological innovation in the Arab world since the glory days of Arab/Muslim dominance" (10). ASF stories may critique the state from a post-colonial perspective, but they critique the culture for reliance on mysticism. Campbell presents this concept as a way of signaling that readers may struggle to understand the intended critique of ASF works due to the works' critiquing multiple vectors of society simultaneously, so that there may not be one central point but several. Likewise, ASF will not tend to have analogues to Golden Age SF works, given the differences in production and audience.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The introduction sets up the considerations of Suvin and "Double Estrangement" that shape the rest of the volume. Chapter 2, "Postcolonial Literature and Arabic SF," outlines why ASF may be understood as "manifestly a postcolonial

literature: it is produced in formerly colonized states, for readers in and from these states" (21) and thus is distinct from many works of postcolonial literature written in English by authors living in diaspora. In chapter 3, "Arabic SF: Definitions and Origins," Campbell draws from Ada Barbaro's work to discuss four genres of classical Arabic literature that serve as proto-SF: philosophical works that use voyages to pose arguments, adventure voyages, the utopian tradition, and *mirabilia*, which is a genre that focuses on real or imaginary places or events that challenge human understanding. Chapter 4, "Criticism and Theory of Arabic SF," tries to establish a coherent framework for the relatively minimal amount of Arabic SF criticism. Partly this involves dealing with the issue of diglossia, the consequence of which is that most ASF, since it is written in the Modern Standard Arabic used for literature, is rendered "the nearly exclusive province of a small class of highly educated people" (79). That is, instead of being built on a pulp background, Arabic SF has as its audience primarily an educated and elite audience. These first four chapters do a great job of setting up the myriad ways in which ASF operates in an entirely different rhetorical and literary situation from commercial western SF.

The remaining chapters each focus on case studies. As has been the case throughout Campbell's study, for several of these works, there is no English translation. This makes Campbell's study essential for the scholar but somewhat less accessible for a teacher who might be thinking about texts to include in a syllabus. Chapter 5 returns to the central concept of "double estrangement" regarding Egyptian author Nihād Sharīf's *The Conqueror of Time* (1972). It is a political allegory that also estranges "Egyptian society as stagnant, figuratively frozen in its obsession with the past" (119) through the novum of cryogenics. Chapter 6 focuses on two novels by Egyptian scholar Mustafā Mahmūd and the exploitation of the peasantry by urban elites. Unfortunately, even Mahmūd's *The Spider* (1965), which is regarded as the first ASF novel, is hard to get access to in Western markets. Chapter 7 presents Sabrī Mūsā's *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field* (1987) as comparable to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), in depicting a character trying to escape a dystopian reality and failing to find a sustainable alternative. Chapter 8 discusses Ahmad 'Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli's *The Blue Flood* (1976). Campbell argues that al-Baqqāli uses some of the same themes as Mahmūd, but places Western culture as an additional point of view, allowing him to critique reformers "for their inability or refusal to question their patriarchal assumptions" (219). Chapter 9 focuses on Tālib 'Umrān's *Beyond the Veil of Time* (1985), which, unlike many of the aforementioned works of science fiction, takes place on a foreign planet. Here Campbell argues that although the novel is superficially trite, it works as particularly effective estrangement for the educated elite readership of ASF, especially their belief that an alternative to despotism can emerge without violence. Chapter 10 focuses on

a three-novel series by Kuwaiti author Tība ʿAhmad Ibrāhīm, characterized by Campbell as the only notable female writer of ASF before the 2000s. Campbell argues that Ibrāhīm's novels serve to show a transition in ASF, where narratives about the effect of technology, modernity, and colonialism do not need to be "cordoned off from everyday life" (278); that is, ASF is starting to become slightly more direct.

For the scholar, Campbell's study does an excellent job of exploring how works of ASF from a range of different countries (Kuwait, Egypt, Syria) have approached the literary demands and political risks of writing speculative fiction meant to critique the existing regimes and cultural programs. The primary frustration for the reader is likely not to be with Campbell's analysis, but with the reality that many of these novels will remain largely inaccessible to the west. Nonetheless, scholars who want to understand the specific challenges of the emergence of science fiction in postcolonial settings would do well to explore Campbell's volume.