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Ian Campbell, *ARABIC SCIENCE FICTION (Studies in Global Science Fiction)*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Arabic Science Fiction by Ian Campbell considers postmodern Arabic science fiction in the context of the classical works of Arabic literature. The result is an intensely theoretical and textual understanding of Arabic science fiction through the contemporary lens of western theories of science fiction and postcolonialism. The book follows a specific set of novels and traces their genealogy back to classical and medieval Arabic literature to contextualise contemporary science fiction in new ways.

The central claim of the book refutes several points made by Reuven Snir, one of the prominent experts in Arabic literature, to argue that Arabic science fiction does in fact offer social commentary in its texts. Early on in the book we also contend with Snir's definition of science fiction as providing an alternative framework to the author's empirical environment. Campbell considers several texts from the 1970s and 1980s in great detail, such as *The Conqueror of Time* (1972) by Nihad Sharif, *The Blue Flood* (1976) by 'Aḥmad 'Abd al-Salām al-Baqqāli, *Beyond the Veil of Time* (1985) by Ṭālib 'Umrān, *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field* (1987) by Ṣabri Mūsā, as well as the novels by Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd and Ṭība 'Aḥmad Ibrāhīm.

Geographically, this is a very diverse selection of writers, and an examination under the common rubric of science fiction should prove very intriguing. As Campbell points out, around twenty Arabic-speaking countries, including Egypt and Morocco, with their multiple cultures and dialects, have been trying to negotiate their postcolonial identity in Arabic science fiction since the 1960s. At the same time, they have had to account for their colonial past, which prided itself on its scientific and technological prowess. Such ambivalence towards the past complicates political questions and avoids any easy answers. On the one

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hand, the postcolonial experience makes the Arabic countries apprehensive about modern technology for its association with the European powers, but on the other, their celebration of the legendary past does not allow for a complete denial of technology. This kind of confusion is evident in Mūsā's *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field* (1987), in which the utopia is unravelled when the characters in the story discover that the totalitarian regime is right, and that they must embrace this future rather than yearn for a distant past.

Unfortunately, even though Campbell is able to identify unique themes such as the mystical vision or the religious inflections of Arabic utopia, he seems to draw too heavily on the Arabic colonial experience and postcolonial theory while characterising Arabic science fiction. He attributes to Arabic science fiction a hybridity resulting from its curious historical position between the colonizer and the colonized in order to reject a past nationalist utopia or a neo-colonial future, but such synchronic analysis that grants it a plurality does not seem sufficient to develop an independent or original study of Arabic science fiction.

Campbell sees most of the tropes recurring in Arabic science fiction as influenced by the colonial encounter and concludes that the genre could be read as an instance of “archetypally postcolonial literature.”² For a study that claims to be attentive to context and culture to develop a theory of Arabic science fiction, nothing seems to be more disastrous. Certainly this kind of third-world-as-national-allegory reading is not surprising as Frederic Jameson looms large in every chapter, tying most of Campbell's themes together: utopia, social commentary, technological development, and late capitalism.

A major unit of analysis that Campbell deploys is Darko Suvin's idea of cognitive estrangement, which he elaborated on in his seminal book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979). Suvin argues that science fiction uses scientific plausibility within the textual universe to defamiliarise the familiar, which produces a critical perspective in such a way that the alternative science fictional world works to critique the present conditions of society. Campbell readily uses this approach to read all of the chosen texts and calls it “double estrangement” – an oblique social commentary that functions in the absence of legal protections for the freedom of expression and to critique the scientific and technological developments in the Arab world. Thus on the one hand, the socio-political estrangement is a commentary on the Arab society which lacks the freedom of expression, and on the other, it draws attention to the decline of science and

² Campbell, 6.

technology in contemporary Arab society when compared to its glory days of Muslim dominance.

One cannot help classifying this reading as convenient because it is not surprising that there is a preoccupation with technology and fantasy in science fiction, but to read the fantastical elements of science fiction as an allegory for politics is to diminish the specificity of form and narrative. Campbell points out that a double estrangement of the social and political system that attacks the stagnant technological progress even as it is not able to fully resist imperialism leads to a formulation of alternate social systems in the novels. However, what are these alternate systems? Is it justified to relegate them all to an umbrella category called utopia?

Campbell's study of utopia is also the most thought-provoking part of the book. It engages thoroughly with the Jamesian model of utopia that seeks an alternative to stagnation implied by the end of history and caused by late capitalism. The author contrasts the Jamesian analysis with the Arabic texts that show us how strikingly different their conception of utopia is. For example, he observes that the Arabic utopia is rooted in the past, as well as the fact that the retreat from the city to seclusion remains a common trope in Arabic literature. How does the mystical qualify the utopia when it is from a distant past? Can we still call it science fiction? Or will such an attribution be made only in western taxonomy?

Campbell's linguistic analysis of the Arabic language to discuss resonances and meanings such as with the word "Nizam" is excellent. Furthermore, his appraisal of the theories of science fiction is comprehensive (albeit a bit too western-focused), and painstakingly rigorous. The author emphasizes that science fiction is a hybrid genre – if that is so, might there be another way to read Arabic science fiction as more than social commentary or postcolonial literature? Is there an aesthetic dimension derived from form and narrative that is unique to Arabic science fiction? Moreover, if we are to assess science fiction through the lens of the colonial past, what about the geopolitical present that allows a more generous and powerful reading of the Arab world? I suspect that the conclusions of the author would have been vastly different, or at least more complicated, had he considered these issues.