

IAN CAMPBELL, *Arabic Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Pp. 322. \$99.99 cloth, \$69.99 paper. ISBN 9783030082543.

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Ian Campbell's *Arabic Science Fiction* marks a laudable contribution to the field of science fiction, and the study of Arabic science fiction (ASF), especially in the Anglophone World. Previously, Campbell's journal articles had examined several Moroccan and Egyptian science fiction novels, including Muḥammad Aziz Laḥbabi's *The Elixir of Life* (1974),¹ Aḥmad Abd al-Salam al-Baqqali's *The Blue Flood* (1976),² Nihad Sharif's *The Conqueror of Time* (1972),³ and Aḥmad Khalid Tawfiq's *Utopia* (2008).⁴ Campbell's intellectual efforts and critical insights culminate in producing *Arabic Science Fiction*. His text comes as a response to a pioneer work of ASF in English, Reuven Snir's "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature."⁵ According to Campbell, Snir's work disregards the fact that ASF provides a critique of relevant societal issues. Campbell rather asserts that the genre is profoundly concerned with a "social commentary" in its own surrounding, albeit implicitly. He points out that allegory is a distinctly salient feature of ASF writing, serving as a protective mechanism against censorship. Therefore, ASF writers are forced to allegorically reveal their voices and implicitly express their views to criticize either a regime or a society.

Campbell's significant contribution is his use of the *double estrangement* motif in examining primary ASF works of the twentieth century. His theoretical framework draws on famous science fiction critic Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement. Accordingly, Campbell argues that the function of ASF operates under *double estrangement* by indirectly engaging with sociopolitical affairs as well as alluding to "the drop-off in scientific and technological innovation in the Arab world since the days of Arab/Muslim dominance" (10). Campbell's study is aimed at three groups of audiences who share a

common interest in ASF: scholars of Arabic literature; scholars of postcolonial literature; and scholars who have no access to Arabic language (viii).

The analysis focuses on seminal Arabic works of the twentieth century published between 1965 and 1992 in various Arab countries, including Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and Kuwait. Moreover, all of the selected novels manifest hybridity in some shape and form, insofar as they are influenced by Western tropes and patterns, which, in turn are impacted by colonialism. In this regard, Campbell remarks, “ASF will always already be an archetypally postcolonial literature, in that it uses the language of the colonizer – the tropes and discourse of science and of SF – to examine, critique, and even resist that colonizer’s power” (6). It is noteworthy that nearly none of these selected novels have been translated into English, which perhaps renders Campbell’s work even more significant. However, Campbell’s non-Arabic speaking target audiences may not always understand some finer nuances of the subject. Nonetheless, he does an excellent job in explaining the meaning of numerous Arabic lexicons for his readers, including: *tanabuu* (prediction), *taqlid* (tradition), *tarqi* (patching), *musattah* (flattened), and *adab*, most often translated as “literature.” He also explains how *fusha*, the language of the Quran and the classical language of Arabic literature, emerged as a formal and modern language, known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

The book comprises eleven chapters. In the introductory chapter, the author summarizes the main argument, provides background, and gives an overview of subsequent chapters. In chapter two “Postcolonial Literature and Arabic SF,” Campbell provides some context on postcolonial theory and bases his argument on the views espoused by postcolonial theorists, Homo Bhabha and Neil Lazarus. He then examines the relationship between postcolonial theory and science fiction. Campbell shifts his focus to the predominant theory of SF in order to help the reader understand the nuances between Western SF and its Arabic counterpart through “a broader and deeper acquaintance with how SF manifests within Arabic-speaking culture(s)” (43). In the third chapter titled “Arabic SF: Definitions and Origins,” Campbell traces the origin of ASF and draws on noted Italian scholar of ASF Ada Barbaro’s *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (*Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*) to examine “four genres of classical and medieval Arabic literature”: *mirabilia* literature, the medieval philosophical work of Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* (1185), *1001 Nights*, and Arabic utopian literature (46). Chapter four titled “Criticism and

Theory of Arabic SF" explains the main difference between *fusha* and *diglossia* in Arabic language, illustrating the fact that *fusha* was exclusively used by nearly all ASF novels (80–81). Campbell relies on the accounts espoused by ASF critics, such as Muhammed Najib al-Talawi and Western critic Ada Barbaro. In this chapter he also articulates his theoretical approach of *double estrangement*, thereby prefacing his analysis for the subsequent chapters.

Chapters five to ten are entirely devoted to detailed analyses of the following novels: Nihad Sharif's *The Conqueror of Time* (1972); Mustafa Mahmud's works, *The Spider* (1965) and *Man Below Zero* (1967); Sabri Musa's *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field* (1987); Ahmad 'Abd al-Salām al-Baqqālī's *The Blue Flood* (1976); Tālib 'Umrān's *Beyond the Veil of Time* (1985); and Tiba Ahmad Ibrahim's *The Pale Person* (1986), *The Multiple Person* (1990), and *The Extinction of Men* (1992). His exposition of *double estrangement* clearly resonates in each of these aforementioned novels.

In his rather succinct conclusion, Campbell stresses the development of ASF over the past twenty-five years, particularly after the publication of a series of three novels written by the Kuwaiti female writer Tiba Ibrahim (discussed in chapter ten). According to Campbell, ASF now aspires somehow to constitute a "canonical literary fiction" (312). Furthermore, he aptly notes the translation of the first example of ASF into English and other languages—through works such as Tawfiq's *Utopia* (2008), Rabie's *Otared* (2016), and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013)—and expresses a hope that the translation of ASF will continue to spread.

However, more context on translation and its dynamic role between the colonized and the colonizer was needed in Campbell's publication, given that the late works of ASF are heavily influenced by Western literature. For instance, Sabri Musa's *The Gentleman from the Spinach Field* (1987) is influenced by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Perhaps Campbell's argument would have greatly benefitted by addressing the question of translation, especially in a postcolonial context, as he postulates that ASF must be understood as a hybrid work and an archetype of postcolonial literature. Here, the link of translation seems indispensable. Nevertheless, *Arabic Science Fiction* includes several insightful arguments and interesting postulations; among other things, it paves the way for future studies and scholarly engagement on the subject.

Campbell clearly demonstrates that ASF has become a self-conscious genre and hence constitutes serious literature. In totality, Campbell's account is unique in its approach towards ASF novels, considering the dearth of scholarship on the subject and the growing interest in ASF, especially after the Arab Spring. Campbell's text responds to the growing interest of both scholars and readers in non-Western science-fiction and opens up the pathway for the translation of a vast body of globally relevant engaging fiction. Campbell hopes that ASF will be positioned as a genre that merits a serious study conducted by various SF and Arabic literature scholars. Additionally, *Arabic Science Fiction* may be a repository for future research on how Arab writers have dealt with the impact of Western colonialism through science fiction by leveraging its mechanisms to form their own views on this topic.

NOTES

¹ Ian Campbell, "Science Fiction and Social Criticism in Morocco of the 1970s: Muḥammad `Azīz Laḥbābī's *The Elixir of Life*," *Science Fiction Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015): 42–55, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.42.1.0042>.

² Ian Campbell, "False Gods and Libertarians: Artificial Intelligence and Community in Aḥmad `Abd Al-Salām Al-Baqqāli's *The Blue Flood* and Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*," *Science Fiction Studies* 44, no. 1 (2017): 43–64, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.1.0043>.

³ Ian Campbell, "Double Estrangement: Nasserism and Stagnation in Nihād Sharīf's *The Conqueror of Time*," *Extrapolation* 60, no. 1 (2019): 43–64.

⁴ Ian Campbell, "Prefiguring Egypt's Arab Spring: Allegory and Allusion in Ahmad Khālid Tawfiq's *Utopia*," *Science Fiction Studies* 42, no. 3 (2015): 541–56, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.42.3.0541>.

⁵ Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature," *Der Islam* 77, no. 2 (2000): 263–285.