

Science Fiction in Egypt: Borrowings from American Literature & Local Tradition, Hosam El-Zembely

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Abstract- Science fiction in the Arab world is finally coming into its own, as evidenced by a recent flurry of publications on this topic. Despite the events of the Iraq War in 2003, which forms the backdrop to such acclaimed SF novels as Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and Ahmed Khalid Tawfiq's *Utopia* (2007), the catalyst for this proliferation in SF came from the Arab Spring that began in late 2010. Shortly after the January 2010 in Egypt, Hosam El-Zembely founded the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction, which proceeded to publish a series of four anthologies that dealt explicitly with post-Arab Spring themes. From then on, commercial SF hit the Egyptian bookshelves, along with traditionally marginal genres such as horror, thrillers and detective fiction. El-Zembely, however, was already a contemporary pioneer in Egyptian SF, having published three novels in 2001 alone: *The Half-Humans*, *America 2030* and *The Planet of the Viruses*. Consequently, analysis of his efforts both before and after the Arab Spring enables us to see the development of Egyptian SF throughout this traumatic period in the Arab-speaking world.

Index Terms- science fiction (SF), Arab literature, Zembely, American literature, tradition, genre, medicine, moral.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ask any Egyptian or Arab science fiction writer and he will automatically tell you that SF in the Arab world faces a completely different challenge to the genre in its European and Western birthplace. Whereas in the West SF was a normal literary response to the industrial revolution, in the Arab-Muslim world SF faces an uphill battle to become recognized because no such revolution occurred. What is more, many an Egyptian and Arab SF author hopes that an industrial and scientific revolution will take place if and when SF becomes recognized in the Arab-Muslim world (Al-Hasab, 2012: 82).

II. THE MEDICAL AND THE MORAL: DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF EARLY EGYPTIAN SF

El-Zembely is a distinguished ophthalmologist and university professor. This comes as no surprise to the average Arab reader, since a great many authors in and out of SF in Arab countries are medical professionals or graduates. Ahmed Khalid Tawfiq and Nabil Farouk both trained in medicine whilst Alaa Al-Aswany, author of *The Yacubian Building* (2002), is a practising dentist. Going to medical school has traditionally been the guarantor of a good career in Egypt; the pioneering short storywriter, Yousef Idris, was also a medical doctor. But SF writers, such as Mustafa Mahmoud in the 1960s, have also been powerful advocates for the public understanding of science within the framework of Islamic culture. A medical doctor by training, Mahmoud was also a renowned public communicator of science in Egypt. Like Nihad Sharif, he was also a family friend of El-Zembely's and an early inspiration via such novels as *A Man Under Zero* (1967). Even SF writers who were not medical doctors by training, such as Sharif and the great playwright and literary critic Tawfik Al-Hakim, frequently incorporated medical themes into their writing. The promotion of scientific literacy is a concern of many Arabic SF writers; and El-Zembely, both a scientist and a devout Muslim, is no exception. Notions of progress, society, civilization or humankind as a whole take on a different coloration in Muslim hands, with physical, moral and spiritual dimensions not readily recognizable to the corpus of western SF. These interrelated themes are repeatedly found in El-Zembely's novels. The hero of *The Half-Humans* is the astronaut captain Seif Al-Din ('Sword of Islam' in Arabic) who is described as having been raised on the principles of 'religion, science, ethics and sports' (El-Zembely 2001b: 41). Sports here is a reference to the physical education of the body and soul along the lines of chivalry, discipline and self-restraint. He is described in no uncertain words as a '21st century knight' (8). At a key juncture in the storyline he squares off against the arrogant king of the shape-shifters in a duel to the death over the king's prize ship. At the end of the contest he is told by the king (a profound atheist): 'It is a shame to kill such a courageous knight... You fought like a hero... Willing to give your life for a cause not your own... You have such principles that I think... I can give you my ship after all, trusting in your word alone, to bring it back to me, safe and sound' (84-85). Likewise, the hero of *America 2030*, intelligence operative Khalid, has learned martial arts from his infancy in the service of the Arab-Islamic Union. During two key fight sequences, when Khalid is about to lose against better trained or physically stronger opponents, he makes it back from the brink and defeats his foes by drawing on his spiritual strength. As the narrator explains during one such incident: 'his defeat here, would be a betrayal of everything he stood for, all the lives that counted on him ... That's when his body learned to defy all physiological laws' (El-Zembely 2001a: 99).

Another character in *The Half-Humans* who embodies this spiritual-biological interface is Shaymaa, a cyborg with a battery-powered metal frame housing reconstituted human tissues, whose name also references the half-sister of the Prophet Muhammad. Her quasi-mechanical status does not prevent her from being brave and self-sacrificing, and Seif finds himself falling in love with her. Both the scenario and the question as to whether she has a soul or not are familiar ones to readers of Anglo-American SF, but the implication here that everything has some level of feeling and consciousness is in keeping with The Quran, for example, verses 17.44 ('There is not a thing that does not glorify Him with praise') and 22.18 ('to God prostrates everyone in the heavens and everyone on earth, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the mountains, and the trees, and the animals'). Furthermore, both *The Half-Humans* and *The Planet of the Viruses* indicate the influence of Mahmoud's *A Man Under Zero*, in particular, the scientific justification for the existence of nonorganic, sentient life-forms (rocks in Mahmoud's novel), again in keeping with the teachings of the Quran. This emphasis on intersubjective states of radically different being is further complemented by Seif's fellow astronaut, Hazem, who is described as having a telepathic bond with him; a preoccupation with paranormal powers to be found elsewhere in Arabic SF (Yousef 2013: 33). They are as close as brothers, having grown up without siblings, and quite literally feel each other's pain. The victims in the novel, the species of half-humans – a mix of mankind and an ancient superior race from the Land of the Seven Hills – capture Hazem early in the story and use him to study Seif and his reactions to them, concluding that he will help them out of his deeply ingrained sense of ethical responsibility.

This ethical and spiritual commitment is also conveyed during the initial voyage of Seif and Hazem. We are told how the Islamic Union sent an unmanned probe into the stormy eye of Jupiter, losing contact with it, while a mysterious ailment killed off many of their terraformers on Mars. Despite all the advances in the medical sciences that have cured diseases, aches and pains, death remains the unsolved mystery. The inner world of the human body, and its spiritual makeup and moral limitations, is just as important as journeying into the cosmic unknown. This dichotomy is even more evident in *The Planet of the Viruses*. Here, the hero is an ophthalmologist, Dr Salah Al-Din (named after the legendary hero Saladin), who is leading a research team trying to find a cure for the herpes pandemic, which is threatening the human race with total blindness. The story is set in the far future with the Muslims united again into an Islamic Union. There are rival teams, from the US and Germany, but it is the Islamic team that makes the critical discovery and saves the world from impending doom. Moral considerations govern their research throughout. What Salah Al-Din stumbles onto while tackling herpes is that it is a sentient virus, infecting the human cornea in an effort to communicate with humankind. When he learns this, he doesn't tell his Islamic Union superiors, and almost gets himself and his team into deep trouble with the authorities. Instead, Salah Al-Din wants a sure means of communication with the virus first before handing over his research. Later, when the virus gives the Islamic Union the means to destroy it (a deadly chemical agent), Salah Al-Din convinces the President that this must be kept top secret, lest another human nation uses the agent against the virus and eradicates an entire species. He also develops an antidote against this chemical agent as a further guarantor, something the President goes along with. As Muslims, they believe they should deal with the virus in a chivalrous, knightly fashion, like the first pioneering Muslims who spread the faith.

El-Zembely's novels not only take a positive attitude towards science, they also celebrate Muslim know-how and look forward to a utopian vision of cooperation within the Arabic world. For example, in the *Half-Humans*, there is the individual cell analyzer which allows for repairs to be made to living tissue in real time, and ion transmission, a science first invented in the west but perfected by Islamic Union scientists. This technological prowess, though, is always framed by religious reverence: the people of the Seven Hills act as a constant reminder that all these scientific blessings are the result of God's helping hand, since there are always those who are more advanced than man. El-Zembely's novels then, because of their pedagogic content, are not only agenda-setting, they are also indicative of how Arabic SF is increasingly establishing a distinctive cultural and religious context for the representation of science and technology.

This is also paralleled in the real world where Arabic scientists, such as Tidu Maini, an engineer and executive chairman of the Qatar Science and Technology Park, has described his organization as a 'unique experiment in accelerating research in a nation where education and healthcare are the centerpiece of national strategy and intent' (quoted in Determann, 2018: 11). What gives El-Zembely his importance, though, is not his modishness but the degree to which he grounds his fiction and present-day concerns within the earlier traditions of Egyptian SF – not only Mahmoud but also Nihad Sharif, for example, and the anti-war sentiments of such novels as *The People from the Second World* (1977). Sharif, though, self-consciously used traditional storytelling techniques from Sufi literature (Snir 2000: 276), with the catch that, in addition to the moral emphasis of his stories, his characters also tended to moralize. Early Arabic SF has consequently been accused of suffering from 'weak and minor plots, underdeveloped characters not delineated sufficiently' (Asaqli 2017: 1447) in addition to trashy commercialism. The distinguished Syrian sf author, Taleb Omran, has condemned much Arab SF for following the superhero mould (Omran 1989: 103) to be found in both classical Arabic literature as well as contemporary popular culture. *The Half-Humans* is, for instance, indebted to the narrative structure of the *Seven Voyages of Sindbad*, from *The Thousand and One Nights*, in that every stage in the story involves a challenge, the solving of a riddle, and only the pure of heart proceeds towards his destiny.

III. FROM PULP TO PURPOSE: THE MORPHOLOGY OF HEROISM

The examples of heroism in *The Half-Humans* and *America 2030* may at first seem tacky and overly romantic. Heroes such as Seif and Khalid, respectively, appear to have no depth and lack characterization. But this apparent failing is in itself replete with lessons. That is, the notion of the hero is evolving in Arab literature, shifting gears as it were from the one-dimensional figures of earlier fictions to the more complex, dualistic and darkly humorous models common to modern thrillers and cyberpunk.

Throughout the 1990s, almost all of the SF produced in Egypt was of the pulp variety, action-packed adventure stories written by such authors as Nabil Farouk and Ahmed Khalid Tawfik, for example Farouk's *Future File* series. These were essentially pocket books for teenagers; formulaic adventure stories more than proper SF, with equally formulaic heroes (Snir 2000: 270–01). This was a deliberate move on the part of Farouk and Tawfik in an effort to maintain readers, especially among the young, not a reflection of their actual writing abilities and interests, as evidenced by Tawfik's later success.

The same holds true of El-Zembely. When asked at a cultural salon why *The Half-Humans* fits the *Young Adult* genre, he explains that his target audience were young readers and that quashing scientific illiteracy is one of his chief objectives (El-Zembely 2017). Again, he had to simplify the form and content for a youthful audience, including the representation of his protagonists. Salah Al-Din in *The Planet of the Viruses*, by contrast, is anything but one-dimensional. He's a complicated and sensitive soul, plagued by inner doubts.

Moreover, the portrayal of the mechanics of scientific discovery and the hurdles facing research are very accurate and recognizable to any real-world scientist. Nonetheless, in all three novels, the emphasis is more on the themes, on serving up heroes for a glorious Islamic future where the Muslims reunite and become leaders of science and exploration once again. The characters are there to facilitate this goal, not complicate it. There is a parallel here with the work of Robert Heinlein in the West, in terms of the contrast between the heroes of his juvenile fiction published in the 1940s and 1950s, and the anti-heroes that occur in his later adult SF, such as *Friday* (1982) and *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* (1985).

Special mention must go to the role of female characters in this regard. In *The Half-Humans*, Shaymaa engages in unarmed combat and saves the lives of Seif and Hazem on more than one occasion. One of the most important members of the research team in *The Planet of the Viruses* is a woman, Dr Shorouk, the top virologist in Abu Dhabi. It is she who sets Salah Al-Din on the right course to making his discovery. In *America 2030*, Kailing is an East Asian martial arts expert who defeats a man twice her size. Arguably, the juvenile demographic of El-Zembely's fiction, in which he is writing for both adolescent boys and girls, encourages him to write stronger, more convincing female characters. In the process, El-Zembely counters an oft-made complaint made about superhero teams in western comics, where the team includes 'at least one female member', but she is invariably 'depicted as frail when compared to her stalwart male teammates' (Davis and Westerfelhaus 2013: 806). This positive representation also feeds into El-Zembely's hopes for a more unified and egalitarian Arabic future.

It is important to remember that El-Zembely is a key transitional figure whose fiction and edited anthologies have appeared either side of the Arab Spring. The development of his heroes into more complex characters prefigures the work of younger Egyptian SF authors such as Ahmed Salah Al-Mahdi, author of the post-apocalyptic novels *Malaaz* (2017) and *The Black Winter* (2018), and the duo of Wael and Mahmoud Abel Raheem, authors of *Akwan* (2017), dealing with parallel dimensions and alternate realities. These authors regularly feature male anti-heroes and strong female characters, so that the line between what constitutes good and bad moral behavior is not only blurred but also posed as a question to the readers. In the wake of the Arab Spring, such involvement of the reader takes on an explicitly democratic dimension. Accordingly, readers have become more sophisticated and demanding whereas, when El-Zembely began writing, readers still needed a simpler heroic model. Nevertheless, such placating of the readers also enabled the basis for a SF-reading culture in Egypt by encouraging them into the weird and thoroughly alien worlds of SF.

VI. CONCLUSION

Early Arabic SF dealt quite explicitly with religious themes, such as the relationship between modernity and scientific advance, and the spiritual and moral values bequeathed to Muslims by Islam. In El-Zembely's novels, Islam is not even on the defensive as regards modernity, catching up as it were, but transformed into a key ingredient of advance. Muslims are democratically governed in all three novels, for example Seif's use of decision-making by majority vote with all members of his crew, whilst leaders who do not respect Islamic principles of charity and humility are portrayed as tyrannical and corrupt, such as the king of the shape-shifters in *The Half-Humans*.

In America 2030 these principles are extended to world governance. Most of the world is divided into five Unions, or blocs of states: The Arab-Islamic Union; the European Union; the Union of Afro-Asian Peoples; the Union of the Japanese Islands, China and Korea; and the Union of South and Central America Peoples. These blocs oppose a United States, and its few remaining allies (the UK and Australia), which has been corrupted from the inside in its quest for empire. When the five Unions form an alliance, the head of the Arab-Islamic Union refuses to lead the alliance, since power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. He insists instead on a rotating leadership by citing the Arab experience with dictatorship, and the failings of once revolutionary presidents such as Abdel Nasser and Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat. The Arab-Islamic Union itself ensures equal rights to all its citizens. Khalid also admires Greek mythology and befriends the monks of the (pagan) Temple of Apollo during the narrative.

In *The Planet of the Viruses*, Salah Al-Din is pardoned for his breach of procedure because he did not break any central tenants of Islam; even the worldly laws he broke were approximations meant to further the public good. (The constitution has Islamic jurisprudential clauses in it, but gives leeway for interpretation). Although there are no detailed descriptions of elections or electoral procedures in the novel, the broad principles of democracy are adhered to and dramatized for the Egyptian readership.

Although El-Zembely's successors are more versatile and sophisticated at narrative and characterization, and deal with a wider range of topics and subgenres, they also seem less ambitious when it comes to themes and content. In comparison with El-Zembely's optimistic vision of the future, why aren't their novels dealing with the proper place of religion in politics, democracy, modernity and Islam? What about Muslims uniting and journeys of discovery and scientific advance? In contrast, the tone is bleak and pessimistic, as evidenced by such novels as *Malaaz* and *The Black Winter*. Instead, such grim post-apocalyptic futures are symptomatic of the democratic relapse suffered by the Arab Spring revolutions. The spring turned to fall, according to Ahmed Al-Mahdi (Al-Mahdi 2017), and there has been an attendant rise in political censorship or in publishers not wanting to get into trouble with the new authorities. Such a situation further hampers the development of a still nascent genre such as SF in Egypt. Little or no critical attention is given to works of Arabic SF on television, in national newspapers or in academia.

It must be understood that SF came late to the Arab world since the novel and short story themselves came late to the corpus of Arabic and Islamic literature (Johnson et al 2007). The pioneer of the short story in Egyptian literature, Yousef Idris, only began writing in the 1950s. Although the Arabic peoples have a long and proud history of fantasy writing behind them, from *The Thousand and One Nights* onwards, early forays into speculative fiction were blunted by a sense of nostalgia for the more pious days of the past, instead of looking forward to the future. Arabic SF also suffers from much of the same problems that SF suffers from elsewhere in the developing world, since the genre also exists uneasily with others such as magic realism and surrealism which are better known internationally (Molina-Gavilán et al 2007); overladen by local factors of censorship and economic hardship that face struggling authors.

Publishers in Egypt regularly take into account the lifecycle of a book by looking at how quickly it ends up in the second-hand market. This includes the black market, since many printing presses operate illegally, and flood the second-hand book stalls with the same set of novels over and over again (Knezevic 2013). There are no literary agents and few copy-editors; young authors often have to bankroll their own publications and the quality of paper is atrocious with cover images pilfered from the internet. (Copyright laws are very lax in Egypt and other Arabic countries, with the onus on the author not the publisher – a point often explicitly stated in contracts). By contrast, Wael and Mahmoud Abel Raheem were lucky because they had a young publisher willing to take a risk on new names, whilst most of their writings appear outside of the genre.

One could add that the absence of subgenre designations is holding back the industry in the Arab world too. Subgenres are very important as a marketing and sales tactic, allowing authors and publishers to target specific audiences and cultivate niche markets. According to Al-Mahdi, the internet is slowly breaking down boundaries and video games, especially multiple online role-playing games, are an important source of inspiration, as are western sub-genres such as cyberpunk and steampunk (Al-Mahdi 2017). By contrast, though, the Islamic concepts that were important to earlier writers, such as El-Zembely, are largely conspicuous by their absence; a partial exception being Ammar Al-Masry's *Shadows of Atlantis* (2017). In reviewing the work of El-Zembely through the prism of contemporary Egyptian SF, I would argue that a synthesis of the older and newer forms of the genre is required. The anticipatory power of positive SF, from the earlier moralistic phase, needs to be coupled with the grittier, multidimensional writing and characterizations represented by the current state of the genre. Only this will deservedly carry it forward to the lofty heights that SF has attained internationally.

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