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The Beginnings of Egyptian Science Fiction Literature

Abstract: There has been a long debate about the origins of science fiction literature in Egypt. Scholars debate who was the first writer to include motifs of the genre, who made references to it and sought inspiration in it. It is commonly assumed that the beginnings of science fiction in Egypt date back to the late forties or early fifties of the last century, and Taufīq al-Ḥakīm and Yūsuf ʻIzz ad-Dīn ʻĪsà are mentioned as pioneers of the genre. But were they definitely the first writers who alluded to science fiction in their literary works? Did this literary genre in Egypt really appear in the 1940s or 1950s? Drawing on the latest studies, the authors of the article attempt to answer these questions and bring the beginnings of science fiction literature in Egypt closer to the fore. They also seek to highlight the importance of the first examples of SF literature in Egypt and their role in promoting the new literary genre in the country.

Keywords: science fiction, 20th century Egyptian literature, Egyptian science fiction novel, Egyptian science fiction drama

Abstrakt: Od dawna toczy się debata na temat początków literatury science fiction w Egipcie. Badacze spierają się o to, kto jako pierwszy wprowadził motywy tego gatunku, kto do niego nawiązywał i szukał w nim inspiracji. Powszechnie przyjmuje się, że początki fantastyki naukowej w Egipcie sięgają końca lat 40. lub początku lat 50. ubiegłego wieku. Jako pionierów tego gatunku wymienia się Taufīqa al-Ḥakīma i Yūsufa ʻIzz ad-Dīna ʻĪsę. Czy jednak na pewno byli to pierwsi pisarze egipscy, którzy w swoich utworach nawiązywali do science fiction? Czy ten gatunek w Egipcie rzeczywiście pojawił się w latach 40. lub 50. ubiegłego wieku? Autorzy artykułu, opierając się na wynikach najnowszych badań, próbują udzielić odpowiedzi na te pytania, przybliżając równocześnie początki literatury fantastycznonaukowej w Egipcie. Starają się także zwrócić uwagę na znaczenie pierwszych przykładów literatury SF w Egipcie i ich rolę w promowaniu nowego gatunku w tym kraju.

Słowa kluczowe: fantastyka naukowa, literatura egipska XX wieku, egipska powieść science fiction, egipski dramat science fiction

Fantasy and fiction are the basic principles on which literature is based. In Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* inspired by *Arabian Nights,* the author states that since the real world is full of magic, "magical worlds could easily be real" (Rushdie 1990, 20). The creation of literary reality and magical worlds is an expression of creative freedom, which in an unrestricted way, and even in the most fantastic visions, eventually becomes a reflection on man and his place in the world. Drawing pictures of the future, science fiction literature gives the writer a special space in which fantasy seems to have no limits; just as the secrets of the human psyche are unfathomable, so is the future of humanity. However, unlike the unlimited imagination of writers, the science fiction genre has its own frameworks. These frameworks define it, characterize it, and distinguish it from other literary genres.

Although science fiction themes can be found already in ancient literature, as pointed out by David Seed, it was not until the late 19th century that its real development took place (Sīd 2016, 9).

As noted by Everett Franklin Bleiler, since the 1920s both writers and critics alike have been occupied by the question of what science fiction literature is and what defines it, and it has been an inexhaustible subject of dispute in those circles (Bleiler 1982, 12).[1] The name of the genre itself has also been a matter of discussion, although a compromise seems to have been reached, at least among marketing-minded publishers, as pointed out by Edward James (James 1994, 2–3). The British writer and scholar Adams Roberts opens the first chapter of his monograph entitled *Science Fiction: The New Critical Idiom* with the words: "The term 'science fiction' resists easy definition. This is curious because most people have a sense of what science fiction is" (Roberts 2000, 1). Although it seems that we know the very essence of the genre, the multitude of approaches and points of view on the definition of sci-fi makes it very difficult to reach unanimity. In his study, Adams Roberts himself refers mostly to the concepts of Darko Suvin, who, in the opinion of John Rieder, has proposed "[...] by far the most influential formal definition" (Rieder 2017, 16). According to Darko Suvin: "SF is then a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin 1979, 62). However, as we are well aware, this popular definition has not resolved all the disputes and dilemmas surrounding the genology of science fiction. Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan, editors of *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* wrestling with the problem of genre definition, decided to set a fairly broad framework for the object of their study in an attempt to take into account the evolution of the genre, its richness, and diversity of expressions. The scholars wrote: "Tak-

[1] It is worth mentioning that Brian Stableford believes that the earliest use of the term science fiction was by William Wilson in his book *A Little Earnest Book Upon a Great Old Subject,* in which he defined science fiction as a sort of literature "in which the revealed truths of science may be given, interwoven with a pleasing story which may itself be poetical and true – thus circulating a knowledge of the Poetry of Science, clothed in a garb of the Poetry of Life", Brian Stableford as cited in Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight. Postmodern Science Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 6.

ing our cues from Knight, Rieder, Suvin and Carl Freedman among others the editors […] understand the term SF to in general denote a very broad category of aesthetic enterprise that posits some discontinuity with the empirical world – as opposed to continuity with the empirical world – and further understand that the nature of that discontinuity is in alignment with a principally post-Enlightenment value system that is oriented toward naturalized as opposed to supernaturalised extrapolation" (Link, Canavan 1917,7).

In *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, John Rieder, the author of many publications on science fiction, argues that a modern definition of science fiction should consider a number of aspects, such as literary (including genre theory), social, and historical ones, in order to fully reflect the reality of the phenomenon (Rieder 2017, 15–27).Contemporary considerations of science fiction literature make us look at it in an exceptionally broad perspective. Its definition is most fully revealed and crystallized in the rich literary output created over the following decades by successive generations of writers who identified themselves with science fiction but who did not always call it by the same name. John Rieder points out that "Perhaps the scholarly task that best highlights the importance of genre definition is bibliography where the choice of what titles to include necessarily has to be guided by clearly articulated criteria that often include such definition" (Rieder 2017, 13).

Most Arab scholars are of the opinion that science fiction has emerged in the history of modern Arabic literature as a borrowing from Western literature. ʻIṣām al-Bahà writes explicitly that "the Arab science fiction writer necessarily turns to the Western heritage of this literary genre" (al-Bahà 1999, 44). The Egyptian writer Nihād Šarīf points out that the Arabic expression al-ḫayāl al-ʻilmī – science fiction, which is now commonly used, is a translation of the English term and became popular in Egypt in the late 1970s (Hazzā' 2014, 41).[2] Arab researchers and writers also attempt to create their own definitions of science fiction literature based on the present output of the Arabic literary *oeuvre* of this genre and the most popular Western concepts and theories. For example, according to Muḥammad ʻAzzām, the author of *Al-Ḫayāl al-ʻilmī fī al-adab* (Science Fiction in Literature) "SF literature is a form of reconciliation between literature and science, or at least an attempt to bring them closer together. At first it was writers who inspired scientists, later it was the former who had to chase after scientific discoveries and inventions" (ʻAzzām 1994, 9). The aforementioned ʻIṣām al-Bahà, an Egyptian scholar specialised in studies of science fiction literature defined it as "literature in which, from the very beginning, fiction is related to scientific facts or scientific discoveries or hypotheses based on scientific data. These provide a starting point to explore an unknown side of existence, life, or the human psyche. It locates vents to an unknown space in the past, the present or the future" (al-Bahà 1999, 12). As we might expect, Arab scholars are not unanimous in their theories. Each of them emphasises different features and aspects of SF in their concepts. After all, as Muḥammad Aḥmad Muṣṭafà notes, "there is no single, complete and

[2] Before that, the term al-adab al-ʻilmī, i.e. scientific literature, was commonly used.

exhaustive definition of SF and this is due to its nature, which links it to many genres we can find within it" (Muṣṭafà 2007, 83).

Like Western writers and literary critics, Arab researchers and authors also seek the first traces of science fiction in the distant past and the rich heritage of their literary tradition. As Muḥammad Aḥmad Muṣṭafà points, "SF began to emerge much earlier than its very definition" (Muṣṭafà 2007, 85). In 2016, the Egyptian Writers Union organized a conference entitled *Science Fiction: Between Science and Story* in Cairo. During the conference, as-Sayyid Niğm presented his paper *Science Fiction of Ancient Arabs* in which he analyzed the literary works of al-Fārābī, al-Mas'ūdī, al-Qazwīnī and Ibn Ṭufayl with regard to the characteristic features of science fiction literature. In his article referring to the conference, As-Sayyid Niğm (2020) remarked: "We may conclude that the features of science fiction can be seen as follows: a vision of the future that uses technological advances, scientific theories and discoveries as well as travel through time and space to achieve the happiness of everyone. It is certain that the Arab mentality has aspired to employ this understanding in the past without attachment to the term (science fiction). Some of what was written in Arabic in the past had those characteristics of science fiction" (Niğm 2020). As-Sayyid Niğm also mentioned that the beginnings of the modern Arabic science fiction literature are presently associated with the writings of Egyptian penmen Taufīq al-Ḥakīm and Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà. Both the cited article and Niğm's conference paper are part of a lengthy debate about the beginnings of science fiction literature in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. It is therefore our aim in this paper to contribute to the debate by shedding more light on the origins of the genre in this country.

The earliest literary work from the treasury of modern Egyptian literature to which Arab critics refer when considering the origins of science fiction literature is *Ḥadīṯ 'Īsà Bin Hišām* (What 'Īsà Bin Hišām Told Us) by Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, which appeared in episodes in the journal *Miṣbāḥ aš-šarq* under the title *Fatra min az-zaman* (A Period of Time). The entire collection of *Ḥadīṯ 'Īsà Bin Hišām* was first published in 1906 (Haykal 1994, 183).[3] Maḥmūd Qāsim, the author of a monograph entitled *Al-Ḫayāl al-'ilmī. Adab al-qarn al-'ašrīn* (Science Fiction. Literature of the 20th Century), explicitly indicates that the roots of science fiction literature in Egypt can be traced back to this fantasy and fairy-tale novel (Qāsim 1994, 53). Qāsim's opinion seems quite controversial. Above all, *Ḥadīṯ 'Īsà Bin Hišām* is composed in the tradition of stories or novels inspired by the maqamas, in this case the maqamas by al-Hamaḏānī. Indeed, they contained some fantastical elements, but still they are far from contemporary science fiction literature. Egyptian scholar Ḥamāda Hazzā' draws attention to this question by arguing that al-Muwayliḥī's novel lacks the essential elements typical of science fiction literature such as hypotheses, scientific facts, and quasi-scientific

[3] In the novel, the main character, Īsà Bin Hišām, which is clearly inspired by al-Hamḏānī's maqamas, finds in the cemetery an open grave from which Aḥmad al-Manīklī the minister of war from the time of Muhammad Ali comes out. Both men roam the streets of Cairo, which becomes an opportunity to outline the socio-political situation in Egypt at the end of the 20th century.

discourse. Thus, the *Ḥadīṯ ʻĪsà Bin Hišām* fails to meet the basic characteristics of the genre (Hazzāʻ 2014, 80).

A literary work almost completely forgotten, and which, unlike *Ḥadīṯ ʻĪsà Bin Hišām*, is much closer to modern science fiction literature, is the short story by Maḥmūd Ḫalīl Rāšid entitled *Miṣr sana 1950* (Egypt in 1950), which was written in English in 1915. The short story translated into Arabic was included in a collection *Al-Ḥaqīqa wa-al-ḫayāl* (The Truth and the Fantasy, nd) (Hazzāʻ 2014, 85). It is worth briefly presenting the plot of this short story due to its historical value in the context of the evolution of Egyptian science fiction literature. Saʻīd, who is the protagonist, is the son of a poor farmer and comes from around Aswan. When the government introduces compulsory education, the boy goes to school. He turns out to be a gifted student and soon obtains a secondary school diploma with distinction. The Ministry of Education decides to send him to a teacher training college in Alexandria to continue his education there. Saʻīd flies by plane to Alexandria. He begins to explore the city. Unfortunately, he is deeply disappointed. He finds the habits of the locals unappealing. He is struck by the sight of women with bare faces and easy access to alcohol. And so he decides to return to his family, abandoning the corrupt city of Alexandria.

In Maḥmūd Ḫalīl Rāšid's story we find many ideas or visions that have been implemented in reality, such as free public education, quick means of transport: airplanes, underground trams, and finally the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in Aswan. Although the ideas about the future in the *Miṣr sana 1950* may not be too bold, the story itself is an interesting example of the beginning of science fiction literature in Egypt, which Ḥamāda Hazzāʻ also clearly emphasizes (Hazzāʻ 2014, 86).

The most interesting aspects of *Miṣr sana 1950* are its literary composition and form. The story is written in realistic language devoid of elements of pseudoscientific discourse. However, it contains a fair amount of quasifuturistic components based on the scientific knowledge available at the time, which were given a specific function in its composition. Because of this fact, *Miṣr sana 1950* balances between different genres, but is clearly influenced by science fiction.

In the opinion of Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Aḥmad Muṣṭafà, the essence of science fiction literature consists in the combination of reality (including the socio-political context), science, perception of the future, and an ideological or philosophical concept (Muṣṭafà 2007, 81). According to the scholar, a specific image of the future is not so much a bold, futuristic vision but rather a tool for constructing a metaphorical narrative about the present day, current challenges, and problems. Damien Broderick and Samuel Delany also draw attention to the important role of metaphor in science fiction (Broderick 1995, 155; Delany 1994, 123). Maḥmūd Ḫalīl Rāšid uses elements of scientism and futuristic vision very carefully. In the story, the elements related to civilizational progress are not merely an attractive background to other events, but rather a tool to accentuate and reinforce the message that *Miṣr sana 1950* carries. Saʻīd's journey to Alexandria is like a journey to another planet in terms of worldview, beliefs, and culture. The airplane is a symbolic vehicle that transports the protagonist of the story to

a different and unknown world. The cosmopolitan city, full of technical innovations, is a completely new reality for a boy from the poor south. The city is full of interesting puzzles, but also dangers that seem to lurk at every step. The modern world of Alexandria also represents a completely different approach to life, religion, and traditional morality. In *Miṣr sana 1950*, technological and civilizational progress is essentially equated with changes in worldview. Modernity is not a neutral phenomenon, but rather a real threat. 'Iṣām al-Bahà notes that in SF literature it is not the journey that is the most important, but what happens next, how the characters behave, how they cope with the new conditions, how they respond to the challenges they face (al-Bahà 1999, 37). Sa'īd withdraws. He decides to escape from this 'planet', which he finds new and incomprehensible. For him the confrontation with the 'alien' and the 'new' is a threat and a risk of losing his own identity. Damien Broderick comments that "SF is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal" (Broderick 1995, 155). We can guess that such reflections on the dynamic changes that took place in Egypt in the first decades of the 20th century were the main impulse for Maḥmūd Ḫalīl Rāšid to write the story. Its message is not very optimistic and makes us look fearfully toward the future in which modernity and technology are taking away traditional values.

In our opinion, first of all, the Egyptian writer was inspired by the very idea of science fiction literature, which was gaining popularity in Egypt in the early 20th century. In Maḥmūd Ḫalīl Rāšid's story one can primarily find certain motifs or elements often present in science fiction such as: travelling into space, meeting inhabitants of another planet, living in a reality filled with intelligent machines, etc. Beyond any doubt, *Miṣr sana 1950* is a very noteworthy step towards Egyptian science fiction literature and an expression of interest in this genre among Egyptian writers in the early 20th century.

A few years after *Miṣr sana 1950* was written, in 1926 Salāma Mūsà published a collection of essays entitled *Aḥlām al-falāsifa* (Dreams of Philosophers). The book by the Egyptian writer and thinker also included a short story entitled *Ḫaymī: muqaddima li-ṭūbà miṣriyya* (Ḫaymī: an Introduction to Egyptian Blessedness). According to Ḥamāda Hazzā', this story should be considered the first Egyptian literary text that meets the definition of science fiction (Hazzā' 2014, 80). A similar opinion is also held by Muḥammad Aḥmad Muṣṭafà, who points out that Salāma Mūsà was not only the first Egyptian, but also the Arab author to write in this genre (SF) (Muṣṭafà 2007, 85). In the story, the author presents a vision of his country in 3105. It begins with the protagonist's reflection on time and space: "Time is a kind of place. So instead of saying: this event took place one thousand years ago we can say that this event took place in a given position in the aerospace" (Mūsà 1926, 107). The man falls asleep and when he wakes up, he learns from a woman named Rādyūm who has been taking care of him that in 1925 he suffered a brain paralysis. His remaining organs remained intact, so for 1180 years he was in the hands of doctors. The man gradually learns about the world around him and how many changes have occurred since he fell into

a coma. The very appearance of the people around him draws his attention. The inhabitants of Ḫaymī have elongated bodies. They are slim and have large heads. Men and women wear simple, similar clothes. They eat fruit with different flavors that provide them with all the necessary ingredients. It is noteworthy that the inhabitants of Ḫaymī hardly show any affection. They are neither nervous nor happy. They move using remote controlled flying machines. Thanks to special devices, they can talk to their relatives and friends remotely, while seeing their faces. Social, political, and religious life looks completely different than in our world and is subordinated to science and care for the quality of life. Thanks to conversations with Rādyūm, the protagonist learns about the principles that rule the state and social relations. Salāma Mūsà finishes his story with the words: "What we want in reality, we see in a dream. So let us not laugh at our dreams and visions" (Mūsà 1926, 124).

The literary scholar Muḥammad ʻAzzām described *Ḫaymī: muqaddima liṭūbà miṣriyya* as a socio-political utopia written in the genre of science fiction (ʻAzzām 1994, 36). His opinion is very pertinent and captures the distinct features of Salām Mūsà's story in a synthetic manner. On the other hand, in our opinion, it is worth looking at *Ḫaymī* not so much as a socio-political utopia, but as an interesting and successful attempt to construct a literary message with social and philosophical overtones, based on a completely new model in Egyptian literature derived from the genre of science fiction. Adams Roberts points out that the common element that links several definitions of science fiction is the issue of 'encounter with difference'. As Roberts writes: "This encounter is articulated through a 'novum', a conceptual, or more usually material embodiment of alterity, the point at which the SF text distils the difference between its imagined world and the world which we all inhabit" (Roberts 2000, 28). This novum, the importance of which has already been emphasized by Darko Suvin, constitutes in Salām Mūsà's short story a very important element of composition (Suvin 1979, 62–63). It is related to another concept, also introduced by Suvin, which is estrangement (Suvin 1979, 62). We are amazed and surprised when the nameless hero of the story wakes up in a completely new world. Our astonishment grows the more we learn about the world of Ḫaymī – the future Egypt. Nothing in Ḫaymī is as we might expect. Both the protagonist and the readers are surrounded by the reality of a 'novum' a world whose organization and functioning vary quite significantly from our own. This novum is enhanced and affirmed by a series of bizarre devices that help structure everyday life in the Egypt of the future. The language of the story itself, saturated with pseudoscientific discourse explaining Ḫaymī's reality, is also an element enhancing this novum for the reader. However, all these elements, like novum and estrangement, so strongly associated with the tradition of science fiction literature, are only a tool to achieve the ideological goal of interpreting the literary work and capturing its meaning. What shocks the reader of Salām Mūsà's short story most is not the very otherness of the world in which the protagonist wakes up, but the fact that he finds himself in such an 'un-Egyptian' Egypt, among such 'un-Egyptian' Egyptians. Otherness here is not about the inhabitants of another planet, but about 'our people' in a distant future, which is in

tune with Scott McCracken's observation that the fantasy of meeting the other is at the root of science fiction (McCracken 1998, 102). Another thing that Salāma Mūsà fantasizes about is his compatriot, who, although he shares common roots with him, lives in a completely different way. Salāma Mūsà, an activist for social change and founder of a socialist party in Egypt, was aware of the changes taking place in the world and in his country. He saw the 'old world' giving way to the onslaught of the youth. He also saw the force with which technological innovations invaded everyday life. Adams Roberts notes that "SF uses the trappings of fantasy to explore again age-old issues; or, to put it another way, the chief mode of science fiction is not prophecy, but nostalgia" (Roberts 2000, 33). Such is the nostalgia that *Ḫaymī* brings us. It is a nostalgia for 'his well-known Egypt, which is drifting into the past. It is a reflection on the inevitable change of generations, the passage of time, and unforeseen changes that await us. In light of contemporary research on science fiction literature, which brings richness and multiplicity of theoretical approaches to the genre, we have no doubt that *Ḫaymī: muqaddima li-ṭūbà miṣriyya* by Salāma Mūsà should be considered the first Egyptian literary work set so explicitly in the science fiction genre.

The 1940s and 1950s in Egypt mark a period of increasing interest in literature closely linked to science. The technological and scientific advances that followed the end of the Second World War were not without significance. From the 1940s onwards, Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà began writing literary works for radio stations in which we find elements of fantasy and science fiction. It is worth noting that in his monograph *Al-Ḫayāl al-'ilmī fī al-adab al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir* (Science Fiction in Contemporary Arabic Literature), Yūsuf aš-Šārūnī begins his reflections on the beginnings of Egyptian science fiction literature precisely with a discussion of this writer's radio dramas. In 1942, an Egyptian radio station broadcast the series *Banwara al-amīra al-masḥūra* (Banwara the Enchanted Princess), which, according to Yūsuf aš-Šārūnī, referred to *Arabian Nights*, combining certain scientific facts with fantasy (aš-Šārūnī 2000, 49, 93). In 1943, Radio Cairo broadcast his next radio drama - *Farāša taḥlum* (Dreaming Butterfly) which was written in a similar style. Generally, these first writings by Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn were dedicated to children, but as early as 1950, Radio London broadcast his radio drama *Raǧul min al-māḍī* (A Man form the Past) for adult listeners. Here, the main theme is the hibernation of the main character, who returns to his family after a coma of fifty years. Unfortunately, most of Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà's writings mentioned above were published only as summaries many years later, mainly in the 1970s.

In a similar period when Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà was beginning to write for the radio, the essays and articles of the writer and chemist Aḥmad Zakī gained great popularity in Egypt. In the introduction to Zakī's collection of essays, Muṣṭafà Nabīl wrote that just like in "the chemical process, he combines science with literature" (Nabīl 2001, 7). However, it should be noted that the collections of Zakī's texts, such as *Ma'a Allāh fī as-samā'* (With God in Heaven; 1945), although often touching on the issues of the distant future or the conquest of space, do not go beyond essay writings, which was also noted by Ḥamāda Hazzā'. The Egyptian scholar indicated, however, that Zakī's work can be considered "sources of the science fiction literature" in Egypt (Hazzā' 2014, 80).

Almost in the same period as Aḥmad Zakī, Taufīq al-Ḥakīm became interested in the science fiction genre. His collection of plays *Masraḥ al-muğtama'* (Theatre of the Society), published in 1950, included the drama *Law 'arafa aš-šabāb* (If the Young Men Had Known), preceded with a brief authorial statement: "Inspired by life of society and modern science" al-Ḥakīm 1950, 641). The protagonist is an aging public figure Ṣadīq Bāšā who suffers from coronary artery disease. Due to his illness, he visits doctor Ṭal'at, who is a young and ambitious scientist working with his American colleague on the process of human cells renewal. Ṣadīq Bāšā proposes that they test their new medicament on him hoping that it could restore his youth. It turns out that the medicine is effective. The protagonist of the play becomes a young man again, which, of course, gives rise to a series of unpredictable events as no one can believe that the vivacious individual is none other than Ṣadīq Bāšā. However, the miraculous specific has restored youth only to the body, leaving Ṣadīq old in the mind. Unable to cope with the whole situation, the protagonist eventually asks Ṭal'at to make him old again. When this happens, it turns out that it was all just a dream.

Muḥammad al-'Abd distinguishes four schemes in his analysis of narrative strategies in science fiction literature. These are: dialogue/conflict between reality and fantasy, slowing the rhythm of narrative sequences, adapting the narrative to the characteristics of the genre, and abbreviation/syntheticism typical of press narratives (al-'Abd 2007, 28–48). Although in the case of *Law 'arafa aš-šabāb* we are dealing with a drama, we can see here very clearly characteristics of the first strategy indicated by Muḥammad al-'Abd. As the Egyptian scholar argues, science fiction takes a specific stance towards reality. "A literary work usually begins with a real event and gradually moves into science fiction" (al-'Abd 2007, 34). This is also the case with al-Ḥakīm's drama. The ageing Ṣadīq Bāšā longs to be young and healthy again. His illness becomes an opportunity to meet with the young doctor and the ambitious scientist who wants to break the boundaries of science, which offers him a chance to realize his own desires. This gives rise to his extraordinary experience. Al-Ḥakīm introduces a quasiscientific discourse into his play, in which he explains in a logical and convincing manner the goal of Ṭal'at's research and the effects of the drug produced by the team of scientists. That said, it is not the language itself that is important here. What constitutes the value of the drama with regard to its classification to a new genre in Egyptian literature is the situation in which Ṣadīq Bāšā finds himself after the transformation. The rationally justified element of estrangement expressed by the protagonist's rejuvenation becomes the hottest point of conflict in the drama. This is simultaneously the axis of conflict/dialogue and the tension that arises between reality and fantasy. Here, the fantastic element becomes a device with which al-Ḥakīm comments on very real problems. As Muḥammad al-'Abd writes, "fantasy always appears as a tool to talk about reality" (al-'Abd 2007, 34). The clash between reality and fantasy makes us ask ourselves a number of questions about the dilemmas that arise from people's quest for immortality and eternal youth. This clash provokes questions about the temporal dimension of human existence and the role of time in human life.

Interestingly, al-Ḥakīm locates the events of the drama in the realm of dream. This may have a double meaning. On the one hand, the author of the play takes the described events in parenthesis. In this way, he expresses the opinion that despite the logical and scientific explanation of the phenomenon, miraculous medicine capable of restoring youth is merely a dream fantasy. The youthfulness of the body cannot be reconciled with the mind of an old, experienced man. On the other hand, he hypothesizes that perhaps what we only dream about today may become real tomorrow. On this occasion, it is worth mentioning the concepts of Muḥammad Nağīb at-Talāwī, which are taken up by Ian Campbell in his monograph entitled *Arabic Science Fiction*. The scholars point out that the placement of narrated events in the realm of dream in Arabic science fiction literature may bring "the effect of containing the threat, keeping it within the bounds of the text and thus rendering it a safe experiment rather than a direct challenge to the dominant paradigm" (Campbell 2018, 9). We do not think, however, that in this case al-Ḥakīm was seeking a safe hiding place from the watchful eye of the puritans and used the dream setting to quietly consider bold scientific theories that disrupt the natural order of nature. The motif of a dream is an important element in the composition of the drama linked to the author's ideological assumption, reinforcing the message which the play carries. According to Muḥammad Mandūr, *Law 'arafa aš-šabāb* belongs to the so-called al-Ḥakīm's theatre of the intellect, and expresses primarily the writer's reflection on the temporal dimension of human existence (Mandūr 1960, 39). On the other hand, Yūsuf aš-Šārūnī noticed a critique of the developing science in the play, which solves only part of the problems and often omits the spiritual and emotional dimension of human life (aš-Šārūnī 2000, 106).

In the 1950s, Egyptian science fiction literature was primarily associated with the names of Taufīq al-Ḥakīm and Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà.[4] However, the 1960s already brought completely new figures to the scene. Writers such as Yūsuf as-Sibā'ī, Sa'd Makkāwī, Muḥammad al-Ḥadīdī and Muṣṭafà Maḥmūd began publishing during that period. Finally, in the 1970s, Nihād Šarīf, who basically specialized in science fiction and gave this genre a significant prominence in Egypt and contributed to its popularization, launched his career.

According to the often-cited scholar Ḥamāda Hazzā', the beginning of Egyptian science fiction literature, in a sense, set certain tendencies that continue to this day. The Egyptian scholar points out that there are two dominant currents in the Egyptian literature of this genre. One treats scientific theories and achievements as a means to portray a problem. In the other, all elements: interpretive intention, literary fiction, and 'science', are equal. Here, the development of science, new technological solutions, or the conquest of space are a natural part

[4] In 1953, Taufīq al-Ḥakīm published a collection of short stories entitled *Arinī Allāh* (Show Me God), which contained two science fiction stories *Fī sana milyūn* (In Year One Million) and *Al-Iḫtirā' al-'aǧīb* (The Strange Invention). In 1957 he published a science fiction drama entitled *Riḥla ilà al-ǧadd* (Journey into the Future). In 1955, Egyptian radio broadcast science fiction drama *Lā nurīd al-ḥayāt* (We Do Not Want to Live) written by Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn 'Īsà. In the same year Radio Cairo broadcast another science fiction radio play entitled *Anbā' 'hāmma* (Important News).

of the world presented in the literary works (Hazzā‘ 2014, 92–93). This question is viewed somewhat differently by Muḥammad ‘Azzām, who observes two main trends in the genre (including Egyptian SF) i.e. the trend based on philosophical ideas and the trend based on scientific/technical ideas (‘Azzām 1994, 10).[5]

Undoubtedly, these classifications structure our knowledge of Egyptian science fiction and draw attention to the dominant tendencies that have influenced its evolution from the very beginning. We must not forget, however, that both the pioneers of Egyptian science fiction and contemporary writers drew on the treasury of indigenous Arabic literature on the one hand, and on the other, were constantly influenced by Western authors. In this way, they often created literary works that are very difficult to classify, and assign them to a particular trend or tendency. The generation of pioneers of Egyptian science fiction was not afraid to experiment and sought new forms of expression with boldness. At the same time, it is worth emphasising that the question of whether their literary works belonged to the genre did not occupy them very much. For example, it was only after many years that Yūsuf ‘Izz ad-Dīn ‘Īsà really realized the role he played in promoting science fiction in his country. In the 1930s or 1940s, when he began writing his radio dramas, he did not present himself as a writer representing a new genre in Egyptian literature. He was more interested in experimenting with a new literary formula than in clearly defining the genre which he practiced (aš-Šārūnī 2000, 92, 101). The same applies to Taufīq al-Ḥakīm (al-Bahà 1999, 83–86, 182). During that period, Egyptian critics paid little attention to science fiction, which can be explained by a relatively small number of native literary works written in the new genre. The author of most likely the first article dealing with science fiction is ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, who published *Al-Qiṣṣa al-’ilmiyya* (The Scientific Story) in *Al-Azhar* magazine in 1952 (Hazzā‘ 2014, 92; al-‘Aqqād 1952, 36–43).[6] However, exhaustive critical studies and monographs on Egyptian SF literature did not appear until the 1980s.

Yūsuf aš-Šārūnī points out that the pioneers of Egyptian science fiction were in fact closer to the fantasy genre and only drew inspiration from scientific discoveries. He adds that it was only in the 1960s that there appeared literary works that could be classified as fully fledged science fiction(aš-Šārūnī 2000, 140).[7] In hi *Arabic Science Fiction* Ian Campbell also contends that the beginnings of Arabic (including, we guess, Egyptian) science fiction are traced back to the 1960s (Campbell 2018, 6, 86). As we think, both scholars draw too radical a boundary on contemporary Egyptian science fiction and leave out those examples that perhaps formally deviate somewhat from the ‘normative model’, although, as Rieder

[5] For example, most short stories and dramas written by Taufīq al-Ḥakīm in the fifties of the last century are generally considered a part of an intellectual or philosophical current in his literary career.

[6] In his article al-‘Aqqād briefly introduces the characteristics of science fiction literature and then provides his analysis of *The Day After Tomorrow* by Robert A. Heinlein and *1984* by George Orwell. Then, in 1958 Anwar ‘Abd al-Malik published in *Al-Mağalla* magazine his article entitled *Mā al-adab al-‘ilmī ?* (What Is Science Literature?).

[7] On the other hand, Yūsuf aš-Šārūnī, in the same monograph emphasises also the important role that was played by the pioneers of Egyptian science fiction at the early stage of its development.

and Bleiler prove, it is difficult to create such a model at all (Rieder 2017, 15–27; Bleiler 1982, 10–15). However, to overlook or downplay the importance of the origins of science fiction in Egypt is, in a sense, to deny the evolutionary nature of literature as part of the Egyptian culture. ‘Iṣām al-Bahà and Ḥamāda Hazzā‘ point out that, undeniably, the Egyptian precursors of this genre have contributed considerably to its popularization in their country (Hazzā‘ 2014, 91; al-‘Abd 2007, 86).

One of the key figures in science fiction, the American writer and publisher John W. Campbell believed that a science fiction tale or any other is primarily a story about people: “[...] Modern readers are looking for stories about people living in a world in which a discovery, or many discoveries, and a machine or machines create the background. But what is important is a man, not a machine or an idea” (Gunn 1987, 10). It seems that the precursors of Egyptian science fiction have fully achieved this goal. They proved that in this genre a writer can not only dream about the future or create fantastic worlds in which the achievements of science are combined with literary imagination but can also talk in an interesting and original way about existential problems regardless of the place and time.

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