



Satire in Egyptian Speculative Fiction: Short Stories as a Borderline Case Study

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“It is with deep sorrow that we pause to announce the total destruction of Acapulco. This flash comes to you courtesy of Interworld Transport, Proprietary, the Triple-S Lines: Speed-Safety-Service.” (Robert Heinlein, *Friday*)

“An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper.” (Khalil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*)

Satire is as old as the speculative arts. The 2nd century satirist Lucian of Samosata authored one of the oldest recorded works of science fiction, *A True Story*, with swashbuckling adventures set between the planets to make observations about life down on this planet. Arabic literature itself has a long and proud history of satire coupled with the fantastic, and even ardent realist authors in our history, such as Naguib Mahfouz, hid their political criticisms in literature through a mixture of period drama, symbolism, and surrealism. Egyptian literature serves as a special case study for Arabic satire given the unique problems and opportunities that exist in the Egyptian literary and cultural spheres, in addition to the more obvious political issues. While it is true that Egyptians love comedy and have always used it as a safety-valve and a tool for criticism, older techniques that relied on fantasy have fallen by the wayside over the years due both to censorship and, interestingly, the imperatives of literary modernization. Fortunately, contemporary authors of science fiction and fantasy in Egypt have been reviving some of these older traditions and blending genres to produce new and compelling works of satire.

Satire in the Egyptian SF novel has already garnered a great deal of international attention after Ahmed Khaled Tawfik’s dystopian *Utopia* (2008) ushered in a new era of dystopian novels, which have been translated, celebrated, and studied in the Arab Spring’s tragic aftermath: most notably, Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* (2013), Mohammad Rabie’s *Otared* (2014), and

Ahmed Naji's *Using Life* (2014). Tawfik's *Utopia* was written and published before the 2011 Egyptian revolution and tells the story of a young, privileged resident of a gated community who is so sick of the easy life of decadence – drugs, sex, alcohol – that he ventures out into a “bad” neighborhood to hunt for the poor. He sees the poor, whose body parts he collects as trophies, as animals, not his fellow countrymen. Not coincidentally, this gated community, named Utopia, is guarded by US Marines – a motif for cultural colonization. The protagonist is also depicted as being so westernized that he can disregard cultural taboos around drug use and disrespecting one's father. As I will demonstrate below, this recurrent warping of the personal and the political in Arab and Muslim traditions of satire stem primarily from moral and spiritual concerns with a clear emphasis on family life.

Shorter works of fiction, however, have fallen by the critical wayside. This is unfortunate because there is a substantial amount of satire in Egyptian short fiction, and it is not circumscribed to dystopia. Fortunately, residing in Egypt and being a member of the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF) and the Egyptian Writers' Union, I have direct access to short fiction authors whose works are overlooked. I regularly conduct interviews and reviews or translate their short stories and novellas. In what follows, I will first provide a basic introduction to satire in science fiction and an account of satire in Arabic literary history, focusing on the unique set of problems facing Egyptian authors. Then, I will offer a survey of authors and stories, demonstrating how they share a common concern with personal ethics and the sanctity of the family, as well as a borderline sensibility to writing SF with a fantastical or surreal feel. Finally, I will evaluate the progress made so far and discuss lingering problems in the Egyptian literary context. My conclusion is that satire in the hands of Egyptian SFF authors serves as a tool of decolonization, allowing us to critique our social and political systems with our own jokes and on our own terms. But we still have a long way to go, as we shall see.

1. Satire in Western SF and Arabic literature

Satire is not mere comedy; the objective is not cheap laughs. It is *critique*, pure and simple, and often depends on “cognitive estrangement” (Borgmeier 7; Suvin 12, 61, 238) – a defamiliarized view of reality that differs from the way we normally see things in everyday life. Cognitive estrangement exaggerates salient features of reality that were there, hiding in plain sight, to the point that they become galling and disturb the audience, leading them to realize what was wrong all along. The term is borrowed from theater, Bertolt Brecht more specifically, but is quite comfortable in the world of SF (Campbell 2).

For a concrete illustration, we have Terry Gilliam's post-apocalyptic epic *12 Monkeys* (1995), where humanity resides underground after an airborne virus that is lethal only to humans is released. The hero, James Cole (Bruce Willis), is a prisoner who literally resides in a birdcage (chicken wire instead of bars), with cells stacked on top of each other in the underground caverns. The underground prisoners are “antisocials” who have violated the permanent emergency code, which temporarily allows for summary arrests and the quashing of civil liberties during a war or natural disaster. (This is a term we are all too familiar with in countries like Egypt with no legal change since the

assassination of Sadat in 1981). All the inmates are clean shaven for fear of hair lice, and the new rulers of this world are scientists dressed in lab coats who see people as guinea pigs. Cole has to “volunteer” to go topside and then go backwards in time to study the course of the virus, with endless quarantine procedures. When he reaches the present-day world and starts talking about viruses and human extinction, he is thrown into a lunatic asylum, ending up in the same position as before. He has to be forcefully washed and “deloused” (despite being completely hairless) and put in front of a panel of experts – psychiatrists in white lab coats. In the end when Cole is gunned down, his arms are spread outwards in Christ-like fashion; even the name James Cole or JC is a veiled reference to Jesus Christ. In a key scene, one of the psychiatrists tells Cole’s doctor that they are the new priesthood because they know what is real and what is not, parodying science becoming the new religion. The satirical force of *12 Monkeys* comes from the fact that it is not about the future at all but the world of today, where truth is up for grabs, and the elites have the final say because the masses have given up the right to think for themselves, becoming TV-addicted passive consumers instead. (The hero even has barcode tattoos on his neck and is scanned like a product at a grocery store). But, again, we would not realize these salient features of contemporary reality, how things happen *behind* the scenes, if we were not presented with an alternate world where these hidden realities are made explicit through exaggerated scenarios.

This is an example of speculative world-building, where the metaphorical or the figurative is made literal – an amazing tool sci-fi and fantasy writers have in their satirical armory, in addition to the more usual techniques like irony, lampooning, and dark comedy. *12 Monkeys* is doubly important, as it also illustrates how hard sci-fi itself can borrow from other satirical subgenres, such as surrealism, which emphasizes blurring the boundaries between dream states and conscious reality to make people question the consensus reality and what they consider to be certain. For example, the adult James Cole is haunted by a childhood memory of watching a man being gunned down at an airport. The memory alters slightly every time he dreams, in line with the people he encounters on his mission. This unstable memory makes him doubt his sanity and want to remain in the present. Little does he know that, as a child, he was witnessing his future self being slain on the altar of intellectual elitism. This scene ties into the Christ motif (JC dies but is resurrected) but is also meant to make us doubt what people tell us and encourage us to find our personal truths.

Philip K. Dick, an author who was an inspiration for Gilliam himself, was also interested in blurring the boundaries between SF and surrealism by playing mind-games with both the characters and the readers and making them doubt what is real and what is not. His novel *Lies Inc.* (1984), for instance, is named after a private sector police agency with a computer mainframe programmed to broadcast lies to everybody. One day, it sends out truthful information to an unwitting citizen, subliminally, and the engineer in charge cannot ask the machine why, since it is programmed to lie even to the agency. In *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974) a TV megacelebrity is catapulted into a world where nobody knows who he is, even friends and former lovers. Later the audience learns that a central character in the story snatched him out of his frame of reality after she took a lethal dose of psychedelic drugs, which led to

the dissolution of the boundaries between subjective and objective realities. Dick used these surrealist ploys to make his characters doubt themselves and to encourage the reader to question their own identity and what makes us human. Dick wrote most prolifically in the 1960s-70s, at the height of the drugs culture and Vietnam War protests, and he often set his stories in dystopian police states to lampoon Cold War paranoia and surveillance, with drugs being both a mode of rebellion and a way of medicating the masses.

Now we turn to Arabic literature and Egyptian satire. Arabs have developed an extensive body of literature and literary criticism on comedy and satire since the heyday of the Abbasids in Baghdad, which produced notable scholars, writers, and poets such as Al-Jahiz (776-868) and Ibn Al-Rumi (836-896). Al-Jahiz famously wrote his 9th century classic *Al-Bukhala* (868/9; The Misers) to catalogue the habits of the miserly in his day and with the express intent of lampooning them, as Arabic culture and Islam promoted charity and generosity. Ibn Al-Rumi likewise used satire to lampoon the vices of drinking alcohol. This is the first distinguishing feature of our satire: Its emphasis historically is not on political critique but on improving religious virtue. Satire, as such, was a tool of moral and social reform (Abū Al-Sa‘ūd 62-63, 65). This religious imperative comes straight out of the Quran, a kind of bottom-up approach that sees morality-building at home as the key determiner of the fate of a nation: “... Indeed, Allah would never change a people’s state ‘of favor’ until they change their own state ‘of faith’ (إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ) (Quran 13:11).” One can quibble over interpretations of course, but the point is that Arabs do not enjoy the same rich political tradition of rhetoric stretching back to the Roman republic and Athenian democracy. Consequently, in Islamic history, personal morals, education, and upbringing were always understood to be the main drivers of societal progress or decline. *1001 Nights*, while not strictly a work of satire, is a case in point since the heroine of the tale, Scheherazade, agrees to marry the tyrant Shahryar to reform him in the private sphere, and specifically through stories – the moral punchline.¹

This moral emphasis is equally true of satire in Egyptian history, a part of the Arab world that played a particularly important role in the development of satire, with an almost unbroken tradition stretching from the Fatimids (909-1171) and the Mamluks (from the 13th to the 16th centuries) to the modern era (Dayf). Another distinguishing feature is that our satirical traditions tend more towards song and poetry than prose and storylines. The novel is a modern invention and even more modern an import into Arabic literature, and most prose satire in Arabic before the novel was written in the form of rhythmic prose, known as the *maqāmāt* (originally parables spoken at social gatherings). With time, they extended into entire works the size of a novel or play. Such parables in Islamic history also include fantasy, a tradition that lived on into the modern period in the form of a work such as *Hadith Isa bin Hisham* (The Narrative of Isa Ibn Hisham) – an Egyptian text dating back to 1898 which was published in book form in 1907. It follows the trials and tribulations of an Ottoman official who has risen from the dead, forced to endure the miserable state of Egypt falling under the purview of Western imperialism (Cooperson

¹ A Farsi-speaking Afghani friend once explained to me that Shahryar means “ruler of the city” whereas Scheherazade means “friend of the city,” so the whole tale is a dialogue between the ruler and the ruled.

2008, 420, 441-443). While technically a novel, this work is self-consciously written in the style of the *maqāmāt*, with the title character, Isa bin Hisham, being the narrator-hero from the classic *maqāmā* of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani (969-1007) and dialogue written in a rhythmic style. (This rhythmic prose style is a common feature of Arab-Islamic storytelling and can also be found in *1001 Nights*.)

Sadly, these older fanciful genres, including the *maqāmāt*, went into decline in 20th-century Egyptian literary circles while the novel form, with its linear prose format, was adopted to meet “modern” standards (Brugman 64, 67, 380-381). Fortunately, other forms of satire flourished with the advent of the printing press. Satire took on biting political criticisms in addition to the older moralistic concerns: the plight of the peasant, corruption in political circles, and the British occupation, among others. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many attempts to silence newspapers, magazines, cartoonists, and poets failed as authors could go abroad and write under assumed names (Dayf 134-135). The country had a thriving civil society and parliamentary life too, with a legal and political elite fighting against the authority of the crown when it came to press freedoms. However, a sea change took place in the Nasserist era (1952-1970), which introduced a far more systematic clampdown on freedoms, with the parliament turned into a rubberstamp organization alongside the nationalization of media and publishing industries. This suppression forced Egyptian satire in particular to go underground (Rāghib 32, 37-38).

The Nasserist era also witnessed a major cultural rupture with the few remaining songwriters (Frankford), cartoonists, and essayists in newspapers producing satirical texts in colloquial Arabic (Rāghib 38-39). This shift from classical to colloquial Arabic led to the dwindling of critical attention to satires in a period marked also by the deliberate elevation of socialist realism, which supplanted fantastical and romantic literature. Literary forms ranging from satire and surrealism to Sufi literature suffered as well (‘Uṣfūr 35-36, 38-39, 41). Reading compendious Egyptian texts on satire, one finds only a few chapters on Arabic satirical traditions, with the majority of texts focusing on Western theater and literature. Even in the nonmainstream realm of genre literature, which finally took off in the 1990s, the only Egyptian case study on satire I have been able to find was about Ahmed Khaled Tawfik (Hamzah).

It seems that, in the wake of the twin crackdowns on artistic creativity and journalistic freedom in the Nasserist era, intellectual circles developed a growing inferiority complex about satire. For example, in modern Egypt, poetry was seen as “serious” literature whereas anything satirical was perceived as nonsensical (Ramaḍān 20). Even a noted Egyptian satirist and leftist, Jalaāl ‘Āmir (1952-2012), argued that satire should be kept out of novels because it would *trivialize* literature, and preferred to write satires only in essay form. This is all the more paradoxical when one bears in mind that ‘Āmir was a self-professed surrealist (‘Āmir 12). Browsing through the library bookshelves in Egypt one will find numerous works of satirists, such as Ibrahim Abdel Qadir Al-Mazini (1889-1949) or Mahmoud Taymour (1894-1973), but very few scholarly studies (outside of journalism) of these accomplished authors and the genre they wrote in. As said above, even Naguib Mahfouz dabbled in a little surrealist satire, as evidenced by his story “The Norwegian Rat” (1984), where

the government tries to scare people into thinking all their problems come from abroad. The story depicts a foreign species of rat that is threatening to eat away the Egyptians' food, whereas in reality it is the government official who turns into a rat-like creature to gobble away people's stocks.² Alas, this style of writing was a fad and did not catch on; Mahfouz reverted to social realism and most authors follow his lead to this day.

This lack of critical attention to satire is tragic also because a distinguishing feature of Arabic science fiction is that it is situated on the borders of genres, often overlapping with surrealism and fantasy. Arab authors are schooled in epic tales and Arabic folklore, along with fairytales, myths, and modern fantasy literature from the West, and they draw on all these influences when they write, not least in satire. For example, Dr. Khalid Tuwkal's satiric "The President and the Clones" (2012) depicts a father struggling with bureaucrat after bureaucrat only to discover they are all clones of the president. Then, at home he is attacked by his wife, who is a clone herself, and finally wakes up to discover it was all a dream. This satiric story, while not explicitly science fictional, blends elements of surrealism and SF through the dream motif often found in such narratives. This is an all too familiar technique used by Egyptian SF authors, such as in Muhammad Naguib Matter's utopian short story "The Dream" (2022). A disgruntled father travels by night to get away from his materialistic family, only to get into a small car accident and find himself in a posh but hospitable neighborhood, where he is invited to freshen up and have dinner in the residents' spacious, lush gardens. Later he goes shopping for groceries in the neighborhood and finds the produce is for free, paid for by the state from ample agricultural export revenues, only for him to wake up the following day in a hospital bed. Was it real or a dream? The narrative hints that it is a dream because the protagonist keeps encountering people who look the same, but the story could also be real according to Arabic folklore, which harbors many legends of utopian cities that disappear for hundreds of years, only for hapless wanderers to encounter them (Aysha, "Interviewing Abdel Aal"; Aysha, 2019: 28).

Finally, Egyptian satire has many cultural sources, one of which is the people's bittersweet sense of humor, often lacing cynicism and sarcasm with hope for the future. Satirical narratives always give a sense of the *sturdiness* of the Egyptians in the face of everything the world throws at them, whether it be poverty, injustice, or cruelty. This is exemplified by the closing scene of a comedy movie titled *Mixedupness* (*Khalṭabīṭa*, 1994). The story, clearly modeled on Kafka's *The Trial*, depicts a lonely desk jockey being pursued by some unknown department in the ministry of interior, with nobody (even the court-appointed lawyer) telling him what he is being charged with. While the hero is on the run, the viewer is introduced to a surreal present-day Egypt that is still ruled by aristocrats, with icons from the old monarchical period evident everywhere. He eventually gets accused of murdering an aristocrat (due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time) and is released from prison to be assassinated. First bullets and then cannons are fired at him, but nothing happens. He is the Egyptian man, the populace, who always perseveres.

² For an online English version, please consult:
<https://web.mit.edu/norvin/www/somethingelse/mahfouz.html>.

One finds this kind of tenacity also in many Egyptian SF texts (particularly time travel literature), which often foster a “sense of hope” and “nervous self-assurance” stemming from a faith in the “timeless” or “trans-historical Egyptian character” who is flawed but nonetheless one of the good guys (Cooperson 1998, 185). Such stories are fundamentally moral parables that use speculation and cognitive estrangement to catapult somebody across worlds to make a point about our world.

2. A Thematic Survey of Satire in Contemporary Egyptian Speculative Short Fiction

In this section I will provide a thematic survey of satirical SF stories that are published by the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF), one of the first intellectual gatherings of SF writers in Egypt and formed in 2012, immediately in the wake of the Arab Spring. These stories cover a wide range of subgenres and SF tropes including parallel dimensions, mind surveillance, alien invasion, and environmental SF. They are all post-Arab Spring stories, focusing on themes of social conditioning and political corruption, but with an internal moral focus that refuses to exonerate us from the responsibility of being the authors of our fate. Much satirical SF in Egypt since the 2011 Revolution has turned dystopian or post-apocalyptic, yet, as grim as many of these stories seem, most are in fact optimistic and complicate the category of dystopia.

A good example of this post-Arab Spring satirical SF trend is “Parallel Universes” (2013), written by the ESSF’s founder and director Dr. Hosam Elzembely. This humorous story follows an Egyptian nuclear physicist who discovers the secret to travelling to a parallel Egypt in 2020. After he makes his trip, a Scientific Intelligence team shows up on his doorstep and explains to his wife the exact nature of his research and how they had been trying to get him to cooperate with them. That is when the reader learns what prompted the physicist’s departure: the sorry state of his country, which is now divided into several countries. Then the storyline cuts to the scientist in the parallel Egypt – a country that is beautiful, green, and prosperous. The physicist gets picked up by (very polite) cops, and when he queries them, he discovers that the date and time is the same and that this parallel Egypt had also experienced an Arab Spring revolution beginning in Tunis. The only difference is that their despot was called Mabrouk, instead of Mubarak. More important still is that the parallel country remained united, and even united with other Arab countries, despite the divisions and chaos the country witnessed after the January 2011 revolution. The trick was the novum of “attitude changer” – a wrist band invented by a group of social scientists and human development experts after realizing what was driving people apart was their inability to respect each other’s views. The closing scene depicts the scientist’s wife rummaging through her husband’s belongings to find a message he had scrawled down, promising that he would return. This final optimistic scene implies that the scientist will bring the attitude changer back with him to fix the current state of his Egypt.

The “polite” policemen, a virtual impossibility in Egypt, along with greenery and clean streets signals that cognitive estrangement operates in positive mode in this story. Contemporary Cairo is a city lacking proper urban planning and adequate infrastructure, marked a widespread garbage problem

and the felling of trees. The story presents a view of Egypt that functions as a form of shock therapy to highlight what Cairo *could* be, if people took responsibility and devised a novum (the attitude changer) that works almost like a magic wand or a spell in a fantasy story. The parallel dimension trope is used here as a ploy for what is essentially a morality play. Not coincidentally, Dr. Elzembely is a trenchant fan of *1001 Nights* and frequently combines riddles and moral exposition with SF tropes in his stories. In this story the scientist is portrayed almost like a sorcerer, holding a glowing orb in his hand that expands till it opens a portal, and he climbs in, engulfed by the light. No explanation is given in this opening section, deliberately, to befuddle the reader. The Scientific Intelligence unit also explains to his wife that the scientist had discovered the language of existence, the secret code that holds the universe together and allows for travel across parallel dimensions. While the story is deeply political, the onus again is more personal: how *we* destabilized our nation by our bad habits and how we have a responsibility to rectify what we as individuals did wrong.

This strategy of combining SF tropes with the concerns of a morality play can also be found in Muhammad Naguib Matter's (Dr. Elzembely's second in command at the ESSF) Arab Spring story "The Game of the Revolution" (2013), which mobilizes the science fictional trope of mind surveillance through advanced technology. The narrative revolves around a policeman investigating the harrowing violence that takes place during a football match between the red team and the white team – a clear reference to the famous Ahli and Zamalik football clubs in Egypt. (These clubs are often used as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the government and the opposition). The cop gets transferred because of his investigation but does not give up and eventually learns that the ministry of information was using a special device to transmit subliminal signals (images and sounds of violence and bloodshed) to manipulate the crowds of football fans. The device comes from Israel, but people on the inside are doing the dirty work, and the policeman narrowly prevents another bloodbath from happening when the 25th of January 2011 protest marches begin. (This is Police Day in Egypt, and in 2011 young people used the occasion to protest police brutality, which had resulted in the death of an internet activist.) In the story there is a clear call for national unity in the face of foreign (and not so foreign) threats, exemplified in the person of the policeman who is doing his duty, and the Egyptian youth who are torn between factions (the rival football fans). The title is the ultimate satirical instrument here since it means that the Arab Spring is not something trivial like a (football) game, and the people's will is not to be *toyed* with (the Arabic word for game *lu'ba* also means toy). Here the science fictional novum (the device that transmits subliminal signals) operates within a very realistic and highly moralizing framework to satirize Egypt's contemporary reality.

Another SF story by Muhammad Naguib Matter, "Hole in the Head" (2017) tackles the theme of mind surveillance through a surrealist play with dreams. The story depicts an engineering student who is woken up from a sound sleep by strangers to be told that they will drill a hole into his head so that they can pour the entire curriculum into his skull. This brutal scene which satirizes the Egyptian education system with its emphasis on endless memorization, makes the metaphorical act of cramming literal through a science fictional technology. When he objects, saying that this will deprive him

of his creative freedom, the strangers tell him that he will at least have the freedom to choose which direction the wind flows in his blueprint designs. The story also plays with the readers' perceptions as the student wakes up at the end, wondering whether it was all a dream (recollect "The President and the Clones" from above, or *12 Monkeys*). In yet another story, "Fingerprint" (2017), Matter envisions a device that picks up the sign waves emitted by the brain when one is dreaming. In the middle of one night, the police wakes up a hapless person and bring him in for questioning. The charge is not subversion but *dreaming* of subversion as the hero had dreamed about joining a protest march – something he would never do while awake. This dystopian world in which even the contents of one's head are no longer private due to advanced technology satirizes the abysmal state of our country where we are not even allowed to dream of a better future, let alone make it a reality. This is a common Egyptian sentiment, even beyond politics, with families teaching their kids not to have aspirations. He who looks up (has ambitions) gets tired, as the Egyptian saying goes!

The theme of social conditioning through advanced technology ties into the classical science fiction trope of alien invasion in Lamyaa Al-Said's Arab Spring story "The Rebels" (2013). The story begins on an advanced alien world populated by intelligent reptilians. This is a world of total technological and social control. As with the abovementioned stories, even sleep is monitored (this time with drugs), and electroshock therapy administered if one does not get their allotted quota of rest. A handful of rebellious youngsters, who are fed up with their lives of rigid certainty, decide to escape like their brave predecessors who left for this primitive planet we call Earth. On Earth, the aliens disguise themselves as human beings and try to blend in, having chameleon-like qualities, but the advanced Western world with its endless rules and procedures reminds one of them too much of their home world. (This is a euphemism about democracy since this alien wants to usurp power on Earth.) So, he sets his eyes on "the East," where people are naive and follow their emotions. He thinks these are lands accustomed to tyranny, not science, reason, and democracy. The alien takes a particular interest in the greatest Eastern country of all, which the reader can tell is a reference to Egypt, and finds the TV set is the ultimate weapon for manipulation. He therefore plants fellow reptilians as TV presenters to rile people up against their rulers and then drive them against each other.

Towards the end of the story, the reader is introduced to two young scientists, Yasmin and Youssef, lamenting the outcome of the revolution and the political division that exists even among family members. In a key scene, the leader of the reptilians brags that these Orientals behave as if they have no minds of their own, while Yasmin herself suspects some external force is sinking the country into chaos and mass hysteria – someone like the devil who can only whisper into someone's ear (but cannot directly control them), albeit on a much grander scale here. Fortunately she specializes in reptiles, and a detection device she had built previously emits an alarm sound when the TV is turned on. With her fiancé and some scientist colleagues, they finally neutralize the aliens' chameleon powers and force them to flee Earth.

The aliens here resemble the Orientalists and Western adventurers attracted to the allure of absolute power that can only be attained in the East, with their home world being a clear parody of the First World. This parodical

aspect becomes even more explicit in a penultimate scene where the reptilian leader is advised not to modernize these Oriental countries, or else they will become like his original home world. These narratives play into the Arab fear of conspiracy, particularly imperialist penetration, but also involve a harrowing self-critique of Egyptian society. They suggest that we are the ones who have opened ourselves up to foreign infiltration by our egotism, suspicions, and rejection of reasoned dialogue – again, an example of personal morals driving social decline in Arab satire. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that a pair of Egyptian scientists and a home-grown invention save the day. The symbolism is all too familiar to Egyptians: the family as the bedrock of society – a symbol of national unity – and with that, science or knowledge (in this case, awareness of foreign plots) as our armory. Recollect the abovementioned example of Ahmed Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia*, which problematizes cultural colonization not only through the figure of US Marines serving as guardians of wealthy gated communities in Egypt, but also through the depiction of a disrespectful, "Westernized" youth. Such narratives regard the family as the emblem of the nation. What we learn from "The Rebels" is that contemporary Egyptian SF is adhering to older satirical traditions in defending the country's identity (in the past, against the British Empire) as well as Egyptians' moral and religious concerns, exemplified by the concern with family values.

Another alien invasion story that perfectly illustrates this lesson is Mustafa Seif Al-Din's minor masterpiece "The Dark Square" (2013), which depicts two detectives hot on the trail of an invisible serial killer who murders women. By following the breadcrumbs (mysterious half captured images in photos), the detectives make their way to a magician and a young couple, who are his "invisible" assistants and do the old sawing-a-woman-in-half act, just without the box. This couple confesses that they are humanoid aliens who come from a distant, dark planet, full of harsh hearted individuals hell-bent on conquest. The planet sends out to other worlds a male and female pair who are tasked with selecting and murdering four women with "pure" hearts. Once they are slain, a beam of pure light emerges, forming a square, and a pan-dimensional door opens that allows the armies of their world to invade. The son of this humanoid alien couple tries to carry out his people's mission and picks out girls who represent the four corners of "happiness:" acceptance, love, wealth, and honesty. Like a typical Egyptian, the detective comments on how it is impossible to find happy people anymore, especially people who are unselfish, romantic, accepting, and completely truthful. Then his partner remembers the famous case of a girl who exposed corruption in the health sector, a girl who refused to change her testimony in court. They make a wild dash to where she works and gun down the young couple's son while he is attacking her but fail to save the girl. And yet, no dark portal opens heralding an alien invasion. When they query the humanoid parents afterwards, the father explains that the "darkness" humans have inside protects them since no one is completely pure, honest, or unselfish – a fact he and his wife learned when they first began slaying victims on their mission of conquest. In the process they gave up and learned to befriend earthlings and dedicated their lives to making them happy through their so-called magic act – using their scientific powers to mimic magic routines. Sadly, their son could not relate to the humans and isolating himself, he reverted to form.

All of this is satire, lampooning the world of today, with social commentary galore. But, more to the point, the story has a very strong fairytale disposition, in line with what we saw above in “Parallel Universes.” Portals and dimensions lie on the borders of what is scientifically possible and the supernatural, but the beauty of these stories lies in the way they embody and ground moral precepts that, otherwise, would be ethereal and abstract. So, a moral lesson is imparted on the cops and the reader, as cynical and jaded as we all are: Innocence does in fact exist and is to be celebrated wherever you find it, and it triumphs in the end. Otherwise, the humanoids would not have redeemed themselves. Oh, and a little darkness (or cynicism) never hurts anybody; it toughens one up for the road ahead.

I end my survey of satire in Egyptian SF with examples from environmental SF, such as “Blind Spot” (2013) by Ahmed Badran. The story begins in a dentist’s clinic, with an anxious patient rummaging through the yellowed newspapers and starlet magazines in the waiting room. He finds a magazine called *Blind Spot*, and his eyes fall on an article that talks about an incident that occurred in a certain district of Cairo where toxic industrial fumes from an accident hurt children and pregnant women living in the area. This situation gets him worried for his wife – he had just left her there with her family – and so he calls them, and they insist nothing has happened. The following day, however, the exact same accident happens, and his wife is affected. He makes his way to the office of the said magazine, located in a posh part of town, and when he gets nowhere with the editor-in-chief, he says he will go to the police and accuse them of being connected to the accident, having foreknowledge in print. The editor owns up and explains that one of his journalists overstepped his bounds, making an explicit news report instead of just making a vague generalization to help people prepare for the future. Their policy at the magazine is never to explicitly state what will happen, because talking about the future will alter it. This means, according to the hero, that these mysterious individuals are from the future. After this realization, he gets zapped and wakes up in the dentist’s clinic. He checks the magazine, and it is exactly the same except for that report. He contacts his wife to make sure she goes back to his place, and the industrial accident does occur. He then makes sure to always check out this magazine to help avoid possible accidents in the near future – most occurrences caused by neglect or corruption.

As Egyptians we are always worried about environmental toxins, the supermarket food with preservatives and hybridization (which are still new to us), and bad sanitation in traditional fast-food joints and local cafes. The issue of polluted air addressed by this story is another anti-modern phobia, standing in stark contrast to the utopianism of the clean neighborhood and lush gardens depicted in Matter’s abovementioned story “The Dream.” It should be noted that the dialogue about the function of the magazine, where they only refer to corruption indirectly, is itself a tongue-in-cheek reference to the function of the media in Egypt. As a former journalist myself, I can confirm that we always talk in generalities and “hide” information between the lines to avoid getting into trouble with the authorities, while still trying to help and serve as a check and balance on the abysmal state the country is in. The same goes for reporting about pollution, incidentally.

One final example of environmentally conscious satirical SF is “Journey into Space” (2022) by Majid Abdel Allah Mattar. Imagine the Earth as a planet

of poor people, like the destitute neighborhood in Tawfik's *Utopia*, with other posh planets functioning like gated communities. The story depicts a medical doctor journeying from Earth to his workplace on Saturn, bragging about the ring road between Earth and Mars. (Ring roads are a constant complaint in Egypt, specifically in an overcrowded city like Cairo numbering at 19 million). Sadly, for him, people from the Earth are considered middle class, with high-class people residing on Saturn and Neptune, which makes it difficult for him to marry. His salary will not cover the rent of a dream home, while parents are mindful of immigrants who try to become permanent residents through marriage. Finally, the doctor explains that everybody in the solar system hates Earth because of the plagues that originated there and wiped out most of mankind. Egypt is depicted as surviving these plagues because the foods they eat have toughened up their immune systems and poised them to colonize the solar system. Dirty foods are indeed an in-house joke in Egypt. A famous comedy movie from the 1980s had a corrupt businessman responding to complaints that his canned meat goods were full of germs by retorting that Egyptians are a people who practically eat rocks, so they are already full of microbes! Combining environmental concerns with class struggle and projecting them onto entire planets is satire through world-building, but it is also cognitive estrangement. As explained above, our humor is bittersweet, lamenting our inability to change things. The important thing for Egyptian satirical SF is to vent frustrations and give hope for the future.

3. Conclusion

The proliferation of such satirical SF narratives in Egyptian literature bodes well, but there are limitations, most importantly in language. I clarified above that a rupture took place in contemporary Egyptian history between classical and colloquial Arabic when it came to satire. I have read many novels by the abovementioned authors, and they either rely on staunch classical Arabic, which does not allow for modern slang swear words in Egyptian Arabic, or use phrasings and expressions that simply do not sound right in (any kind of) Arabic. They are one-liners translated from Western SF, thriller novels, and action movies.

These problems are not nearly as pronounced in science fiction and satire in the rest of the Arab world. One good example is the work of Dr. Faycel Lahmeur, an Algerian author who specializes in SF and philosophical stories and has published his own satirical masterpiece, *Amin Al-Ulwani* in 2009.³ The novel is about a future author-blogger who finds a biographical novel written in the past about someone with his exact name – Amin Al-Ulwani. What impressed me from the outset about this novel was not so much the story, which is great and satirical, but the style of writing. It was written in impeccable classical Arabic – no colloquialisms and slang – but it was also very modern in its relaxed style of sarcasm. It did not feel dry or verbose at all, which is often the case with classical Arabic. It felt like reading John le Carré. Dr. Faycel also has an unpublished story, “The Rapist of Baghdad,” where a scholarly jurist in classical Baghdad encounters a time-traveler from the future who gives him a

³ For Dr. Faycel's own comments on his story, please see Lahmeur, 36-38.

copy of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), hoping this will change the theocratic future the traveler (an actual descendent of the soon-to-be-doomed jurist) comes from. The amazing thing is that Dr. Faycel wrote this story in French and had it translated by a friend into English, and yet it feels like it was written originally in Arabic – old Arabic from the time of the jurist narrator. That is how linguistically skilled Dr. Faycel Lahmeur is. The kind of rupture that took place in language circles in the Egyptian satirical tradition clearly did not take place in Algeria. The same can be argued for Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Mauritania, and Syria, from my experience of reading their literature.

In short, we are still not out of the woods, and that is not discounting the fact that even an author as skilled as Dr. Faycel Lahmeur still cannot match the older satirists in Arabic literature, who used the *maqāmāt* rhythmic format for their stories, including fantasy stories such as *Hadith Isa bin Hisham* (ironically, an Egyptian text). We are still too concerned with the novel and living up to modern literary standards. We still need to recapture our own satirical heritage, dust it off, and upgrade it for the modern world while being true to ourselves.

To date, the only novel I have read where older satirical storytelling techniques are used is Emad Bakr's *The City of Honka Ponka Combats Atheism and Corruption* (2015). It is a meta novel set in an unnamed city, which is not a utopia by any means, and where two heroes are introduced by the narrator: one cynical and one naive. They are on a quest to root out the source of all evil in the city, with many an adventure from the poverty-stricken streets to the corridors of wealth and power, till they find a married couple who are embodiments of the cosmic forces of good and evil lurking behind the scenes. This pairing of the two heroes is based on the model of the Sufi parable of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, which tells the story of a skeptical rationalist philosopher and a naïve and pious textual literalist (Aysha 2024, 57-58). I mentioned above that Sufism was discouraged by socialist realism, and that is another historical albatross we still have not fully overcome here in Egypt (Aysha, "Conferring on the"). Bakr's novel itself is self-published, with hardly a review online.

Nonetheless, we have made considerable progress. The authors cited above are asserting their identities as Arabs, Muslims, and members of the Global South in their critique of both imperialism and local elites. The authors mentioned in this survey still have not broken out of the mold of the novel or completely bridged the gap between colloquial and classical Arabic, but they are, at the very least, overcoming the obsession with literary realism and bringing back older traditions of fantastic storytelling and fairytales, and blending them with SF elements. Introducing foreign audiences to the Egyptian sense of humor alone is enough, if you ask me!

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