

Chapter 15

I's & Others in Egyptian SF: Difference and Tolerance in the Alien Mirror

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ABSTRACT

Egyptian science fiction is very distinct in its portrayal of alien others. Portrayals are predominantly positive and benign, setting Egyptian SF apart from both mainstream Western science fiction and mainstream Egyptian pop culture, which is highly xenophobic. Arabic science fiction more generally shuns the notion of mankind conquering space and is eager to meet and learn from more advanced alien civilizations. Egyptian science fiction takes this a step further and looks for common ground with alien races when it comes to religion and the supernatural. Egyptian SF authors are searching for an ideal Egypt in these alien encounter scenarios. Even alien invasion and robotic rebellion scenarios turn benign in the end, with redeemable enemies. Egyptian SF authors are still adherents to the pan-Arab dream and many are religiously conservative and pan-Islamists too. They also have a wider readership in the Arab world, sheltering them from many xenophobic tendencies.

INTRODUCTION

*O generosity personified!
To the Christian and the Magi,
You bestow with pleasure,*

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*From Your invisible treasure.
O ardent benefactor!
You will lift Your friends high,
There is solid proof of that,
Not abandoning enemies to die!*
--- Saadi Al-Shirazi

This paper began life as a virtual presentation in 2024 made in front of a Chinese student audience—“I’s & Others in Egyptian Science Fiction—Beyond Ethnic Strife & Civilizational Confrontation.” As a member of the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF) and the Egyptian Writers’ Union it became apparent from early on just how distinctive Egyptian SF really is, as exemplified by our alien encounter scenarios that are predominantly positive and benign. This is not only in contradistinction to mainstream Western SF, but also from the kind of jingoism and xenophobia on display in Egyptian pop culture—even fellow Arabs are castigated and portrayed as laughable, amoral or disgusting, which is discussed below. It was also more than appropriate that this presentation was made in front of a Chinese audience since China’s authors likewise spin positive scenarios involving extraterrestrial encounters, often as a foil for something else. For a foretaste of this we have Liu Cixin’s modern classic *The Three-Body Problem* (2008). Here aliens select a cosmopolitan group of humans to solve their planetary orbit problem caused by their three suns. They devise a VR game that pits the greatest minds in Chinese history in competition (and cooperation) with the likes of Galileo and Aristotle. This jolts the Chinese figures, many of whom are emperors, into either self-immolation or thinking more practically and verifiably about the cosmic order. What Cixin is doing in his novel, very intelligently, is talk about China’s need to modernize itself and break out of self-referentiality, looking only for solutions from within its own history. But, at the same time, he underlines that the Chinese need to advance as Chinese.

This positions Egyptian SF *closer* to this Eastern model than the Western science fictional mainstream. This is in part because Egyptians, and by extension Arabs and Muslims, perceive borders in a very different way than Westerners. Arabs and Muslims have an expansive sense of self that inherently disdains political boundaries. Their religion, language and historical experiences all tie them to a larger world beyond borders which themselves are seen as artificial and imposed on them in an attempt by colonial Western powers to divide them. Our travel and fantastical fiction in the past were always cosmopolitan, in thrall of older, more advanced civilizations and our modern sci-fi literature takes this sense of expanse and embrace of ‘the Other’ to the stars. Egyptian science fiction is even more transgressive of political-cultural boundaries, embracing cosmopolitanism and religious pluralism because of the country’s internal religious diversity and its grand civilization heritage. Ancient

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