

Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's Novel *Utopia* as an Important Example of the New Wave of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature

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Abstract: This article is a study of Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's 2008 best-selling novel *Utopia* within the context of Arabic science fiction, the genre of Arabic literature experiencing a certain renewal in the recent years. The analysis of the novel's themes, motifs, style, language and literary techniques is aimed at understanding its main influences and its place in the development of Arabic science fiction. As a dystopian novel, it is influenced by the respective European tradition while being socially relevant to the problems of today's Egypt as well. The article also offers a brief look at Arabic science fiction in general at the present state of its evolution.

Key words: Arabic science fiction • Ahmad Khaled Tawfik • Dystopian literature • Literary analysis • Utopia

INTRODUCTION

Science fiction as a literary genre has never been in the vanguard of Arabic-language literature. However, at the present moment the genre is obviously experiencing an uplift, with many new authors emerging across the Arab world and their works being actively published and translated into English and other languages. The scholarly interest to Arabic works of science fiction has grown accordingly as of late, with several studies carried out by both Arabic and foreign scholars, the most recent of which is A. Barbaro's *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, a book-long study published in 2013 [1]. Worthy of note, also, are M. 'Azzam's book *Al-Khayal Al-'ilmiyy fi-l-'adab* [2], as well as several works by Y. al-Sharuni [3] and a dissertation by G. Boutz [4], among others. Ignoring Arabic science fiction as a tendency ceased to exist among European scholars only in the past few years, due to this new wave which revived the genre. One of the most prolific and well-known authors to emerge from this new wave is Egyptian Ahmad Khaled Tawfik, a popular author of thriller and adventure books who also created one of the first Arabic best-selling science fiction novels, *Utopia*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study attempts to present Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's science fiction novel *Utopia* as a literary work representative of its time, genre and cultural background, by analyzing its main themes, motifs, literary techniques, influences, language and styles.

Emergence and Development of Arabic Science Fiction:

Examples of proto-science fiction in Arabic literature can be found dating back to as early as XII-XIII centuries. Various works by Ibn Tufail, Ibn al-Nafis, Zakariya al-Qazwini and some others are known to contain thematic elements and motifs typical for science fiction of XX and XXI centuries. In the middle of XX century Arabic culture had to re-discover the science fiction genre- this time relying primarily on Western influences, such as well-known novels of H. Welles, A. Clark, I. Asimov, etc. The leading Arab country in terms of, at least, quantity of produced science fiction literature is Egypt, with authors such as N. Sharif, N. Farouk and M. Al-'Ashry.

However, during the course of its development Arabic science fiction was met with a considerable amount of criticism from researchers, journalists and common readers. The critics pointed out the lack of

social awareness or any serious issues raised in the works of Arabic science fiction. It seems that even the Arabic term itself, *'adab al-khayāl al-'ilmiyy*, contrary to the English term *science fiction* is indicative of the genre's little connection with reality and even less so with science. G. Boutz points out that some Arabic researchers confuse the terms *science fiction* and *fantasy* [4]. The other term often used for both of these genres, *'adab al-fantāziyā*, only adds to the confusion.

A.Kh. Tawfik's *Utopia* as the First Arabic Science Fiction Bestseller: Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's novel *Utopia (Yūtūbiyā)*, first published in Arabic in 2008 [5], later reissued three times and translated into English by Chip Rossetti in 2010 [6], is the first major commercial success of both A.Kh. Tawfik and Arabic science fiction in general. Before the novel Tawfik (born 1962) enjoyed moderate fame with a collection of science fiction short stories *Fantāziyā*, as well as two series of thriller/fantasy novelettes *Mā Warā'a at-Tabī'ah* and *Sāfārī*.

Utopia is clearly influenced by the aforementioned authors both in terms of plot, style and even language-the narration is filled with English words, descriptions of American feature films and anglicized names. However, the title of the novel itself could serve as a reverse genre reference, as Tawfik's *Utopia* is clearly a piece of dystopian fiction, represented in Western literature by the works of G. Orwell, A. Huxley, A. Burgess and others. In accordance with I. Asimov's 'three kinds of science fiction' [7], dystopia can be characterized as social science fiction.

The storyline of the novel in question is largely reminiscent of social science fiction of the popular European and American literature of the XX century, however the setting-Egypt in 2023-creates an important connection to the reality surrounding an average Arabic reader. In the universe of the novel, Egypt of 2023 is divided into two separate territories-the eponymous Utopia, land of the rich and the land of the poor 'Others'. The protagonist of the story (who introduces himself as Alaa), a seemingly spoiled, immoral young man from Utopia, leaves the country of the rich and successful together with his girlfriend in search of a new experience. Upon reaching the land of the poor, he hires a prostitute there and tries to take her to Utopia with him-however, this immediately triggers a series of misfortunes. Soon Alaa is rescued by a denizen of the poor people's country named Gaber, the second protagonist of the novel. Gaber and his sister Safiyya guide 'utopians' Alaa and Germinal through the land of 'Others'.

Structurally the novel consists of five parts, alternating between two narrators-three out of these five parts (narrated by Alaa) are called *Predator*, while the remaining two (narrated by Gaber) bear the title *Prey*. This technique is clearly influenced by the wide usage of the unreliable narrator trope in modern literature [8], allowing us to define the novel as postmodernist. The 'predator-prey' motif used in combination with this trope could be borrowed from postmodernist psychological thriller genre, its most cited example being J. Fowles' *The Collector* [9]. In *Utopia*, the technique accentuates the social inequality theme, on one hand, while allowing the author to maintain the position of a neutral observer, on the other.

Other important themes studied in the novel are borrowed from European existential/postmodernist literature of the XX century. Among them-the dichotomy of violence/cruelty, on the one hand and moral stance, on the other, both implied to be inherent in human nature. Other ideas, such as degeneration of consumerist society, meaninglessness of an individual's existence in such society and his slow transformation into an animal-are hardly new in world literature. However, what is new is the way Tawfik adapts these themes to the present-day Arabic cultural environment, the future Egypt being a clear allegory of today's Egypt. The science fiction elements include the premise of the story being centered around the discovery of petrol synthesis, or the often-mentioned synthetic drugs such as 'phlogistine' and 'Libidafro', a motif similar to the one used in A. Huxley's *Brave New World* [10].

Yet the main feature of Tawfik's novel is not its plot, characters, themes or ideas, but the adaptation of all that to Egyptian social and cultural background, thus ensuring the social relevance of this work of fiction. As A.Kh. Tawfik himself stated, *Utopia* basically tells the same story as economist Galal A. Amin's well-known book, *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians* [11], but in novel form [12].

Worthy of mention is the novel's loud, slightly flamboyant style. We identified several of its basic features:

- Frequent usage of anaphors, repetitions of phrases, sentences or even complete paragraphs, intentional stylistic redundancy;
- Epigraphs before every part of the novel-some of them making use of in-universe quotations-they reference the so-called 'Orgasm Songs', a popular entertainment in the world of the novel;

- Intentionally controversial details, some of them still taboo in most Arab societies;
- Parallelism and contraposition-mainly expressed in the two protagonists mirroring each other in many ways and getting into similar situations;
- Tendency to laconic expression, mostly using nouns and adjectives, as opposed to Arabic discourse being normally verb-oriented;
- Avoiding dialectal and colloquial expressions in favor of Standard Modern Arabic;
- High number of etymologically English words and expressions, mostly used for futuristic phenomena, both arabized-such as *yûtûbiyā* (utopia), *'ûrjāzm* (orgasm), *al-mārīnz* (the marines), *'ikstāzī* (ecstasy)-and written in Latin letters-such as *ideomotor effect*, *crew cut*, *LSD*, etc.;
- The work being highly referential, with direct mentions of other works of literature (G. Orwell, H. Welles, E. Poe, Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi), cinema ("Platoon" by O. Stone, "Gangs of New York" by M. Scorsese, etc.), theatre (B. Brecht), references to the history of Ancient Rome, etc.

CONCLUSION

We have analyzed Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's 2008 novel *Utopia* as a work representative of the new wave of development of the science fiction genre in Arabic literature. It could be argued that the novel was released at a very appropriate time for Arabic science fiction. Its commercial and critical success is justified by its socially relevant themes and the combination of Western influences, postmodern approach to the narrative and specifically Egyptian motifs.

Summary: Science fiction in Arabic literature is experiencing a new wave in terms of both quantity and quality of the emerging works. Due to the aborted tradition the genre was obliged to reinvent itself in the middle of XX century-this time with the works of Western science fiction as its main influence. The leading country of the Arab world in terms of quantity and popularity of science fiction has always been Egypt.

In 2008 Egyptian author Ahmad Khaled Tawfik published *Utopia*, a dystopian novel telling a story of social inequality, violence and dangers of consumerist society in Egypt of the near future, with many important social themes, allegorically connected to modern-day Egypt. The novel's plot, ideas, thematic contents allow us to define it as belonging to dystopian fiction.

Its referential nature, memorable language filled with English words, numerous uses of anaphor, the dominance of nouns and adjectives over verbs, taboo topics being tackled, as well as its postmodern narrative structure, are among the novel's dominant features. Most of these elements bear resemblance to Western cultural phenomena, such as literary works of G. Orwell, J. Fowles, A. Huxley, cinematic works, postmodern poetry, etc. All these features are highly representative of modern Arabic science fiction and at the same time indicate a step forward, resonating with the recent renewal of the genre.

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