

Science Fiction in the Arab World: Tawfiq al-Hakim's Voyage to Tomorrow

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Voyage to Tomorrow (Rihlatun

ilal-ghad) by Bhargav Rani *Arab Stages,*

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Tawfiq al-Hakim, a pioneering figure of modern Arabic literature, wrote the full-length play, *Rihlatun ilal-ghad*, or *Voyage to Tomorrow*, in 1957, at a time when he was already well-established as the leading playwright of the Arab world. Although the play rarely finds itself central to discussions and scholarly estimations of al-Hakim's literary genius and legacy, often marginalized by his more popular and nuanced works like *The People of the Cave* and *The Tree Climber*, it gains significance when appraised within a completely different context. Tawfiq al-Hakim is also recognized as an influential proponent of modern Arabic science fiction, and *Voyage to Tomorrow* is regarded as possibly the first science-fiction play from the Arab world. While it might be technically untenable to append the label of science fiction to any work predating the nineteenth century, maybe even the twentieth, the time when it congealed into a distinctive genre in the West with the initial explorations of Jules Verne followed by the landmark contributions of H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, there have been many significant works since antiquity that have engaged with some of the prominent themes of science fiction, particularly its play with time and space. However, against the backdrop of the literary proliferation of Euro-American science fiction over the course of the twentieth century and the scholarly obsession that it nurtured, the role and contribution of the Middle East has been largely ignored and understudied.

The Ancient History of Science Fiction in the Arab World

The history of this genre in the Arab world is still fraught with disagreements and discrepancies with respect to its origins. One of the earliest works cited as an example of proto-science fiction, both in the Euro-American as well as the Middle-Eastern tradition, is the second-century text, *A True Story*, by Lucian of Samosata, a rhetorician and satirist who wrote in Greek but was of Assyrian descent. Lucian, in his seminal text, depicted tales of travel to outer space, interplanetary warfare and conquest, contact with alien life-forms, among other things. However, his delineation of fantastic and outrageous stories was directed as a subversive parody of the works of such authors as Homer, who not only invoked the mythological but also ascribed it with an aura of verisimilitude.^[1] Thus, Lucian's conflation of science fiction and satire as a stratagem for literary criticism is fundamentally different from modern science-fiction writing in that, unlike the modern genre, his interest in the fantastical was not in the service of a utopian exposition but was rather deployed to contest the presumed verity of a mythological past.

The genre of literature that distinctively resonates with modern science-fiction motifs, albeit with a different accent, is that of the fantasy tale and mythological stories. In the Arab world, a tradition of

writings developed and flourished between the sixth and the twelfth centuries called the *aja'ib* literature, or *mirabilia*, travel writings and geographical and cosmographical treatises that earnestly engaged with the extraordinary and the occult. The *aja'ib* literature ranged from expositions on natural phenomena or extraordinary human feats of a semi-mythic stature, like the conquests of Alexander and Solomon or man-made wonders that challenged human intellect, to mariners' tales and folkloric material, and drew substantially from Hellenist learning, the Qur'an and the religious tradition of Islam, as well as from popular fairy-tales and beliefs.^[2] A significant author from this tradition is Zakariya al-Qazwini, a thirteenth-century astronomer, physician, and proto-science-fiction writer from Baghdad, whose famous cosmography, *Aja'ib al-makhlūqat wa-ghara'ib al-mawjūdat* (Marvellous Things of Creation and Wondrous Things of Existence), effectively drew from Arabic and Persian *mirabilia*. Within the history of Arab science fiction, he is most noted for his futuristic, proto-science-fiction tale, *Awaj bin Anfaq*, that depicted a man who travelled to earth from a distant planet.^[3]

Another contemporary of al-Qazwini who is cited as one of the first Arabic proto-science-fiction authors is Ibn al-Nafis. His fantastical-philosophical treatise, *Fadil Ibn Natiq*, translated to *Theologus Autodidactus* in the West, is considered as one of the first Arabic novels, probably the first theological science-fiction novel, written in 1270. It depicts the tale of an autodidact feral child, Kamil, born on a secluded island, who eventually comes in contact with the outside world, with the climax taking the shape of a doomsday apocalypse. Ibn al-Nafis weaves in discourses on philosophy, theology, and medicine even as he takes on themes of futurology, Islamic eschatology, cataclysmic doomsday, and death and afterlife. Drawing from his own extensive scientific knowledge, al-Nafis proposes a scientific theory of metabolism and the pulmonary circulation of blood to explain resurrection.^[4]

The other significant strain of influence for modern science fiction in the Middle East comes from the tales of *1001 Arabian Nights*, with some of the stories depicting advanced technologies and quests for lost civilizations. Although not Arab in origin, with most of the stories coming from Persia and India, the tales were translated and adapted for Arab readers in the early medieval period. Some of the proto-science fiction stories include "The Ebony Horse," a story about a mechanical horse capable of flying into outer space; "The Adventures of Bulukiya," in which the protagonist's quest for a herb of immortality leads him to parallel universes; as well as the famous "The Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor."^[5] However, except for the tales from the Arabian Nights which have held a sustained influence over the centuries, all the other works cited as examples of proto-science-fiction have been strictly intermittent and singular literary eruptions in their times rather than progenitors of or participants in a larger culture of science-fiction writing. In this sense, the history of Arabic science fiction effectively dates back to no earlier than the 1940s, and much of its subsequent evolution has been, for the most part, in emulation of its more prolific counterpart of Euro-American science fiction.

The Modern History of Science Fiction in the Arab World

Egypt was, like in many other things, a pioneer in the field of Arabic science fiction. Youssef Ezeddin Eassa, a prolific Egyptian writer and thinker who has made significant contributions to almost all forms of literary expression, wrote and broadcasted a popular science-fiction radio series in the 1940s, and is widely regarded as the pioneer of modern Arabic science fiction. It must be noted that Eassa perceived his radio dramas as part of the larger movement of "Modern Arabic Theatre." His first radio drama, "The Wheel of Days," broadcast in 1940, itself had a touch of science fiction to it, particularly in its play with temporality, for it portrayed a scenario where the sun, no longer proceeding towards the West, begins to

move backwards, thus turning time backwards, with all humans gradually inching back into their pasts. Their new future was their old past, already known and experienced, and their new past no longer held any ontological credibility. In his radio series of the 1940s, his most famous radio drama was titled, “The World of Donkeys,” in which he outlined a dystopian future, where the intellectual ascendancy of the humans in the world is usurped by donkeys, as a satire on the tragic consequences that arise from human avarice and arrogance. Another of his popular radio dramas from that time is “Violet Rays,” in which mysterious rays of light fall on earth to make all humans look alike, destroying any basis for external beauty, and thus compelling humans to look beyond the superficial veil of outward appearances. Eassa’s pioneering work had an indelible impact on the emergence of science fiction in the Arab world.^[6]

The most definitive emergence of Arab science fiction as a distinctive genre was in the 1960s, with the publication of three landmark novels, *Al-Ankabout* (The Spider) and *Rajul tahta as-sifr* (The Man with a Temperature Below Zero) in 1965, and *Al-khuruġ min at-tabut* (The Rising from the Coffin) in 1967, by Mustafa Mahmud. Mahmud is known as “the father of modern Arab science fiction,” and he influenced a whole generation of writers to produce works of science fiction throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, including Nabil Farouq, Ahmad Suwailem, Omayma Khafaji, Nihad Sharif, and Muhammad al-Ashry. This proliferation of science fiction in Egypt also inspired other Arab writers throughout the Middle East, for instance, the Moroccan author Mohammed Aziz al-Habbabi, Iraqi author Kassem al-Khattat, Kuwaiti author Tiba Ahmad al-Ibrahim, and a number of Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Bahraini, and Saudi Arabian writers such as Kassem Kassem, Lina al-Kailani, Taleb Omaran, Sulaiman Mohammed al-Khalil, Abdallah Khalifa, and Ashraf Faqih.^[7]

Tawfiq al-Hakim and the Genre of Science Fiction

It is in the context of this nascent period of an emerging genre that we must locate Tawfiq al-Hakim’s contributions. His first significant work of science fiction was a short story, *Fi Sana Malyun* (In the Year One Million) published in 1947. In this story, al-Hakim envisions a future in an expansive time frame, when disease and death have been eradicated, distinctions of gender have given way to a homogenous androgyny, and procreation has been rendered redundant with laboratory conceptions. This dystopian future of eternal life is also bereft of love, art, and poetry, a theme that we will encounter again in *Voyage to Tomorrow*. The story ends with a revolutionary overthrow of the state by the people, who, in their struggle to win back death, break into the laboratories and destroy the equipment infusing the air with nutrients. Disease returns to the world eventually, and with it, death and fear. Religion finds a voice against science, the human species splits into males and females, and there is a resurgence of love and art.^[8]

Al-Hakim’s next significant contribution in the genre of science fiction is his full-length play from 1957, *Voyage to Tomorrow*, which we shall come to shortly. In 1972, he published another play, *Shair ala al-qamar* (Poet on the Moon), and a short story, *Taqirir Qamari* (Moon Account), both heavily seeped in the genre, and in 1974, an essay called, *Hadith am al-kawkab* (Conversation with the Planet). It must be noted that al-Hakim did not hold an allegiance to the propagation of science-fiction writing in the same way he held an allegiance to the development of Modern Arabic Theatre. However, his attitudes towards and efforts in the service of the latter are symptomatic of a vision and philosophy which also form the essential basis for his interest in science fiction, and his dabbling in futuristic and utopian works. That is, it is in his philosophy for the theatre that we can also find a rationale and a context for his interest in science fiction.

While theatrical activity has existed in the Arab world in various forms for centuries, theatre in the European sense was only a mid-nineteenth-century development. Al-Hakim, born at the tail end of the nineteenth century, began taking an interest in theatre and started writing plays at a very young age. He grew up watching and reading plays of Egyptian dramatists like Farah Antun, Ibrahim Ramzi and Muhammad Taymur, which had an indelible impact on his aspirations. In 1921, he joined what was to later become the Egyptian (now Cairo) University to pursue law, at the insistence of his parents who disapproved of his proclivity to the theatre. During this period, he wrote a number of plays, some of which were also staged in theaters in Cairo with some modicum of popularity. However, al-Hakim had his major theatrical enlightenment when he moved to Paris in 1925 to continue his studies in law, which he altogether disregarded during his stay there. Far away and thus free from the reservations and exigencies of his home life, al-Hakim immersed himself completely into what he perceived as the liberated world of Western art and literature. He was a prolific reader, devouring the works of Homer, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Molière, Goethe, Nietzsche, Poe, Maeterlinck, and Cocteau, among others. He voraciously attended operas, art exhibitions, and plays, completely taken in by Pirandello, Ibsen, Shaw, and frequented the Folies Bergère and Moulin Rouge. Al-Hakim was forced to return to Egypt in 1928, again at the insistence of his father, and became a public prosecutor in Alexandria. However, it was this first stint in Paris that influenced al-Hakim's theatrical vision profoundly.^[9]

Al-Hakim returned to Egypt with an unshakeable belief in what he perceived as the civilizing function of theatre, a function that he saw as crucial to the enlightenment of the Arab world. He unequivocally subscribed to the history of European theatre as a "natural progression" that Arabic theatre must undoubtedly go through in order to command any social or cultural significance, and assumed the responsibility of taking it through that journey, a task that he undertook with, in his own words, "mad anxiety."^[10] He set out, again in his own words, to carry out "in thirty years a trip on which the dramatic literature of other languages has spent about two thousand years."^[11] Between 1920s and the 1970s, he thus produced a remarkably diverse corpus of plays, more than eighty in number, ranging from adaptations of Greek tragedies to experiments in the absurdist tradition. It is in light of the philosophy underlying this monumental theatrical mission that we must appraise the identification of al-Hakim as a significant writer of science fiction. Al-Hakim was among the first few authors who imported the genre of science fiction as it proliferated in the West during that time, and one can find strong influences of Wells, Huxley, and Orwell in his works.

However, it must be emphasized that al-Hakim's agenda, while being essentially colonialist, did not entail a mere slavish imitation of European theatre, a criticism that he leveled against his predecessors in his enthusiasm to proclaim himself the sole, pioneering dramatist in the cause for modern Arabic theatre. For all his conviction in the Western artistic and literary culture, he also discredited the West as obsessively materialist and morally corrupt, always consciously distinguishing himself as "A Sparrow from the East," as the title of one of his novels goes, throughout his sojourn in Paris. Moreover, while he derided romantic fetishization of the Egyptian past and traditions, he simultaneously ensured that his works were strongly rooted in the Egyptian socio-cultural context and ethos, often engaging directly with specifically Egyptian concerns.^[12] Thus, while his indubitable infatuation with the West and his wholehearted subscription to the merits of the Reason of Enlightenment and the scientific temperament in the development of civilizations impelled him to find value in the genre of science fiction, he was also deeply suspicious of the utopias of Western modernity and acutely aware of the need for Egypt to carve out its own distinctive modernity, a modernity that while divesting from the conservative stronghold of religious forces, did not completely sever its ties with its roots.

Another point must be noted that is specific to the genre of science fiction and its relation to the theatre. Notwithstanding the prevalence of an active science-fiction drama in the West, there was a common predisposition that theatre, which in its nascent form was consumed with concerns of unity of time and place, is a logistically inadequate medium for the expansive temporal and spatial features of science fiction. The advanced technologies, intergalactic warfare, and alien life-forms that find sublime expression in the novel are more often than not deemed impossible to reproduce on stage with the same impact. However, during his sojourn in Paris, al-Hakim was thoroughly taken in by the idea of plays written solely for the reader, that is, with the explicit intent of publication and not production. This was a novel proposition for him, for he had never envisioned a play as a literary form in itself. He readily espoused this idea, probably also in light of the fact that his plays enjoyed little popularity on stage, and he claimed that even his most famous play, *People of the Cave*, was written for publication. Al-Hakim, over the course of his career, wrote a number of plays that he called Theatre of the Mind, plays intended as literature and aimed at intellectual provocation. This foray into the realm of an intellectual theatre freed him from the dramaturgical impositions that science fiction plays seemed to pose, thus paving the way for a play like *Voyage to Tomorrow*, a full-length science-fiction play, and probably the first of its kind in the Arab world.^[13]



Voyage to Tomorrow

The precarious position that al-Hakim negotiated between subservient emulation of European modernity and mindless celebration of an Egyptian identity evinces most palpably in *Voyage to Tomorrow*. The play is distinctive in that it closely engages with two of the most common motifs of science fiction, travel to outer space and travel through time. In the four-act play, al-Hakim sets every act in a radically different spatial-temporal environment, each bearing little relation to the other. The first act happens in a jail cell on Earth, the second in a rocket in space, the third on an unknown planet completely different from Earth, and the fourth act takes place back on Earth, albeit 309 years have transpired since the events of the first act, and the world has reached the age of automation and complete mechanization. In this wide array of starkly different settings, the only thing that al-Hakim keeps constant, if one can say that, is the human mind, thus drawing attention to the very conditions that come to define human condition.

The play begins in a jail cell on Earth with the Convict, an accomplished doctor by profession, awaiting death for the murder of his wife's first husband. However, we soon learn over the course of the Convict's conversation with the jail doctor that his crime of passion for her was part of a cunning plot orchestrated by his wife. The Warden arrives to inform him that his wife is there to meet him, and the Convict makes up his mind to kill her and entreats him to leave them alone for a minute. However, the Warden returns, not with his wife, but with a Representative from a scientific agency who has a proposition for the Convict that he should agree to assist the agency by embarking on a mission to space, a mission offering only one-in-a-hundred chance of survival. Faced with certain death by hanging, the Convict agrees to the proposition, but quickly learns that this new arrangement alters his agreement with the Warden, for he is no longer permitted to see his wife, thus frustrating his scheme for vengeance.

Al-Hakim posits a particular relationality of the human being with time in this opening scene of his play, which he sets on Earth in what can be interpreted as a generic present. The Convict on death row, facing execution on the very next day, is caught in an existence that brutally denies him a future. And not only is his future nonexistent, but it is compounded by the fact that the Convict is made acutely aware of his condition for he is even denied the luxury of uncertainty. Thus, for the Convict, the future is known, and it is nothing. As for his relation with the past, he is tormented by the realization of his wife's double-faced treachery and is unsympathetic to the fact that he threw away a happy life and a prosperous medical career with a horrific act of passion that went essentially unrequited and is utterly meaningless. Thus, the past stands as a burden on the Convict as a violent rejection of meaning to his life. All that he is left with is the present that is slowly inching its way toward its own absence. It is this independence of the present that has no recourse to the past or the future for its redemption that warrants the Convict's candid admission of his suspicions about this wife's treachery to the doctor. When he learns from the Warden that his wife is there to see him, he suddenly sees in the present a revolutionary possibility to resurrect his past from meaninglessness, for if he killed his wife in revenge, his inevitable death would no longer be in vain and unjust. Thus, in the first act, al-Hakim envisions a life of an unwanted past and no future, but with a present brimming with potentiality. But the Representative's proposition changes this equation. The Convict is offered a glimmer of a future in all its uncertainty, which, as he quickly realizes, must naturally deplete the present of its revolutionary potential, to reduce it back to its quotidian mundanity that is constantly looking toward the future for its validation.

The second act opens with the Convict waking from the effects of a drug to find himself in a space capsule.

Much to his surprise, he realizes that he is not alone on the mission. He soon makes acquaintance with the

Second Convict, an engineer by profession, who was also offered the mission after being on death row for murdering four wives in order to sponsor his scientific aspirations with their estates. They realize that it has already been three days since their launch, and have only a brief conversation with the scientists on Earth before their capsule darts past the communications range. The instant the television receiver loses signal, all connection is lost between the two convicts and Earth. While the action in the first act proceeds rather tediously, setting up the “reality” against which the space-time irregularities of the other three acts must position themselves, al-Hakim quickly delves into the philosophical questions that constitute the nuclear concerns of the play. In the second act. In this severance of communication, al-Hakim explores an array of implications through the conversations of the two convicts.

Unlike the futureless world of the first act, here, the convicts feel, at least at first, a certain assurance of the uncertainty of what the future holds, albeit not much.

Convict: You mean you are not threatened by death?

Second Convict: I mean that the type and time of death are not known here. The execution’s method was known and its time set...

Convict: ...Because it is no longer tied to the will or people looking at watches.^[14]

However, against this stabilization of the future as assuredly unstable, the relation of the convicts with their past takes on a distinctive shape, and al-Hakim pushes the severance of communications with Earth to its philosophical limits. For this severance with Earth is also a severance with their pasts. With little possibility of a safe return, their earthly lives, actions and crimes no longer have any meaning in this new existence. When the Convict insists that they are still murderers by law even if their intentions were humane, the Second Convict remarks, “In the view of the law, the Earthly law. And there’s no more Earth. Look out this crystal window. You won’t find the Earth.”^[15] However, this erasure of the past, as they quickly realize, has profound implications on their present. As the Convict asks, “Who are we then... now?”^[16] Al-Hakim, in this moment, raises the crucial question of individual identity as defined in social and cultural terms. For the vast distance that separates them from Earth also separates them not just from Earthly law but also from the very cornerstones of civilization, morality, love, and art. Even as the Convict, a doctor with a penchant for philosophy and art, grapples with these questions of identity and self, the Second Convict, a man of a scientific temperament, staunchly locates his identity within the social and political context he comes from, thus denying their existence in a space capsule any semblance of humanity. He asserts that name, age, address have all lost their meaning in a place where even “here” is meaningless. The two convicts differ in that the Convict is consumed by the relation of the past to the present, a relation that is embroiled with the question of his identity, whereas the Second Convict, unperturbed by the erasure of his past, is more distraught at the implications of an unchanging future of gliding aimlessly in space on the present lived moment. He articulates this when he asks the Convict to pass the bottle of capsules that is their food, not because he is hungry but, in his words, “I need to *do* something.”^[17]

These opposing temperaments soon enough come clashing into each other. The Convict discredits the Second Convict’s stance on the question of their humanity by positing that even when they are a million miles away from Earth and civilization, the thing that constitutes them as human beings, their sense of morality, is still preserved within them, and as long as they remain alive, humanity shall permeate every

moment of their existence. Moreover, the Convict calls the Second Convict a “filthy murderer,” asserting that “there’s no power which can deprive me of the right to judge people and things. I still retain in my soul feelings of respect and disdain.”^[18] In this instinct to judge, the Convict locates the persistence of distinctly human qualities, and unlike the other convict who insists on a loss of humanity with the loss of context, he asserts, “We preserve them alive wherever we go.”^[19] Thus, through the different positions that the two convicts occupy with respect to the meaning they attribute to their lives, al-Hakim explores the possibilities of meaning infusing our relationship with the world around us by questioning the very limits of what constitutes us as human.

Even as the two convicts strive to understand each other’s positions, realizing it to be of utmost importance in the situation that they find themselves—the frightening void—their conversation their conversation is abruptly interrupted by a sudden whistling from the console, indicating that there is a meteor darting towards them. However, the spaceship, which at first seemed to be on collision course with the meteor, narrowly misses being hit. The reactions of the two convicts during this dramatic turn of events is particularly telling, for while they are concerned, neither of them show any sign of panic. As opposed to the first act, where the finality of death shadowed the vitality of the present, here, against the meaninglessness of the present, even death is rendered inconsequential, and possibly even welcome. When they reflect on their fortunate escape, if one can call it that, the Second Convict remarks, “An unhappy life is long, so they say.” However, the two convicts barely have time to digest the implications of their narrow escape with death, as the spaceship, caught in an insuperable gravitational field, begins accelerating towards an unknown planet. Al-Hakim, beginning with the finality of death defining the future in the first act, and proceeding through the assurance of an uncertain future, now gradually strips the uncertainty of that assuring quality to further complicate and nuance the convicts’ relationship with time. Against the uncertainty of death in space, the certainty of death on Earth, the precise fate they had escaped, now appears more appealing to the convicts.

Convict: What tempted us on this terrifying trip? We were going to die a single time at the gallows. Then we did not. We agreed to come here to encounter death every minute in a different fashion. Why did we do this? What tempted us to this?

Second Convict: The one per cent!^[20]

Al-Hakim sets the third act on the unknown planet, after the spaceship has crash landed. The two convicts survive the crash, despite losing a lot of blood. In fact, they feel perfectly healthy and alive. As they gather themselves up and set about their first reconnaissance of the planet, they realize that their physiology has been drastically altered on this new planet. They find themselves able to survive without having to breathe, they feel neither hungry nor tired, neither heat nor cold, and that they are capable of communicating their thoughts to each other without even vocalizing them. On that unknown planet, the two convicts realize that they have been transformed into beings that function on electricity, beings that no longer have any need to engage in human pursuits of food and shelter. Necessity has been rendered redundant, for survival is no longer a contest but is given. The two convicts who were biding their time on Earth have, in this new world, become ironically immortal. Al-Hakim transforms the uncertainty of the future that pervaded the lives of the two convicts in the space shuttle in the previous act back into a definitive certainty. However, unlike the certainty of death that characterized their lives in the first act, here, the certainty is that of life. Through this relationality of the subjects with time, al-Hakim explores the implications of eternal life on the present lived moment of existence.

Not long after the two convicts make sense of their surroundings and understand the nature of their new existence, they begin confronting the new crisis that this existence brings about. As the Convict remarks, “Here’s the problem. What work shall we do?”^[21] In the absence of necessity, work has also been rendered redundant. With the assurance of their survival, the two convicts have been stripped of any need to engage in any form of labor, and this void, the absence of meaning that the negation of work engenders, frightens them. That is, with the future assured and certain, they struggle to ascribe the present with meaning. The Second Convict, with his scientific temperament, always looking towards the future for the redemption of the present, is particularly distraught at this idea, for he insists, “But we must work. It is not possible for us to pass this eternity without doing something... We have an intellect. The intellect refuses to remain still for long.”^[22]

In this exposition of the relation of the present to the future, al-Hakim also weaves in the relation of the two convicts with their pasts. They soon realize that the electromagnetic waves that they transmit with their minds are also capable of telecasting their past memories onto an invisible screen in space, much like a television set. As the Convict reminisces fondly of his wife, sitting in her accustomed chair and knitting a sweater, an image of her exactly as he remembers comes alive in front of them. The Convict’s feelings towards his wife, who, as he believes, framed him for the murder of her first husband, also gradually change over the course of the play. His initial anger slowly dissipates with the drastic change in his circumstances, and he no longer feels a desire for vengeance. On that unknown planet, where the future is eternal and yet nothing, he is satisfied to simply dwell on the fond memories of his past, to look at the beautiful figure of his wife knitting a sweater for him. But the Second Convict does not share his sentiments. As an orphan who grew up in the care of his uncle, listening to stories of smugglers and thieves that his uncle harbored in his coffeehouse, and as a man guilty of many horrendous crimes in his past, the Second Convict has little desire to look back. For him, the past is a burden, and it is for this reason that he obsesses about the future. Thus, while the Convict in his nostalgia is content with resurrecting the images of the past for all eternity, for the Second Convict who is constantly trying to escape his past, this is an unwelcome proposition. Remarking on his condition, he says, “It is really atrocious to be granted an eternal life with that past I always wished to flee.”^[23]

The convicts, after a brief interrogation of their relationship with their pasts, return to dwell on the question of their present in the context of their eternal future, the question of what work they can do. The Second Convict interprets the curse of eternal life as the death of change itself. That is, on the unknown planet, where everything persists eternally, nothing can possibly change, or as the Convict notes, “Nothing will happen here.”^[24] Against the context of this redundancy of work and unchanging eternity, al-Hakim also appraises the nature of art. As they rack their brains to find something to do, the Convict’s suggestion of indulging in art is also rejected by the Second Convict, who asserts that it is impossible to create art, or even science for that matter, in a world where they are incapable of producing any change. In a constant world, or in a world devoid of social and political context from which he comes, thus even art and science are impossible. Al-Hakim, through this negation of art and science, also returns to the essential question of what makes us human. On this new planet, neither their physical bodies retain any semblance of the human nor can they indulge in any form of activity that is characteristic of a human.

As the conversation between the two convicts progresses, a heavy sense of hopelessness descends on them. Their hopelessness stems from their chronic inability to reclaim the present lived moment from the void of meaninglessness. The two convicts, who are conditioned to feel that their lives are entitled to significance, can find no means by which they can be significant. There is an interesting play of

intertextuality that al-Hakim seems to weave into the text that must be noted. One of al-Hakim's most famous plays, *The Tree Climber*, written in 1962, assumes significance for its engagement with the Theatre of the Absurd that had taken the European theatre scene by storm over the previous decade, and scholars have located distinct influences of Beckett and Ionesco in it. However, while *Voyage to Tomorrow* can hardly be termed absurdist, there seems to be a citation of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the play, particularly in the third act. The situation of the two convicts and the distinctive quality of their temporal engagement is remarkably similar to the futureless and hopeless boredom and ennui that plagues Vladimir and Estragon, and their conversations are reminiscent of the two tramps trying to pass the time, to fill the meaningless void with meaning. *Waiting for Godot*, which first premiered in 1953, had created ripples in the French theatre scene, heralding a new politics and aesthetics for the theatre. There are some indications to believe that al-Hakim, at the time he wrote *Voyage to Tomorrow*, might have been acquainted with Beckett's work. In 1957, Tayeb Sadikki, another major playwright, published the first Arabic translation of *Waiting for Godot*, an indication that the play had caught the fancies of the Arab literati around that time. Moreover, biographical accounts of al-Hakim's life suggest that he travelled to Paris in 1957, where he claimed to have watched plays by Beckett and Ionesco. Notwithstanding that, al-Hakim, a keen observer of European theatrical traditions and as someone proficient in French, might have had the chance to read the original text of *Waiting for Godot* that had been in publication since 1952. While I have not been able to find out the precise chronology of his visit and the publication of *Voyage to Tomorrow* to make any definitive claims, I think there might be a case to make that al-Hakim had Beckett on his mind, even if at the back of it, when he wrote this play.



The strongest suggestion of Beckettian influence in the script can be found at the end of the third act. As the hopelessness of their condition becomes too much to bear, and as the present stubbornly resists its own emancipation in meaning, the two convicts, like Beckett's tramps, begin to contemplate suicide. The Convict, looking at the tall, needle-like mountain in the distance, suggests, "What if we scale the mountain until we reach its peak and then throw ourselves off? Wouldn't we fall and shatter?"^[25] reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon looking at the tree and contemplating hanging themselves. And just as the two tramps are cruelly reminded that even death will not be easy for them, that the rope might not hold strong to kill them, the two convicts too are thrown deeper into the abyss of hopelessness as the

possibility of their survival from the fall haunts them.

Convict: Wait a bit. We don't know the consequences. Nature is different here. There's a possibility we must consider: our fall might not prove fatal.

Second Convict (looking at the mountain): Given that elevation and hard ground!

Convict: Who knows what would happen?

Second Convict: Don't make me despair again, after you opened a crack of hope for us. Notwithstanding that, what would we lose? Let's try it at any rate. Let's go try.^[26]

But despite this apparent citation of Beckett's work, this is, in essence, not an absurdist play. The two convicts, of course, do not attempt suicide for the point of their contemplation is for al-Hakim to push the critique of an eternal future to its abject limits. Having driven that point home, al-Hakim quickly turns toward taking the action of the play forward. Over the course of their discussion on suicide, the Convict's attention falls on the rocket and he stumbles on a better idea than trying to kill themselves—to try and repair the rocket. This idea swiftly transforms the nature of their condition, for now, there is suddenly a ray of hope in the void of hopelessness, a possibility for change to take place. And more importantly, the convicts now have work to do. Their present has found meaning and has, once more, been rendered significant. And al-Hakim ends the act with the indication that it is probably this ability to produce meaning to our lives alone that makes us human, for the Convict, jubilant at this idea, says, “Yes. Let me embrace you. We're human once again.”^[27]

In the final act, al-Hakim takes us back to Earth when the two convicts, having successfully repaired their space ship, return home. However, time, too, assumes a new ontology when taken out of its worldly context, and 309 years have transpired since they left Earth on their mission. The mission itself had become a part of history, and scientists for generations had hoped and waited for their return. The two convicts, now heroes, were repositories of knowledge that the scientific community, the state, had a keen, vested interest in. To acculturate them to the realities of this futuristic world and assist them in drawing up a report of their observations in space, they are each assigned an assistant who al-Hakim generically calls Blonde and Brunette. However, before they can get to working on the report, the two convicts are brimming with curiosity, and direct a slew of questions at their assistants. Through this conversation between the convicts and the assistants, al-Hakim paints a vivid picture of the new world that they occupy.

It is in this act that al-Hakim overtly engages with the theme of utopia that is so central to definitions of science fiction. The utopia that al-Hakim portrays three centuries in the future is a world that has reached the age of complete automation. At first, this world seems to resemble a socialist utopia. All basic essentials of life are provided for by the state. Hunger has been eradicated, for food is now manufactured chemically with nutrients extracted from the basic elements of nature. Medicine has advanced to such a degree that disease has been vanquished, and life expectancy as gone up tremendously. War has become outmoded. Currency has no place in this society, and everything is available to anyone who needs it. However, this seemingly utopian world is fraught with a new set of tensions that complicate it, for in this new world of the future where all necessities have been taken care of, the crisis that plagues its people is the crisis of work. With the people no longer needing to work to earn a living, the motivation to work has

been culled from the realm of necessity and placed in the realm of enjoyment. Work is engaged in for its own sake, for the sheer pleasure of it. The real crisis of this society is that there aren't enough jobs for everyone anymore. In this sense, the fourth act invokes the same conditions that defined the two convicts on the unknown planet in the third act, and while the technological advancement of society denotes a utopian progression, al-Hakim also invokes the hopelessness and meaninglessness that is an inevitable consequence of this utopian condition.

At the same time, it is through this utopian-dystopian construction that al-Hakim brings out the central political thrust of the play. In this world of the future, the real political question is the question of work. While the necessities of food and shelter are taken care of by the state for the whole population, the necessity of meaning to life through work, which al-Hakim establishes as central to the human condition, is a privilege of the few, with unemployment being a rampant problem. As the Blonde explains, the pursuit for work is a pursuit to escape the drudgery of nothingness, of boredom, that the absence of work implies. The boredom and misery that characterized the lives of the two convicts on the unknown planet is the everyday reality for the millions of unemployed in this world. Al-Hakim makes this political tension explicit with the two assistants belonging to two opposing political parties and ideologies. In the words of the Blonde, who belongs to the ruling party and is derisive of the Brunette's reservations about the ruling party's philosophy of progress, "One group wants to advance bravely forward and the other group wants to stop and look fearfully back."^[28] While the ruling party believes in the ideology of technological advancement at all costs, the opposing faction is of the view that in this ruthless advance into the future, there is something essentially human that is being depleted from their lives. As can be expected, the Convict finds himself convinced of the ideological stance of the opposing party and sides with the Brunette in the debate, while the Second Convict, the engineer and a man of science, sides with the Blonde in their assertion that one must keep looking toward the future.

The final act is not only the most overtly political at the level of the text, but it is also the act that brings out the politics to which al-Hakim subscribes. The world of the future, with its automation and technological advancement, is a reference to the Western model of modernity, that is impelled by Science and Reason. And the precarious position that al-Hakim occupies between valorization of the West and fetishization of Egypt evinces in his conclusion of the play. As the political debate between the two assistants, and eventually the two convicts, intensifies, the Convict and the Brunette become vocally critical of the policies of the ruling party, and in the heat of the argument, they carelessly touch on the idea of a revolutionary overthrow of the state. And of course, this utopian-dystopian world is, much like an Orwellian world, under constant surveillance of the state, and in no time, there is a Security Man along with a robot at the scene. The state, which had been monitoring and analyzing their conversation, detected in it an intention to revolt, and the Convict and the Brunette must pay for it. They must agree to either be subjected to rays that would control their brains to prevent such thoughts, or be incarcerated in The City of Quiet. Since neither of them are willing to allow anyone tamper with their heads, they agree to be taken into custody. However, the state, on the indication of the Brunette, realize that there might be fatal consequences to their status quo if they arrested the Convict, who, having returned from space after three hundred years, is somewhat of a hero, and people would talk about it and decry it. A loudspeaker booms into the room, ordering the Security Man to leave the Convict and take the woman only instead, for they can easily find another assistant to replace her.

But the convict cannot stand this, and offers himself up to the state in place of her. When the Security Man refuses this, as those were not his orders, the Convict threatens the state with the leverage he has as

the possessor of a unique knowledge, “I will tell the world that after three hundred years I find everything has changed except fear of free speech and alarm at the expression of an opinion. It is better for you to arrest me. Sentence me to death, if the affair requires it.”^[29] Fearing the consequences of his actions, the state is forced into a corner to acquiesce to his demands. As the Security Man takes the Convict away, the Second Convict says, “You are really going... You haven’t changed in three hundred years. Once again you’re going to prison because of a woman.”^[30] Perceiving this utopia as inherently dehumanizing, as a negation of love and art, the Convict offers himself up in place of a woman he barely knows, bringing the play to a full circle. Al-Hakim completely undermines the utopias of Western modernity through this self-sacrifice of his protagonist, for his act is an utter renunciation of the rationality and Reason that form the cornerstones of scientific development. Even as al-Hakim acknowledges the benefits to this Western rationality in the advancement of civilizations, as is evidenced in his agenda for the Arab theatre and in his indulgence in the genre of science fiction, he nonetheless attributes it with a certain dehumanizing function that stifles love, art, and all that is beautiful in this world. Thus, Tawfiq al-Hakim’s science fiction, while characterized as science fiction principally due to its emulation of the genre as it developed in the West, also markedly divested from it, and in that sense, *Voyage to Tomorrow* can be properly called a work of Arabic science fiction.

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^[1] Yazan al-Saadi, “Arabic Science Fiction: A Journey Into the Unknown,” *Al Akhbar English*, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/arabic-science-fiction-journey-unknown>.

^[2] Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 65.

^[3] *Ibid*, 64.

^[4] Malika Belkharchouche, “Science Fiction in the Arab World: A Genre Still in the Cradle,” *Revue Sciences Humaines*, no. 34 (2010): 153.

^[5] *Ibid*

^[6] Ayman Eassa and Faten Eassa, “Youssef Ezeddin Eassa’s Radio Dramas,” *Youssef Ezeddin Eassa 1914-1999*, 2008, accessed on 14 March, 2015, <http://www.eassa1914.com/pdf.pdf>.

^[7] Yazan al-Saadi, “Arabic Science Fiction: A Journey Into the Unknown,” *Al Akhbar English*, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/arabic-science-fiction-journey-unknown>.

^[8] Christina M. Sidebottom, “An Introductory Survey of the Plays, Novels, and Stories of Tawfiq Al-Hakim, as Translated into English” (MA thesis, The Ohio State University, 2007) https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1409229640&disposition=attachment.

^[9] Charles William Richard Long, *Tawfiq Al Hakim: Playwright of Egypt* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1979)

^[10] Marvin Carlson, "Negotiating Theatrical Modernism in the Arab World," *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 4 (2013): 530.

^[11] Ibid.

^[12] Ibid., 529.

^[13] While the play doesn't seem to present any great dramaturgical or logistical problem for production, I have not been able to find any reference to a production history, and am inclined to believe, albeit very speculatively, that it has never been staged.

^[14] Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Voyage to Tomorrow (1957)*, in *Plays, Prefaces & Postscripts of Tawfiq Al-Hakim: Theatre of Society*, trans. William M. Hutchins, A.I. Abdulai, and M.B. Lawani, 1st ed., vol. 2, 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press Inc., 1984): 275.

^[15] Ibid., 279.

^[16] Ibid., 280.

^[17] Ibid. Emphasis added.

^[18] Ibid., 283.

^[19] Ibid., 282.

^[20] Ibid., 288.

^[21] Ibid.

^[22] Ibid.

^[23] Ibid., 299.

^[24] Ibid., 301.

^[25] Ibid., 304.

^[26] Ibid.

^[27] Ibid., 305.

^[28] Ibid., 315.

[\[29\]](#) Ibid., 325.

[\[30\]](#) Ibid., 326.



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