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Arab Science Fiction

Science Fiction (Sci-Fi), as defined by *Merriam-Webster*, is a literary form that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals. This genre has been flourishing rapidly in the West. Nowadays, Sci-Fi is viewed in our Arab world as an extension of a foreign heritage, although it is not novel or strange to our culture. Arabs have produced many fantastical stories, as well as truly futuristic Sci-Fi works; however, they have not always been in the spotlight.

Many date Sci-Fi back to the 19th century in Europe; to Jules Verne's scientific romances and H.G. Wells' novels, or a few years earlier to the groundbreaking publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Others argue that Sci-Fi evolved during the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, 16th–18th centuries, with the birth of early Sci-Fi works following the scientific revolution and major discoveries in astronomy, physics, and mathematics.

In reality, Sci-Fi dates further back several centuries in the East. Noticeable examples of proto Sci-Fi tales are recounted within the tales of *The Arabian Nights*. Some of these tales are *The Adventures of Bulukiya*, which depict cosmic pluralism through Bulukiya, who looks for a herb of immortality and travels across the cosmos to different worlds; *Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman*, where Abdullah, the protagonist, discovers an underwater submarine society after he gains the ability to breathe underwater; *The Ebony Horse*, about a mechanical horse capable of flying into outer space; as well as the commonly known *Adventures of Sinbad the Sailor* and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*.

Although these tales include fantastical journeys through various cosmoses, Sci-Fi

in the East neither begin nor end with *The Arabian Nights*. The earliest known fiction was written in the 2nd century CE by the Syrian Lucian; it is *True History*, which recounts the story of a space voyage, wars between celestial planetary bodies, and encounters with forms of alien life. The novel is referred to as "the first known text that could be called science fiction".

There is also a long history of early Arabic Sci-Fi that goes all the way back to the 8th–13th centuries. Arab sci-fi, which is inclusive of fantasy and mythology, was witnessed in many works of intellectuals. In the 9th century, 500 years before Thomas More's *Utopia*, al-Farabi envisioned in his *Opinions of the Residents of a Splendid City*, a utopian society ahead of its time.

Moreover, Ibn Tufail's *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan*, written in the 12th century, is considered an early example of Sci-Fi literature and one of the most important books that had a profound influence on philosophy. In the 13th century, *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* inspired the Arabian polymath Ibn al-Nafis to write *The Book of Fadil ibn Natiq*, later translated as *Theologus Autodidactus*, which is considered a Sci-Fi novel. It narrates the story of a wild child on a deserted island; as the tale progresses, elements of futurology, apocalyptic destruction, and other wild concepts arise.

Ibn al-Nafis explained these elements using scientific concepts in anatomy, biology, physiology, astronomy, cosmology, and geology, instead of giving supernatural or mythological explanations. For example, he explained bodily resurrection by introducing his scientific theory of metabolism and making references to his own scientific discovery of the pulmonary circulation. Furthermore, Al-Qazwini's *Awaj bin Anfaq* futuristic tale, written around 1250 CE, about a man who came to Earth from a distant planet also has proto Sci-Fi elements.

In the modern era, Arab science fiction has been witnessing a revival of interest after it was dominated by translations of Western Sci-Fi tales for many centuries. In the late 1950s, Tawfiq al-Hakim published *Voyage to Tomorrow*, followed by Mustafa Mahmoud, who wrote famous Sci-Fi novels, including *The Spider*. Both authors' works encouraged other writers throughout the region, including Nabil Farouq in Egypt, known for *The Future Archive*, Mohammed Aziz Al-Habbabi in Morocco, known for *Elixir*, and Kassem Al-Khattat in Iraq, known for *The Green Stain*. These are only a few names and the list goes on, which shows wide interest in that genre from Arabs seeking change, hoping to reach a future different from our present.

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