

# From the Ashes: Sufi Literature in the Modern Arabic Science-Fiction Novel

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**Abstract:** Sufism, while popular among Western SFF writers, is a rarity in the Arab world: the very birthplace of Sufism. For the longest time modern Arab literature has neglected the rich literary tradition represented by Sufism, in part thanks to the heritage of Orientalism. As a consequence, Arab SFF authors have passed up a tremendous opportunity to have their own distinctive subgenre grounded in spiritualism and mysticism, and one that automatically resonates with foreign readers given Sufism's long and proud cosmopolitan credentials. This situation however is changing and rapidly as Arab authors writing in fields of hard sci-fi, satire, magic realism and horror/fantasy take up Sufi themes, tropes and storytelling techniques. Egypt is taken as a test case of the rise of this new subgenre, involving the works of successive generations of authors, in addition to some other Arab and Muslim writers. In the process the false division between the material and

spiritual, or the Western and Eastern, can be bridged once and for and to the benefit of SFF.

**Keywords:** Sufism, science fiction subgenres, Egypt, Orientalism, Philip K. Dick.

*The ocean can be yours; why should you stop,  
Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew?  
The secrets of the sun are yours, but you  
Content yourself with motes trapped in beams.*

Farīd-ad-Dīn 'Aṭṭār

*The cosmos is also within us, we're made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos, to know itself.*

Carl Sagan

Something interesting is happening in the world of Arabic science fiction, witnessed from the author's own direct experience as a member of the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF), namely, the first tentative

steps towards a new mystical subgenre of science fiction grounded in Sufism. We had held discussions before at our monthly events to publish an anthology of stories about spiritualism and the director and founder of the ESSF has since published a novella, *Ar-Rihla Al-Ahīra* [*The Final Voyage*], containing explicit Sufi references (Aysha, 2022). An Algerian author we correspond with, Dr. Fayṣal al-Aḥmar, has recently published a YA Sufi SF novel, *Fī al-Bu'd al-Mansī* [In the Forgotten Dimension] (2022), and is in the process of publishing another more substantive work. The only question then is why this has not happened sooner. I list several Egyptian Sufi speculative works below, some dating as far back as the 1960s, but the truth is that Sufism is a rarity in Arabic SF and does not even hold a major presence in modern Arabic literature. There is an odd smattering of Sufi references or personages in the writings of such great Egyptian authors as Naguib Mahfouz, Jamāl Ghītānī and Ammar Ali Hassan, as well as Libyan author Ibrahim Al-Koni. Nonetheless, the only writer who has really specialized and distinguished himself in the field is Abdel Ilah Benarfa from Morocco, as well as the fantasy author Djamel Jiji from Algeria.

In contrast, authors from the West and around the globe, and especially genre writers, are positively smitten with Sufism. The list of names is long and distinguished and includes the likes of sci-fi legend Philip José Farmer who went as far as classing Ibn Tufail's (c. 1105-1185) version of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (the classical philosophical Sufi novel) as an early example of proto-science fiction (1994). The big names that deploy Sufism in their work include Robert Graves (poetry), Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt (drama) and Paulo Coelho (magic realism). This trend in SF is followed by Doris Lessing, Frank Herbert, Viktor Pelevin, Rene Rebetz

and Ian Watson to name a few; Philip K. Dick is a special case that will be dealt with below. Some younger SF authors have entered the fray with Jeremy Sazl and Blaze Ward, not to forget Dawoud Kringle, an American convert to Islam (Kringle, 2019). One can quibble as to the depth and understanding of Sufism in the writings of non-Muslim authors and one can even raise the specter of cultural appropriation (both topics for another article) but the point is that they have ventured where we have not. And if there is any misappropriation going on it is *we* who are to blame because we opened up this opportunity through our neglect and intellectual laziness, if not downright turning our backs on our own heritage, blindly aping Orientalist prejudices (see Khafājī below). As the progenitors of Sufism, in the Arab world, this is both unfortunate and inexcusable. Fayṣal al-Aḥmar's new novel is actually the exception to the rule, since he wrote it in 1997 and has been *struggling* ever since to get it published. It's also a tremendously missed opportunity since Sufism has such an international reputation that it could serve as a springboard for Arab SF to reach a wider audience and help place Arab and Muslim-themed SF on the global literary map.

Consequently, this article is divided into three sections. The first deals with the local challenges facing Sufi science fiction written in the Arab world, namely, the curious hostility that exists within Arab literary circles (authors, critics, academics) towards Sufism. Egypt is taken as an Arab test case, given the author's personal experience with the Egyptian literary scene, direct access to authors and publishers and literary critics and events. The second section deals with positive examples of Sufism in Egyptian and Arab SF. The third and final section melds Arab and Western sci-fi through the example of Philip K. Dick.

A quick note before proceeding. Sufism is notoriously difficult to define (Maḥmūd, 1999: 436). It's best to see it as a methodology rather than a sect, an alternative means towards gaining insights and certainty about God and morality (Maḥmūd, 1999: 432). As a learned bookseller friend told me, Sufism can be summed up in the statement "he who has tasted knows" (من ذاق عرف). Sufism was never comfortable with the literalism of the clerics and jurists *or* the subservience of these learned elites to those in power, hence the Sufi parable of the grammarian and the boatman. When the grammarian learns that the boatman knows naught about grammar, he tells him: "you have wasted half your life." When a gust of wind knocks them over into the water and the boatman sees the grammarian can't swim, he tells him: "you have wasted *all* of your life" ('Abd al-Dāyīm, 2016: 150-151). The grammarian is a textual literalist, not concerned with the deeper meaning of the rules and rituals of Islam, while the boat is the journey of life and the soul. The sea is knowledge itself, the inner depths of which you can never plumb if you never venture beyond the seashore ('Abd al-Dāyīm, 2016: 150-151).

This is why Sufism, in its very genesis, was first and foremost a *literary* movement. Its modus operandi, the way it functions and converts and heals and cleanses people of their worldly desires and lusts, is through literature and artistic performance. It is not enough to know what is right in the form of "the moral of the story is..." but to *feel* what is right. Sufis did not publish their works ipso facto but spoke in public and sequenced their stories into series, leaping from one moral precept and exemplary role-model to the next in a logical chain that left the listener morally replenished and intellectually humbled (Subḥ, 1977: 286). The stories functioned at the level of dilemmas,

challenges and resolutions with support characters and a linear narrative flow. Sentences were also short and rhythmic, to ensure clarity and effectiveness with a mass audience. In the process Sufis became literary innovators extraordinaire, breaking the mold of classical Arabic literature with its over-emphasis on poetry.

Poetry in the Arabic tradition can be quite elitist and long winded; poets in the past lengthened their poems since they were paid by the word. Sufi poets instead relied on cryptic phrases and esoteric knowledge to challenge listeners to question all they knew and took for granted. No wonder then that in the 20th century the modernist school of Arab poetry, so eager to break old conventions, have revived Sufi literature (Al-Wakīl, 2021: 148-149). A great scholar of Sufi literature, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mun'im Khafājī, went as far as to compare Sufism to *surrealism* given its mistrust of the human consciousness of reality, and its being skeptical of both the empirical senses and pure reason and their failure to shelter your mind and soul from the power of the ego and worldly pursuits (1980: 177), hence the likening of life to sleep and worldly pursuits to dreams—an illusion—and death, or the putting away of material concerns, to the ultimate awakening to the truth (Khafājī, 1980: 99). Khafājī adds that Sufism was also a cosmopolitan enterprise from the very beginning. Arab poetry, apart from being elitist, was also in the service of one tribe or royal clique against another, a pattern that reasserted itself by the 2nd century of Islam (founded in 610) with the Baghdad caliphate (750-1258, 1261-1517). Religious figures rebelled against this, and the factionalism and sectarianism stoked by the Abbasids, to bring all Muslims and Arabs together around a common moral cause, using art again as a mode of moral

instruction and soothing balm to societal ills (Khafājī, 1980: 63).

Sufis speak the language of all nations, using their myths and cultural precepts to aid in the process of conversion, as Uzbek author in exile Hamid Ismailov (November 2018) reveals, himself an author of a Sufi speculative fiction novel, *Of Strangers and Bees: A Hayy Ibn Yaqzan Tale* (2019). As an illustration, consider Farīd-ad-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *The Conference of the Birds*, in which the representatives of the bird kingdom go on a trek in search of Simorgh, a phoenix-like bird from Persian mythology. After traversing the valleys of Unity, Love, Poverty and Annihilation, etc.—Sufi maqamat or levels of moral being that take you closer to God—only thirty make it in the end. That’s when they learn that Simorgh means thirty birds. And one of these birds is the Hoopoe, from the Quranic story of the Prophet Solomon and Queen of Sheba (Quran 27:20-24), further fusing local cultures in a pan-Islamic mould.

Sufism, then, is *perfect* as a way to speak to the world. It has always inspired literary innovation and cultural cross-pollination. Again, such a wasted opportunity, one that must be ameliorated both in the Arab publishing industry, and academic appraisal of publishing.

### Nipped in the Bud

The main Arab SF author to write about Sufism and spiritualism more generally in his works was Muṣṭafá Maḥmūd in the 1960s, an early pioneer of SF in Egypt with his novels *Al-‘Ankabūt* [*The Spider*] (1967), *Rajul taḥta al-sifr* [*A Man Under Zero*] (1967), *Al-Khurūj*

*min al-Tābūt* [*Out of the Coffin*] (1967), and his play *Al-Afyūn* [*Opium*] (1976). Apart from that there are no examples for Sufi SF, at least in Egypt, till the turn of the century. Muṣṭafá Maḥmūd was a maverick in all cases and gave up fiction writing shortly afterwards, with no one taking up the mystical mantle. There are multiple reasons for this as well, besides the usual problems SF faces in the Arab world to gain mass popularity and critical acclaim and recognition (Knezevic, 2013; Malik, 2009; Khammas, 2006). Speaking to several Egyptian SF writers, old and young, you get the distinct impression that many are hostile to Sufism itself, and not just for religious reasons. One condemned it outright as a blasphemous variant of Buddhism while another said many of the (non-SF) authors he knows who are advocates of Sufism are into hocus pocus and a giant embarrassment to the writing established. Yet another said that Sufism was a product of the scientific decline of the Muslim world in the late Ottoman era, an example of Muslims caving in on themselves intellectually, substituting spiritualism for science. For many of those who embrace science wholeheartedly in the Arab SF world, Sufism is seen as a backlog, while many who embrace Sufism entirely in the world of fiction have the same hostility towards science.<sup>1</sup>

Surveying Arab studies on Sufi literature you find remarkably the same pattern (Bil‘alī, 2001: 8). There is religious hostility to Sufism of any kind, old or new, in certain conservative quarters and a strange kind of resistance to it also found in progressive-leftist circles. They see it as retrogressive and a throwback to a bygone era, and do not consider its tremendous heritage of stories and poetry as constituting a ‘literary’ movement on a par with surrealism or post-

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Dick in her compendious study of Arab SF noted an early hostility to *modern* science, which invariably comes from the West, and with that an initial kneejerk response that saw spiritualism and Sufism as a *refuge* from modernity (Dick, 2022: 355, 359-360, 361, 363).

structuralism or cubism (Bil‘alī, 2001: 5-6), which is ironic, given the speculative credentials of Sufism highlighted above. In the socialist era in the Arab world (1950s-1960s), Sufism was quietly condemned for its retrogressive nature, seen as beholden to superstitions and bolstering old and outdated traditions and customs, let alone propping up the aristocratic order (Mylwsláfsky *et al.*, 2019: 22). The love of classical Arabic poetry has also worked against Sufism in academia and among Arab literary critics, whether studies of Sufi poetry (‘Abd al-Dāyīm, 2016: 7) or prose (Leder & Kilpatrick, 1992: 2, 16). Even academics who do study Sufi literary productions themselves complain about the dearth of works on the topic, with nothing more than studies of individual classic poets like Saadi or Hafez or historical surveys of Sufi literature from its inception and formative period but not following through into the modern era (Bil‘alī, 2001: 13). There are some books that deal with more contemporary examples of Sufism in literature, but they are few and many are tragically dated and out of print. Khafājī adds that yet another reason why Arab academia has neglected Sufism as a literary movement is the legacy of Orientalism which tried to do away with what was distinctive and Islamic to Sufi literature, charging it with endless borrowings from Greek and Christian traditions (1980: 73).<sup>2</sup> He also does away with the hocus pocus charge mentioned above since many of the leading lights of Sufism in the past—Abu‘l ‘Atahiya, Al-Jilani, Ibn ‘Arabi, Al-Ghazālī, Zu Noon Al-Masri—were also trained in chemistry, the medical sciences and philosophy (Khafājī, 1980: 76; see also Ebnou, 2022: 276).

Even so, there are other problems to contend with. Distinguished Yemeni author and playwright (and SF writer), Wajdī Al-Ahdal, adds that one of the reasons that Sufism hasn’t been written about frequently in novels is that Sufism in Muslim history has always been expressed through poetry and parables. The novel is a modern import into the Arab world, after all (modernist Arab poetry has fared better).<sup>3</sup> There is also a self-confidence problem involved on the part of the authors, since Al-Ahdal himself has thought about writing a Sufi novel, but he has hesitated repeatedly to start writing it. He prefers to have a Sufi ‘experience’ first before putting pen to paper (Al-Ahdal, 2018). It seems that being too close to something can be detrimental and, anyway, it’s almost a dictum in Sufi discourse that Sufism cannot be learned by reading alone (Maḥmūd, 1999: 424).

No wonder, then, that the list of distinguished *foreign* authors cited above has outpaced the Arab-language authors. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is evidence that this lack of self-confidence is being overcome in the Egyptian theatre, if the little experiments documented here persist, grow and flourish—the topic we move to now.

## A Subgenre in the Making

As noted above, Muṣṭafá Maḥmūd—a medical doctor, author and Islamic thinker—was one of the first to write Sufi-themed SF in Egypt and the Arab world, if only for a short interval of his long life (Rāghib, 1998: 87-93). The opening chapters of *Al-Khurūj min*

<sup>2</sup> For the love-hate relationship Orientalists have with Sufism, please see Sedgwick (2019) and Arjana (2021).

<sup>3</sup> The list of contemporary Arab poets reviving Sufi techniques is impressive and includes non-Muslims, such as Elia Ibmedi, Elias Farahat and Elia Qunsul. Ironically these modernist Sufi poems include ‘scientific’ poetry (Al-Wakīl, 2021: 147).

*al-Tābūt* are set in India and involve magical powers such as levitation and speaking with the dead and the story as a whole deals with reincarnation alongside the challenge of Western modernity. *Al-Afyūn* (or *Opium*) is more explicit still, with its Sufi dervishes and orders and a protagonist struggling to maintain both his sanity and the mystical heritage of his forefathers in a world awash with materialism and corruption (the protagonist's brother is also a corrupt civil servant, working in the socialist agricultural reform programme in the days of Nasserism). Noticeably, the son of the protagonist is an avowed Marxist and tries to kill the Sufi sheikh his father followed. He fails however as the sheikh's neck feels as if made of concrete.

*Opium* is controversial with many a critic arguing that the author was trying to find a middle path between mindless spiritualism and soulless scientism (Rāghib, 1998: 88-92). *Al-'Ankabūt*, interestingly, does deal with reincarnation but scientifically via the instrument of genetic memories, putting the novel on a par with a movie like *Altered States* (1980). *Rajul tahta al-sifr* [Man under Zero] is a Utopian/dystopian novel about a near-perfect future world devoid of faith, with the universe itself beginning to contract. The hero in the story, a scientist, turns himself into electromagnetic radiation, journeying across the solar system and then heading towards the core of the Sun. He burns himself to death but realizes the error of his ways, his belittling of love and religion and broadcasts his message to the rest of humanity.

Muṣṭafá Maḥmūd then is an example of the tremendous potential that Arab and Muslim authors had early on when it came to Sufi SF but, sadly, he was the exception to the rule. The hostility to Sufism in modern literary circles in Egypt and the Arab world was too deeply set

for him to turn the tide. Thankfully the latest writings in the field are beginning to break this recalcitrant mould. Muḥammad Najīb Maṭar, an engineer and member of the ESSF, has an uplifting little story called "Shakhābī" [Scribbles] in which a man takes a friend to a Sufi ceremony and the guest is furious at the displays of poverty and superstition on display (Maṭar, 2013: 33-36). He condemns this as a travesty and a perversion of Islam, a religion built on the love of knowledge and science. The next day, while attending a physics class at university, the professor talks about the inner workings of the atom and the presence of opposing particles that equalise each other out, how electrons circle round the nucleus, and how an electron has an indeterminate position and can be in more than one place at the same time. While listening to these words the man, an engineer, recollects what he'd heard and saw during the Sufi ritual the previous day. Sufi saints are supposed to be able to travel incredible distances in the blink of an eye and can be in more than one place at the same time. They talk of the balance between good and evil governing the world, while Sufi dances involve a circle of men supposedly moving in a daze around a central figure, and yet never overstepping each other. This is like the world of the inner atom, the protagonist realises, and he begins to sing out Sufi chants in the university, to the shock and consternation of all, including the man who had originally invited him!

Speaking to Mr. Maṭar, he told me that his story caused quite a riot when it came out, with one group interpreting it as anti-Sufi, and the other as pro-Sufi. Later he wrote the novel *Ghurabā' min al-faḍā'* [Strangers from Outer Space] (2019), inspired in part by a mysterious man he encountered in his hometown, an angelic figure who was mute and physically very strong, living out in the wilds

and admonishing the youth for smoking drugs (Maṭar, 2019). It was as if the man was from outer space or possessed of *karāmāt* (divine blessings associated with Sufi saints), Mr. Maṭar explained. Hence the themes of alienation in the novel, lamenting how modern man has polluted and corrupted both himself and nature after losing touch with basic tenets of the faith.

A second brave attempt is Īhāb Muḥammad Zāyid's novel, which is actually a play printed in novel-form: *Bīmāristān al-rūḥ* [Hospital of the Soul] (2014) (bīmāristāns were hospitals in Islamic history, some of the first hospitals in human history). It is borderline surrealism-magic realism but with a strong scientific core. Egypt is afflicted with a mysterious blight, with crops turning from green to black, with animals and humans becoming affected, death rates and crime rates (even sexual harassment rates) going up and, inexplicably, many of the ancient Egyptian inscriptions turning black as well. The leader of the country gathers together his government ministers and tells them point blank how useless they all are, how they have presided over the degradation of education, science, cultural life and common morality in the country. He adds that all the foreign universities and schools operating in Egypt have done nothing good for the country, either.

The scientist who discovers the cause of the blight is called Hassan Al-Sufi and he begins by digging up the past to find a solution, going to the tombs of the ancients to harvest seeds from bygone ages, pure seeds that have not been corrupted by the Egypt of today. He finds that it is the contemporary Egyptian citizen who is to blame. Something went wrong in his genes and these genes infected the plants, spreading human corruption into nature's bounty. By harvesting ancient seeds from tombs, and by also extracting pure DNA samples from mummies, the crisis is finally resolved. Hassan

Al-Sufi adds that these original plant strains belong to the Fertile Crescent, the very cradle of human civilisation, and explains how Western imperialism divided these nations up, cutting them off from each other and from their history and identity and common causes and pains. That is when Egyptians stopped being Egyptians, stopped being true to themselves and their roots, and fell into a bottomless pit of corruption that eventually polluted everything. This spiritual-ethical realization drives the scientific solution.

*Bīmāristān al-rūḥ* is also notable for how innovative it is at the level of narrative experimentation. Plays published in novel form are common fair in Egypt but Īhāb Muḥammad Zāyid takes this a step further, with little paragraphs introducing a scene or commenting on events, with emojis at the beginning and end of a chunk of text to help liven things up and clarify what is narrative voice and what is dialogue; a marriage of traditional Arabic storytelling with modern theatre, and the lingo of social media to boot.

A third example is 'Imād Bakr and his satirical novel *Madīnat hwnkā bwnkā tajārib al-ilhād wa-al-fāsād* [The City of Honka Ponka Combats Atheism and Corruption] (2015). You have a made-up city that stands in for Egypt, with names of characters and public figures and opposition parties that are clearly modelled on the Mubarak era, with tongue-in-cheek commentary on the causes and consequences of the January revolution. The narrative techniques employed are also quite innovative. You have a traditional Arabic storytelling format, with a narrative voice introducing the city and its people and customs and problems, and the deliberate insertion of two characters, one naive and the other devious, to explore this city up close and personal. This setup is much like the two

characters that emerge at the end of the Sufi classic *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, one devoutly religious who only follows the literal word of the text and the other a mischievous philosopher who is concerned with reaching God's intentions.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time the novel is awash with gritty realism, ugly facts about everyday life and politics and business, and characters have depth, while their appearance helps to reflect the themes that they embody. One of the characters, the explicit spokesman of the poor districts, is portrayed as a troubled philosopher who drinks too much. His wife, in contrast, is white and blonde and slender, hailing from the posh New-Cairo-like neighbourhood.<sup>5</sup> Later it is discovered that they aren't human nor genies or figments of the oral narrator's imagination, either. They are physical embodiments of cosmic forces, of negative and positive energy, determining the ultimate fate of the city, based on how cooperative the people are with what is transparently evil or good. *The City of Honka Ponka* is both a modern novel and a story told in the traditional oral narrative form, with very self-aware characters: the naïve and devious duo describe themselves as figments of the author's imagination that don't necessarily have to obey the laws of physics half the time.

A fourth example is Dr. Hosam Elzembely's novella *Ar-Ribla Al-Abīra* [The Final Voyage], about a handful of human settlers on Mars after Earth has been engulfed by a cataclysmic disaster. In one of the key flashback chapters a character speaks of her father the inventor who found a way to subvert Asimov's three laws of robotics, allowing his androids to develop their own sense of self and from there their own

creative impulses and even belief systems. In the penultimate scene of this chapter a heroic robot asks his inventor if it is okay for him to pray, specifically to his master. The inventor clarifies he is no creator since every atom the robot is made of was created by God, so the machine replies that he will then pray to the creator of his creator, and hope God will graciously reward him with a soul. But more significant still is why the inventor decides to toy around with Asimov's laws, something he has misgivings about later, since the robots might choose to replace us as the predominant sentient life form. He explains that he stumbled on the notion indirectly while trying to figure out the secrets of the universe which he believed lie in the human soul, because God created man by breathing his spirit into man's body, meaning that the mysterious equations that control the universe were inside us all along: the ultimate reconciliation of science and religion, as he himself states. The trick was taming the soul first, cleansing it, to insure that the knowledge produced was not abused for profit or power. As an additional precaution he decided to programme his equations into the machines first, as an experiment, after noticing how some were going over and above the call of duty—expressing volition and even creative jealousy—as if they already had souls.

This novel is also concerned with the search for extra-terrestrials and the human heroes stumble on crystalline life forms (see about non-organic life and spontaneous generation below). This is pure, unadulterated Sufism. In an earlier novel Dr. Hosam has toyed with a religious notion that all things, living and

<sup>4</sup> This is the duo of Absal and Salman, another instance in Sufi thought of esoteric knowledge, the insatiable desire to go beyond the surface to the hidden meanings (Heath, 1989: 207).

<sup>5</sup> A cultural note here: in the Mubarak era New Cairo was where the rich went to escape rubbing shoulders with the poor in the country's capital. Another notorious area for the super-rich are compounds on the north coast, hence Ahmed Khaled Tawfik's compound (guarded by Marines) in his dystopian novel *Utopia* (2009).



unliving, worship God and that even inanimate beings have a kind of residual consciousness (Elzembely, 2017). *Final Voyage* is also notable for literary innovation, relying on traditional oral storytelling snuck in through the back door, so to speak, in the form of flashbacks. There are seven central human characters and they each tell their separate tales about how they ended up on Mars, and in the process blanks in the story and the world-building are filled. This is an all too familiar means of telling a story in Arab and Islamic history, the classical example being Shahrazad in the *1001 Nights*, also called *Arabian Nights*.<sup>6</sup>

Another theme in the novel, found likewise in *Bīmāristān al-rūḥ*, is the concern with national unity for a country like Egypt where Christians are a key component of the population. One of the seven human heroes is a Christian and he is paired with a Muslim on a key mission to save these would-be settlers on the red planet. Īhāb Muḥammad Zāyid also has a Christian scientist working diligently to find a cure for the blight. The Egyptians' wish to become true to themselves also entails national unity in the patriotic discourse of the country. Note also the return to Egypt's ancient origins as a source for the cure, the pure DNA samples and ancient crops—national symbols we can all unite around, regardless of our religious differences.

While not Egyptian we cannot discount Fayṣal al-Aḥmar, possibly the most ambitious of the names mentioned here, replicating in his story the journey of Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) from his plush life of comfort in the royal courts to his ten-year trek searching for the truth from one land and mosque to

the next. Ghazālī struggled with his own soul, through prayer and isolation and fasting and charity, cleansing himself of the ego and the subservience of knowledge to power. Likewise, the hero of *Fī al-Bu'd al-Mansī* [In the Forgotten Dimension] leaves the comfortable life on the terraformed-colonized world where he resides, returning to his native Algeria to recapture the purity of his youth, up in the green hills, far away from the electronic controls and overcrowding and pollution of modern cybernetic life. He gets arrested, for antisocial behaviour, but uses his time in solitary confinement to remake himself through *riyadat al-naḥs* (exercises of the soul), reading a long-lost Sufi manuscript to master his own consciousness and to protect it from repeated attempts by his captors to drive him mad. After that he becomes a dervish with paranormal powers and has already developed a following due to his rebellious example.

I would like to list Iranian authors here too, especially those who incorporate spiritual themes in their works. Sadly, from speaking to friends over there—without naming names—it transpires that Sufism is castigated and marginalized by the Islamist regime in Iran and, as a consequence, it cannot make a literary imprint on the modern publishing scene. This is tragic given the incredible contribution that Iran has made to Sufi literature, with the likes of Rumi, Hafez and Saadi. There are restrictions on literary innovation and religious themes in certain Central Asian republics too, to cite Hamid Ismailov again (2022). The irony is that some Central Asian authors could get away with using Sufi and mystical folklore references in their work in the Soviet era, most notably Begenas Sartov in his *When the Edelweiss*

<sup>6</sup> Simorgh appears in the *1001 Nights* in the guise of the Rukh, a bird so large and mighty it can lift an elephant in its talons.

*Flowers Flourish* (1969), a borderline fantasy novel written by an otherwise hard SF author (Ismailov, 2022: 223). It seems that Central Asia and Iran are now going through the same period of stasis that modern Arabic literature had been suffering, until recently, and Sufism is once again the litmus test of literary radicalism and renovation.

### A Parting Word: The example of Philip K. Dick

To finish off on a positive note the examples cited above are all evidence of literary innovation, heirs to the stylistic improvisations of successive generations of Sufis in Islamic history. Sufism once again is becoming a literary movement in these able hands. To be even more ambitious the very nature of SF itself could change, even in its Western birthplace. The dual split of the world into Western materialism and Eastern spiritualism or mysticism is a false separation at best, and a colonial and Orientalist ploy at worst (Aysha, 2020). As noted above, many great Sufi thinkers were also scientists and logicians, and this was *no* coincidence. They believed in a form of spiritualist evolution where all things, even inanimate minerals, moved towards consciousness. The life of man by extension was all about the path to perfection and wholeness, making man the culmination of cosmic history (Khafāji, 1980: 120-121).

Hence, Ibn 'Arabi's description of man as the microcosm of the universe and Rumi's quip that man is the seeing eye of the universe (Khafāji, 1980: 121-122). Farīd-ad-Dīn 'Aṭṭār also stated proudly that the world does not distinguish between grand and minor, as the atom contains within it a sun just as the droplet holds in it an ocean, each containing an

entire world unto its own with myriad secrets of creation (Khafāji, 1980: 42). And with a sense of responsibility towards maintaining God's creation and humility in the face of the limitations of reason alone in comprehending this order, hence the transition from mere knowledge to wisdom—knowing what to do with that knowledge. These themes and motifs are evident incidentally in Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's reincarnation tale in *Al-'Ankabūt* [The Spider], where human memories move further back in time towards lower life-forms and beyond. Even in *Rajul taḥta al-sifr*, scientists in this heartless future world find non-organic life-forms: rocks that grow and reproduce.

In legend Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān himself is said to have been born from spontaneous generation, with the action of the sun on the mud (Farmer, 1994: 75). This brings us full circle back to where we started, how the West has been openly embracing Sufism in genre literature while we've fallen behind. And one cannot talk about the Western SF tradition in this regard without mentioning the titanic figure of Philip K. Dick who also committed himself to bridging this artificial gap between knowledge and faith. As Stanisław Lem reveals, Dick was desperately trying to create an *entirely new subgenre* in science fiction, grounded in mysticism (1975). He certainly challenged all our assumptions about the modern scientific world vision and the foundational assumptions of Western civilisation in *The Man in the High Castle* (Mountfort, 2016; Warrick, 1980). And Sufism was part of this project, as evidenced by its incorporation into *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (Boonstra, 1982).

Another curious crossover point is his psychedelic novel *Valis* (1981) which heavily references the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts. By funny coincidence an Egyptian author friend, Eslam Samir Abdel-Rahman, references

the same texts in his works of horror and fantasy, which rely heavily on Sufism (2019). In another novel of his, *Abū al-karāmāt: Al-irṭh alml'wn* [Abu Al-Karamat: The Accursed Inheritance] (2019), a cop has an identity crisis after accidentally killing a child while doing battle with terrorists—people who don't understand Islam properly. He then goes back to the countryside where his family comes from to find solace and rebuild himself, rediscovering his grandfather's legacy as a Sufi saint. And all of this in southern Egypt, a stone's throw away from ancient Egyptian monuments, highlighting again the cosmopolitan credentials of Sufism.

This marriage of spiritual-mystical concerns and resources with ancient Egypt has a long and proud history in Islam. Dr. Hosam Elzembely's short story "Ashbāḥ al-fis Būk" [Facebook Ghosts] (2013: 27-31), for instance, has a young man receiving messages over Facebook from his recently deceased father and he and his colleagues fail to find a scientific explanation. The story, once again, takes place in southern Egypt close to ancient Egyptian monuments and cities, signifying returning to your roots and heritage. The deceased father himself is a reference to continuity with the past. Sufis, moreover, have a resounding love affair with ancient Egypt, reveals Egyptologist Okasha El-Daly, even to the point of making major strides towards translating and classifying hieroglyphs, long before Champollion. He also explained that Muslim Alchemists were so enamoured by the ancients that they believed these inscriptions contained secrets that would allow them to create life itself and from mere chemicals (El-Daly, 2022).

Finally, here is a key passage to contend with in Dick's *The Divine Invasion* (1981):

He knew, of course, why the Christian-Islamic Church did not allow the

transmuting of the Bible into a color-coded hologram. If you learned how you could gradually tilt the temporal axis, the axis of true depth, until successive layers were superimposed and a vertical message—a new message—could be read out. In this way you entered into a dialogue with Scripture; it became alive. It became a sentient organism that was never twice the same. The Christian-Islamic Church, of course, wanted both the Bible and the Koran frozen forever. If Scripture escaped out from under the church its monopoly departed. (Dick, 2011: 73).

The success of the TV series based on *The Man in the High Castle* is testament to how substantive works of mystical SF can make an impact. Without exaggerating then the very face of science fiction could change and forever, and Dick's dream can come true.

To conclude, SF in the Arab world is an import from the West, but, as long as Arabic science fiction is true to itself, there is no reason why a Sufi subgenre could not be a game-changer on the international scale. The only proviso is that Arab and Muslim authors be true to their roots and write their Sufi SF on their own terms. The global marketplace for literary products and cultural goods is a treacherous domain and it is easy to succumb to the temptation of putting fame and fortune ahead of quality and authenticity. Philip K. Dick, like all tragic artists, only became well known after he died. Then again, Sufism is all about trial and error and standing up to temptation and finding your true calling in the end whatever mistakes you make along the way. Hence, the dictum he who has tasted knows. Sufi SF is fiction that places God centre stage and allows us to *taste* of His mercy and wisdom

in our fallible human way: science and world-building with an Islamic *flavour*.

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## APPENDIX FOR ARABIC TEXTS

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