

# Fictional Islam: A Literary Review and Comparative Essay on Islam in Science Fiction and Fantasy

By Rebecca Hankins

Islam and the Arabic language have appeared in the science fiction and fantasy genres from their earliest known creation. This literature was produced in the Arab/Islamic world and expressed in a variety of formats such as storytelling, poetry, prose, and performance. These literary forms were central to the early culture of Islam and to the speed by which the Islamic faith was spread throughout the world. The literary term coined here is *fictional Islam*, which is used to define the various forms of speculative fiction by Muslim and non-Muslim writers who have used Islam and Muslims as characters, plots, or colorful backgrounds. Fictional Islam, similar to Latin American literature and international literature, often involves not only the futuristic, alternative or other-worldly type scenarios, but also includes stories rich in horror and the fantastic. The stories told by subjects of the royal court regaled audiences with tales of genies, magic, and the fantastic. These performances were highly sought after and drew spectators and admirers; their stories were retold many times and spread far and wide. Of these popularized texts, one in particular, *The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* have influenced the imaginations of not only children, but also adults from their earliest known renderings from 800-900 AD. These stories emerge not only as captivating tales of fantasy, adventure, and discovery, but also are the earliest examples of fictional Islam. This paper will provide a review of selected examples of scholarly writings on fictional Islam followed by an analysis of two international views on Muslims and Islam as reflected in similar science fiction texts, Brian Aldiss's *HARM* (2007)<sup>1</sup> and Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971).<sup>2</sup>

## Origins of Fictional Islam

An often repeated saying of the Prophet Muhammad encourages Muslims to seek knowledge from the "cradle to the grave." Muslims are told to contemplate, think, learn, comprehend, and examine everything around them. Anas Al-Shaikh in his article "The Need for Education" explains how knowledge,

education, and the acquisition of learning, for Muslims, reinforces “the values of humanitarianism, morality, citizenship, peaceful coexistence, revulsion of racism and discrimination, acceptance of the ‘other’, and is married to actively taught skills of critical thinking and awareness”.<sup>3</sup> The vehicles through which these attributes are acquired are as diverse as the forms of knowledge are vast. As quoted on the Bangla science fiction webpage, a statement by the great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, “true science fiction could not really exist until people understood the rationalism of science and began to use it with respect in their stories”.<sup>4</sup> For the early Muslim communities, there was no conflict between science and religion, allowing for the free flow of scientific invention and innovation. According to I.A. Ibrahim in *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, the spread of Islam coincides with “great advances in medicines, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, literature, and history... Sophisticated instruments which were to make possible the European voyages of discovery, such as the astrolabe, the quadrant, and good navigational maps, were developed by Muslims”.<sup>5</sup> By extension we could arguably conclude that the creation of these instruments has a direct correlation to the expansion of the literary heritage of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative writing as a whole. The astrolabe and the quadrant have been staples within the language of science fiction writing as is found in some of our popular science fiction television shows and movies such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Dune*. The Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Gamma Quadrants and the astrolabe’s use by the ancient mariners or its use as spaceship monikers demonstrate the longevity of these early inventions and of their importance as tools of discovery. If people can now explore and discover new worlds with the use of these new tools, then stories of other worlds, stargazing, time travel experiences, and “first contacts” are not impossible.

One of the greatest examples of paranormal time travel is the account of the Prophet’s ascension from Jerusalem to Paradise while sitting in the Great Mosque in Jerusalem; for Muslims these ideas were neither strange nor foreign. Yusuf Nuruddin in his article, “Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology,” notes this episode as an inspiration for what he calls the science fiction motif, a belief system that inspires science fiction, although he personally sees “very little cosmology which can inspire works of Islamic science fiction”.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he maintains “...mythic literature and/or science fiction by and/or about Muslims need not rely upon Islamic cosmology”.<sup>7</sup> Nuruddin continues, “Some of the stories in this (Arabian Nights) collection, e.g. “The City of Brass” and “The Ebony Horse,” might be considered proto-science fiction...”<sup>8</sup> Often Muslim writers draw on these early prophetic parables and religious miracles in developing their science fiction and fantasy narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Reuven Snir’s article titled, “The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature,” Arabic and Islamic science fiction and fantasy have been around from the known beginning of the genre. Snir advances the *Master*

and writings of fictional Islam. The *Adherents.com-Religions in Literature* webpage at [www.adherents.com/lit/](http://www.adherents.com/lit/) discusses fictional Islam as a subject. A search on Islamic science fiction brings up over 700 entries. Of course, none of these sites provide a comprehensive overview. The majority of them offer listings rather than any form of scholarly analysis of writings related to fictional Islam. The only exception is the site *AfroFuturism* a [www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html](http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html), which focuses on African Diaspora writers of science fiction and fantasy and includes critical essays by writers who have also critiqued writings of fictional Islam.

The following selected scholarly articles investigate and discuss Islamic science fiction and fantasy; Christian Szyska's "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" (1995), Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-travel Literature" (1998), Reuven Snir's "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature" (2000), Yusuf Nuruddin's "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology" (2006), and Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener's "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel" (2007). These articles add to the richness of fictional Islam by discussing how writers of Arabic and Islamic science fiction and fantasy have influenced literature historically, from Europe to urban America and from the Middle East to Africa. The authors' subjects often overlap, but each presents the genre while identifying a few of the notable science fiction/fantasy writers and writings how they have interpreted their religion in these new avenues of expression.

Christian Szyska's "On Utopian Writing in Nasserist Prison and Laicist Turkey" tackles the use of utopian fiction, "fiction that goes beyond reality in order to depict an imaginary community in its ideal form as an opportunity to reflect upon the present situation."<sup>13</sup> The article presents the activity of writing as a coping mechanism for Muslims incarcerated in an Egyptian prison and as a plot device for a Turkish writer's quest for an Islamic utopia. The essay opens with a discussion of writings by Egyptian political prisoners and their use of the narrative to build an Islamic utopian world that allows them to escape the persecution and alienation they experience within their present societies. These stories are transmitted as plays and dramas that take their inspiration from the writings of one of Islam's more controversial figures, Egyptian political prisoner, the late Sayyid Qutb<sup>14</sup>, a leader within the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has consistently fought against the secularization of Egypt. The play Szyska critiques is titled *Al-bu'd al-khamis* (1987), written by Ahmad Ra'if, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a political prisoner. The story revolves around three characters, two men and a woman, who become disillusioned with planet Earth and decide to emigrate to planet Mars. On Mars they find a utopian system run by the tolerant, intelligent, and non-violent Martians who are undergirded with a moral and religious framework similar to Islam. Szyska notes, "The

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Martian system mirrors the concept of Islamic government as proposed by Sayyid Qutb and expressed in the concepts of tawhid [oneness of God] and hakimiyya [governance].<sup>15</sup>

Szyska also discusses the science fiction novel of Turkish author Ali Nar titled, *Uzay Ciftçileri* (Space Farmers). Nar's story centers on astronaut Hasan II's venture on a mystical path that mirrors the Prophet Muhammad's example. After traveling in outer space on his mission that he labels *Ascension*, similar to the ascent of the Prophet, they discover a star system they call the second world. During their extended stay in this new world they discover an eleventh planet that coincidentally contains the inhabitants who are tied to an earlier lost flight. After several months of getting to know each other, they all leave the planet for earth where they are warmly received. Nar concludes the story with this statement, "The results of the mission become the center of attention, especially those which confirm the Qur'anic predictions"<sup>16</sup>. Nar's story represents the two themes that Szyska deals with in her article, space travel and an Islamic utopia, but they differ in that Ra'if's play focuses on an established utopian system, while Nar's novel speaks of the establishment of a utopian society. Throughout the essay Szyska highlights the connections of these works to Islamic concepts of governance and societal norms:

"Ahmad Ra'if...orientates towards the Qutbian conceptualism, i.e. principally towards his Islamist conception of the sharia, that makes an increase in knowledge possible and leads to power, Ali Nar's hero pursues an esoteric path. Instead of finding a withdrawn enlightenment serving the individual cognition of God, *Uzay Ciftçileri* propagates a kind of a mystic cognition of God is connected with scientific progress and serves in this way to reach power".<sup>17</sup>

Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future" article, similar to Szyska, concerns time travel and governance. Cooperson centers his narrative on the earliest origins of Arabic time-travel literature from the 1800s and shows how it parallels English language time-travel literature. He also discusses the historical legacy of time travel, how it developed, and the impetus for its continual popularity in the Arab and Islamic literary world. He notes that "in the Arab world, particularly in Egypt, the tradition of time-travel and metahistorical fiction ...offers a range of complex responses to the warping of historical experience in the wake of imperialism"<sup>18</sup>. As with other writers of this genre, Cooperson notes the varied means in which Arab writers have used time-travel as an escape that offered alternatives to their current worldview acting as political commentary on the times, and often providing a sense of optimism for the future.

The Cooperson and Szyska articles share a focus on the concept of time-travel in fictional writings. Both articles agree that the writers they discuss are looking for an escape from what confines them, reminding them of life's earthly failures.

Time travel allows the writers they profile to remedy the negatives of their lives by fleeing; taking flight to outer space that provides an expansive canvas to present a different narrative of serenity, freedom and tranquility. For some of the writers this new canvas is represented by an Islam that offers the populace a peaceful, just, and orderly utopia. Yusuf Nuruddin's article also fits into this discussion of time travel and space from the perspective of African and African American writers of Islamic science fiction and fiction.

Reuven Snir's, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature" speaks about science fiction in the Islamic world as "emerging" as if it is something new, negating the history of writings in the field. He, nevertheless, traces Arabic science fiction writings back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His article discusses the emergence of Arabic science fiction from those earlier works noting that these were the "first steps on the road toward canonization".<sup>19</sup> Snir sees this move as important to the recognition and legitimacy of Arabic science fiction as a literary form and the acceptance of it for scholarly academic research. He ends his article saying:

"...as there is a marked awareness in Western SF writers to stay away from stereotypes and introduce authentic Arab and Muslim characters in their works, it may not be long that scholarly communities...will start taking up the change to systematically explore Arabic SF".<sup>20</sup>

For Snir legitimacy is only relevant if the West has provided the *seal of approval*. His analysis tends to erase the long tradition of Arab science fiction and views only the acceptance by the West as important to legitimize Arabic science fiction. Unfortunately, this is an argument that has been used to dismiss the works of other writers especially writers of color. Yusuf Nuruddin's "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads" rebuts this notion. His article connects the Arab, African, and African American to a long tradition of writing within the science fiction genre. Nuruddin confirms the early writings of science fiction by and about Islam, providing examples of its influence and manifestations within the urban community of artists and activists in the United States. Nuruddin traces the writers of the Arab-speaking world such as Mustafa Mahmoud and Ali Salim from Egypt, and Imran Talib of Syria and their influence on urban science fiction. He notes:

"Science fiction literature has been produced in many Arab countries; the diverse themes have included life in 32<sup>nd</sup>-century Libya; the encounter of mysterious aliens by a Palestinian hero living in the occupied territories; and other fantastic discoveries and excavations as in Salim's plays".<sup>21</sup>

He then introduces the reader to American science fiction writers who emerged out of an Islamic/Arab tradition and those writers who use Islamic-

related characters or settings, such as Rashad Khalifa, Javed Akhtar, and Chris Lawson. He highlights Frank Herbert, whose *Dune* stories have been made into major motion pictures, and the *Star Wars* saga that is in Nuruddin's words "resplendent with Islamic symbolism".<sup>22</sup>

Nuruddin does not claim to give a comprehensive survey of Islam and science fiction, but provides an impressive introduction to some well known and some lesser known writers, those that portray Islam, Islamic themes as backward or enlightened, or those that portray Muslims as heroes or villains. He spends the bulk of the article dissecting the works of African Americans Stephen Barnes, Jalaluddin Nuriddin, and Ishmael Reed, whose writings have extensive connections to urban life, Islamic movements, and in the case of Barnes and Nuriddin, he further ties to the Afrofuturist novels and African centered science fiction. Nuruddin connects all of these writings to various groups who have used Islam and science fiction as a foundation of their beliefs. These groups such as the Nation of Islam, the Ansaru Allah Community, the Five Percenters, and the Moorish Science Temple are not considered a part of orthodox or mainstream Sunni Islam, but they have carved out a unique identity within the greater Muslim community in America and parts of Europe. The adherents or followers of these often marginal Muslim groups are primarily composed of African Americans or those of the African Diaspora. The Nation of Islam was one of the more successful of these groups due largely to the charisma of its leading spokesman Malcolm X, who later embraced orthodox Islam. These groups also subscribe, in varying degrees, to the *myth of Yakub*, a mythical black man who created the depraved master race, *the white devils*, Europeans.<sup>23</sup> According to the myth "The tale of Yakub is one which seeks to explain the origin of racial oppression".<sup>24</sup> This tale has morphed from group to group, from a concept of the black man being *the original man* to others who incorporate space travel and intergalactic themes, while concurrently co-opting Qur'anic language into a new genre of expression. These new expressions combine music, poetry, Islam and science fiction into what Nuruddin describes as *urban mythology*. According to Nuruddin, "Urban mythology is the mythology of the wretched of the earth-the wretched of the inner cities. It is their scathing social critiques of the existing political and economic arrangements".<sup>25</sup> This critique continues in the hip hop music of African American and Latino artists in urban and suburban communities in the US and Europe.

The Johnson, Maxwell, Trumpener article "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel" presents an interesting look at the origin of the *Arabian Nights* and traces its influence to the birth of the European novel, from Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; all celebrated texts. According to the authors, "The *Nights* inspired a huge number of imitations, pastiches, and parodies".<sup>26</sup> The essay discusses these writings from the major character in *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade, telling tales to save her life, and then

the story travels from the Arabic literary realm moving into the English, German, French, Hindu, and Spanish literary traditions. The article comments on the iterations of Scheherazade's story and its impact on the status, situation and character of women, the nature of female sexuality, and the interplay of sexuality and domestic power. The authors note that "*Nights* presents an intricately patterned, nuanced, at times highly indirect debate about the relationship of male honor to female chastity, fate, slavery, and human agency".<sup>27</sup>

The "Arabian Nights" article provides a direct connection between Arab/ Islamic influence on early writings of science fiction and fantasy that have yet to be explored fully. For example, the authors spend considerable time dissecting Cervantes' *Don Quixote* who, according to the authors, "...Cervantes claims (in chaps. 8 – 9 of *Don Quixote*), his own manuscript was originally written in Arabic, found by chance while he browsed among stalls of waste paper in the Toledo marketplace and translated for him by a Morisco".<sup>28</sup> They note how Quixote does include repeated references to Arabic words, characters, and names that speak to the lingering influence of Islam in Christian Spain and in their words, "...evokes the Arabic sources of European romance and the substantial Islamic presence in the great chivalric poems of Tasso and Ariosto".<sup>29</sup> Further exploration of whether or not this statement is true is fraught with controversy, but the authors take a considerable amount of time to make their case and assert its plausibility.

The five articles confirm the recognition of the impact of Islam as a contributor to the West and Europe's intellectual knowledge base relative to speculative literary production. Works that have had significant and wide reaching impact as the *Arabian Knights* and Cervantes *Don Quixote* are examples of what scholars describe as the mutual influence of cultures. Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie in her article "The Islamic Ottoman Influence on the Development of Religious Toleration in Reformation Transylvania" writes "the recognition of mutual influence has basically taken the form of acknowledging the European debt to Arab learning, literature, and material culture".<sup>30</sup> To acknowledge the Islamic contribution to literature generally and speculative fiction in this case is not to elevate one group over another, but to allow for an accurate telling of history. It also provides confirmation for Muslims that their knowledge and historical presence have been the source of furthering intellectual and scholarly discovery. The history of the marginalization of the writings and contributions of other ethnic and racial communities such as Africans and African Americans, as Nuruddin article acknowledges, parallels what Islam and Muslims face in fighting for recognition of their historical involvement in the creation and distribution of knowledge. Writers such as Johnson, Maxwell, Trumpener, Nuruddin, and writings similar to this article provide opportunities for other scholars to build on this work, offer a response, and an opening for Arab/Islamic writings on science fiction and fantasy to enter the academic canon.



## Comparative Essay: *HARM* and *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*

Although over 30 years separate the publications of Aldiss and Mazrui, the similarities in some of the themes of both books are uncanny and offer some interesting observations on Islam as imagined in the science fiction genre, past and present, minor and major. Both authors are writing from an international perspective; Aldiss is British writing about the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on US and British soil; Mazrui is Kenyan writing in the aftermath of Nigeria/Biafran conflict. Similar to Christian Szyska's article "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" and Michael Cooperson's "Remembering the Future" articles that analyze torture and Arabic time travel respectively, both Mazrui's and Aldiss's tales' attempt to act as political commentary of their respective historical time frames, war and terrorism. This section will include a summary of both texts and a comparison of the central stories and characters.

Taking a cue from current events, in Aldiss's *HARM* the protagonist is a Muslim, Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali, swept up in the British government's war on terror, because of an innocuous two lines in his novel, *Pied Piper of Hamant*, where two characters discuss the death of the prime minister. Thrown in prison by agents of HARM (Hostile Activities Research Ministry), he is tortured because he refuses to confess to a terror plot or identify himself as a Muslim. Throughout his ordeal he retreats into an alternative world that often precedes his torture sessions and at other times follows them in the real world, which leaves one wondering where reality ends and the dream/nightmare begins. Are his visions of a utopian society, real or a dystopian reality of cruelty and oppression? These parallel worlds have similarities in the level of cruelty and brutality they inflict on those who they see as the *other*. His torturers in the imprisoned world hate him because he is Muslim and leaders in the imaginary world hate those who are not Muslim.

In this alternative world Paul is now called Fremant, a persona that allows him to blend into this new country of Stygia. The leader of the country and head of the hated Waabees, Astaroth, is cruel and religiously austere, who, it is later revealed, is also sexually abusing his daughter Aster. The Christian cult overthrows the evil Astaroth, but they eventually turn over the leadership to the science and reason leader, Safelkty. Essanits, formerly commander of Astaroth and leader of the Christian cult that overthrows him, decides to seek out the last of the Dogovers, a creature that he was responsible for wiping out. Instead of returning to Stygia with the last Dogover, it is accidentally killed and they only have his dog to bring back. On their way back they enter Essanits's community, Haven City that is now looking more like the city of Stygia. Fremant and Essanits relationship has deteriorated and when they return to Haven, Fremant is arrested and thrown in jail for an altercation he had with Essanits on their journey. Rather than develop a government that is tolerant, the Christian group now mimics the Taliban-like government of the Waabees. Crushing the opposition becomes the goal of the government with no mercy for those with opposing views. Essanits

tells Fremant he has the choice to stay in jail or take the dog to Safelkty in Stygia. Fremant takes the dog to Stygia, but Safelkty shows contempt for the uniqueness of the species, seeing it only as a means of advancing science. Again, Fremant felt betrayed, "He thought he had only been doing 'the right thing.' Instead he had denied what was good and true in his nature" (193). Fremant wonders what does this all mean, is he the problem because he seeks to deny who he is? Fremant ponders if anyone is worthy of leadership or is there such a place as utopia? It is at these times when Fremant ponders the human condition that he returns to the reality of his life as Paul where he continues to be tortured in prison. When he is released from prison without explanation or reason he returns home wearied and confused.

Paul comes to the conclusion that all of his dreams and visions are his attempt to run away from who he is, a Muslim. Paul states in the book, "He had been so eager to demonstrate to the Western world that he was not a ...not a Muslim, so he had betrayed himself..." (194). His attempts to blend into society and ignore that part of his identity came out in his writing, "those throwaway lines in his novel, about the British prime minister being assassinated...They reflected his true secret hatred for what he had become" (194). As the *HARM* concludes the prime minister is actually assassinated similar to words in Paul's book. As the British police are beating down his door, Paul, anticipating his fate, slips into the world of Fremant and his last words bring him full circle to the realization that his Muslim identity is inescapable. His last words attest to that realization when he says, "Oh Allah, the Merciful..." (210), but for Paul it is too late.

An interesting addition to *HARM* includes a conversation with the writer, Brian Aldiss. He discusses the duality of Paul's existence, British and Muslim and the religious struggle that occurs in both Stygia and on Earth. One section of the interview appears to sum up how he feels about Muslims and his depiction of Islam as personified in the character of Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali:

"Many people have taken refuge in Britain from dirty, dusty villages in the Middle East. They neither know nor understand the West. Consequently, many would destroy it. They have never heard of that ancient piece of sound advice: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" (224).

According to Aldiss, leave off your ethnic, religious and cultural identities when you leave your home country. But on the other hand *HARM* reveals that it doesn't matter, because you will never be accepted even when you *do as the Romans do* as Paul attempted; he would never be considered a *Roman*. Unfortunately, Aldiss doesn't have a follow-up response to the dichotomy he poses with *HARM* and the real world advice he quotes.

Contrary to Aldiss's long career as an acclaimed science fiction writer, Dr. Ali Mazrui is a renowned economist and scholar, who wrote only one work of

science fiction titled, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, (1971). In this story Mazrui makes use of a thematic device used throughout his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, that he labels "the triple heritage" of Africa, those faith traditions that have the strongest influence on the continent; i.e. Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous African/animist systems. Set in the African afterworld this utopian novel concerns a trial that takes place in heaven concerning major moral issues of loyalty, love, life and death as they relate to the Nigeria/Biafra War of 1967-1970. The people of southern Nigeria, the predominantly Christian and animist Biafrans, attempted to secede from predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria. The defendant, prosecutor, and defense lawyer are real-life Africans who did not know each other in life, but are connected in this trial that represents this tragic period in Nigeria's history.

The central figure in the story is not Okigbo, a Biafran poet and writer on trial for mixing art with politics, but the defense attorney Mohammad Salim Said. A famed Muslim journalist, Said, now called Hamisi in the After-Africa, was killed in a tragic car accident. Hamisi, the Counsel for Salvation, is himself on trial for the crime of miscalculation that caused his death; furthermore, it is his miscalculation in calling witnesses in this case that leads to the dramatic conclusion of the trial. For this miscalculation he was found guilty and sentenced "to haunt a lonely baobab tree in Gabon and frighten little children straying near" (145) for an undetermined length of time. The verdict handed down to Hamisi is mitigated when Aisha/Salisha Bemedi requests to share in his fate.

The second character in After-Africa is Counsel for Damnation, Kwame Apolo-Gyamfi, considered "one of the most brilliant Africans produced by the twentieth century...died in an act of tragic impatience" (65) while studying at Oxford. He is also on trial for his act of impatience, but is acquitted due to his patient prosecution of the case against Okigbo. It is through his prosecution that the tragedies of the war are told. The blame for those that died is intertwined in the stories of the Biafran Ibos and the Nigerian Hausas, who in their hatred of each unleashed a wave of violence and death that encompassed Okigbo and Aisha.

The famed poet, Christopher Okigbo, is the third character on trial. Okigbo is not only on trial for himself, he also represents a charge against the people of Biafra, who in their desire to separate from Nigeria, according to the author, caused the deaths of thousands. Killed while fighting for Biafra independence against Nigeria, his crime is mixing his art as a poet with his fight against Nigeria; by acting as an Ibo first and a poet last he placed the need for a unified Nigeria second to the ideals of Biafran independence. These words sum up the great crime committed by Okigbo, "When the ordinary man or the great soldier dies for his nation that is indeed heroism. When the great thinker or the great creator dies for his nation that is escapism...that is our case against Christopher Okigbo..." (72). Verdicts for Okigbo and Biafra as determined by the Elders of Judgment, was *not proven*. The reasoning behind the decision returns to Mazrui's notion of the triple heritage of Africa that the Elders deemed, "The Curse of the Trinity in

relation to this old continent of ours" (135).

One of the major similarities in both texts is that the lead protagonist in both Aldiss's *HARM*, and Mazrui's *Trial* are Muslim in name only. Neither character adheres to the religious tenants of the Islamic faith, but they are both judged based on that identity. In both *HARM* and *Trial* the characters take on alternate names, a further distancing from their Islamic identification where their current names mark their Muslim origins. The stories also deal with characters transported to alternate realities where their ideas and desires to escape their Muslim identity come back to challenge them.

A feature that Muslims will recognize in both text is the *stranger* imagery mentioned in Aldiss and Mazrui's works. In *HARM* one of Essanits's men uses this characterization of Fremant, "You, Fremant, you're always asking questions, you'd be the Eternal Stranger. He thought the observation was acute. He was eternally a stranger, even to himself" (64). This echoes the sentiments expressed in Muslim writer Ian Dallas's science fiction novel *The Book of Strangers* (1972).<sup>31</sup> The story describes a librarian's mystical journey of self-discovery in a technologically advanced world. The *strangers* that this book speaks of are those people that seek to find the dedicated and spiritual teachers of Islam; those who selflessly work to perfect their faith. The stranger concept in Islam is from a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that is referenced in Dallas's book, "Islam began as a strange element, and will become thus again, as it was at the beginning. Blessed, therefore, are the strangers."<sup>32</sup> Paul/Fremant is a stranger in both worlds, searching for his place in Stygia and British society. His journey of self discovery leads to a tragic end, but in his final words, he finds his Islam.

The stranger theme also plays out in Mazrui's story in the characters of Said/Hamisi and Aisha/Salisha, strangers who meet one night, fall in love, sleep together and meet again in the After-Africa. Salisha reflects on their night together in the After-Africa, "How could she have capitulated to a total stranger in so short a time...who was this stranger who had known where to strike, in spite of her intellectual armoury" (21)? The symbolism of *the stranger* in Islam may not connect with the authors' intent, but the similarities in how their main characters are described are noteworthy.

There are many other similarities in these stories to Christian Szyska's article "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey" where the political prisoners wrote fictional stories to escape the persecution and alienation they experienced in the Egyptian prison. In *HARM* Paul's book and his Muslim identity are the catalyst that lands him in prison where he is tortured. Similar to Szyska's political prisoners it is the torture that precedes Paul's retreat into an alternative world and it is the torture that generates the writing of the utopian plays. Another similarity of the prisoners in Szyska's article with Paul, they were also judged by their faith, but in contrast to Paul, this led them to search for an Islamic utopia, a place where Muslims and non Muslims alike could flourish. Paul, on the other hand, felt the alienation of living in a society where he was judged by his religion,

a part of him that he wanted to escape. He states in the book, "He had been so eager to demonstrate to the Western world that he was not a ...not a Muslim, so he had betrayed himself..." (194). Paul and his alter ego Fremant viewed Islam as the source of his problems and he felt the need to distance himself from that identity. Fremant's alternate reality views any religion as seriously flawed as represented by first an oppressive Islamic government that is overthrown by a Christian sect that becomes just as intolerant as the previous system.

In Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* the characters are already dead, but they incorporate the same storyline of individuals in a sort of prison-like system where they are on trial for their actions and behaviors. Prison in Mazrui's story becomes a means of mental rather than physical torture. Mazrui's story central characters are two men and a woman, defense lawyer Mohammad Salim Said/ Hamisi, the prosecutor Kwame Apolo-Gyamfi, and the woman Aisha/ Salisha Bemedi who is the pivotal character in the trials. Each character has to face the reality that their behaviors have caused lasting damage. Their deaths force them to examine issues of faith, personal frailties, and justice, issues that Paul faces in *HARM*.

Islamic sexuality is explored in both stories, but Muslims are viewed as sexually repressed, hypocritical, inhibiting, and often criminal. This is another of those stereotypes that is advanced, but Islam, in contrast to Christianity has never viewed sexuality as only a means of procreation. On the contrary, sex in Islam, albeit marital sex, is encouraged as a means of mutual pleasure and satisfaction for both partners. There are numerous stories about men and women asking the Prophet Muhammad intimate details regarding sexuality and marriage including a woman who complained that her husband "was like a limp cloth." This reality stands in stark contrast to Aldiss's portrayal of Islamic sexuality. In *HARM* Aldiss says that for the women of Stygia "The protocol was against love and lovemaking." (21) The only love for these women was through abuse or rape as represented by Aster, the daughter of Astaroth. Aster is sexually abused by her father and raped by Fremant, but neither man is punished for their crime. Moreover when Astaroth is defeated, nothing is mentioned about his crime after he escapes. Fremant, after accusing Aster of dishonesty brutally rapes her, but even this reprehensible act is written with the notion that it wasn't really so bad, "Aster ceased struggling and gave a groan between pain and pleasure, though her face remained distorted with anger." (34) There is this "Stockholm Syndrome"<sup>33</sup> like mindset that seems to be playing out in this story, with Aster declaring her love for Fremant in spite of his treatment of her, "I have decided to forgive you for what you did, you brute." She continues after he asks why, "Because I love you...Burning, burning love!" Fremant's rape of Aster left her disgraced and enslaved. He felt no responsibility except to apologize and then he abandons her for Bellamia, an older woman that resembles Paul's wife Doris.

Bellamia, is described as unattractive, crude, and having a foul smell, but Fremant comes to love her, often confusing her with his wife. Does she represent

Doris, a non-Muslim woman Paul married to further his escape from his Islamic identity? Is Aster his Islam and Bellamia his escape from that identity? Bellamia is the only female character transformed, but only physically to justify her appeal to Fremant. After sleeping with her his description of her changes from someone that “he thought her old and frumpy (111)” to “Her face was dreamy on the pillow, and held the beauty of satiety...In the following days, Bellamia did her hair differently. She seemed to tread more lightly (111).” Bellamia understands that her power lies in the domestic and sexual pleasure she provides Fremant, but in the end she simply disappears as a figment of his imagination. What is her fate and will he return to her are questions never answered, similar to other works of fiction where the women are no more than sexual partners and then disappear.

This characterization of women as objects of gratification is a common theme in literature; women derive power via physical beauty or sexual exploitation, their fate or fortune dependent on men. The views of women and sexuality are combined in both Aldiss and Mazrui’s use of female characters as sexual partners to be used and discarded as needed. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes in “Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture” and is represented in both *HARM* and *Trial*, neither author attempts to disrupt “the classic gender distinctions that have linked men to speech, power, identity, and the mind’ while linking women to the body and the physical.”<sup>34</sup> Aldiss’s females are linked to Fremant as love interests and sexual partners where their fate is tied to his mental state as he moves from one world to the next. Mazrui’s starts out depicting Aisha as an intelligent and thinking woman, but she is easily manipulated into a sexual encounter with Said after only a few hours of acquaintance. Her fate is not known until towards the end of the story.

Mazrui further looks at issues of sexuality and gender throughout his story with his main character Hamisi dealing with another charge that concerns his lack of concentration while interviewing a nude witness as he prepared for the trial. He is comfortable with seducing a Muslim woman who he also impregnates, but exhibits shame at the open nudity displayed by some of the witnesses. Mazrui describes this crime as Hamisi elevating his Islamic identity over his African identity. Nevertheless Hamisi is found not guilty on these charges precisely because he begins to see himself as a Muslim man, who has an inner sense of modesty. On the other hand Hamisi’s lack of a sense of Muslim modesty allowed him to initiate a sexual encounter with Aisha that results in her getting pregnant. This sexual act and its consequences is the miscalculation that leads to his losing the trial. Aishah returns to Nigeria to have the baby and while at the home of her uncle the Nigeria/Biafra war starts, where she is murdered. He suffers the ultimate punishment for his sexual misconduct, the loss of his child and the woman he loved.

Similar to Aldiss’s *HARM*, Mazrui’s *Trial* sexuality is dealt with in terms of abuse. Aishah is brutally raped and killed by a gang of Biafran independence

supporters. Hamisi hears this story when he calls Aisha as a witness to support his defense of Okigbo. He miscalculates by not getting the truth about her presence in the After Africa and the prosecutor has her tell the whole story about her pregnancy, rape, and murder that devastate Hamisi and his defense. Both main characters, Paul and Hamisi committed tragic miscalculations that had severe negative consequences for themselves and those they loved. Paul's miscalculation was writing those two lines in his novel that not only caused his torture, but also resulted in Doris suffering humiliation, torture and abuse.

Another side issue that is always beneath the surface in Western writings on Islam about Muslim women is the headscarf. For many writers the headscarf is a symbol of oppression and degradation. In *HARM* the women of Stygia "went hooded and masked outside their home..." (21). Aldiss also has Paul hooded during his torture in prison, another bid to the oppressive symbol that the veil signifies. In *HARM* the women had no choice but to wear the veil as Aster says to Fremant when he asks to see her face, "It's the rule here, dearest... You know Astaroth insists women go veiled (33)". Aldiss continues the mindset of those writers that see the veil as something that women wear out of duress and at the behest of men; it couldn't possibly be something that women would choose to do. Covering women's hair is used repeatedly and consistently to demonize and stereotype Muslims and Aldiss continues that narrative. As Eilberg-Schwartz notes in "Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture" accurately notes that "... the eroticization of the hair, which is presupposed by veiling practices, also lies at the heart of various Western traditions including early Christianity, Judaism, and Greek and Roman society."<sup>35</sup> Covering the hair is a practice of women in many societies and faith traditions, but it is those Muslim women who veil that are stigmatized, stereotyped, and labeled as backward, oppressed or ignorant.

This narrative is consistent throughout a number of science fiction writers works, but the science fiction author Mack Reynolds represent a particularly virulent anti-Islam strain in his book *Blackman's Burden* (1961) where the only way to raise the people in stature was to give up the veil, "She must drop the veil...and wear the new clothes...the clothes of civilized people everywhere."<sup>36</sup> *Blackman's Burden* tells the story of a group of Caribbean and African Americans and as they work to rid Africa of Islamic influence, undermining their leaders and practices. A big part of their infiltration of tribal societies is sending in a woman who pretends to be a native. Their aid organization comes in requesting volunteers who will remove their veils and work for them, providing her education and health care. Reynolds book represents some of the most inflammatory language about Islam as it relates to Africa, "That North Africa cannot be united under the banner of Islam is she is going to progress rapidly...Islam and pagan as well; they hold up the wheels of progress."<sup>37</sup> Reynolds attack against Islam continues throughout his second novel in his Africa series, *Border, Breed nor Birth* where when questioned about Islam his main character, Homer Crawford "growled,

non on one of his favorite peeve subjects...The Moslem religion exploded out of Arabia with some new concepts that set the world in ferment from India to Southern France...they couldn't get away from that Qur'an of theirs...we don't even think of the Moslem world as particularly civilized."<sup>38</sup> It is no surprise that Reynolds sets his story among the North African Tuareg tribe, where the men veil their faces and the women do not. Unfortunately, Reynolds sees this lack of face veiling as some defiance of Islam, when in fact, the women of Tuareg tribe cover their hair, but not their faces, but again, it fits his narrative of the oppressive nature of the veil and Islam.

In contrast to Aldiss and Reynolds's characterization of the veil, Ali Mazrui, a Muslim, describes the veil in sophisticated language in *Trial*, using the Swahili term for the head scarf, *mtandio*. He describes it as something that doesn't take anything away from the Aisha's intelligence or beauty. For example Said/Hamisi describes his first meeting with her, "Miss Bemedi was a striking figure. She was dressed in a skirt and blouse, but wore in addition an embroidered mtandio to cover her hair and fall down elegantly across her shoulders (11)." The veil is mentioned as a part of her apparel and represented as a Muslim woman's choice.

In Aldiss's *HARM*, similar to Mazrui's *Trial*, Islam, Christianity, and secular society, "the curse of the trinity" is examined. Both stories provide intersections with Islam, Christianity and the secular world, viewing them as flawed and problematic. Christians are depicted as either fanatics or fatalistic in both stories, while secular groups are less concerned with the humanity of their fellow countrymen or women, but see domination as the ultimate goal. Similarly, one could argue that both stories view Islam from a skewed perspective, as an undesirable influence as portrayed in Aldiss's story and in Mazrui's story as an inhibitor of natural expressions of sexuality. As Aldiss's Fremant seeks a world of peace, he is disappointed when each of the groups he joins becomes a mirror of the tyranny they had overthrown. Mazrui's Hamisi has looked at the world as an intellectual playground, using his knowledge as a means of elevating himself not to enhance the world, but only to further his sexual exploits and massage his ego. The After African world and the alternative world of Hamisi shock them into the reality that actions have consequences that are often deadly.

*HARM* features Islam as a major aspect of the story with Fremant's realization of himself as a Muslim and with that awareness he is freed from his tortures and prison, both mentally and physically. He is also freed from the alternative universe of his 'dreams' and his psychological torment, only to be thrust into the physical world of torture again. He is constantly trying to discover if his visions of a utopian society are real or a dystopian reality of cruelty and oppression. Or are his visions a part of the psychosis he developed because of an abusive childhood or are these visions the results of a fertile imagination gone awry? It is also in Aldiss's *HARM* that you recognize some of Nuruddin's, "Ancient Black Astronauts" *urban mythology* concept where Paul's critique of the plight of Muslims in Britain "the wretched of the earth" gets him in trouble. As Paul is arrested again he cries



out “Oh, Allah the Merciful...” (p.210) as he hears voices from the alternative world that all “threats to stability had to be stamped out” (p.211). In contrast to the significance of Paul’s faith to his outcome, Hamisi’s recognition of his Islamic identity plays a minor role, but it is this recognition that provides him with a significant not guilty verdict that mitigates his punishment. In the end, both characters see their Islamic identity as necessary to acknowledge, but because they come to this realization late, neither man is saved or left unscathed.

## Conclusion

This study of Islam in science fiction and fantasy concentrated more narrowly on critiquing historical and scholarly writings and concludes with an analysis of two science fiction works that incorporated similar concepts. The scholarly writings represent a renewed interest in analyzing the popular and hidden works by and about Islam and Muslims. What the Johnson and Snir articles reveal is that some of the West’s most read texts have roots in Islamic literature and there is a growing body of literature that is making its way into the science fiction and fantasy literary canon. The Cooperson and Nuruddin articles show the shared legacy of time travel literature, the impetus for its development, and how it has been co-opted into various urban settings. Szyska’s article discloses the tragic shared experience of torture victims’ use of science fiction to escape their condition while searching for an Islamic utopia. These articles represent a growing body of science fiction and fantasy literature written by or about Muslims and about Islam that presents opportunities for scholarly critique and analysis. Science fiction writers such as Steven Barnes, Pamela Taylor, Donald Moffitt, and G. Willow Wilson are providing works that tell the varied stories of Islam and Muslims. This growing list of authors and writings are providing a critical mass of literature that can be measured against the science fiction and fantasy writers of the past.

This article also presents an analysis that compares and contrasts two writers who, at different periods in time, have constructed their characters, settings, and plots while critiquing Islam and Muslims in often similar and different ways. Their views and narratives incorporate current events, religious traditions, political and gendered perspectives. Although Aldiss and Mazrui sought to ground their works in merging historical events with science fiction, it does not mean they are free of bias, stereotypes, or blatant inaccuracies that perpetuate falsehoods. That’s the nature of this genre of speculative fiction that is all about creative and imaginative license.

Further opportunities for research include a comparative analysis of subjects like slavery and emancipation as depicted in science fiction writings by African American writers such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Steven Barnes’s *Lions Blood* and their use of Christianity and Islam as storylines. An in-depth study of other

novels by writers that have used Islam and Muslims as characters, settings or plots would provide additional avenues of research. A study of Islam and Muslims in science fiction and fantasy covering films, comics, and the horror genre can also be an interesting area of research. The media and mass communications scholar, Dr. Jack G. Shaheen has written extensively on the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in popular movies and the media, but a critique of science fiction films would offer a valuable addition to this work. A comparative study of how other minority groups have been portrayed in science fiction and fantasy is another research idea that would be of importance in ethnic studies.

This study makes clear that not only has the religion of Islam been an integral ingredient in the creation, imagination, and stimulation of science fiction and fantasy, but that Islam and Muslims can play an important role in countering the *Master Narrative* that removed non-Western contributions from the historical record. There is a renewed interest in the Muslim world, both nationally and internationally, to write science fiction, fantasy and comics that present other perspectives of Islam and Muslims, thus adding to the richness of fictional Islam and correcting the *Master Narrative*.

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(ENDNOTES)

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- 1 Brian W. Aldiss, *HARM* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007).
- 2 Ali Mazrui, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd, 1971).
- 3 Anas Al-Shaikh Ali, "The Need for Education", *Islamica Magazine*, 20 (2008) <[www.islamicamagazine.com/issue-20/the-need-for-education.html](http://www.islamicamagazine.com/issue-20/the-need-for-education.html)>. Consulted July 2, 2008.
- 4 "Bangla science fiction." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, (2008) <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangla\\_science\\_fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangla_science_fiction)> Consulted July 29, 2008.
- 5 I. A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (Houston: Darussahan, 1997), p. 57.
- 6 Yusuf Nuruddin, "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology", *Socialism and Democracy* 20.3 (2006), pp. 127-65, p 138.
- 7 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.
- 8 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p. 138.
- 9 Proto-science fiction is used in this instance to denote the early stages of the development of this particular literary genre.

- 10 Master Narrative posits in this instance that the dominant narrative comes from the West and all other works must be interpreted against it to obtain some validity.
- 11 Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature", *Der Islam* 77.ii (2000), pp. 263-85, at p. 1.
- 12 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.
- 13 Christian Szyska, "On Utopian Writing In Nasserist Prison And Laicist Turkey", *Die Welt des Islams*, 35.1 (1995), pp. 95-125, at p. 97.
- 14 Sayyid Qutb, Egyptian writer and educator, visited the United States from 1948-1950, and formed a view of America as a depraved, capitalistic, racist, and materialistic society; a theme that runs throughout his writings on the West. His visit is also considered the impetus for his push for the establishment of an Islamic government and rejection of all things connected to Western society.
- 15 Szyska, op. cit., p. 107.
- 16 Szyska, op. cit., p. 121.
- 17 Szyska, op. cit., p. 121.
- 18 Michael Cooperson, "Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-Travel Literature." *Edebiyat* 7.2 (1996), pp. 171-89, at p. 186.
- 19 Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature", *Der Islam* 77.ii (2000) p. 279.
- 20 Snir, op. cit., pp. 281-282.
- 21 Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.
- 22 Nuruddin, op. cit., p. 140.
- 23 The Myth of Yakub is consider to have been a mad scientist responsible for the separation of the races by pigment; an evil genius responsible for the plight of the black man and his disconnection from his true position of superiority in the world.
- 24 Nuruddin, op. cit., p. 150.
- 25 Nuruddin, op. cit., p. 39.
- 26 Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener, "The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 68:2 (2007), pp. 243-279, at p 247.
- 27 Johnson, op. cit., p. 257.
- 28 Johnson, op. cit., p. 261.
- 29 Johnson, op. cit., p. 261.

30 Susan Ritchie, "The Islamic Ottoman Influence on the Religious Development of Religious Toleration in Reformation Transylvania", *Seasons*, Spring-Summer (2004), p. 59-70, at p 60.

31 Ian Dallas. *The Book of Strangers*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

32 Dallas, *The Book of Strangers*, p. 151.

33 Joseph M. Carver, Ph. D. Stockholm syndrome is when "victims support, love, and even defend their abusers." [www.mental-health-matters.com/articles/article.php?artID-469](http://www.mental-health-matters.com/articles/article.php?artID-469) Consulted December 12, 2008.

34 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, eds, *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, c1995), p. 9.

35 Eilberg-Schwartz, *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, p. 9.

36 Mack Reynolds. *Blackman's Burden*. New York: The Conde Nast Publications Inc., 1961, p. 22.

37 Reynolds. *Blackman's Burden*, p. 123.

38 Mack Reynolds. *Border Breed Nor Birth*. New York: The Conde Nast Publications Inc., 1962, p. 84.

# Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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Cover image: Fresh Tiger Stripes on Saturn's Enceladus

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