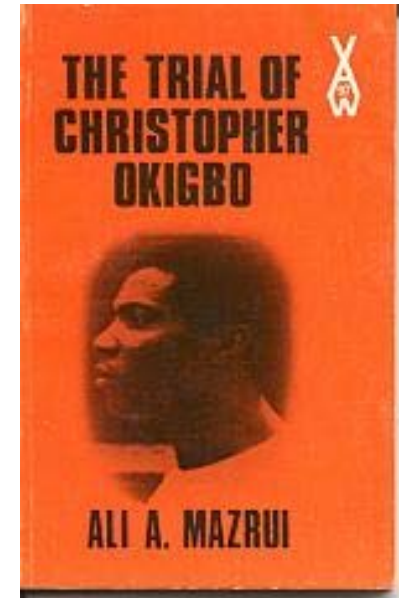
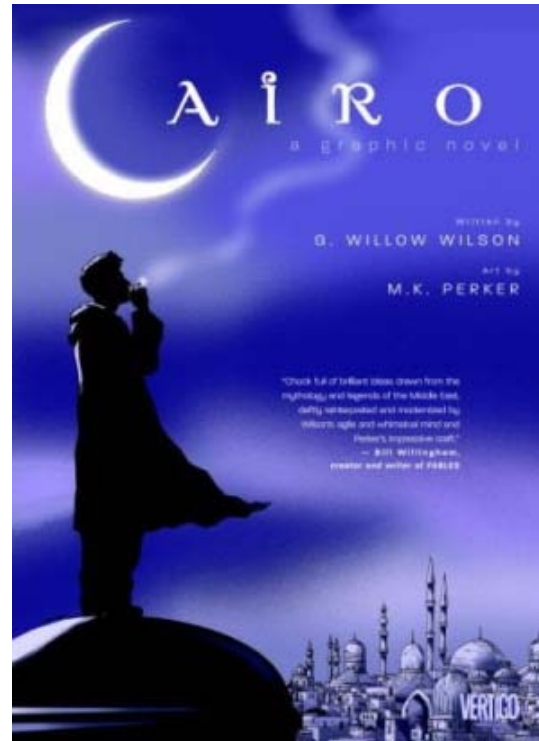
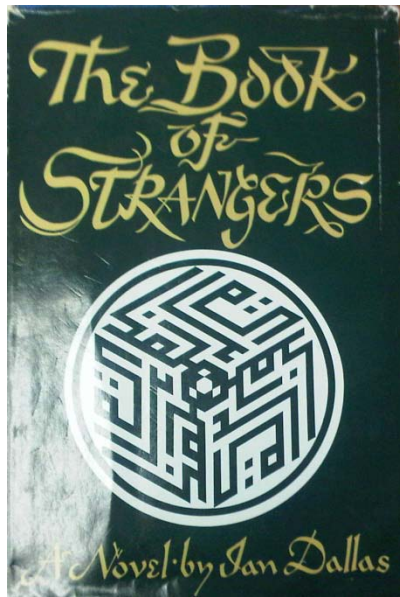


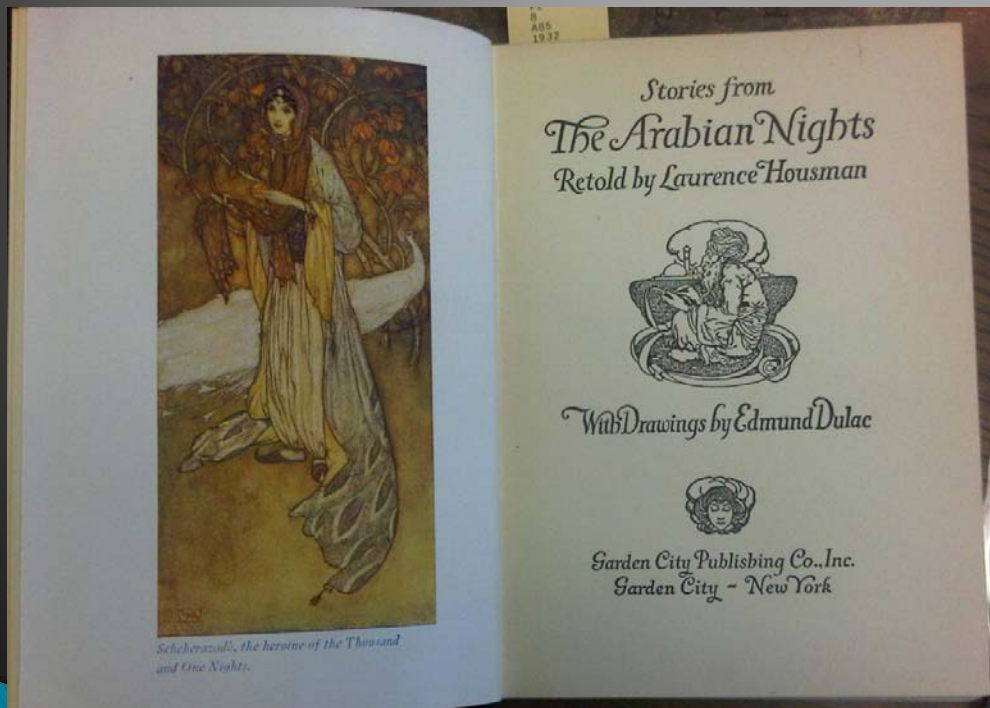
# Countering the Master Narrative: Islamic Science Fiction & Fantasy



Rebecca Hankins, C.A.  
Texas A&M University's Special Collections  
Sci Fi Symposium April 15, 2010

# Scheherazad

This image shows a woman in full Islamic attire. Very different from other versions that show her half clothed and without veil.



*Scheherazade, the heroine of the Thousand and One Nights.*

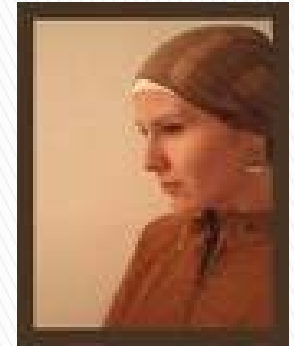


*Scheherazade, the heroine of the Thousand and One Nights.*

# Muslim Writers

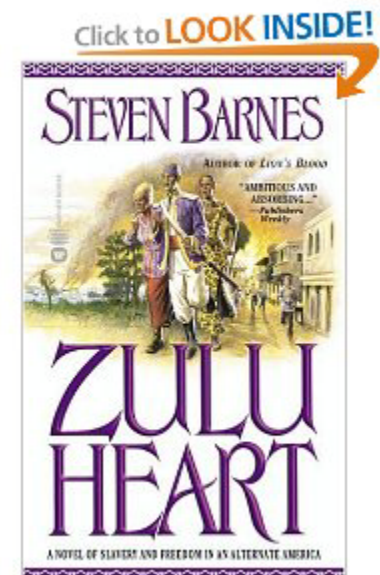
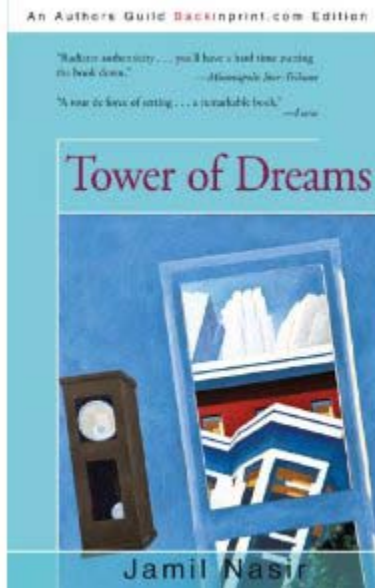
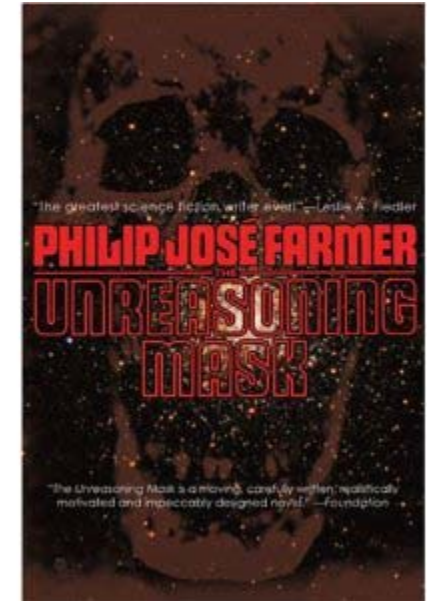
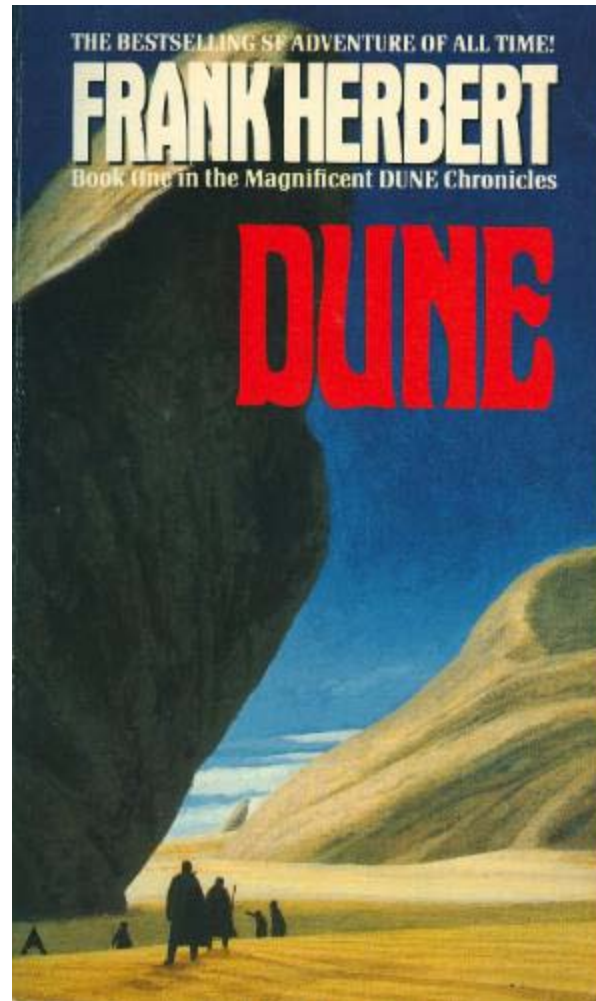
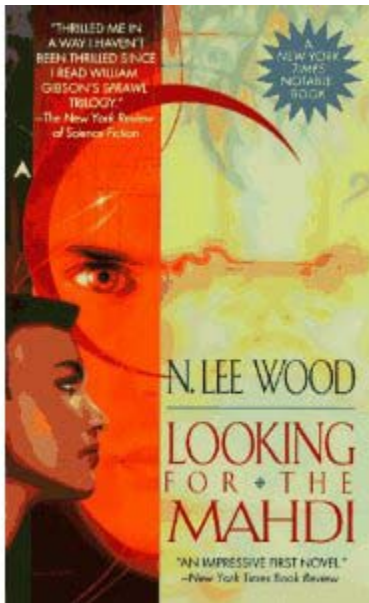


Nabil Farouq (far right) and Ahmed Khaled Towfik (next to Nabil)  
(Wikipedia)

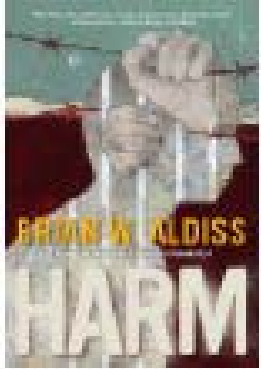


Roquia Sakhawat Hussain, G. Willow Wilson, and Pamela K. Taylor

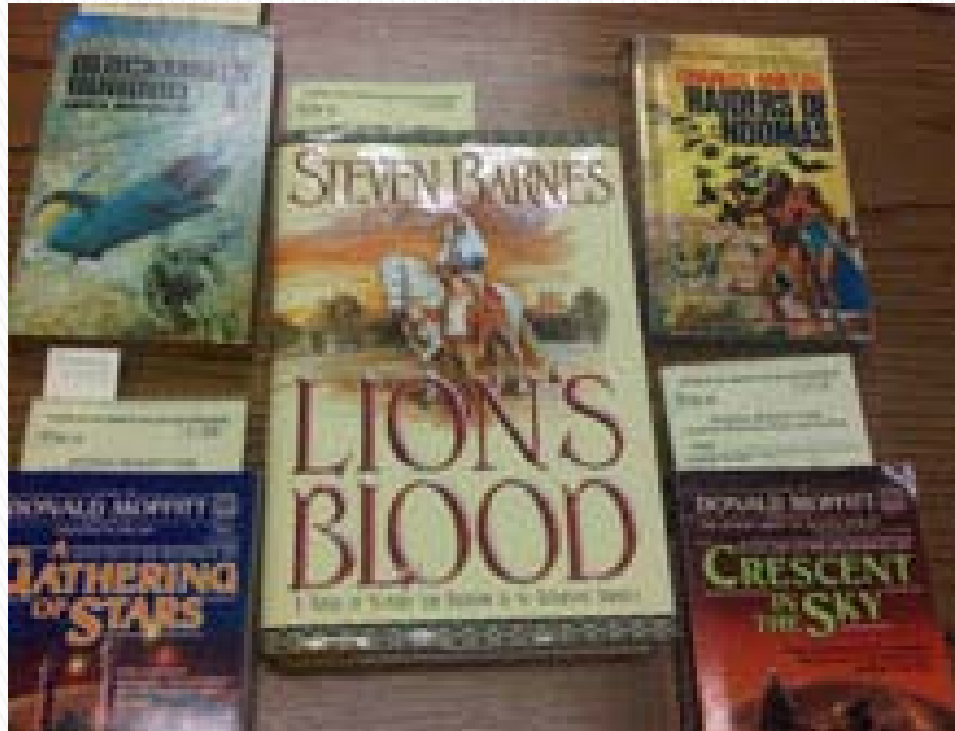
## Books with Islamic characters and plots



## contd. Books with Islamic characters and plots



HARM by Brian Aldiss

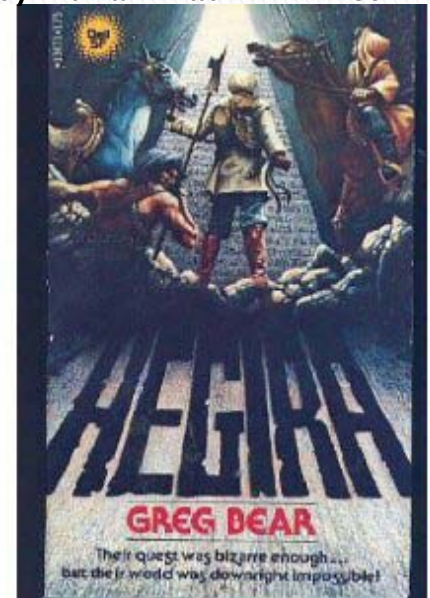


A Mosque Among the Stars  
by Muhammad A. Ahmed



The Flying Inn by G.K. Chesterton

Positive and Negative Depictions  
of Muslims and Islam



Hegira by Greg Bear

# Websites of Interest

- ▶ [Adherents.com](#)–*Religions in Literature*,
- ▶ [The Adventures of Hassan](#) Muhammad Yusuf.
- ▶ [Afrofuturism](#) Alondra Nelson
- ▶ [Bangla Science Fiction on Wikipedia](#)
- ▶ [BlackScienceFictionSociety](#)–login required
- ▶ [The Fantasy Magazine](#) K. Tempest Bradford
- ▶ [Arabic and Islamic themes in Dune](#) The Baheyeldin Dynasty.
- ▶ [Islam & Science Fiction](#)
- ▶ [Pamela K. Taylor](#) website
- ▶ Share Your Science Fiction Story  
<http://www.islamonline.net>
- ▶ [The Veiled Web](#) by Catherine Asaro
- ▶ [World SF News Blog](#)

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“Countering the Master Narrative: Muslims and Islam in Science Fiction,  
Fantasy and Comics.”

Rebecca Hankins

Science Fiction Symposium-April 15, 2010

The influence that science fiction, fantasy and comic literature has and continues to have on popular culture is undeniable. The release of movies such as *Transformers*, *Avatar*, *Batman*, and *Twilight* that have grossed astronomical and record breaking sums of money; moreover independent sci fi films such as *Moon* and *District 9* have garnered critical acclaim and new audiences, demonstrating the far reaching impact of this genre. If one surveys the top grossing films in the last 20-30 years they are filled with science fiction, fantasy, and comic book derived products. People of all different races and religions are latching on to this renewed interest in science fiction, fantasy and comic genres for literature, films, and other media. Although African Americans and Muslims, the subject of this paper, have had a long historical involvement in science fiction and fantasy, there is a renewed effort of reclaiming this genre within these communities.

Science fiction and fantasy literature is experiencing a “revival” in modern day Muslim societies. In past centuries, the early Muslim communities took pride in their storytellers, poets, and writers who always included feats of the fantastic in their narratives. Spinning stories that regaled audiences far and wide is part of the tradition that produced the *Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* which included stories like *Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and *The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor*. These stories not only captured the



imaginings of children, but also adults from their earliest known renderings from 800-900 AD. Jalal Nuruddin in his article titled “Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology” describes the *Arabian nights* tales as *proto-science fiction*, early renderings of science fiction with futuristic, alternative or other-worldly type scenarios. A reading of *Arabian Nights* notes that the stories frequently combined elements of allegory, romance, mysticism, science, and satire.

Although not as widely acknowledged as other science fiction traditions, Islamic fantastic literature or fictional Islam, has had a remarkable history of influence on the literary writings of European, African and Spanish cultures. I specifically use the word **acknowledged** because unfortunately, there continues to be a *Master Narrative* that has removed non-Western contributions from the historical record. One example of this mindset is articulated in Reuven Snir’s article titled, “The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature,” where he equates the lack of Western scholarly analysis as the absence of the works. He states, “the scholarly academic research, especially in the West, has paid little or no attention to it.” Because the West hasn’t put its stamp of approval on the writings then they are absent. Nuruddin has an answer to that charge in which he states, “Modern Arabic literature boasts the science fiction genre in short stories, novels and plays...much of which is relatively unknown to the West because it has not been widely translated”. As my recently published article on Fictional Islam notes, the influence and production of fictional Islam has been constant and has had a far reaching and varied history.

Muslims have had an impact on speculative fiction from the fantasy stories of the *Arabian Nights* to the time-travel stories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Egyptian, al-Muwaylihi, to the obvious borrowing of Islamic themes by contemporary writers, movie scripts, and music. Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener's article, *The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel* (2007) presents an interesting look at the origin of the *Arabian Nights* and traces its influence on 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." (247) The authors illustrate the universality of these writings that originated from the Arabic/Islamic literary sphere while influencing the English, German, French, Hindu, and Spanish literary traditions.

For the early Muslim communities, there was no conflict between science and religion, allowing for the free flow of scientific invention and innovation. The Islamic advances in science created conditions that encouraged creativity and adventure; a belief in the dynamism of the universe arguably provided the incubation for early stories of time travel and outer body transport. 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" (57). By extension we could arguably say that the creation of these instruments have 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, the stories of other worlds, star-gazing, time travel experiences, and "first contacts" are not impossible. The early Muslim adherents took to heart what the great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov states, "true science fiction could not really exist until people understood the rationalism of science and began to use it with respect in their stories." (1) The early interconnectedness of science fiction and fantasy to scientific inquiry in the Islamic world are similar to the elements that are spurring the revival of both areas in current societies.

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 Nuruddin personally sees "very little cosmology which can inspire works of Islamic science fiction", a statement he contradicts later by stating that "...mythic literature and/or science fiction by and/or about Muslims need not rely upon Islamic cosmology".<sup>i</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>ii</sup> Often Muslim writers draw on these

early prophetic parables and religious miracles in developing their science fiction and fantasy narratives.<sup>iii</sup>

The resurgence of science fiction and fantasy writing by Muslims began in the late 1800s but has recently increased exponentially. Muslim writers have seen the influence and allure of video games, virtual worlds, comic and graphic novels; the need to shape these stories from an Islamic perspective has been an incentive for writers to craft stories that capitalize on the genre while also casting Islam in a positive light. Many of the new Muslim writers see science fiction and fantasy as a vehicle to promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence, while simultaneously telling a good story. Particularly in these times where Muslims, today's enemy of choice, and the religion of over a billion people is the new *boogeyman*, these stories can be told from a unique vantage point. Science fiction, fantasy, horror, and comics offer ways of telling the varied stories within the Islamic community to highlight the similarities, celebrate the differences, and provide a perspective that harkens to the universality of Islam. These writings are attempting to become a part of the canon, by producing works that challenge the prevailing notions of science fiction and fantasy while also encouraging spirited dialogue about identity and differences. Again, Muslims and Islam have historically had and continue to influence speculative fiction from the fantasy stories of the *Arabian Nights* to the time-travel stories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian, al-Muwaylihi and the 20<sup>th</sup> century African American musician Jalaluddin Nuriddin.

**Selected Notable Muslim Writers of Science Fiction/Fantasy:**  
Muslim writers of science fiction and fantasy are no different than their counterparts when developing stories. They incorporate in their works

themes similar to other writers of love, heroism, futurism, utopia, dystopia, outer space travel, and other worlds, etc. Although most Muslim writers include some aspect of their faith as an underlying theme, many of their stories contain universal messages, storylines, and characters. The writers below capture these sentiments and demonstrate the diversity of storytelling related to fictional Islam.

**Nabil Farouq.** (1956-) Egyptian Science Fiction writer well known for his novellas in the Egyptian Pocket Novels series. His most famous works are *Ragol Al Mostaheel* (The Man of the Impossible) and *Malaf Al Mostakbal* (Files of the Future). Farouq, a physician by profession, was awarded the Tanta Cultural Palace Prize in 1979 for his short story "The Prophecy" - which began the series "Cocktail 2000"; in 1984 he won the competition initiated by the Kuwaiti magazine "Book Worlds" for his short story "Deadly Rays" which launched the series "Future File". In this series, a fearless group of young Egyptians of both genders fight against the whole gamut of crime, from illegal arms deals through invaders from outer space, who have been hiding in the innards of our earth for millions of years. Farouq makes use of all the tricks of the trade, from parallel worlds to travels through time and space. He weaves in plenty of "life belts" in the form of philosophical observations, so that the stories do not descend into a flood of mere action. These series have made Nabil Farouq the most well-known SF writer in the Arab world.

**Roquia Sakhawat Hussain.** (1880 – 1932) Hussain was a prolific writer and social worker in undivided Bengal in the early 20th century. She is most famous for her efforts on behalf of gender equality and other social issues. She established the first school aimed primarily at Muslim girls, which still exists today. She was a notable Muslim feminist and her book, *Sultana's Dream*, is an early work of feminist science fiction, involving a utopian male/female role-reversal. *Sultana's Dream* was first published in a Madras-based, English language periodical the *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905. In 1908, it appeared as a book.

**Muhammed Zafar Iqbal.** (1952-) The most widely read and popular Bangladesh writer of science fiction, Iqbal wrote the story "*Copotronic Sukh Dukho*" when he was a student of Dhaka University. This story was later included in a compilation of Iqbal's work in a book by the same name, published by Muktohdhara, a famous publishing house of Dhaka. This collection of science fiction stories gained huge popularity and the new trend of science fiction emerged among Bangla writers and readers. After his first collection, Iqbal transformed his own science fiction cartoon strip *Mohakashe Mohatrash* ("Panic in the Cosmos") into a novel. Iqbal has written the greatest number of science fiction works of Bangla science fiction. Iqbal first used the word 'copotron' in his first science fiction '*Copotronic Shukh Dukho*'. He became so popular that everyone started believing it as a real robot brain. Iqbal has written over 20 works including *Saira Scientist*, *Project Nebula*, and *Ruhan Ruhan*.

**Ahmed A. Khan.** A Canadian science fiction writer, born in India, Khan has published numerous stories in the science fiction genre. He has edited two anthologies: *Fall and Rise*, a post-apocalyptic science fiction anthology and *Science Fiction Waxes Philosophical*, a collection of Science Fiction stories with philosophical underpinnings touching on Islam. An extensive listing of his many publications are found at a blog he maintains at <http://ahmedakhan.blogspot.com>.

**Jalaluddin Nuriddin.** (1944-) One of the founding members of The Last Poets, a group of poets and musicians that evolved in the 1960s out of the Harlem Writers Workshop in New York City. He converted to Islam and learned to *spiel*, an early form of rap, which he called "spoagraphics" or "spoken pictures." His talent and genius with words and rhythm are renowned. He joined The Last Poets shortly after their first album "Right On", which was the soundtrack to a movie of the same name. His epic poem titled *Beyonder* is a futuristic dystopian apocalyptic tale that speaks about an android called Sir Manikin.

**Hasan Khurshid Rumi.** (1959-) Considered the "godfather" of Bangladesh science fiction, he spends most of his efforts in translating over 50 anthologies and books from science fiction, fantasy and western genres, and in editing various Bangla science fiction anthologies. He has written a number of books including the science fiction and fantasy anthology "Ora Eshechhilo" in 1992. He is also co-founder of Bangladesh's first Sci-Fi magazine "Moulik" in 1999.

**Nihad Sharif.** (1932-) An Egyptian author and pioneer of Arabic science fiction, Sharif published his first novels in 1970s and hosted radio broadcasts on the subject. Sharif, who studied the science of history, began writing in 1949 and his texts were published in mostly Arabic newspapers and magazines.

**Pamela Taylor.** (1964-) Taylor is publications officer of the Islamic Writers Alliance and co-chair of the Progressive Muslim Union. Her science fiction stories include: *The Cathedral*, a futuristic look at a world where seminaries encourage multiculturalism and the quest for tolerance is taken a step too far, published in *Citizen Culture Magazine* (Feb 2005); *Hajar's Long Walk* and *First Impressions* published in *Many Voices, One Faith: Islamic Writers Alliance Anthology* (2005); a vampire story *Peaceful Conclusions* published in *Beyond the Mundane Anthology: Vampires, and Werewolves, and Monsters, Oh My!* (2005); and *Recompense* is featured in the 2008 science fiction publication, *A Mosque Among the Stars*.

**G. Willow Wilson.** (1982-) An American author and essayist, her first graphic novel "*Cairo*" has fantasy elements. Wilson draws on both American and Middle Eastern culture in her work, ranging from autobiographical essays to superhero sagas. Her current focus is on three projects: *Vixen: Return of the Lion*, a five-part series for DC Comics; *AIR*, a monthly comic about a flight attendant embroiled in a terrorism plot; and *The Butterfly Mosque*, a memoir slated for release in January.



## Conclusion

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>iv</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. 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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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.

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<sup>i</sup> Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p 138.

<sup>ii</sup> Nuruddin, *Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology*, p. 138.

<sup>iii</sup> *Proto-science fiction* is used in this instance to denote the early stages of the development of this particular literary genre.

\*\*This presentation is the foundation for a book chapter that will be published in the Praeger 3 volume set titled, *Muslims in American Popular Culture*.