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Abstract: The present study examines the aesthetic features of Sabry Musa’s *Lord of the Spinach Field* (1987) through Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s “Utopia of the Subject” to foreground Homo’s quest for a wished-for yet unattainable reality. Post-Colonial Utopianism depicts man’s inner turmoil to force an act of willful rethinking to enhance the “anticipatory consciousness” of a better life, a point interrogated within Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* to propose the concept of the “Not-Yet-Become”: the not realized futuristic reality. Therefore, the interest is in utopia/dystopia historicities as analytical markers of historical inquiry to analyze specific space/time coordinates; post-colonial pitfalls of a technoscience dystopia. As such, the remarkable characteristic of Post-Colonial Utopianism is critique, and “Subjective Utopia” strives to achieve a breach in the teleological ideology of historical structures; thereby, transformation is the central aesthetic strategy of post-colonial critique.

Keywords: Egyptian Science Fiction, Bloch’s Ontology of Not-Yet, Subjective Utopia, Post-colonial Utopianism

Introduction

Fiction is generally understood as the attempt to imagine unimaginable futures. But its deepest subject may in fact be our own historical present. (Jameson, 2005: 345)

Etymologically, the Latin “Scientia” means knowledge that can be philosophical, theological, and technological (Roberts, 2016: 9). Science Fiction (SF) – as a genre – proposes “an alternative or altered reality” that is “beyond the confines of normal experience” (Cuddon & Habib, 2013: 638). In *The Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (Suvin, 1979), Darko Suvin defines SF as a “literature of cognitive estrangement” (ibid.: 4) to provide “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (ibid.: 8). Thereby, SF is “an optical illusion and epistemological trick” (Suvin, 1979: 84), a “device for
historical estrangement, and at least initial readiness for new forms of reality, for novum of desalinating human history” (ibid.: 84). Suvin’s adaptation of Bloch’s “novum” to SF denotes a fresh and innovative tendency to enhance a genre that has been acknowledged by the reader’s recognition of futuristic scientific possibilities. Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between fantasy and SF, though both are aesthetically fantastical; SF is defined as a realm where “the supernatural is explained in a rational manner, but according to laws which contemporary science does not acknowledge” (Todorov, 1975: 56), while fantasy literature tackles supernatural elements within irrational contexts through the clever manipulation of magic.

“Transcendence” is key to ancient SF to represent supernatural marvelous aspects, and the transformation of fantasy into the mundane world has weakened the transcendent feature of the literary genre to introduce super technologies displayed, for example, in the depiction of space rockets and atomic power. Dystopia is deployed as a device of estrangement to expose the hatred of modern despotism, and it functions as a prophetic warning of futuristic grim condition, that is, technologically-based dystopia. This pinpoints the cleavage between a transcendent utopia and a secular technological fantasy to pursue a better life. Science, technology, and futurity are strategic aspects of SF and the tenor of reason illuminates “the sense that something in the fictive world is dissonant with the reader’s experienced world” (James & Mendlesohn, 2003: 5). Within this cognitive reasoning, Yusuf al-Sharuni, in Science Fiction in Contemporary Arabic Literature (al-Sharuni, 2000), remarks that fantasy literature is effortless to interpret whereas SF requires mental and cognitive skills to create a rational narrative context (ibid.: 38).

Within this rationale, Lord of the Spinach Field is relevant to discussing futuristic technology set in an unspecified world as a literary imaginative enterprise to exercise freedom of expression, to exhibit fears, hopes, and inner tensions allegorically in a post-colonial era. The Egyptian writer Sabry Musa (1932–2018) deploys the journey motif to explore the contours of the utopian prospect through the rebellious dream images of the oppressed and radical thinkers. The poetic significance of SF – as dramatized in Lord of the Spinach Field – is its critique of realism for depicting closed frozen entities within a single point of time in history. Homo’s journey to the past is an inspiring force to abolish static immobility and to defy orthodox determinism, which is advocated by the antagonistic capitalist society.

**Genre Ontology**

Historically, the philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Faraby’s 10th-century utopia The Virtuous City was inspired by Plato’s The Republic (380 BC), and it depicts an Islamic rule in which happiness is the strategic aspect in this idealistic splendid
city with fantastical elements such as the flying carpet. Travel tales to outer spaces and travel writings have solemnly engaged with the exotic and the occult. This has marked the rise of SF in the Arab literary world dating back to the 13th century known as a scientific golden age (Campbell, 2018: 50). This is exemplified in Ibn al-Nafis’s first theological SF *Theologus Autodidactus* (1270), which provides scientific explanations of supernatural events and introduces the scientific theory of metabolism and pulmonary circulation of blood to describe resurrection. Zakarya al-Qazwin’s cosmography *Marvelous Things of Creation and Wondrous Things of Existence* is an early proto-SF depicting supra-terrestrial monsters, angels, and other marvels of heaven and the earth. His tale *Awaj bin Anfāq* describes a man who travels to the earth from a remote planet. The story’s setting is fantastic; however, it tackles rational and cognitive spectacles to develop the reader’s awareness of the complexity and profundity of creation (Campbell, 2018: 52). In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Clute & Nicholls, 1999), John Clute and Peter Nicholls cite the fantastical anthologies of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* in the Arabic SF entry as futuristic proto-SF (ibid.: 49). For example, “The City of Brass” recounts humanoid robots and the brass horseman who undertake an archeological expedition to recover the copper bottles owned by King Solomon, who used them to entrap evil spirits; moreover, “The Ebony Horse” features a flying robot that can take its rider anywhere. There is also the underwater civilization manifested in “Abdulla the Fisherman” and “Jlnar of the Sea” (Barbaro, 2015: 41), underscoring the poetics of estrangement and defamiliarization.

The present study examines *Lord of the Spinach Field* as an illustration of Egyptian Science Fiction (ESF), a genre that still holds a peripheral academic status in comparison to Euro-American counterparts. The contribution of ESF has been overlooked despite its literary proliferation over the course of the 20th century: Yusuf Ezz Eldin’s Sci-Fi Radio Series in the 1940s to explore motifs of temporalities and Mustufa Mahmoud’s SF to illustrate the discovery of new physical laws as discussed in his novel *Man Below Zero* (1965) envisioned in 2067 when the University Professor Shahin creates a machine that turns biological beings into wave forms. Shahin’s body has been transformed into waves that will eternally travel in the universe through teleportation that maintains the consciousness of the subject in a fashion similar to the Eastern philosophies of reincarnation. Tawfiq al-Hakim – the father of modern ESF in the last quarter of the 20th century – tackles a myriad of weaved themes of futurology, eschatology, and afterlife. For instance, *Voyage to Tomorrow* (1958) is a play about two different convicts sent to outer space to escape the death penalty, and the finale depicts their return to earth after 309 years. Physiologically, the two convicts have realized the drastic changes that have inflicted them; they have been transformed into beings that function with electricity; they can survive without breathing, feeling neither
hungry nor weary. Al-Hakim’s utopia is an emblem of the age of automation to abrogate individualism and question existentialism. It is argued that al-Hakim’s theatrical SF enterprise sprung from the general cultural milieu in the 1950s of mankind’s exploration of space; however, “the quasi-SF plays owe more to experimental drama and Pirandello’s theatrical conventions” (Barbaro, 2015: 101).

In “The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arab Literature” (Snir, 2000), Reuven Snir refers to contemporary ESF in which technology is a means to the future: Nabil Faruq’s Sci-Fi Series entitled The Future File in the 1980s are detective stories depicting the crew of the High Command of Egyptian Scientific Intelligence, which works for the “protection of the scientific secrets that are the guarantee for the progress of nations” (ibid.: 270). Ahmed Khaled Tawfik’s Supernatural – published in two series in the 1980s – gained great appeal among the youth in particular, and is “a collection of fantasy-horror novels, in which an Egyptian housewife uses a dream-generating computer to live in various fictional worlds” (Campbell, 2018: 74). The more sophisticated Ahmed Khaled Tawfik’s Utopia (Tawfik, 2008) marks is a 21st-century dystopia set in 2023 in which he uses “cognitive estrangement” to critique both the class gap in the Egyptian society and the Arab Spring protests of 2011 (Campbell, 2015: 541). The gap is established between the utopian US Marine colony that embraces the rich and the bleak land of the poor seen as “Other.”

**Scope and Rationale**

I seek to interrogate the poetics of Lord of the Spinach Field as a speculative ESF to question the protagonist’s primeval hope for a better life in contrast to the doubts of wholesome existence. Homo’s Sisyphian status manifests the inner struggle between an undesirable reality and the inability to fulfill a favorable resolution. The argument unfolds the conflict between benevolent and malevolent power to tease totalitarian techno-science society in order to address a number of research questions: 1) Can a truly free individual exist or what makes a subject an individual? 2) Where is utopia and what would utopian thinking do in a world that is desperate to solve its accrued evils? 3) Is the hope for the future still convenient? 4) How far is Lord of the Spinach Field a post-colonial dystopia? Unfortunately, Post-colonial Egypt has been entrapped in the Neo-Liberal Capitalism, which is set in opposition to Musa’s Marxist thought that is well-rooted in the rhetoric of decolonization; hence, the post-colonial is “a way of reading the continuing engagement with colonial and neo-colonial power” (Ashcroft, 2012: 1). Themes of hope, dissatisfaction, daydreams, and the supremacy of “anticipatory consciousness” enhance the subjective agency in the historical change. What Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) endorses is a hermeneutical mode of historical thinking that urges a critical interrogation of the subversive potential that can be nurtured and
fostered within the incessant experiences of shattered promises and disenchanted dreams. As such, Bloch’s philosophy of the “Not-Yet” is an attempt to deconstruct antinomic metaphysical systems in order to rearticulate the individual as an active subject marching forward for the “Not-Yet” unknown potential self-identity, not only seen as an entity determined by socio-economic forces.

*Lord of the Spinach Field* is an intended SF enterprise to locate the 1980s Egypt in the faraway future under an earthly dome in order to critique “the masquerade undertaken by the regime while retaining plausible deniability” (Campbell, 2018: 196) in the face of the Neo-Colonial despotism. This underlies the delineation of dystopia as a utopia that has gone sour or a utopia that has only served a particular class of society. Thereby, the premise of the argument is to revisit the utopia/dystopia dichotomy not as objects of analysis, but “as historically grounded analytic categories with which to understand how individuals and groups around the world have interpreted their present tense with an eye to the future” (Gordin et al., 2010: 2, emphasis in the original). Utopia is tackled as a “practice” (Turner, 1994) to probe if humanity has reached the state of “beyond utopia” (Gordin et al., 2010: 2) or if humanity still believes in the possibilities of change.

The present study examines the aesthetic features of *Lord of the Spinach Field* through Karl-Heinz Bohrer’s “Utopia of the Subject” (Bohrer, 1994[1981]) to portray Homo’s quest for a wished-for yet unattainable reality. The “Subjective Utopia” questions the epistemological dilemma in a technologically-based dystopia. Within this rationale, Post-Colonial Utopianism depicts man’s sufferings and inner turmoil to force an act of “willful rethinking” to enhance the “anticipatory consciousness” of a better life, a point interrogated within Ernst Bloch’s three-volume anthology *Principle of Hope* (1954–1959) to propose the “Not-Yet-Become”: the not realized futuristic reality. *Lord of the Spinach Field* is investigated as a “Subjective Utopia” not to be seen as an imagined place at some future time; instead, the reading is on the exploration of the specificity of a time and a place; post-colonial pitfalls of a techno-science dystopia. Thus, the interest is in utopia/dystopia historicities as analytical markers of historical inquiry to analyze specific space/time coordinates.

**Dark Satire and Science Fiction**

The dystopian writer’s disillusioned and anti-utopian temperament is “born of a sense of frustrated and thwarted utopianism,” and anti-utopia is itself “a kind of angry revenge against deluded purposes of utopia” (Kumar, 1987: 104; emphasis mine). Dystopian fiction and dark satire serve as a counterpoint to the vision of utopia. The shocking reversal of high utopian expectations into deep disillusionment has been central to the tense vacillation of the utopian/dystopian discourse. Dystopian fiction is
an emblem of “literary pessimism” (Hammond, 2017: 102) to expose state-controlled media, industrialization, and totalitarianism; thus, dystopias function as critiques to convey a warning message, and the dystopian writer adapts the present historical flaws to his own SF storylines to provide understandings of future concerns through painting truthfully the most shocking undertones. SF’s poetic power interrogates “the foundation of new political orders, the endeavor to realize utopia, the exigencies underpinning tyranny, the relationship of a saintly politics to the potential and the limitations of radical politics in the present age” (Paik, 2010: 1). Born out of satire as a reaction to the revolutionary overthrow of anti-humanist systems, the central function of the dystopian impetus is to ponder how an originally utopian promise has been abused or ironically fulfilled.

In *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (Aschcroft, 2017), Bill Ashcroft writes that utopianism as a genre seeks perfection, which bestows upon it “the character of a dream or an illusion” (ibid.: 1). A debatable question that poses itself: is utopia a satire or a serious proposal for an ideal community? (ibid.: 1) as Ashcroft speculates to underlie the dystopian strain of satire in order to redirect the historical and cultural process. The utopian/dystopian nervous fluctuation articulates the collapse of utopia and the rise of dystopia as an inevitable outcome of an all-embracing closure thought, dogmatism, and political fanaticism. The satire/dystopia dialogue decentralizes a claustrophobic stone-like fixed discourse. Satire – as a structural device – exposes the historical failure and the lack of fulfillment to foreground the huge cleavage between a utopian dream and a dystopian bleak reality.

In *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Griffin, 1994), Dustin Griffin argues that satire is “embedded in history and in culture” and it is deployed to “subvert the dominant social order,” therefore, “do satirists tend to come from a particular social niche? What is the function of satiric aggression in a modern society?” (ibid.: 3). The satire/dystopian interaction enhances a state of revitalization in opposition to the intellectual and political sterility that has imprisoned human beings in existing fixed forms of order. Resistance is a state of self-creation, a matter of concrete freedom, and possible transformation. Satire’s potentiality can exist in the realm of what Suvin calls “a potent estrangement” (Suvin, 1979: viii) endorsed by acts of resistance.

The post-colonial regime’s failure is due to the fact that it has become just a mechanism to advance personal agendas. Amidst the maze of striving for democracy, the political élite has become a hostile one for advocating an ideology that has been tainted with the same colonial arrogance in favor of a fascist dictatorship. Nationalist Socialism has changed from being an icon of liberation to a lifeless shell of personal tyranny, corruption, and defeat. As the euphoria of the post-colonial period is seen to fade away, the pressing questions are: How long must post-colonial societies be cursed with their leaders? Why should there be such a shrinking of hope, and why must so much despair be so steadily embraced? Musa
expresses his political indignation of post-colonial Egypt in the 1980s: a period of distress and difficulty because the élite had not succeeded in making the idea of the new nationhood a reality to the populace.

Science is key to the SF narratives described by Kingsley Amis as

that class of prose narrative treating a situation that could not arise in a world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology or pseudo-science, or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin. (Amis, 1963: 18)

Dystopia is known for its themes of horror and a “terrifying future” within the paradigm of SF as well as within what Brian McHale calls “space-travel narratives [which display] displacement in space and time [in works which are] an expression of the mode of displacement from present to future which falls into one or another of several categories: that of future history” (McHale, 1987: 61). Accordingly, Musa’s hypothetical society is worse than any imaginative one and the novel in question reveals a historical reality of the worst totalitarian dictatorship. “Science-fictionality,” Istvan Csicsery-Ronay argues, is associated with two “forms of hesitation, a pair of gaps” (2008: 3): the “historical dimension of possibility” and the “ethical dimension” of consequence provide responses to questions like what would the repercussions be? Would they be good or bad? Thereby, the two dimensions are part and parcel of science-fictionality, and they determine how mankind can think about the future as a historical process.

Finally, laying the guilt for all the contemporary mischiefs at the doors of colonialism is over-simplistic. It is obvious that it is often used as a pretext for the failings of the ruling élite. The collapse of utopian ideals stands for a contradictory sentiment; it is both liberating and shattering since it has encouraged the writers’ impulse of disillusionment to speak implicitly of political oppression and frustration, producing outspoken fiction which is full of cynicism and disappointment with the once-promising regime to display the shocking reversal from lofty utopian expectations to deep disenchantment with the ruling class.

**Lord of the Spinach Field: The “Not-Yet Being”**

It is this essential dissatisfaction at the very core of hope which drives time forward and which transforms each contingent wish into a figure of the Utopian wish itself, each contingent present into a figure of that ultimate presence of Utopia. (Jameson, 1971: 138)

Utopia is not a good place, but the spirit of hope for a better life; the space of utopia has become “the space of social dreaming” (Sargent, 2000: 8). This brings to the
fore the Blochian theory of “Not-Yet-Conscious”; the Not initiates a dynamic material reality that is in pursuit of the recognition of possibilities hidden in its capacity to fight for freedom. Within the forward-looking aspirations of humanity, the “Not-Yet-Being” becomes “conscious in its act, known in its content” (Bloch, 1986: 144) to enhance the utopian capacity and to be engaged in a “creative practice” that deepens humanity’s realization of its wishes. Historical materialism advocates historical change initiated by class conflict, and it is described by Bloch as “the transformation of the topos from space into time” (Bloch, 1988: 3) and as a theory it hypothesizes “the transformation of the world from within itself” (Bloch, 1986: 267). Accordingly, utopia is pivotal to historical materialism as it theorizes the “transformation of the world from within itself” (ibid.: 267) and envisions the historical possibility of creating “another world beyond hardship,” “beyond expropriation and alienation” (ibid.: 267). As such, historical materialism functions as a “liberating intention and materialistically humane, humanely materialistic real tendency” (Bloch, 1986: 209) toward personal emancipation as well as political liberation.

The “Ontology of Not-Yet-Being” questions the static quality of the traditional metaphysics that underlie the dominance of dualistic thinking; one term is privileged over the other, and the damaging aspect resides in hierarchical systems. Against the dominance of binary oppositions, “Not-Yet” adds a temporal dimension to the originally static antinomic formulation. “Not-Yet” represents a recognition of the fluidity of events and acknowledges the flow of history as dissolving rigidity; thus, history is “multi-level” and “polyrhythmic” oriented to the “objective-real possibility” concept, which itself is based on a notion of reality regarded as not yet ended, not yet completely determined or undecided. Thus, the orientation of knowledge is essentially to what is yet to come, and the “backward-looking” vision can lend dynamism to the ahistorical facets of laws. To expand the temporal dimension, it is the present with the unfulfilled past and the possible future that all together relentlessly seek the abolition of political and economic antagonisms.

In “Outlines of a Better World” (Williams, 2010), Patrick Williams proposes the act of “rerouting the post-colonial” within “the combination of hope as resistance (rerouted postcolonialism) and hope as utopian function (the New, the Not-Yet of rerouted postcolonialism)” to evoke “a Blochian mode” of “not only to hope, but also [to] do” (ibid.: 95; emphasis in the original). Hope emerges “in a conscious-known way as utopian function” (Bloch, 1986: 144) and “as a directing act of a cognitive kind” (Bloch, 1986: 12); thereby, the imaginative ideas generated by the utopian function are extended in “an anticipating way,” into “the future possibilities of being different and better” (Bloch, 1986: 144). Bloch’s concept of “concrete utopia” (1986: 197) can be examined within the post-colonial vision, which is embedded in the past in a way that transforms the present and anticipates the future.
Man’s suffering forces him to “rethink the nature of a social life” (Ricouer, 1976: 16), which is an anticipatory consciousness of a better world. Hope alludes to future possibilities, and this leads to an “anticipatory illumination” or a revelation of “the possibility for rearranging social and political relations” (Zipes, 1989: xxxiii) to generate *Heimat*, Bloch’s term for utopia that exists beyond the conceptual and metaphoric boundaries. Bloch’s “novum” (Bloch, 1986: 8) augments humanity to reorient its existence within the belief in possibility and potentiality. Bloch draws upon Friedrich Schelling’s idealistic concept of the “eternal urge and primal ground of all creation” (Bloch, 1988: 273) to propose the notion of the “ontological incompleteness” of a reality. Thereby, “what-is-in-possibility” is the subjective drive that is analogous to Schelling’s concept of “the subject of nature” to refer to “an unconscious yet” so as to create a redeemed future.

*Lord of the Spinach Field* depicts a hypothetical 23rd century; a community under a glass dome after a nuclear catastrophe to protect its dwellers from toxic atmospheres. It is the Age of Honey in which flying cars and airbuses are familiar with teleportation. Parental separation and artificial wombs are advocated as well as selective breeding. The dead are buried in space and visited by their relatives after deducting the flight tickets’ cost from their salaries. Marital couples are selected according to statistical compatibility, and children are raised in crèches. The regime’s resources are abundant, yet there is a total supremacy over civil society where technology is the highest zenith of rationality, a state inimical to the dismal realities of colonized societies: “the social apparatus has hardened itself against people, and thus, whatever appears before their eyes all over the world as an attainable possibility, as the evident possibility of fulfillment, presents itself to them as radically impossible” (Adorno & Bloch, 1988: 4). Thereby, the ruling regime’s utopia is fake; their version of democracy is superficial since it has been abused by panoptical surveillance, and all aspects of life are dominated by a Leadership Committee.

In *Brave New World Revisited* (Huxley, 1958), Aldous Huxley explains that man’s dehumanization is the normal outcome of suppressing biological drives through “over-organization” that inevitably leads to “mental sickness.” He emphasizes the fact that the social sphere’s “Will of Order” paves the way for the evolution of a totalitarian dictatorship: “Too much organization transforms men and women into automatons, suffocates the creative spirit and abolishes the very possibility of freedom” (ibid.: 30). Man’s “perfect adjustment to that abnormal society,” Huxley continues, “is a measure of mental sickness” (ibid.: 28). This is an “illusion of individuality” which embodies the ugly face of “de-individualization” seen as a terrible crime against man’s unique idiosyncrasies so as to establish a social condition of conformity; however, uniformity and personal freedom are incompatible; “Uniformity and mental health are incompatible too. Man is not made to be an automaton, and if he becomes one, the basis for mental health is destroyed” (ibid.: 28).
In the Age of Titanium, Homo is a manual laborer in the last titular Spinach Field, and his wife Layaly works in the Climate Control Station. Homo, the New Man of the future, is at the crossroads of the utopian/dystopian discourse within a post-colonial society shaken by radical changes; cold love, rational calculation, lack of beauty, and creativity. He is indulged in his quest for “concrete utopia,” which is an emblem of a concrete act toward the hope of the “not-yet conscious.” The point is not whether we should pursue a utopia or not. The debate investigates what type of utopia, where to search for it and the quest for a utopian thought within post-colonial resistance:

Utopia is a vision of possibility that affects the transformation of social life. It is a desire in the act of imagining, and imagination that can be at once oppositional and visionary, a state of affairs that explains the importance of the literary in post-colonial representation. (Ashcroft, 2007: 416)

The discussion of the reality of the “Not-Yet” perception signals the return of “concrete utopia,” which is perceived by Bloch as “an anticipatory kind which by no means coincides with abstract utopian dreaminess, nor is directed by the immaturity of merely abstract utopian socialism” (Bloch, 1986: 146). In other words, the “unfinished forward dream” is not wishful thinking or a “glimmer which flickers up” (1986: 144), but “an educated hope” (1986: 157). In *Lord of the Spinach Field*, the Leadership Committee represents a national ideology with its rigid systems to impose a worldview to be unquestionably followed. This identifies the difference between ideology and utopia; ideology seeks to regulate human relations through punitive control to maintain the current status quo, while utopia brings about change, challenge, and subversive acts: “both ideologies and utopias are ideas [that are] incongruous with the state of reality within which [they] occur” (Mannheim, 1966: 173). The delicate line between utopia and dystopia is that actual utopias fail, and freedom is not possible without utopian hope and transformation.

Despite the several claims that announce the death of utopia, utopia “as a literary imagination of possibilities and alternatives is not outdated at all” (Seyferth, 2019[2018]: 1) due to the practices of “the real-life totalitarian systems as a result of the implementation of utopia ideas” (Seyferth, 2019[2018]: 1). Anti-utopianism, consequently, gives rise to science-fictional novels within the paradigm of “critical dystopias” (Sargent, 1994: 9). Lofty hopes have been crushed since the rise of Neo-Liberation that always endeavors to exterminate utopia within a gloomy mood. “Critical dystopia” negotiates nihilism and pessimism “with an open, militant utopian stance that not only breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the text’s alternative world, but also self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers like a dormant virus in every dystopian account” (Moylan, 2000: 195).
Lord of the Spinach Field, thereby, is a sober apprehension to revive a utopian hope in a dystopian futuristic society through Homo’s clash with a techno-ruling regime in order to pursue a better life that enhances man’s instinctual spirit and creative intellect.

**Homo: A Modern Everyman**

In “From Technological Dystopia to Intopia” (Hadomi, 1991), Leah Hadomi uses “intopia” to signify the difference between the traditional satirical dystopian approach and that of “Subjective Utopia” (ibid.: 110). The “Utopia of the Subject” (Bohrer, 1994[1981]) underlies the protagonist’s inner plight illustrating the “continuous facing of the conflict [which] is in itself an expression of the utopian intent” (Hadomi, 1991: 110). In this sense, “Intopia,” Hadomi explains, is a “textual phenomenon of the utopian discourse to express a quest for the ‘good life’ based on the normative choice of the protagonist located in the ironic discourse” (ibid.: 110). In other words, the intopian poetic strategies highlight the irony between the emotional and the rational worlds to emphasize feelings of frustration with an external materialistic society.

In *Lord of the Spinach Field,* Homo feels bored with the new automated world where robots are designed to perform man’s hard work and hot food is served through tubes into the wall of the constructions (Musa, 1987: 53). He finds no pleasure in earning soft furnishings, and he is dissatisfied with “illustrious dull walls” (Musa, 1987: 24). He gets fed up with “the boring daily routine” (ibid.: 11) and falls prey to the “mechanic repetition of daily life” (ibid.: 92). In *Irony and Ethics in Narrative* (Handwerk, 1985), Gray J. Handwerk deploys “ethical irony” to examine self-awareness to awaken the protagonist’s understanding of the present status quo. This initiates an open dialogue between the internal and the external worlds to face the unquestionable triumph of scientific progress and technology. Narratively speaking, *Lord of the Spinach Field* is written with a third person narration that relies heavily on the use of the mono-voice technique displayed in the rhetoric repetition of “He said to himself.” This intopian strategy of self-speculation enhances Homo’s estranged feelings, which cannot be expressed openly and verbally. Feelings are monitored, destined to be silenced and concealed to ensure fake loyalty to the regime, and punishment always awaits dissenters.

Homo’s ennui is the outcome of the intellectual and spiritual emptiness that urges the positive drive toward the future. Homo is accused of being a “thinker” (Musa, 1987: 22), and the Leadership Committee condemns Homo’s “glittering eyes which radiate a strange mixture of challenge and despair, exhaustion and desire akin to that of the ancient people’s eyes screened in old movies” (ibid.: 36).
Expression is forbidden, and spontaneous behavior is denied; accordingly, Homo’s pursuit of natural life is seen as a “whim against the regime” (ibid.: 40), and his non-conformist behavior is regarded as “a psychological problem” (ibid.: 35) by the Local Mechanic Investigation Center. He is obliged to take a medical leave, and he is ordered to be separated from his wife since they are no longer a well-matched couple. Homo himself is in full recognition of his inner crisis:

I am overwhelmed by a vague nostalgia to the ancient world [. . .] I am the modern man, living in the Age of Honey, possessing a huge amount of knowledge and advanced technological tools, yet, I cannot catch what is beyond my orbit. (Musa, 1987: 92)

Homo’s intopia can be perceived within the historical process “as a pre-conceptual philosophical exploration of what is not yet attained” (Bloch, 1971: 172). A subtle question arises from the protagonist’s hope to “return to the past”: To what extent does the fate of Homo express the satirist’s denunciation of the scientific worldview? Homo suffers from a sense of displacement since the individual’s private self, feelings, sexuality and family are dominated by a punitive control. Homo’s trial is a motif of an intopian strategy to signify the firm belief in individualism crushed by an inevitable harsh punishment.

Aesthetically, Lord of the Spinach Field reveals the core structure of a morality play to depict a protagonist in agony. Symbolically named, Homo represents a modern Everyman who struggles for his inner self against the dehumanizing forces of a totalitarian dictatorship:

Humankind still lives in pre-history everywhere; indeed everything awaits the creation of the world as a genuine one. The real genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end, and it only begins when society and existence become radical, that is, grasp themselves at the root. The root of history, however, is the human being. (Moylan, 1982: 159)

As a deviant, Homo is in a conflict with his subjective consciousness: “Homo, for the first time in his life after fifty years – speculates about his present comfortable and easy life. It is very insightful in this middle-age to contemplate the past and look-forward to the future” (Musa, 1987: 94). Homo unmasks the state dictatorship to expose the ugly face of Capitalism, and his trial ends in a horrifying way; thereby, humanity’s salvation is in conflict with society’s damnation ruled by a power-crazed élite.

Ambivalence is a salient intopian strategy to denote the gap between Homo’s rational image and the instinctive natural self. Homo’s selfhood is in crisis, and
this ambivalence is a pivotal aspect to depict the inner tension: Homo is an estranged protagonist seen torn between his social image in a technologically-based dystopia and his inner consciousness. This internal schism is symbolically illustrated in the mirror motif in the introductory page: “I am inverting the time mirror” (Musa, 1987: 7) to signify the protagonist’s ambivalent tension: Is Homo the rational civilized man, or is he the disillusioned rebel? The inversion of the time mirror is an act of transgression. It paves the way for the forthcoming revolution led by Homo and Prof to return to the primitive past facing a toxic environment where wild grasses and trees devour savagely human beings. Homo and Prof are hailed by the Speakers in the Discussion Room as “Enthusiasts of Nature” (Musa, 1987: 63). Prof delivers lectures on natural beauty, advocating the fact that “free spirit is the true essence of humanity” (Musa, 1987: 65). Prof and other Nature Defenders aspire “to return to a point where the universe is small and humanity [is] significant within it” (Campbell, 2018: 201). They boldly take the decision to “return to the past” to regain spiritual sanity and to dismantle the robots’ supremacy over human intelligence.

Homo’s fascination with the Ancient Food Museum and the artifacts of the old world is a utopian nostalgia to be explored in the past as an unfulfilled promise. His nostalgia is regarded as a transgression which is dramatized in a myriad of actions; reading *Romeo and Juliet*, exploring the empty spaces aimlessly using sky train to the Ruined World after the First Electronic War, enjoying the “Free Food Day,” eating an ancient dessert called “The Imam is Eating His Fingers” and “feeling full” (Musa, 1987: 46). This is a sense of “fullness” of what is spiritual and intellectual as Homo speculates: “the automated revolution has set up dense colonies and has made the fields yield plentiful harvests, yet it could not abrogate this pleasure felt by a human being in listening to words being shaped from the inner self” (Musa, 1987: 55). This nostalgia of what is antique and ancient functions within the “non-linear” relationships between the past, the present and the future based on the touches of a utopian impulse in the past. Homo is in search for what Bloch calls “novum” that pushes humanity out of its present toward the not-yet-realized vision. Homo seeks to capture “concrete utopia” in order to seize the possibility of imagining a future that stands for the ability to hope. “Concrete utopias,” therefore, are “points in history where utopian possibilities are established in the concreteness and openness of the material of history” (Moylan, 1982: 159).

The futuristic icon of Homo’s science-fictional world is the Hanging Hall. It is a small, planet-like sphere placed within the earth’s gravity, and it is prevented from falling by titanium chains and parachutes. It is used by the ruling regime as a repository for the earth’s arts and science heritage. Its construction has been planned to mimic the human brain and to be reachable by flying cars (Musa, 1987: 184). The Iron Brain, with its swift colored lamps harshly interrogate Homo, who
is identified as number 7049, not seen as an autonomous individual. The Iron Brain accuses Homo of “committing the original sin” and of being the “heir of blood and devastation”: “Don’t let yourself get lost in the darkness of the past. Now is the right time to be completely liberated from ancient fears and original sins” (Musa, 1987: 190). In this sense, Lord of the Spinach Field fulfills Csicsery-Ronay’s perception of SF – “the world has become ‘science-fictional’” (2008: 1) – as an epistemological response not only as a literary genre of “aesthetic entertainment,” but as a “historical reality unfolding into the future” (2008: 4). Accordingly, SF is “a direct interaction with contemporary culture that lies at the nexus of technological, scientific, critical and social thought in that it determines what we conceive of as possible in and for our future” (Schmeink, 2016: 19).

Technically, Musa deploys Prof’s lectures as a scheme to preach against the abolition of the traditional family and to call for “the return to the past” to restore humanity’s instinctual creativity and spiritual ideals. Homo and Prof are not allowed to think backward and the faculty of thinking itself is considered by the Leadership Committee dangerous even the drives of the subconscious are denied. Artistic creativity, memory of past heritage, cultural legacy, and spiritual inquiries are replaced by the excessive consumption of Beer Pills. Memory, in Post-Colonial Utopianism, does not seek to recover the past, but it strives to provide a possibility; thus, memory is “a recreation, it is not a looking backwards, but a reaching out of a horizon, somewhere ‘out there’” (Glissant, 1989: 64). The vital strength of memory resides within the paradigm of ahistoricity since the utopian hope acts as a catalyst to challenge the teleological ideology of history. The individual liberty – usurped by an all-powerful state – possesses within its covert capacity the postcolonial utopian vision that is embedded in the past in a manner to radically transform the present and anticipate the future.

What makes a subject an individual? Is an inquiry of a political action, and it denotes the transformative energy of utopianism as pinpointed by Ashcroft: “freedom, like consciousness, can never exist in the abstract, it must be realized in the terms of ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’” (Ashcroft, 2017: 11). Homo seeks freedom from machine worship to what is instinctual and natural beauty. Homo’s personal reflections or “local practices” set a “counter-conduct” (ibid.: 273) – to use the Foucauldian terms of subjectivity – to decentralize the logocentric power of the techno-dystopian discourse and to reconstruct himself against the sovereign hegemony. Homo’s agonies are heightened when he gets petrified by the anger of the wild toxic environment outside the glass dome. The novel’s ending inquiry, “Did he forget that time does not move backward?” (Musa, 1987: 228) evokes a sense of rupture and lack of historical continuity within the temporal/spatial narrative. The concluding saying shows the regime’s renunciation of Homo’s request to return to the technologized futurological world. Homo’s ambivalent status is
provocative; Musa does seek a “ThirdSpace” to underscore “negotiation rather than negation” (Bhabha, 1994: 25), to borrow Bhabha’s expression, since technology and science are inevitable, nevertheless challenge should be a way to resolve socio-political antagonism and contradiction. Homo’s Subjective Utopia is a celebration of resistance and transformation to rebut hegemonic rule. He reconstructs himself in order to open the path of contestation and the route of possibility to articulate pluralistic voices and to erode temporal/spatial boundaries.

Homo’s trial commands admiration, and it is itself full of awe. Homo speaks of an “Ontology of Not-Yet Being,” which proposes a “concrete utopia”; however, it cannot be realized since the material conditions for the realization is not yet complete. Homo’s inner dilemma denotes that the process of attaining utopia is a self-creating one; utopia is not regarded as a pre-existing program controlled by the all-knowing Leadership, but it is seen as an autopoietic process driven by the labor who dreams of liberation and freedom; hence, the concept of utopia as Telos or as a pre-planned perfect city is declined. Homo’s trial reveals the difference between “abstract utopia” as a wishful act and a “concrete utopia” as a willful one: “If utopia does not lead to action in the present, it is an evasive reality” (Gutirréz, 1988: 234). This is a typical feature of Post-colonial Utopianism that rejects a closure of a political resolution, a state termed as an “agonistic utopia” (Ashcroft, 2007: 416): “Agonism is anti-teleological, yet without the imagination of the possibility of change, the process of transformation, which constitutes the greatest and most lasting species of post-colonial resistance, change cannot occur” (Ashcroft, 2007: 418). Thereby, the Blochian theory of utopia, interpreted as the spirit of hope, is itself a catalyst of change and a “willful” act of agency.

Conclusion

Dystopia has been associated with tragedies of 20th-century despotism. It is quite evident that Sabry Musa had been acquainted with the extensive Euro-American dystopic literature, especially Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), which targets a totalitarian regime, since dystopia always seeks “to critique and ridicule that worldview” for replacing “a humanistic ethos” with a technological one assailing “the scientizing of society” (Aldridge, 1978: 79). The Wellsian dream of a futuristic rich, highly efficient and cultured society has been betrayed by the new ruling élite in the decolonized era. Musa has projected the fears of a monster state to warn against something that could but should not be permitted to come true during the long decades of a totalitarian regime. Literary productions of utopia – since Plato and Thomas More – have been deeply rooted in the post-colonial author’s conviction of social justice, which is deliberately abused by the ruling regime. Reconsidering *Lord of Spinach Field* over more than 30 years after...
its publication marks its singularity as an Egyptian Science Fiction emphasizing its enduring appeal. It is a satirical critique of a Neo-Capitalist society, a frightening surveillance culture and scientific wrongs.

Homo’s nostalgia is an escape to history to juxtapose the values of the present with the past to anticipate futuristic utopian aspirations. Homo’s intopia conceptualizes human subjectivity, which is clearly associated with the historical struggle for freedom to reach a condition of possible self-identity; a potential aim illustrated as the “naturalization of man and humanization of nature” (Bloch, 1986: 313). This subtly pinpoints the distinction between the ongoing time of cosmic chronology and the historical time of man’s life from which the “forwards” are not only sensed spatially but, most importantly, temporally to achieve a revolutionary challenge. Sophistically articulated, “we need the most powerful telescope that of polished utopian consciousness,” Bloch argues, “in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness of the present as the concrete moment when historical change can begin” (1986: 12). It is problematic to say what a future would look like, yet the present ongoing struggles for personal freedom and social justice are a powerful motivation for action.

Lord of Spinach Field’s elusive finale makes it a profoundly unsettling text. The closing scene is ambivalent and denotes Musa’s denunciation, not of science per se, but he rejects the debauched manipulation of science to only serve a totalitarian State machine. Musa leaves the reader with a position, not of either/or, but of neither/nor and ultimately with an aspiration to search for a third alternative, which is a typical aesthetic feature of a dystopian satire. Defamiliarization is also a principal technique to underlie spatially/temporally distant setting to investigate problematic social/scientific practices that have been taken normal and inevitable. Aesthetically, estrangement is used to allegorize Egypt of the 1980s as a powerful surveillance state. Musa creates “a plausible estrangement of the Egypt of his time, where a pervasive State masked its authoritarianism and illegitimacy using socialist rhetoric and subsidizing the prices of staple foods” (Campbell, 2018: 196). The Age of Honey is spoiled by excessive abundance and the ease provided by robots to maintain the docile nature of the populace until they become the real masters and human beings are their slaves; thereby, humanity loses its natural character, its faculty of creativity and the critical appreciation of beauty and aesthetics.

Utopia occurs with its dark ego dystopia to place man in a sour reality facing a horrifying future if he fails to handle its terrifying symptoms in the here and now. What is unique is that both utopia and its implied dystopia are “markers for conditions of possibility” or “the conditions of imaginability” (Gordin et al., 2010: 4). As SF seeks to define man’s status in the universe, Lord of the Spinach Field is engaged in Homo’s inner plight and his ambivalent position in the technologized world; thus, SF negotiates humanist concerns by fictionalizing a critique of the
humanist stance. To be human is a key concern of SF discourse to explore anxieties of the triumphs of scientific advancement. As such, utopia does not mean a construction of a place, but it is envisioned to endorse a dynamic engagement with an authorial power. The remarkable characteristic of Post-Colonial Utopianism is critique, and “Subjective Utopia” strives to achieve a breach in the teleological ideology of historical structures; thereby, transformation is the central aesthetic strategy in post-colonial critique.

Note

1. All the English translations are rendered by the present researcher.

References


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