Science Fiction and Social Criticism in Morocco of the 1970s: Muḥammad `Azīz Laḥbābī’s The Elixir of Life

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ARTICLES
Graham J. Murphy. Archivation and the Archive-as-Utopia in H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* and "The Empire of the Ants". 1
Steven Mollmann. Air-Ships and the Technological Revolution: Detached Violence in George Griffith and H.G. Wells 20
Ian Campbell. Science Fiction and Social Criticism in Morocco of the 1970s: Muḥammad `Āzīz Laḥbābī's *The Elixir of Life* 42
N. Katherine Hayles. Greg Egan's *Quarantine* and *Teranesia*: Contributions to the Millennial Reassessment of Consciousness and the Cognitive Nonconscious 56
Joseph P. Weakland. "Forked Tongues": Languages of Estrangement in China Miéville's *Embassytown*. 78
J.P. Telotte. The Empire's New Robots 99
Brian Baker. "Here on the Outside": Mobility and Bio-politics in Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* 115
Nidesh Lawtoo. *Avatar* Simulation in 3Ts: Technē, Trance, Transformation 132

REVIEW-ESSAYS
Patricia Melzer. Future Sex and Power? Call’s *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy* 158

BOOKS IN REVIEW
Adler's *Physics and Math in Science Fiction* (Gregory Benford) 163
Attebery’s *Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Michael Levy) 164
Brittain’s *Eduardo Paolozzi at New Worlds* (Andrew M. Butler) 166
Evans’s *Vintage Visions: Essays on Early Science Fiction* (Adam Roberts) 170
Fritzsche’s *The Liverpool Companion to World SF Film* (J.P. Telotte) 173
Höglund’s *The American Imperial Gothic* (Liz Gumm) 176
Hottois’s *Généalogies Philosophique, Politique et Imaginaire de la Technoscience* (Annabelle Dolidon) 178
Londero’s *Futuro Esquecido: A Recepção da Ficção Cyberpunk na América Latina* (Pedro Groppo) 181
Raulerson’s *Singularities: Technoculture, Transhumanism, and Science Fiction in the 21st Century* (Veronica Hollinger) 182
Smith’s *Conversations with William Gibson* (Graham J. Murphy) 185
Telotte’s *Science Fiction TV* (Brooks Landon) 187
Vint’s *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Grace L. Dillon) 191
Books Received 193

NOTES AND CORRESPONDENCE
Israel SF Anthology (Sheldon Teitelbaum) 197

CONTINUED OVERLEAF
Irradiating the Object and SF/F Now (Chris Pak) .................. 197
Call for Papers: SF and the Subject of South Asia (Joan Gordon) ........ 202
Notes on Contributors ........................................ 204

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Science Fiction and Social Criticism in Morocco of the 1970s: Muḥammad `Azīz Laḥbābī’s The Elixir of Life

Near the end of the main narrative of ‘Ikṣīr al-Ḥayāt [The Elixir of Life, 1974], the science-fiction novel by Moroccan professor Muḥammad `Azīz Laḥbābī, the invention of an immortality elixir has thrown Moroccan society into total chaos.1 Its impoverished protagonist Ḥamīd hopes that his classmate and would-be love interest will help him obtain food—but she mocks his request for help:

He was no longer able to look at her face: it had grown huge and her red, burning eyes stuck out, as if Ḥamīd was in front of a funhouse mirror, where we see our faces elongated in the form of a knife, or squared and thick like a jar. “How loathsome this damned woman has become!” (95)

She mocks him because she belongs to the upper classes and he to the lower; and the elixir, rather than leveling class distinctions, has exacerbated them.

Laḥbābī’s novel uses the sf strategy of cognitive estrangement to hold a distorted mirror up to the Morocco of the early 1970s. The effect of this reflection is to show how the postcolonial Moroccan state, which retained its claim to be the heir of the liberal, democratic, nationalist revolution that freed Morocco from colonial authority in 1956, has become two decades later a place where class mobility is so limited that even prison is preferable to life in poverty. This pointed political criticism is wrapped in two layers of estrangement, enabling Laḥbābī to criticize his society while remaining insulated from the potentially brutal consequences of a direct challenge.

1. Importance and structure of the text. Readers trying to remain current with the vast and diverse array of modern Anglo-American sf may well wonder why an obscure novel by an obscure novelist from a country entirely peripheral to the development of sf may be worth examining. The Elixir of Life has much to offer critics of the genre: it is a foundational text in Arabic-language sf, one of the first to present itself explicitly as al-ʿilm al-khayālī, then a neologism meaning “imaginative science” and now the standard term for the genre (Cowan 310, 744). Its publication coincides with a more rigorous approach to sf criticism that integrates science fiction into developments in the general discourse of literary criticism. The novel provides examples of many of the tropes identified by the first wave of sf critics; furthermore, as scholars begin to integrate the fast-growing and diverse body of work that is twenty-first-century Arabic sf into English-language criticism, a careful analysis of this foundational text will prove useful.

Laḥbābī (1922-93) was a professor of philosophy, educated at the Sorbonne and in residence at Muhammad V University in Rabat. He is best known as a
philosopher whose work took an anthropological approach to Islamic thought, but he also wrote literary fiction. He was one of the founders of the Union of Arab Writers of the Maghreb and the director of the influential review 'Afāq [Horizons]; he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987 (Craig 20). Lahbābī published his first novel in 1967: Jīl al-Zamā' [Generation of Thirst] sets all but one of its chapters inside the office of the sort of liberal, secular intellectual who dominates the Arabic-language Moroccan novels of the 1960s. It is in no way science fiction; rather, it is firmly grounded in the social-realist tradition and the desire to promote positive social change that the critic Ahmed al-Madini argues characterizes Moroccan literary and critical discourse of the time (al-Madini 198). Its plot traces the intellectual's dawning awareness that the future belongs to less academic and more active people; this can be read as a caustic critique of the pretensions and weakness of the Moroccan intellectual class (Campbell 111-13).

The Elixir of Life was published seven years later. Its first section centers on 'Idrīs, a poor, elderly, pious, and conservative carpenter who lives in an impoverished district in Rabat. His friend alerts him to the news that scientists have developed the titular elixir, which bestows immortality upon its recipients. The elixir is never present in the text, which never explains where the elixir was discovered and omits any meaningful details about it. 'Idrīs angrily rejects the idea, believing that it undermines the moral and economic underpinnings of society; it is not “natural” for Muslims not to die. His skepticism seems justified: the immediate consequences of the news of the elixir are rioting, looting, hoarding, price-gouging, and mass hunger. All of this is driven by class resentment, as the poor are unanimously convinced that the elixir will be reserved for the elites, despite the government’s protestations to the contrary.

The center of the action shifts to 'Idrīs's son Hamīd, an enlightened medical student and thus something of a stock character in Arabic-language Moroccan novels of the epoch. Social unrest has reduced him to near-starvation. Hamīd persuades his father to end his standoff with local militia who want to take him off to be injected with the elixir by convincing the militia to let 'Idrīs join other family members in the country. He then makes his way to the wealthy quarter, where he intends to persuade his female classmate to purchase his medical textbooks so he can buy food. This woman mockingly rejects both his offer and his romantic pursuit of her: now that she is immortal, she has no need to study in pursuit of a trade and she has become engaged to a man of her own class. On his way back, police detain Hamīd because he does not belong in that neighborhood and, though he explains himself, they decide to take him in and have him injected with the elixir. But a more pressing crisis intervenes and Hamīd is allowed to return home, where he perishes from hunger.

The novel's brief final section is set off from the rest of the text and entitled "Mudhakirāt mā ba'da al-Mawt" or "Post-Death Reports." Hamīd is still in his house, and for the most part does not find death all that unpleasant. He conceives the idea of somehow communicating to his brother,
a literature professor, about the post-death world, but comes to the conclusion that the elixir will not solve the problems of the poor. He persuades angels to help him in this task, but while the perhaps hallucinatory angels are willing to communicate with the living world, they are unable to do so. The novel ends with a hūrī coming to take him to paradise.

2. SF and literature in Arabic. Reuven Snir argues that for complex cultural reasons including but not limited to the legacy of colonialism, critics of Arabic literature have tended, and still tend, to inflate vastly the value and influence of formal literary fiction while ignoring or even disdaining the considerable production of and interest in genre fiction in the Arab-speaking world. Snir writes: “Even when they have significant aesthetic qualities, such works tend to go unnoticed or their importance is minimized, which only reinforces the basic dismissive attitude toward popular literature and its writers” (265) Snir traces criticism of Arabic-language sf back only to 1980 and he argues that Arabic sf critics often conflate sf and fantasy literature. While there are many and various examples of tales of the fantastic in classical Arabic literature, true sf in Arabic, for Snir, arose for the most part as a result of the influence of Western sf in translation during the 1970s. The appearance of translations dovetailed with the moon landings and televised Western sf programs to generate enthusiasm for local production in Arabic of science fiction by Arabs beginning in the early- to mid-1980s (270). Yet Snir also makes the following argument:

Unlike in the West, Arabic SF in general has as yet [in 2000] not generated any serious inquiry into the nature of contemporary social reality and most of the writers, instead of using this genre as “medium for social comment,” are still too prone to serve amusement or didactic aims. (280)

The Elixir of Life refutes both this specific and Snir’s more general argument about native production of sf not beginning until the 1980s: Laḥbābī’s novel is clearly sf, is clearly intentionally framed as such, and it both undertakes an inquiry into contemporary social reality and uses the genre as a medium for social comment.

Ada Barbaro, in her recent monograph on Arabic sf and fantasy, traces its emergence further back. In an English-language translation of an interview summarizing her work, she argues that:

Arabic sci fi comes in a relationship to the production in English. But we have to open a post-colonial discourse here: the Sci-Fi in English comes with industrial development, which comes late in the Arab countries. Not to mention that the “novel” arrives late in these countries, being an imported literary form. We can say that the [sic] sci fi in Arabic was born in the ’50s, more or less. (MLYNXQUALEY, paragraph 2)

Barbaro then goes on to contextualize the development of Arabic sf by referencing the very rich and long tradition of tales of the fantastic in Arabic literature (see Jayyusi 21-26), including ʿajāʿib or “mirabilia,” travelogues, tales of the animal world, and the Sindibad journeys and other fantastic tales from the 1001 Nights. Barbaro mentions what could be considered the world’s
first proto-fantasy/sf novel, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* [Alive, Son of Awake], published in the early twelfth century in Moorish Andalusia by the philosopher Ibn Tufayl, who wrote it as a thought experiment (Nasr and Leamon 316) aimed at demonstrating the naturalness of Islam. But it also contains a critique of human society in the section in which a child, raised by animals away from humanity, is brought to the city and considers urban culture from a naive point of view. This critique places it firmly in the discourse of utopian fiction, if not precisely utopian *science* fiction: for Barbara, therein lies the difference.5

The *Elixir of Life*, however, is arguably science fiction, as it claims to be, and neither proto-science fiction such as *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* nor the fantasy of tales such as those found in the *1001 Nights*. In Darko Suvin’s familiar construction, sf is “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (*Metamorphoses* 7-8). Estrangement is a form of defamiliarization that confronts a set normative system with a point of view implying a new set of norms, or, in the words of Ernst Bloch, one of Suvin’s chief influences, “providing a shocking and distancing mirror above the all too familiar reality” (Bloch qtd. in Suvin, *Positions* 34). Science fiction differs from other estranged genres in that the defamiliarizing element is cognitively based. Suvin writes that cognition both reflects reality and reflects upon it: it “implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author’s environment” (*Metamorphoses* 10). In a fantasy such as the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, the flying carpet or magic elixir is clearly inimical to the empirical world and its laws—in Suvin’s words, fantasy is *anticognitive*. Arab sf critic ‘Isām ‘Asāqala makes use of Suvin’s cognitive estrangement in his comprehensive analysis of Arabic sf, arguing that one of its main functions is to critique contemporary society (‘Asāqala 80-82).

3. SF in *The Elixir of Life*. In Lahbābi’s novel, the elixir itself, though it remains entirely offstage, is clearly framed as a plausible scientific development rather than something mystical and anticognitive, although ‘Idris, the subject of the novel’s first section, clearly thinks in such premodern terms. He does not like to read the newspapers because he believes it will make him a “victim of deviation [al-ńska’udha]” (19), and his reaction to the news, and to everything else, is to retreat into pious formulae. But his friend clarifies that *al-‘ilm*, science, has invented, *ikhtara’a*, the elixir; and while *‘ilm* can denote both traditional Islamic knowledge and modern science, the context of *ikhtara’a* makes it clear that the *‘ilm* in this novel is modern science, just as it is in *al-‘ilm al-khayālī*. ‘Idris later reads the newspaper, finds out both that “humanity [al-‘insāniya] has realized the most wonderful invention [al-ikhtīrāمكان],” and that “the fate of humanity has been created in the laboratory [al-makhbar],” (23) which repeats “humanity” and situates it together with the modern words for “invention” and “laboratory” in order to further clarify that the elixir is not something out of the voyages of Sindibad but rather a
cognitively plausible development, albeit one in clear opposition to ‘Idris’s faith and traditional mindset.

By the time Hamid enters the narrative, Moroccan society has fallen completely to pieces, but even with rioters outside Hamid frames the elixir as scientific: “The scientists [‘ulamā’] are not responsible for our chaos and disorder…. [W]e’re the ones who can’t use their inventions and discoveries [ikṭiṣḥāfāt] very well” (41). Everything else about the elixir—who created it, what it is made from, whether it provides eternal youth and health or the fate of Tithonus—is handwaved by Laḥbābī. But the elixir, the novum in this sf story, is clearly intended to decenter us while remaining part of a cognitively plausible reality. For Suvin, the introduction of only one novum marks a work of sf as being at a lower stage of development. But this is, after all, one of the first works of Moroccan science fiction and, as we will see, there is both detail and nuance in the novel’s presentation of life and death.

Moroccan science fiction in Arabic is a branch of the Arabic-language Moroccan novel, whose preoccupation with critiquing and improving society dovetails with what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. states is sf’s concern with “imagining progressive alternatives to the status quo, often implying critiques of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends” (113). Csicsery-Ronay argues that (Anglo-American, mostly) sf of the 1960s had a “utopian charge” to change the world, one that emphasized class consciousness. And while one might well imagine counterexamples to this concern in Anglo-American sf, or assert that by 1973 that genre had moved on to a period of more formal experimentation or exploration of consciousness (Broderick 51-52), The Elixir of Life is undeniably a class-based critique of Moroccan society of its day, one that holds a distorting mirror up to its stratified society and finds it wanting.

A review of Moroccan history of the period shows that conditions had been deteriorating for years. The revolution that led to independence from France in 1956 led to a postcolonial state that elected liberal parliaments under King Muhammad V (Penneil 159-62). By the early 1960s, however, power had been concentrated in the hands of Muhammad’s successor Hassan II, who was famously hostile to the educated classes, having at one point responded to civil unrest among students by saying publicly that “There is no danger for the state as grave as that of the so-called intellectual” (Penneil 323). Poor harvests and poor planning led to economic stagnation and political repression; the 1970s were known in Morocco as les années de plomb or “the years of lead,” as economic growth entirely failed to keep up with population growth. Almost anyone who dared protest was carefully watched by the network of informers that were the country’s real growth industry, and then taken away to desert prisons. Even well-known intellectual figures were subject to this sort of treatment. The Francophone novelist Abdellatif Laabī, editor of ‘Āṣāq’s sister review Souffles, began introducing politics into the journal: in 1972, Hassan II threw him into prison without trial, where he remained until 1980 (Gontard 19-20).
4. The Élite and the Preterite. Barbaro, in her brief analysis of *The Elixir of Life*, stresses the novel’s emphasis on social criticism, arguing that it asks what will happen to a society riven by class conflict when the elixir is discovered? (Barbaro 155-56) She cites as her source for this argument the work of the critic Bū Shaʿīb al-Sāwari, who frames his analysis of Lahbābī’s novel in terms of class conflict. For Sāwari, *The Elixir of Life* provides the answer to the question it poses: the gap between the rich and the poor will widen, not shrink. He continues:

SF uncovers, by means of the idea of the elixir, the endeavors of two social groups differing by class ... in the framework of a discursive style based on clashes and confrontation between two contradictory ideas, in a language that reveals the prevailing contradictions in the society by means of conflicting dualities. (al-Sāwari 63)

And he is correct. *The Elixir of Life* uses conflicting dualities to ground a larger and more abstract political critique. But neither Barbaro, whose book is a general survey and only touches briefly on the novel, nor Sāwari, who uses *The Elixir of Life* as one of three primary sources in a relatively short article whose thesis addresses general trends in Arabic-language Moroccan sf, engages much with the language the text uses to depict these conflicting dualities. A close reading of Lahbābī’s novel enables us not only to understand how he accomplishes this, but also to go beyond the overt political criticism; a folktale Lahbabi places within the text enables us to more fully understand the importance of the novel’s first and last sections.

In the Morocco of *The Elixir of Life*, police trucks with loudspeakers enter ‘Idrīs’s neighborhood and announce that

By order of the government, the elixir in question has been nationalized [‘a‘mīm]. The allotments [al-ḥisas] will be distributed, equally, to the entire population. The allotments will be distributed equally; equally, in special offices and at specific times that will be announced in due time [fi ‘ibbānim]. (31)

The vocabulary is that of the sort of Arab socialism to which the Moroccan regime paid lip service throughout the period leading up to the years of lead. Yet the people are immediately skeptical, especially of “in due time” and the repetition of “equally.” As one of ‘Idrīs’s neighbors says:

In proper Arabic, that means they’ll begin with taking care of the desires of the élite [al-khāṣṣ] ... and if anything’s left, it’ll be distributed to the[ir] favorites among the people [al-‘āmma]. And for the others, the deluge! Nothing for the likes of us! We’re always the forgotten. (31)

The words khāṣṣa and ‘āmma are the historical Arabic terms for the élite and the common (Cowan 280, 751), the fortunate and the preterite, the ‘a’yān and the sha‘b, the rich and the poor—the classes that existed in the quasi-feudalism of precolonial times and still exist today in the quasi-modern postcolonial societies. The moment the elixir is announced is the instant the people formulate it in terms of class conflict. And class conflict is the order of the day: as soon as people learn about the elixir, they stop working, and this
disrupts the food distribution network to the extent that Hamïd has to sell his best djellaba for a piece of melon rind. (42)

When the militia captain expresses astonishment that Hamïd does not have a card for a food ration, Hamïd counters with a folktale:

An elderly king was unable to chew the [pastry] shell of the dessert [al-ḥalwa] known as kuʿb al-ghazâl, but it sufficed him to gulp down the almond paste inside. One day, he heard shouting from beyond the gates of the palace.... [H]is vizier said, “That, my lord, is the people [al-shaʿb] demanding bread, for hunger has begun to spread.” The king pondered this, then said, “O vizier, go and advise them to eat the shells of kuʿb al-ghazâl.” He [the vizier] responded: “Kuʿb al-ghazâl is a dessert that only the élite [al-ʿaʿyān] consume, at holidays, and of course they eat the shells.” (69)

The evocation of Marie Antoinette and a slightly different manifestation of class consciousness should be evident here. But the vocabulary is the same: khâṣṣaʿ/ʿal-ʿamāma and ʿaʿyân/shaʿb denote the same pair of opposites. The Elixir of Life holds its distorting mirror to the Morocco of the years of lead, and what it reflects on is that the difference is not so much between the two different sorts of ʾilm or (scientific) knowledge, but rather between the two classes that have always been at war.

When Hamïd goes to the quarter of the khâṣṣa to try to sell his medical books, he notes how calm that quarter is: “it’s protected by regular soldiers.... [I]ts population isn’t protesting because they’re the ʿansâr of the elixir, and their quarter has yet to know hunger, and won’t know it” (79). ʿAnsâr literally means “helpers” or “allies.”8 To a Moroccan, however, this would be very reminiscent of the Naṣrâni or Christians, the word used to denote the French occupiers of Morocco, many of whom retained their status among the Moroccan élite after the revolution.9

As Hamïd approaches his classmate’s house, he reflects further: “The authorities respect and protect them, for the sake of money.... [Power] always strives to raise up the people of quality [ʿabnāʾ al-ʿāʾilât], those with material [mâddâl] power over those with spiritual [maʾnawi]” (80). This time the opposition is between the material and spiritual worlds. This is in no way Marxist, but in traditional Islamic culture moral authority always lies with the spiritual over the material: the introduction of the novum in the form of the elixir reflects a Moroccan society that has sided against righteousness. Hamïd’s classmate, whom he has been tutoring because he is a better student, turns down his offer of books for food.10 She “cuts him off, coldly”:

What do I need with books? With the triumph of the elixir, medicine’s time has ended. For a short and temporary period, our countries will need a small number of doctors for the poor neighborhoods, and the countryside—and veterinarians, of course. On that note, what do you plan to do? Practice carpentry, like your father? Medicine has ended, and just at the right time, since the medical school has become like the Jmaa el Fna in Marrakech, without dignity, where the rabble, and the damaged, and the foundlings set up chairs alongside the people of quality. (91)
Regrettably, the novel concludes before we are able to find out if this woman ends up sharing Marie Antoinette’s fate, but the class conflict is evident here: the Moroccan society reflected in the mirror distorted by the elixir may on some level pay lip service to social equality, but it is in fact a society pervaded by the exploitation of the rabble by the quality.

She tries to mollify him by telling him that while he is not one of the ‘abnā’ al-‘ā‘ilāt, another gloss on khāsxa, he is “graced with [tatahalla bi] some of their attributes... My family and I consider you one of the abnormals/deviants [al-shawādhdh], so we don’t oppose inviting you in for cards or chess” (92). The choice of games and of verbs reflects and distorts the story of the king and his ku‘b al-ghazāl, as the verb tahallā shares its root with al-halwā, “dessert.” She is literally saying that Hamīd is “sweetened with” the attributes of the elite, right before she magnifies the class conflict by singling him out as deviant, the word of which Hamīd’s father, ‘Idrīs, did not want to be a victim, and a word from which a common homophobic slur is derived (Cowan 167, 539).

5. Politics and reaction. But in fact, Hamīd is indeed a deviant in a binary society. The police who detain him as he angrily runs away from her house find his medical books and demeanor so abnormal that they are unable to speak: “The two cops looked at the books. The two cops looked at the books and at Hamīd, then one cop looked at the other, without saying a word, then signaled to Hamīd to collect the books” (104). They take Hamīd with them but let him go when a crisis intervenes, urging him to take care of himself. When he returns to his neighborhood and observes the crowds of demonstrators and counter-demonstrators, all so faint from hunger that they can no longer fight physically, he starts to shout slogans against the elixir and then understands his liminal position:

The elixir is a scientific [‘ilmī] discovery, and science only battles ignorance and stupidity. The elixir is one of the miracles of human thought, and the people of quality like [his classmate] had no hand in its discovery. Therefore, I’m exemplifying reaction [al-ra‘īya] that fears the progress of culture and the growth of science. (113)

The “reaction” here is not the chemical but the political sort, as in “reactionary,” so Hamīd is trying to decouple the opposition between science and tradition from the class conflict. The argument is inchoate because Hamīd is starving to death: he crosses the street to join the pro-elixir demonstrators, but he is unable to do much more than shout a few slogans before going home, catching his reflection in a mirror, refusing to believe it reflects reality, then smashing the mirror. The text then breaks for the “Post-Death Reports” section. The reality reflected by the elixir is one where class conflict has always already been a class war; Hamīd, as someone who looks ‘āmm but thinks and sounds khāṣṣ, causes a glitch in the system.

And this is the essence of both the critique and the implicit utopia beyond the critique. A Morocco that at the very least allowed enough class mobility for the sons of carpenters to become doctors would be one where rank was
determined by more than just birth; the effect of the elixir is not to level society by making everyone immortal but, rather, as Sawari argues, to exacerbate the already existing class conflict. *The Elixir of Life*, by holding Morocco up to the mirror of a potential utopia, reveals the dystopia of intractable class conflict that structures the actual society.

Moreover, the novel does this within the context of an imagined Morocco distorted by the *novum* of the elixir; and this is extremely important from a political point of view. Writers in the West may well have to contend with the capitalist realities of the publishing industry, but they also have political and legal guarantees of freedom of speech; in the Morocco of the years of lead—and even today throughout the Arabic-speaking world—this is not at all the case. Were Lahbabi to have written a novel about an actual Morocco that directly described the nepotism, exploitation, and class conflict that structured its society, he might well have shared prison and torture with his colleague Laabi. But by using the distorting mirror of cognitive estrangement, he can make his point while still retaining enough plausible deniability to avoid too much scrutiny.

Wrapping a political critique in an implausible or distorted situation is a common tactic in Arabic-language Moroccan novels of the 1970s: Muḥammad ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Tāziʾs *The Towers of the City* (1978), for example, uses the device of a man who has returned from the dead after hanging himself to describe the conditions for political prisoners. The real question here is why it took sf so long to catch on in Arabic literature, given its usefulness for political critique in and of repressive societies. There are probably multiple answers, including but not limited to the role of magazines and fandom in generating momentum for sf in the US and Britain, as well as the fact of technological development as an external rather than internal force in Arabic-speaking countries.

6. Fantasy and plausible deniability. Now that we have considered the reflection on class conflict that occupies the bulk of the text of *The Elixir of Life*, we must heed the example of the king in the folktale and consider the chewier shell in which Lahbābi wraps this analysis. Before focussing on ʿIdrīs, the novel opens with a brief musing on the inevitability and inscrutability of death. This serves to emphasize the estrangement when the elixir is introduced; the effect of this estrangement is to render a Morocco with access to immortality all the more unfamiliar. There is a political as well as literary strategy to this emphasis, in that it provides plausible deniability against censors who might argue that Lahbābi is critiquing the real Morocco—which of course he is. The musings on death take as their example the perspective of one of the ʿamm:

*We don’t know anything about [death], any more than ʿAbd al-Qādir, who’s worked at the airport for a quarter of a century, presenting to the travellers the stairway to climb up into the airplane or to come down from it, but who knows nothing about the inside of the airplane. (12-13)*
A clearer depiction of the class barriers could hardly be imagined; and the conflict is spatialized in the same way as the difference between neighborhoods, only this time it is not armed police but rather internalized self-regulation that keeps the 'āmm out of the space reserved for the khāss. Right from the start, even before its novum is introduced, *The Elixir of Life* foregrounds the class conflict.

But in the novel’s coda, the “Post-Death Reports” section, Laḥbābī’s text goes beyond what Suvin considers a “lower” stage of development characterized by the introduction of only one new factor. Sawari, in his analysis of *The Elixir of Life*, dismisses the “Post-Death Reports” section as “not well-developed” (Sawari 60), while Barbaro does not address this coda at all. But while it appears superficially to have little to do with the more direct social criticism of the novel’s midsection, it is in fact a much more pointed and well-developed critique than Sawari gives it credit for.

At the end of the main text, the starving and delirious Ḥamīd returns home, confronts himself in the mirror, believes it does not reflect reality, and smashes it. The text presents readers with a few paragraphs of discontinuity on a separate page—bodies are piling up in the streets; no coffins can be made because nails are imported—before the beginning of the coda in which the dead Ḥamīd reflects on existence. Clearly, the presence of a ghost appears to take *The Elixir of Life* from sf to fantasy, but it must be noted that there is no evidence at all other than Ḥamīd’s perspective—that of a starving, delirious man—that he is actually dead rather than just hallucinating. To the typical Moroccan, this is not a plausible presentation of the afterlife (Esposito, I: 60-64) and we can therefore continue to read the novel as sf.¹³

Ḥamīd thinks he is dead, and what he immediately notices about the “afterlife” is that there is no need or desire; he is not hungry anymore. But his thoughts immediately shift in a very peculiar direction. He now understands why so many citizens [muwātiniyyūn] come to prefer prison to “what is called ‘free’ life”:

> It’s true, there’s always that poor soul, Lost son of Lost, whose mother is the alley and whose father is the long, curving street, who finds brothers in despair. He feels something like, he’s got a number special [khāss] to him, a personal number that sets him off from the rest.... [H]e feels shelter from the heat and the cold, and guaranteed food, organized meals.” (122)

This is social criticism even more pointed than that in the main section of the novel. Laḥbābī uses the word muwātiniyyūn to describe what are essentially political prisoners, people who are protesting against the authoritarian regime. But in what was then quite recent Moroccan history, the wataniyyūn, the “nationalists,” which even someone unfamiliar with Arabic can see is almost exactly the same word minus the grammatical prefix (Cowan 1265), were the sloganeers and freedom fighters who organized against the colonial occupiers and helped free Morocco from colonialism. Many of the novels of the 1960s address the direct experiences of wataniyyūn; some have extended scenes in French colonial prison wards, in which the wataniyyūn, many of whom are from very khāss families, reinforce one another’s desire for a free Morocco.¹⁴
Labbābī could have chosen any number of words for the prisoners he describes, but muwātīniyyūn makes it clear that the society the waṭanīyyūn helped to liberate is now one where the `āmm are so excluded from even basic needs that prison life, with its regular meals, does not seem any worse than starving in the streets—you get a number, and if that is the only way you get to be khāṣṣ, well, at least you are warm and dry.

This is a very pointed critique, and were it expressed directly, one that could have resulted in Labbābī’s being taken from his comfortable life as chair of the philosophy department at Muhammad V University by Muhammad V’s son and thrown into the next cell over from Abdellatif Laâbi. Social criticism has real consequences in a postcolonial dictatorship, ones that simply do not pertain in the West. And this, more than anything, explains why this section of The Elixir of Life is set off from the rest and is perhaps a little harder to masticate. Showing social unrest as a consequence of the introduction of the novum of the elixir is a plausible extrapolation; talking about political prisoners and the regime’s basic failures is quite another. We may imagine Labbābī weighing the risk of direct political critique over the value of remaining true to the then only just emerging academic conventions of a genre that was in any case totally unfamiliar to the vast majority of Moroccans. Perhaps he felt that discretion in the form of placing his critique within a clearly anticognitive section was, ultimately, the option that would allow him to continue to write.

In the section titled “Post-Death Reports,” Hamīd is convinced of the need to report on the conditions of what he thinks of as the afterlife. The section grows progressively more hallucinatory as Hamīd tries to persuade some angels to help him send a message to his brother, a literature professor at Muhammad V University. We never see or hear these angels—the passage is narrated at second hand through Hamīd’s weirdly lucid perspective—but the conclusion Hamīd comes to is that angels do not understand the fundamental human need for conflict and struggle. Humans need struggle; they are inherently given to dividing into classes and this leads to scientific progress. For the critic Hamīd Lahmidānī, this point is where The Elixir of Life fails:

The novel does not reveal the deep, concealed reasons behind the problems found in society; this is because it tries to interpret these problems as springing from absent givens that reduce all the ills of society to the natural corruption of humanity... and the eternal nature of the poor... It’s superficial, because it treats the class conflict in society without addressing its material causes. (217-18)

And Lahmidānī’s critique is certainly valid: in the end, The Elixir of Life pulls its punch by making the root cause of the conflict human nature rather than the material exploitation of one class by another. But at the same time, we should give credit to Labbābī not only for bringing sf to the Arabic-language Moroccan novel, but also for putting his privileged position at risk to draw attention to the unfair role of privilege in his society. If his mirror has a few flaws, so be it; The Elixir of Life offered Moroccan readers a new and compelling reflection on their society.
Whether Arabic sf can decenteer us as readers and critics of Western sf is a worthy question as well. Even forty years after Lahbabī’s novel, Arabic sf has yet to reach the full complexity of form and content that already characterized Western sf in the 1970s. This may be a result of the privileging by critics within the Arab-speaking world of “serious” literature over genre fiction. It may also be a result of the conditions of production of literature in that world. Even the most widely lauded authors of serious fiction in Arabic need to keep their day jobs, as nobody can support themselves entirely by writing: the absence of the profit motive, when combined with critical disdain, may deter potential authors from investing time and energy into creating fully-realized Arabic sf.

Yet the conditions of production of political discourse in that world make sf an ideal choice for a novelist wishing to maintain sufficient plausible deniability to stay out of prison. To point at a text and be able to say that it is just a thought experiment about what life might be like in, say, the distant future, and that any censor inferring criticism of the regime in power is clearly missing the most basic elements of the text, is a powerful tool in repressive societies. Given the wild popularity of Western sf films and television programs dubbed into Arabic, it stands to reason that the genre will continue to develop. Moreover, in spite of the lack of attention paid to Arabic sf by critics, it is also likely that works heretofore ignored may prove, like The Elixir of Life, to have more to recommend them than might at first meet the eye.

NOTES

1. Like nearly all Arabic-language and even Francophone Moroccan literature from before the mid-1980s, it is not available in English translation. All translations in this article are mine.

2. See the entry on “Mohammed Aziz Lahbabī” in the online Encyclopedia Britannica. Online. 5 Oct. 2014.

3. See, for example, Muhammad bin al-Tahāmi’s Dahāyā Hubb [A Victim of Love, 1973], in which the eponymous victim’s status as a medical student earns him special treatment from the legal system.

4. Mudhakkirāt is a borrowing from French, the colonial language of Morocco, where mémoires is the word for the official report of a diplomatic or scientific body. The Arabic word is a close cognate to dhikriyat, “memories” (see Cowan 359).

5. Hayy ibn Yaqzān was translated into English in 1686, where it served as a primary source for Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) (Glasse 202). So while Thomas More’s Utopia (1516) significantly predates Ibn Tufayl’s translation into Latin, the exchange of information and culture from Arabic to Latin had been going on for centuries, making it unlikely that More, a well-educated theologian, would have been unaware of the story. This in turn calls into question the statement in Tom Moylan’s excellent analysis of Utopian sf that Utopia is “the source of the genre in history [and] in form,” as well as in title (Moylan 33).

6. Morocco was liberated from Spain as well, although the Spanish role in colonial Morocco was very small.

7. See, for example, al-Tāzi’s novel, ‘Abraj al-Madīna [The Towers of the City, 1978], which describes in detail the surveillance imposed on a would-be activist and the conditions to which he is subjected in prison.
8. In the standard narrative of the founding of Islam, Muhammad and his followers decamped from Mecca to the city of Yathrib (later, Medina), where the people of that town succored the Muslims and were thereafter known as the 'Anṣār. See Houtsma et al., vol. 1, 357-58.

9. That is, “Nazarenes.” Arabic words are structured by a (usually three-letter) root that determines meaning. Words with the same root have similar meanings; e.g., muwāṭtiniyîn and waṭaniyîn both share the w-t-n root, which has the connotation of “homeland” or “nation.” Though “Nasrani” is ultimately a borrowing from French, a native speaker of Arabic would recognize from its root n-s-r a connection with ‘Anṣār.

10. She is never named in the text, but is referred to only as ‘ānîsa (“Miss”) or “the Hajj’s Daughter.”

11. The Jmaa el Fna is the large open square in the center of Marrakech, well-known even in 1974 as a center for tourism: storytellers, fortune-tellers, and mountebanks set up chairs under umbrellas to entertain and fleece both tourists and locals.


13. This is true at least from the perspective of the orthodox Malikī Sunnism that is the official discourse in Morocco. Folk Islam admits the presence of the barzakh or period between death and resurrection, but Hamid is here portrayed more like a European ghost.

14. The most widely known and influential of these is Ghallāb’s novel (see Campbell 95-96).

WORKS CITED


This paper addresses the Moroccan science-fiction novel, ‘Iksīr al-‘ayāt [The Elixir of Life, 1974] by Muhammad ‘Azīz Lāhibbī from the perspective of the efficacy of sf’s cognitive estrangement in providing a class-based and highly charged political critique in and of a repressive society with little or no class mobility. The novel depicts a Morocco fallen into chaos after the introduction of a (never-seen) immortality elixir. A young, impoverished medical student tries to obtain food in the wake of massive disruption caused by the poor’s belief that the elixir will be reserved for the rich. His inability to leverage his educated status over his low birth provides a caustic critique of Moroccan society. The wrapping of this critique in two layers of displacement enables Lāhibbī to undertake this critique while remaining insulated from the very real consequences of making it directly.