Artificial Intelligence (AI), Gender and Identity Issues: Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī's Novel *'Araq al-ālihah* (2005/2008)*

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Modern literature of Yemen is a relatively new discovery to Western scholarship. That is particularly true as far as fiction is concerned, especially in the literary genre of the novel. Nonetheless, Yemeni novels are being acclaimed more and more at home and worldwide. Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī is included among the most acclaimed novelists. Although he has been living in France for many years, he has never forgotten his native country and its people, neither in his genuinely literary works nor in other texts. Besides this, he is an intellectual in the broader sense of the term, since not only is he a man of letters, but he is also a scientist and academic. In his works as a novelist, he manages to mingle these two facets, which are fundamental in his life, as it happens in 'Araq al-ālihah, *with its interesting mixture of science fiction and gender/identity issues.*

When one thinks of science-fiction books and movies produced in the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is extremely easy to find an incredibly rich and extensive critical literature on these topics. When, however, one looks at the Arab world, the situation is quite different, even though things have been changing steadily and swiftly in recent years. A good deal of creative and academic texts have indeed been published in the field of Arabic *ḫayāl 'ilmī* – this is the most widely used definition for science fiction (SF) in *al-'arabiyyah*[1] –

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[1] A. Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, presentazione di Isabella Camera d'Afflitto, Carocci editore, Roma 2013, pp. 21 ff.

which deserve to be fully analyzed, since they introduce both science-fiction fans and Arabic literature students to interesting and astonishing universes where authors are doing their best to represent their own society in a new and original way.

Truth be told, science fiction is one of the most intriguing genres, which is imposing massively on the Arabic literary scene these days. Despite the probable link existing between Arabic and Western SF, with the latter having perhaps influenced the former through its many examples so famous worldwide, in some scholars' opinion its roots could be searched for in masterpieces of Arabic culture, both Islamic and non-Islamic[2]. In fact, some researchers maintain that some of these have had an impressive effect on Occidental SF, thus paving the way to its very birth and development[3]. Regarding those Arabic works which may have features in common with science fiction, some belong to the *Nahḍah* period, such as *Ġābat al-ḥaqq* (The Forest of Truth, or The Forest of Justice, 1865), the «allegorical protonovel»[4] written by the celebrated Faransīs Fatḥallāh al-Marrāš (1836-1873) from Aleppo, and *al-Dīn wa 'l-'ilm wa 'l-māl aw al-Mudun al-ṯalāṯ* (Religion, Science and Money or The Three Cities, 1903) by the equally famous Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874-1922). All these texts are relevant, either in the philosophical or in the literary fields from multiple viewpoints[5]. As far as the present discourse is concerned, for instance, it is useful to underline at least the fact that they have been considered as utopias[6] and that they can say something helpful to those who aim at understanding contemporary Arabic literary activity. Arabic literature has of course produced many other utopias[7], but the works

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[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 27 ff.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 32 fn. 44. In particular, an interesting thesis has been pushed forward, on the basis of which *Alf laylah wa laylah* (One Thousand and One Nights) and *Risālat al-ġufrān* (The Epistle of Forgiveness, 1032) by Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (973-1057) have inspired not only the birth of Arabic SF, but also the advent of world science fiction as a whole. See, e.g., Mahā Maẓlūm, *Bināʼ riwāyat al-ḫayāl al-'ilmī fī 'l-adab al-miṣrī al-mu'āṣir*, Dār al-Kutub wa 'l-Waṯā'iq al-Qawmiyyah, al-Qāhirah 2001, pp. 14-19.

[4] Rasheed El-Enany, *Arab Representations of the Occident. East-West encounters in Arabic fiction*, Routledge, London and New York 2006, p. 22.

[5] For an introduction to and a general overview on both al-Marrāš and Anṭūn, see, for instance, the pivotal and evergreen study: Mārūn 'Abbūd, *Ruwwād al-nahḍah al-ḥadīṯah*, Dār al-Ṯaqāfah, Bayrūt 1977 (new edition), pp. 122-137, 260-265 (respectively).

[6] A. Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, cit., pp. 42-54. Specifically on Anṭūn's novel, see L.-W. Deheuvels, Le livre des trois cités *de Faraḥ Anṭūn: une utopie au coeur de la littérature arabe moderne*, in "Arabica", XLVI, III-IV (1999), pp. 402-434; ID., *Espace du conte et territoire de l'utopie: des* Mille et une nuits à la Ville du bonheur *de Muṣṭafà Luṭfi al-Manfalūṭī. Actes du colloque du CARMA*, in Les Mille et une nuits *en partage. Sous la direction d'A. Chraïbi*, Sinbad-Actes Sud, Paris 2004, pp. 350-364. See also P. Viviani, *Un maestro arabo del Novecento. Faraḥ Anṭūn*, Jouvence, Roma 2004, pp. 131-134.

[7] It is also significant here to add that Faraḥ Anṭūn wrote other works of fiction, which might be reckoned likewise. They are *Ūrūšalīm al-Ǧadīdah aw Fatḥ al-'arab Bayt al-Maqdis* (The New Jerusalem or How the Arabs Captured the Holy City, 1904) and *al-'Ālam al-Ǧadīd aw Maryam qabl al-tawbah* (The New World or Maryam before her Repentance, 1906-1908), but also *al-Transvaal: ẓālimah am maẓlūmah?* (Transvaal: Oppresser or Oppressed?, 1899-1900). Apart from few articles on them, they have been almost neglected by critics, although they certainly deserve greater attention. Cf. Shimon Ballas, *'La Nouvelle Jerusalem' ou la République utopique de Faraḥ Anṭūn*, in "Arabica", XXXII, 1985, pp. 1-24; Zeinab Ben Lagha, *The New Jerusalem by Faraḥ Anṭūn: from the Mythical City to the Modern City – Social Project and Literary Project*, in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*

mentioned above represent two of the most influential ever written in a crucial period for the Arab world. This is especially because not only did some of the topics discussed there prove to be essential then, but also because they still can teach so much to contemporary readers. Let's take, for instance, the novel *'Araq al-ālihah* (Sweat of Gods, 2005/2008)[8], the text which I wish to discuss in this paper, by Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī (1956), the well-known Adeni intellectual. I chose this text because some of its elements, in my opinion, link it directly to utopian as well as dystopian literature. The reason for this is their peculiar connection to Artificial Life (AL)[9] and to the so-called soft (namely, software based) AL, or Artificial Intelligence (AI)[10], and, consequently, to science fiction. As a matter of fact, in SF, «digital utopia» and «digital dystopia» are of course indispensable for a deep knowledge of the mechanisms at work in the «digital cosmos» we all willy-nilly live in[11]. Therefore, as will be shown, *'Araq al-ālihah* may represent a further example of Arabic science fiction where anthropological/sociological issues are intimately intertwined, as it happens exactly both in AI and utopian/dystopian stories. Moreover, *'Araq al-ālihah* reveals a rich medley of themes which shape a colourful array where serious questions are dealt with from many perspectives. Although these sometimes appear so different from one another, they may be said to originate from one sole source: a deep love for science-poetry-religion, and for the human being and his/her liberty of thought and expression. For this reason, I will try and sketch those which seem to represent the main lines at work in *'Araq al-ālihah*; in order to do so, I will have to start a little further back.

Quite obviously, Artificial Life in all its forms has been widely used in

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towards a New Hermeneutic Approach, Proceedings of the International Symposium in Beirut, June 25th-June 30th, 1996, Angelika Neuwirth, Birgit Embalo, Sebastian Guenther & Maher Jarrar (eds.), Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Beirut; Steiner, Stuttgart 1999 (Beiruter Texte und Studien), pp. 553-572; P. Viviani, *Un maestro arabo del Novecento. Faraḥ Anṭūn*, cit., pp. 134-141 and 142-145; EAD., *Farah Antûn's Unfinished Novel* al-Transvaal: zâlimah am mazlûmah?, in AA.VV., *Modernity and Modernism in the Mediterranean World*, Edited by Luca Somigli and Domenico Pietropaolo, LEGAS, New York, Ottawa, Toronto 2006, pp. 283-292 (on this, see also fn. 37).

[8] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *'Araq al-ālihah*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā', 2005 (Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li 'l-Kutub wa 'l-Našr, Bayrūt 2008).

[9] It is «the study of artificial systems that exhibit behavior characteristic of natural living systems. It is the quest to explain life in any of its possible manifestations, without restriction to the particular examples that have evolved on earth. This includes biological and chemical experiments, computer simulations, and purely theoretical endeavors. Processes occurring on molecular, social, and evolutionary scales are subject to investigation. The ultimate goal is to extract the logical form of living systems.» See C.G. Langton, *Artificial Life*, in *Artificial Life*, ID. (ed), Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA 1989, p. 1.

[10] Artificial Intelligence (AI) was explained in 1956 by John McCarthy as «the science and engineering of making especially intelligent computer programs. It is related to the similar task of using computers to understand human intelligence, but AI does not have to confine itself to methods that are biologically observable». Cf. J. McCarthy, *What is Artificial Intelligence?*, Computer Science Department, Stanford University, Revised November 12, 2007, viewable at http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/whatisai/node1.html.

[11] See, for instance, D.M. Weiss, *Digital Ambivalence: Utopia, Dystopia and Digital Cosmos*, in M. Bartter (ed.), *The Utopian Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twentieth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2004, pp. 67-80. For this article, the online edition of Weiss' essay was viewed on http:// faculty.ycp.edu/~dweiss/research/Digital_Ambivalence.pdf.

science fiction, which, as critics underline[12], helped technology, and AI, to develop greatly[13]: «Contemporary science fiction has been central to shaping our digital future and cyberspace and because it foregrounds technology it provides a readymade laboratory for examining and testing our intuitions about technology and the human lifeworld.»[14] Besides, the very SF provides for a continually better understanding of «the religion-science engagement with robotics and artificial intelligence»[15], since it, «like modern art, maintains a persistence of religious language and themes […], which makes it ideal for thinking through the possible connections between artificial intelligence and the sacred.»[16]

Moreover, science fiction often portrays utopian societies and their reverse (dystopian realities) which have served as the basis for amazing books and films[17]. In such "alternative" worlds, AI creatures frequently play a key role, either as heroes or as anti-heroes, or as a medium between utopian and dystopian civilizations themselves. Even as a way of shaping such utopias/dystopias. Moreover, who could say whether AI beings and human beings always belong to different spheres of existence? Sometimes individuals in flesh and blood may juxtapose to computer programs, for instance, when they are treated by a "superior entity" as if they were mere "slaves" and "machines" devoid of feelings and soul. In this sense, the line of demarcation dividing humans and non-humans is exceedingly blurring and dim.

Moreover, if SF is a literary genre which is developing more and more in the Arab countries, that is also true for Yemen, thanks to Surūrī himself and to the creative genius of other innovative writers. For instance, one can look at ʿAbd al-Nāṣir Muġallī, with his short story *Riḥlah ilà kawkab Sāfūras* (Voyage to Planet Sāfūras, 2008)[18] and *Ǧuġrāfiyyat al-māʾ* (Geography of Water, 2009)[19], or to authors who have published Surrealistic works sometimes leading the astonished reader to the wondrous realm of science fiction[20]. Through this very genre, new perspectives may be opened before writers and the audience alike: certainly,

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[12] R.M. Geraci, *Robots and the Sacred in Science and Science Fiction: Theological Implications of Artificial Intelligence*, in "Zygon", vol. 42, no. 4 (December 2007), p. 962, available on http://home.manhattan.edu/~robert.geraci/sci%20fi.pdf.

[13] Geraci's sources are: S. Brand, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*, Viking, New York 1987, pp. 224-225; J. Pontin, *On Science Fiction: How It Influences Imaginations of Technologists*, in "Technology Review" (March/April) 2007, available on http://www.technologyreview.com/infotech/18282/?a=f; O. Shivers, *Stunning Achievement, Review of V. Vinge,* True Names and the Opening of the Cyberspace Frontier, available on Amazon.com website.

[14] D.M. Weiss, *Digital Ambivalence: Utopia, Dystopia and Digital Cosmos*, cit., p. 5 (on line edition).

[15] R.M. Geraci, *Robots and the Sacred in Science and Science Fiction: Theological Implications of Artificial Intelligence*, cit., p. 962.

[16] *Ibid*. See, in particular, D. Miller, *Toward a Structural Metaphysic: Religion in the Novels of Frank Herbert*, in *The Transcendent Adventure: Studies of Religion in Science Fiction/Fantasy*, ed. Robert Reilly, Greenwood, Westport Conn. 1985, p. 145.

[17] On utopia/dystopia and the literature devoted to them there is an extensive bibliography. See, e.g., *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Gregory Clayes, editor, CUP, Cambridge 2010.

[18] ʿAbd al-Nāṣir Muġallī, *al-Aʿmāl al-qiṣaṣiyyah 1989-2005*, Markaz ʿUbadī li ʾl-Dirāsāt wa ʾl-Našr, Ṣanʿāʾ 2008, pp. 103-122.

[19] ʿAbd al-Nāṣir Muġallī, *Ǧuġrāfiyyat al-māʾ*, Markaz ʿUbadī li ʾl-Dirāsāt wa ʾl-Našr, Ṣanʿāʾ 2009. For the analysis of both Muġallī's works, cf. A. Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, cit., pp. 238-252.

[20] A. Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, cit., p. 239 fn. 60.

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al-ḫayāl al-ʿilmī may help Arab society as a whole and, in this specific case, the Yemeni one, to rethink itself from unusual viewpoints.

Innumerable sources have been produced so far about utopia, but here I will repeat what M.K. Booker, who is actually a specialist on the marriage of dystopia and science fiction, wrote: «[…] imaginative literature is one of the most important means by which any culture can investigate new ways of defining itself and of exploring alternatives to the social and political status quo. Utopian literature, with its quest for ideal society, represents the epitome of this project […]»[21]. It is exactly for this reason, then, that *Ġābat al-ḥaqq* and *al-Dīn wa 'l-ʿilm wa 'l-māl aw al-Mudun al-ṭalāṯ*, and also *Ūrūšalīm al-Ǧadīdah aw Fatḥ al-ʿarab Bayt al-Maqdis* and *al-ʿĀlam al-Ǧadīd aw Maryam qabl al-tawbah*[22] can be quoted in this context. They represent the world as it should or might be, starting from ideas of peace and justice often, but not solely, deriving from a Western environment. Conversely however, the authors draw immensely from their own local Arabic background. That is, they do not confine themselves to elements belonging to the specific religious and/or ethnic groups of which they are members: they also care for what all the Arabs have been producing since the dawn of time. This is a very important point, in view of a comprehensive and deep appreciation of so much of *Nahḍah* literature, and of some of the most recent creative outputs, too, just like the very Ḥabīb ʿAbd al-Rabb Surūrī's. At the same time, by representing their personal view on the matter, these writers have put their own society's evils in the foreground, in order to try and wipe out those dystopian factors inherent in them, but how might dystopian literature be defined? M.K. Booker underlines that it

is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions[23].

Before continuing along this direction, I wish to hint at some other elements relevant to the analysis of *ʿAraq al-ālihah*. As a matter of fact, the most attention-grabbing literary work of the Arabic and Islamic tradition to be mentioned here is the very famous *Risālat al-ġufrān*, by the tenth-century Syrian poet and thinker Abū 'l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī. Not only has it been considered as one of those ancient texts at the roots of local and world science fiction, as has already been mentioned[24], but it is of paramount importance when thinking of Ḥabīb ʿAbd al-Rabb Surūrī's activity as a whole[25].

First of all, however, it is important to remember that this contemporary

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[21] M.K. Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1994, p. 3.

[22] Cf. fn. 8.

[23] M.K. Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, cit., p. 3.

[24] Cf. fn. 4.

[25] Ḥabīb ʿAbd al-Rabb Surūrī, *al-Ǧannah wa 'l-ǧaḥīm fī malakūt* Risālat al-ġufrān and *al-ʿAlāqah bayn al-taḫayyul wa 'l-taʾammul al-falsafī:* Risālat al-ġufrān, both appeared in January 2011 and are available on http://my-last-articles-and-texts.blogspot.fr/2012/06/httpabdulrab.html.

author is a novelist, a short story writer[26], a poet[27], a journalist and a scientist[28]. In fact, he is Professor of Computer Science at the University of Rouen and has been living in France for many years. After his earliest attempt at writing fiction in French, with the publication of the novel *La reine étripée* (The Unfaithful Queen), in 1998[29], he reverted back to his mother tongue for his later works both in prose and poetry. In the field of the novel, he thus produced the trilogy *Damalān* (2004)[30], followed soon thereafter by *Ṭā'ir al-ḥarāb* (Bird of Ill Omen, 2005)[31], *'Araq al-ālihah* and *Taqrīr al-hudhud* (The Hoopoe's Report, 2012)[32]. His latest work, which appeared at the very beginning of 2013, is *Arwà*[33]. When considering all his multifaceted literary activity, this Arabic writer may be said to be endowed with an uncommon sensitivity, which is either poetic/imaginative or rational/philosophical/scientific. Indeed, common readers as well as students of Arabic literature can find interesting and intriguing elements in Surūrī's texts. He seems to pour his special and rich sensitiveness, which holds so fundamental a place in his life, into every work he produces. For instance, it is patent also in *Taqrīr al-hudhud*[34], where the influence of *Risālat al-ġufrān* is absolutely clear, even from the mere fact that the main hero of this novel is the very Abū 'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī. This ancient poet is profoundly admired by the Yemeni author who deplores how much he was completely abandoned and forgotten by his own contemporaries; and how much he is now[35]. In *Taqrīr al-hudhud*, al-Ma'arrī is portrayed as living his afterlife on the planet Sky 77 (*al-Samā' 77*). The Adeni novelist depicts an extremely interesting and stimulating Paradise where an incredible number of famous thinkers have found their own eternal abode[36]. Many

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[26] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Hamasāt ḥarrà min mamlakat al-mawtà*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2000.

[27] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Šay'mā yušbih al-ḥubb*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2002.

[28] Along with many journalistic and scientific texts, he wrote a book of memoirs. See Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *'An al-Yaman, ma ẓahara wa mā baṭana*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2005.

[29] Habib Abdulrab, *La reine étripée*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1998 (Arabic translation by 'Alī Muḥammad Zayd, *al-Malikah al-maġdūrah*, Dār al-Muhāğir 2000; Wizārat al-Ṯaqāfah al-Yamaniyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2004).

[30] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Damalān*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2004.

[31] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Ṭā'ir al-ḥarāb*, Mu'assasat al-'Afīf al-Ṯaqāfiyyah, Ṣan'ā' 2005.

[32] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Taqrīr al-hudhud*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2012.

[33] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Arwà*, Dār al-Sāqī, Bayrūt 2013.

[34] The hoopoe is an important bird from an Islamic point of view, and central to the relationship between King Salomon and Queen Bilqīs, one of the key figures in Yemeni history. See *Qur'ān,* 27, 20-44. Cf. also G.T. Elmore, *The "Millenial" Motif in Ibn Arabi's* Book of the Fabulous Gryphon, in "The Journal of Religion", 2001, pp. 410-437, available on http://www.academicroom.com.

[35] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Taqrīr al-hudhud*, cit., p. 13.

[36] The premises from which this work starts remind the reader of Faraḥ Anṭūn's almost ignored work *al-Transvaal: ẓālimah am mazlūmah?*, which is set between Heaven and Earth. In Paradise, the negative aspects of the world, either in their political and social spheres, are being discussed by two parties, which, in a sense, represent liberalism and modernity on one side, and reaction and tradition on the other. This extraordinary assembly takes place, while the first steps of the Second Boer War (1899-1902) occur in Africa. In this text, which is halfway between a journalistic report and a novel dealing with philosophical and realistic/concrete matters and facts, Plato and his ideas hold a key role in the shaping of a kind of utopia which those in Heaven wish to "transfer" to the gloomy world. In order to do so, two spirits set out on a journey to Earth in search for those heads of State who may help human beings to re-create on Earth the dream of utopia: a world where peace, and not war, prevails. Cf. P. Viviani, *Faraḥ Anṭūn's Unfinished Novel* al-Transvaal: zâlimah am mazlûmah?, cit.

well-known customers spend their time in the most renowned café on the planet[37] but only six men visit it daily. The inhabitants of Sky 77 refer to them as the «six assassins» (*sittat qatalah*)[38], because each of them has destroyed something exceedingly relevant in the history of humankind. They are Darwin, Einstein, Marx, Freud, Picasso and the Arab intellectual Abū ’l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī. In particular, the latter is an «assassin» because he has wiped out «the irrational and the biggest lies» (*arḍ al-lā‘aql wa ’l-akāḏīb al-kubrà*)[39], whereas Charles Darwin may be considered as the killer of metaphysics, after he explained the origins of species[40].

From his celestial abode, Abū ’l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī is invited (through a simple SMS) to go back to Earth in order to detect what happens there:

عزيزي أبا العلاء! نحتاجك في مهمّةٍ عاجلة: السفرُ إلى الدار الفانية، للحياةِ فيها عمرًا جديدًا، ولِكتابة تقريرٍ عن أوضاعها الراهنة، لا سيّما يدور في بلاد العرب التي لا يفهم أحدٌ هنا كيف وإلى أين تسيرُ!...
سيكون اسمهُ التقني «تقرير الهدهد»...

Dear Abū ’l-‘Alā’, we need your urgent assistance: you have to go back to Earth, in order to begin a new life there, in order to write a report, especially on what is taking place in the Arab world, as no one knows where it is heading for!
Technically, it will be «The Hoopoe's Report»[41].

Why exactly Abū ’l-‘Alā’? Because he is the sixth of «the greatest inventors and most talented people on Earth» (*sittat^{un} min a‘ẓam mubdi‘ī wa ‘abāqirati kawkabi al-arḍ*)[42]. Moreover, he is profoundly appreciated "over there", for he is, as his interlocutor repeats to him:

[...] مهووسٌ دومًا بالبحث عن الجذر، تتجهُ مَطْرَقيًا نحو العلّةِ والباطن، نحو سبر الأغوار دون مواربة، تستخدم بذكاء، في كلّ ما تقول، العقلَ والتساؤلَ والشكَّ والتجريد! لهذا اقترحتُك!... يكفي أن تظلّ في حياتك الجديدة أبا العلاء الحرّ، كما أنت دومًا، أن تحيا ويكتب كيفما تريد!...

[…] a visionary, constantly in search for the source [of things], stubbornly heading for the roots and what is hidden, unambiguously delving into the things. You always do that by cleverly using reason, tolerance, doubt and abstraction. That's why I've recommended you!... You just have to hold on being what you are, Abū ’l-‘Alā’, the free man you have always been. Live and lie as you like![43]

Actually, if it is true that, in the beginning of this novel, Surūrī reveals his respect towards the great Syrian poet, whose *Risālat al-ġufrān* is identified by the Yemeni author at the roots of the Italian poet Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*[44], it

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[37] The list is very long and contains all those «who have crossed Time heading for eternity!», as the omniscient narrator clarifies. Cf. Ḥabīb ‘Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Taqrīr al-hudhud*, cit., pp. 13-14.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[44] In this manner, Surūrī takes a definite position regarding the relationship between the Italian writer and his Arab colleague. Truth be told, this topic has always been quite controversial since the apparition of a book which gave substantial evidence of a strong influence of the important Arabic epistle on Dante's masterpiece and milestone. Italian scholars, in particular, even some orientalists, were not pleased by the discoveries made by the Spanish researcher Miguel Asín Palacios. Cf. the

cannot be denied how much he appreciates (and it could not be differently) another of the famous masters living on Sky 77, namely Charles Darwin.

Surūrī's readers can find this English scientist's name also in the novel *'Araq al-ālihah*, where he is once again mentioned because of the unavoidable relevance of his evolutionary theory, which is of course a landmark in the domain of biology and, consequently, in the so-called A-life, that is Artificial Life. A-life (along with its branch Artificial Intelligence, of course) is indeed one of the main characters in *'Araq al-ālihah* and, as it has already been highlighted, among the major themes, and the main "instruments" also, to be found in science fiction. Again, it may be of some interest that Darwin is, like the Syrian poet, cited more than once in Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī's articles which enrich his blog[45], through which the Adeni writer offers his personal views on many thorny topics dealing with Yemeni society and the Arab world at large. In this «cybernetic space»[46], which is both an abstract and a concrete space open to dialogue and confrontation, Surūrī tries to shed light on significant topics he wishes to analyze so as to help his readers see through their own problems. In this blog, one is able to find articles published by Surūrī elsewhere, mainly in periodicals, along with new texts. The moment one reflects upon these writings, he/she is struck even by the mere fact that the number of them has been growing ever since 2009, when the first contribution appeared, and that they obviously deal with momentous contemporary issues. Besides this, it is worth mentioning what might be described as the writer's "creative frenzy", which has helped him to produce a lot in less than ten years, both as a journalist and blogger, and as a novelist. What I have just defined as Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī's "creative frenzy" is, in my opinion, an extremely intriguing aspect to be scrutinized. Truth be told, it is questionable whether the audience's input was a cause for, or an effect of, his very writings.

Certainly, the last decades have offered a good deal of topics to work upon for creative minds. Besides, someone who has a bent for both poetry and science, which he has deeply studied and cultivated, just like the Yemeni author vehemently affirms and demonstrates to have done, may have managed to read and peruse contemporary society from multiple perspectives. At the same time, Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī seems to be able, and especially eager, to partake of his inner world, his thoughts and scientific knowledge with his audience. This is

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Italian edition of his book: M. Asín Palacios, *Dante e l'Islam, l'escatologia musulmana nella* Divina Commedia, 2 voll., Nuova Pratiche editrice, Parma 1994. Interestingly enough, the first Italian translation of *Risālat al-ġufrān* appeared only recently. See Abū l-Alā' al-Ma'arrī, *L'epistola del perdono. Un viaggio nell'Aldilà*, traduzione di M. Diez, Einaudi, Torino 2011.

[45] See, e.g., Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Naẓariyyat Darwin: farḍiyyah ġabrā' am ḥaqīqah sāṭi'ah?*, March 24th 2009, available on the website http://my-last-articles-and-texts.blogspot.fr/2012/06/httpabdulrab.html. It had already appeared in "al-Quds al-'arabī".

[46] On the concept of "cybernetic space", see A. Mitra and R.L. Schwartz, *From Cyber Space to Cybernetic Space: Rethinking the Relationship between Real and Virtual Spaces*, in "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", Vol. 7, n. 1, 2001, available on http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/mitra.html. Among the scientific literature on the sociological meaning of blogs, see, for instance, A. Mitra, *Using Blogs to Create Cybernetic Space: Examples from People of Indian Origin*, in "Convergence. The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies", November 2008, 14, pp. 457-472. As far as Arab female voices are concerned, cf. Hoda Elsadda, *Arab Women Bloggers: The Emergence of Literary Counterpublics*, in "Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication", vol. 3, issue 3, November 01, 2010, pp. 312-332. For other concrete examples of how the Internet worked in the Yemeni society and above all in the crucial days of the 2011 revolution, cf. F. De Angelis, *La rivoluzione in Yemen del 2011 raccontata sui* social network *delle scrittrici e degli scrittori*, in "La rivista di Arablit", I, 1, 2011, pp. 53-61.

expected to augment as time goes by, also through his blog, which, among other things, has been constantly used so far by its founder and owner as a way of divulging his own fiction quite easily. Not only did the Adeni author utilize his personal cybernetic space to introduce, for instance, *Taqrīr al-hudhud* and to underline once more the value of intellectuals like Abū ’l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī and Charles Darwin, but he also aimed at underlining the never ending significance of concepts such as *‘ilmāniyyah* (laity), *ḥadāṯah vs taḫalluf* (modernity *vs* backwardness, sometimes juxtaposing with tradition), *madaniyyah* (civilization), and so on. It is patently clear, then, that in his works he often resorts to the direct allusion of Charles Darwin’s teachings, because he would like to help his readers become completely aware of a very simple detail: studying and understanding the great evolutionist’s discoveries might be of great help in today’s Arab societies where the current school-system is still stagnant, according to him[47]. Indeed, one should never forget that these same issues have been, let’s say, tormenting Arab reformers (within both an Islamic and a non-Islamic environment) since the *Nahḍah* period, giving way to a long and vehement debate in Greater Syria and, still more, in Egypt, where many Greater Syria emigrées took refuge[48].

On the basis of all these elements, it is clear that there is a close link between the topics, which are dealt with both in Surūrī’s blog and in his novels. In particular – as I mentioned before –, Darwin is a key figure in both. At least, just like his predecessors, the Yemeni writer still thinks that Arab societies have so much to learn from Evolutionism and its father. The Victorian scientist is effectively the man who overthrew all the religious and socio-anthropological laws on which society was then based and in which it had been deeply rooted for ages, although other incredible turning points in the history of humanity preceded Darwinism. No doubt, then, that Charles Darwin’s views were absolutely shocking. At the same time, it can be said that they lead to science fiction, thanks also to its intrinsic link with Naturalism, whose emergence and progressive achievements were backed, among others, by Marx’s and Freud’s theories, as it is well known. That is, by two of Darwin’s companions in *Taqrīr al-hudhud*.

Besides, it was the appearance of Darwin’s *Origins of Species* in 1859 that influenced and definitively oriented some authors in choosing the best way to voice Victorian people’s anxieties and needs. Without forgetting that a good deal of those same people’s doubts, perplexities, fears and previously unimagined hopes ensued and came to light exactly after the publication of Darwin’s revolutionary book which threw the doors open for them to new possible worlds and realities. Most importantly, it changed the way the individual looked at religion, at God, at himself/herself. Moreover, the relationship between the human

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[47] Ḥabīb ‘Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *al-Ta‘līm al-‘arabī: bināʾ[un] fawqiyy[un] ġarbiyy[un] wa taḥtaniyy[un] ta’assasa fī ‘aṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ!*, in “Minbar”, 14, Summer 2013, viewable at http://www.ibn-rushd.org/typo3/cms/magazine/14th-issue-summer-2013/habib-abd-ar-rabb-sururi/. This article is dated March 23rd 2009.

[48] This is an over-discussed topic; nevertheless, see, e.g., Nadia Farag, al-Muqtataf*, 1876-1930: a study of the influence of Victorian thought on modern Arabic thought*, Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University 1969; D.M. Leavitt, *Darwinism in the Arab World: The Lewis Affair at the Syrian Protestant College*, in “The Muslim World”, Vol. 71, No. 2, April 1981, pp. 85-98; Adel A. Ziadat, *Western Science in the Arab World: The Impact of Darwinism, 1860-1930*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, London 1986.

being and Nature, and his/her position in the universe were being questioned in a disruptive manner forever.

Charles Darwin's studies have also inspired a special branch of knowledge aiming at «[u]nderstanding religion as a result of evolution by natural selection»[49], although it has only been in the last two decades that a «new evolutionary perspective»[50] was truly born. It was indeed in his *The Descent of Man, and Selection of Sexes* (1871) that the British thinker paved the way to this peculiar perspective[51], which numbers Pascal Boyer among its major representatives. Pascal Boyer and his studies are relevant here for it is Surūrī himself who gives them an essential place in *'Araq al-ālihah* by stating that he resorted to the French researcher's famous book *Et l'homme créa les dieux* (2001), together with Stefen Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997), to write the scientific attachment to the novel[52]. In these long pages, the Arab writer offers a detailed explanation about the biological and physiological aspects of human brain functioning, along with the sociological features linked to those fundamental needs which have made, along the centuries, men and women as they are, according to developmental psychology experiments and conclusions[53]. Truthfully, however, it is the novel *'Araq al-ālihah* as a whole, which is apt to be considered as a tool by which the author seeks to explain to his readers how the mind works not only in the religious field but also in gender relations in an Arab and Islamic environment. This is presented more exactly in two specific societies, namely Yemeni and Omani, as will be shown later on, which are particularly centred on tradition in so many areas, no matter how open-minded their members are, on the basis of generally accepted "highly-civilized" principles. In fact, one may wonder to what extent a human being is able to really break his/her fetters so as to live according to such principles and not as stubborn followers of sometimes debatable traditions.

Besides, it is patently clear, then, that Surūrī is profoundly attracted by worlds alternative to the one we live in. These "other" realities give his characters a unique chance to re-create a new existence for themselves and for all mankind or, at least, a possibility to "shape" a hope for something completely different from, and opposite to, their daily routine, since their own concrete world is often gloomy and bleak, be it for individual or socio-political reasons.

'Araq al-ālihah revolves around a key question: how does the mind work in a man and a woman who, coming from Yemen and Oman, have been living in the West for many years? Thanks to their peculiar life and work experience and to their scientific studies, have they managed to go far from the backwardness sometimes present in their original societies, whose practices undoubtedly shaped

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[49] P. Boyer and B. Bergstrom, *Evolutionary Perspectives on Religion*, in "Annual Review of Anthropology", 2008.37, p. 112.

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] «The sole object of this work is to consider, firstly, whether man, like every other species, is descended from some pre-existing form; secondly, the manner of his development; and thirdly, the value of the differences between the so-called races of man.» Cf. Ch. Darwin, *Introduction*, in ID., *The Descent of Man, and Selection of Sexes*, Rand McNally & Co., Skokie (Chicago) 1874 (second edition), pp. 8-9 (of the on-line edition available on http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2300/pg2300.html).

[52] P. Boyer, *Et l'homme créa les dieux*, Robert Laffont, Paris 2001; S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, Norton, New York 1997. See Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *al-Mulḥaq al-'ilmī*, in ID., *'Araq al-ālihah*, cit., p. 284.

[53] Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī, *al-Mulḥaq al-'ilmī*, cit., p. 265.

their way of thinking and of feeling? Have the greatly extolled Western modernity-laicism-liberalism succeeded in freeing them from ancient prejudices on some fundamental issues just like, for instance, male-female relationships?[54]

Surūrī's novel is a love story between a Yemeni computer scientist from Aden, Šamsān, who lives in France with his Iranian wife, Firdaws, and Ḥanāyā, an Anglo-Omani woman based in London, who is working on experiments on the human brain. When Šamsān accepts to have his own brain deeply analyzed by the medical team of which Ḥanāyā is an important member, he becomes utterly enthusiastic about what he discovers, that is, how the so-called «The Philosopher, *Kāšif al-asrār*» works. *Kāšif al-asrār* is a computer program provided with «both a theoretical and applied encyclopaedic knowledge, in the scientific, cultural and sociological fields»[55] which is literally able to detect the secrets inside every human's brain and mind. It flawlessly demonstrates this when it manages to perfectly and fully discover what Šamsān is thinking of in the course of a decisive test. Šamsān has, then, his most intimate feelings and thoughts displayed and anatomized. The hero discovers from Ḥanāyā the content of the secret report produced by the astonishing machine. By this literary device, the readers find out about Šamsān's innermost self and beliefs, but supposedly also Surūrī's too. As a matter of fact, in the novel there are at least two unmistakable pieces of evidence, which indicate that the narrator and the author (and writer) coincide. More importantly, the author *wants* to be perceived clearly, thus reasserting his own authority on the whole book and – one would dare say – the scientific/literary activity which is being exemplified therein. At the end of Chapter 1, Surūrī writes:

بعد نصف ساعة فقط خرج التقريرُ من الطابعة، تَبَعَهُ مُلحقٌ علميّ [...]. أَتركُ الملحق العلميّ هنا في نهاية الرواية، مُلْحَقاً لها كما خرج من طابعة كاشف الأسرار، دون مسٍّ حرفٍ أو فاصلةٍ منه.

> After half an hour only, the report was printed out, followed by a scientific attachment […]. I attach it here, at the end of the novel, just like it came out of the print of *Kāšif al-asrār*, without changing any letters or commas at all[56].

One can read almost the same words later, in the final paragraph of Chapter 3[57]. At the same time, since the hero and the omniscient narrator also coincide, one may assume that Šamsān is Surūrī's literary *alter ego*. I would not maintain, however, that we are faced with a complete juxtaposition between Šamsān and Surūrī. What we are faced with rather is perhaps a "spiritual" concurrence between them.

First and foremost then, poetry and science are extremely important features in Surūrī's personal existence, as it emerges even from a swift look at his biography and bibliography. They are relevant in Šamsān's experience too: not only is he a computer scientist like his own "creator", but he is also a poet. We learn that Šamsān has given up composing poetry and that he sees himself as «a

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[54] See, e.g., Ḥabīb ʻAbd al-Rabb Surūrī, *Il dramma del rapporto tra uomo e donna nel romanzo yemenita: l'esempio di* ʻAqīlāt *(Mogli) e* Damalān, in *Lo Yemen raccontato dalle scrittrici e dagli scrittori. al-Yaman fī ʻuyūn al-kātibāt wa 'l-kuttāb*, a cura di Isabella Camera d'Afflitto, Editrice Orientalia, Roma 2010, pp. 23-28.

[55] Ḥabīb ʻAbd al-Rabb Surūrī, *ʻAraq al-ālihah*, cit., p. 23.

[56] *Ibid*., p. 53.

[57] *Ibid*., p. 82.

retired poet» (*šāʿir mutaqāʿid*)[58], despite the fact that poetry is all around him (his wife Firdaws represents his perpetual link with it, because she translates and writes poems) and still dwells in the depths of his heart. As for religion, Šamsān is proud to be a Sufi, like his father[59]. Equally, Surūrī, who was brought up in a religious family environment, was given the chance to approach traditional religious studies and had access to books devoted to Sufism. Going now back to Šamsān and to his exciting experience, while listening to Ḥanāyā reading the report, he is greatly surprised and wonders:

لم يُثرني في هذا التقرير إلا شيءٌ واحد: كيف عرف «كاشف الأسرار» أن محور تفكيري، عندما كنتُ أواجهُ أجهزتَه، كان فعلاً مفهوم «الروح» والكائنات الغيبية التي ملأت طفولتي؟

> The sole astounding thing about this report is how *Kāšif al-asrār* could understand that, when I was in front of its mechanisms, I was focusing on the very concept of "spirit" and of the invisible beings which had filled my childhood[60].

Later on, he will be absolutely dazzled when he knows how the revolutionary computer program is able to produce a detailed explanation, not only of the way the idea of "divinity" was born and developed in his brain, but also of Šamsān's profound interest in the Supreme Being's characters, as they are described in Sufi doctrine. Besides, during «the Philosopher's» test, Šamsān was thinking of his father's (who was a very pious Sufi) last will. What is more important however, is that this same machine catches Šamsān's shame he felt while remembering his father's attitude towards his favourite religious doctrine. He was ashamed, Ḥanāyā reads in the machine's report, because

لا تعرف إذا كانت هذه الهمسات هرطقةً أوهي عين الإيمان الحقيقي السامي بالذات العليا [...]

> [y]ou don't know whether you have to consider this murmuring as a heresy or whether they are the origin of the authentic and sublime faith in the Supreme Being […][61].

This is the «centre» (*al-markaz*)[62], as the hero of the novel calls it, of his reflections while he was being analyzed by the computer. Consequently, the man persuades Ḥanāyā to provide him with some of the human brains she is working on, because he feels the urgent need to produce a ground-breaking project: he will create an Artificial Intelligence software whose "creatures" he will endow with real, not artificial, biological material. He is spurred on to do so by an unavoidable necessity to fully and authentically discover how religion was created and how it really was that it became so fundamental in human existence and, subsequently, in his own life.

Poetry, science and religion are therefore substantial in *ʿAraq al-ālihah*, where these three issues meet and mingle, almost fusing with each other. Firdaws and Ḥanāyā represent poetry and science respectively, and they are both loved and desired by Šamsān who seems to consider himself as a sort of god who is torn between two passions. Contemporarily, poetry, science and religion combine with

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 74. This discussion reminds the reader of those theories present and analyzed by P. Boyer.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[62] *Ibid.*

further relevant topics, so attractively dealt with by the Adeni author, who resorts to the specific mode of writing represented by science fiction. Moreover, all this serves several goals among which, in my opinion, the most important is a profound and subtle discussion about gender matters in the Islamic world and especially in some regions of the Arabian Peninsula, as has already been mentioned above. It is important to clarify also that in the writer's texts the male/female relationship is closely linked to the sensitive question of identity, again both in Yemen and the Arabic *ummah* as a whole. Actually, Surūrī uses *al-ḫayāl al-‘ilmī* to analyze human mind's behaviour, especially in the specific grounds of gender relation, which is also a matter of identity: men and women continue to wonder who they are and why they and their society are the way we know them, but they now look for help in a more and more innovative manner of utilizing science and machines.

A-life and Artificial Intelligence are indeed two of the major "characters" and themes in *‘Araq al-ālihah* through which Ḥabīb ‘Abd al-Rabb Surūrī aims at studying those biological, and psychological as well as social elements which might have lead in the past, and may still lead, a human being to welcome ideas or ideals. In this sense, *‘Araq al-ālihah* may be considered as a novel with a well studied mixture of hard and soft science fiction[63] through which the author seems to be composing a digital utopian reality which aims at destroying a dystopian reality, namely all those civilizations and societies where men and women do not enjoy the same privileges in all fields of human existence. Obviously, this may happen (and does happen) in any society, and not exclusively in those described by Ḥabīb ‘Abd al-Rabb Surūrī.

Moreover, the Yemeni writer tries to delve into the intimate self of a man and a woman who want to assert themselves as an almighty god or a goddess, spurred on as they are to shape the others in their own image. The very title of the novel, *‘Araq al-ālihah*, hints at the "effort" made by gods to give life to humans and, contemporarily, is a nickname used by Šamsān to hint at his beloved Ḥanāyā. However, and ironically enough, the young woman, as the story develops, takes his place in detecting how the special software he wanted to create is working, and deposes him. Thus, Šamsān, a god, worshipped by his wife (and by his secret lover), and a man who aimed at becoming a god by elaborating that very software, is dethroned by a goddess. Truth be told, Šamsān thinks he is a modern man, not subject to specific religious and social dictates which someone might consider as, let's say, excessively strict and traditional in a negative way, especially as far as gender and identity issues are concerned. Nonetheless, he is completely abandoned by Ḥanāyā, who is a person who has been fighting very hard to free herself, since she stubbornly strived in order to escape the harsh discipline and norms dictated by the Omani court. She learns well all the dangers and tricks set by Šamsān's apparently unambiguous attitude and behaviour because, as a forward-looking woman, as a combatant for liberty and as a scientist, she is

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[63] As it is known, it is possible to talk about hard science fiction, where focus is put on the technical scientific matters, and light science fiction, where stress is put, instead, on social and psychological issues. In *The Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature* it is defined as dealing «less with technology and more with ideas and concepts of where technology may be leading us». Cf. S.R. Serafin, A. Bendixen (eds.), *The Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London 2005, p. 1005.

equipped with the newest and most advanced tools to do so. Ultimately, then, when Ḥanāyā realizes how mean and narrow-minded Šamsān is, despite his flaunted open-mindedness, modernity, sympathy and sincere love, she deposes him and usurps his throne once and for all[64]. Actually, she already begins to substitute him in his dominion of the computer program for she has realized how revolutionary it is and to what extent it may help an individual in his/her way to absolute knowledge and freedom.

In my opinion, in *'Araq al-ālihah* it is likely to find what Anna Foerst called human beings' fear and fascination, which is, for her, the special mingle of feelings which is experienced by the people the moment they face AI creatures[65]. As a matter of fact, in the novel, both Šamsān and Ḥanāyā seem to show this very fear and fascination towards both *Kāšif al-asrār* and their own computer program. At the same time, they are spurred on, as it were, by what they discover, to become themselves superior and almighty beings. Actually, it is above all Ḥanāyā who finally decides to wipe out all her assumed enemies (in this case, Šamsān) so as to remain the sole queen in her newly born realm. However, her behaviour is absolutely understandable, when it is viewed from the perspective of those women who have sensed freedom only after a strong battle or from the perspective of those ones who are still deprived of liberty. Namely, if she seems to be acting dishonestly and cruelly with Šamsān, she is not really doing that. If analyzed in a wider framework, her actions can be considered as a legitimate deed caused by the peculiar situation in which she was brought up and received her education. Moreover, what really moves her to act this way is that, as the digital society created by the computer program shows her, she becomes more and more conscious about her lover's two-sidedness and male-centred personality. Ḥanāyā was – or ought to be – a sort of robot, according to the canons of society: she turns out to be a rebellious robot which, as such, becomes a real woman who frightens those men (and people in general) not yet ready to accept this revolutionary transformation.

'Araq al-ālihah represents another step in Ḥabīb 'Abd al-Rabb Surūrī's way to the fulfilment of an important task: teaching his readers some fundamental concepts, which may help them achieve a thorough freedom of thought, in the first place. To do so, he looks back to those great personalities and literary modes, which, both in the West and in the East, have made relevant efforts in this field. That can be attained also by means of local science fiction, which, with all its rich and thrilling contents, is in itself an authentic revolution in Arabic literature these days, though not completely unknown to its readers.

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[64] Šamsān's behaviour, however, should not be closely and strictly linked to his being an Oriental man, at all.

[65] A. Foerst, *Cog, a Humanoid Robot, and the Question of the Image of God*, in "Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science", 33, pp. 91-111, quoted in R.M. Geraci, *Robots and the Sacred in Science and Science Fiction: Theological Implications of Artificial Intelligence*, cit., p. 961.